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“You’re My True Vessel”¹

Knowledge and Digital Fan Culture Discussed on the Basis of Mediumship and Possession in *Supernatural*’s Narrative and Fandom²

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Abstract

Portrayals of mediumship in modern Western television narratives need to be seen as part of a broader phenomenon of the presence of religious elements in Western media, a phenomenon I argue expresses a longing for grand narratives in contemporary Western society. The portrayal and mediatization of religious elements in television narratives as well as their discussion in digital fan culture are part of what I would call a transformation process of knowledge and in particular knowledge of religious phenomena. More specifically, digital fan culture allows for an engagement with discursive transformation processes of knowledge and thus influences what is perceived *as* knowledge in society. Therefore, religious studies needs to pay closer attention to television narratives and the way fans interact with these narratives to create knowledge about religious practices. This article focuses on how the elements of “possession” and “mediumship” are being transformed by the US American TV series *Supernatural* and its fan culture. I argue that we can see at least two transformation processes here: the transformation and transplantation of religious concepts and practices (in the case of this article the idea of the human body as spirit medium) into a television context, and the transformation of these concepts and practices through digital fan culture. In its discussion of fan culture, the article looks at and analyzes fan based websites and how they present, discuss and imagine the body-medium.

About the Author

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Introduction

The topic of religion and media is a well-researched area (Hoover, 2006), but popular television series have received little scholarly attention from a religious studies point of view (Fiske, 2008, p. 43; Ellis, 2002, p. 69). The transformation and mediatization of religious elements, their relation to the depiction of gender in popular television series and the reception of religious elements and representations of gender in fan culture (Hills, 2002) are all relatively new research areas. This paper, with its analysis of television narratives as well as fan culture, aims to provide a starting point for further research addressing the transformation of knowledge, particularly information regarding religion, in contemporary societies (White, 1997, pp.37-64).

Western literature and visual media in the last decade has developed a fascination for grand narratives in the sense of mythical, supernatural, religious and fantastical adventures with traditional values and gender roles. Traditional representations of gender roles and religion give support and stability in times of uncertainty, but after 9/11, according to David Hastings

Dunn (2006, p.318), the emphasis has been not just on the production of feel-good films and TV series but also on elements of horror and mystery. These mythically-infused narratives revive a universalistic idea of humankind and reveal a strong orientation towards religious structures.

Jean Francois Lyotard (1984, p.37) argued that modernity and post-modernity are characterized by the lack of grand or meta-narratives. However, Emily McAvan (2012, p.23) states that mythic narratives can build on the postmodernist belief in rationalism. Through the reincorporation of the religious into grand narratives, scientific rationalism has been pushed into the background. These narratives move between science and pseudo-science, McAvan argues, and they do not distinguish fundamentally between real and fictitious elements.

The television series *Supernatural* draws on relatively well-known audio-visual signs and codes to establish a relationship with its viewers. Narrative structures are of primary importance in this semiotic system (Hall 1980), and the depiction of the human body as medium for supernatural beings is a vital part of *Supernatural*'s narrative (Peirce 1998, p.411). The narrative of *Supernatural* draws on religious mythologies rooted in religious practice, and picks up, (re)works, (re)introduces and disseminates these mythologies as narrative to a wider audience. In the process, *Supernatural* constructs a differentiated system of signs and codes regarding religion and mediumship/possession that can be interpreted in different ways by the audience. Fans contribute to the series' discourse through writing about and analysing the aesthetics and narratives of the series.

John Fiske describes narratives as expressions of the need to make sense of our lives. They are part of a "fundamental cultural process" (Fiske, 2011, pp.129-130), of which television

culture is an important aspect. Based on this theoretical insight, I argue that the analysis of television texts' possible meanings and associations can provide some insights into the transformation process of religious elements and what fans perceive to be knowledge of religion. As Mary Douglas (1973) and Clifford Geertz (1983) have argued, religion is part of a cultural symbol system that is never static (Pezzoli-Olgiati, 2012, pp.48-49). Within social discourses, religious elements, such as rituals, symbols, myths or narrative storylines, can develop their own dynamics or can be transformed in their meaning by being adopted into new contexts. Television narratives, like other media forms, can therefore play a role in the transformation of religious knowledge and practice.

Taking the notion of the human body as vessel and spirit medium found in many diverse religious traditions as a starting point, this paper will analyse how these ideas are translated into the narratives of the television series *Supernatural* (Drama/Mystery, 2005 onw.) and how they are discussed in its fan culture. Within fan culture, knowledge of religion is influenced by the close interrelation of real and fictitious elements within the narrative of the television series (Hills, 2002, p.65).

Spirit Mediumship and Possession in Western Discourses

To discuss mediumship in detail one must define the terms (*spirit*) *medium* and *possession* and distinguish between their positive and negative connotations. According to the Oxford English Reference Dictionary, a medium is “a person claiming to be in contact with spirits of the dead and communicating between the dead and the living” (Pearsall and Trumble, 1995, p.898). He/she is someone who transmits messages from all kind of supernatural beings such as spirits, ghosts or a god and angels as well as demons, to the living in the human world. It is

a form of communication during which the person cannot be held responsible for his or her statements and actions (Jones, 1976). It seems almost as if the supernatural entity takes over the human body and suppresses or even replaces the body's soul/spirit with its own spirit (Boddy, 1994). Bourguignon refers to this phenomenon as an alternate state of mind, defining mediumship from an anthropological point of view either as "possession trance" or "possession" (Bourguignon 1976, pp.47-55). For both, the "displacement of the individual's identity and speech by an embodying spirit" (Sidky, 2011, p.92) is important, even though possession trance is a voluntary condition while possession is a forced state. Taking control of a human body and using it to relay a message often involves some kind of manifestation of the supernatural being, such as the presence of a voice, wind or even a materialization of the entity before entering the human body.

The manifestation of the supernatural being through the medium is particularly interesting because it changes or blurs the boundaries between the individual human, its environment, and the collective audience. The summoned force could either appear as a corporeal being or some sort of power. The understanding of the human being as medium reflects on a social environment that corresponds to spiritual expectations. The audience of religious practitioners is the key element in the performative experience of mediumship: the audience has to interpret texts, practices, and symbols and evaluate their importance for the community (Schömbucher 2006, 41-43). The medium as well as the audience must acknowledge the spirit's power as an external force.

The performative act of mediumship carries positive and negative connotations within the different traditions and rituals through which (religious) communities make sense of, integrate, and structure supernatural experience. Many spiritual and religious traditions

attempt to make the human body available as a vessel for supernatural beings, often relying on rituals in sessions of communication with the supernatural world, but it may be important in these traditions to distinguish between a trained spirit medium who willingly communicates with supernatural forces and the involuntary possession of a normal human being through spirits or demons (Goodman, 1997, p.57).

The understanding of possession in Western societies is mainly rooted in the discourse of Christian demonology (Johnson, 2011), which can be traced back to ancient Sumerian and Babylonian mythology as well as to ancient Greece. In Sumerian and Babylonian mythologies, ghosts, spirits and demons inhabited frontier areas such as deserts and often were neither positive nor negative in essence. In ancient Greece, demons were considered creatures of an intermediate realm between humans and gods. Homer uses the term *demon* neither positively nor negatively, and Hesiod described demons just as powerful beings. Over time, however, these societies started to perceive demons as negative entities that brought evil, sickness, and sorrow (Frey-Anthes, 2007, p.2). Therefore rituals, enchantments and incantations had to be developed to fight these evil spirits. In late Judaism, criminal angels and corrupt demons were connected with an evil inclination and envy (Ziegler, 1957, p.123). This negative depiction of demons later became part of early Christian ideas as we see the New Testament, including Matthew 10:8 (“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give”; NASB translation) or Mark 16:9 (“Now after He had risen early on the first day of the week, He first appeared to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons”; NASB translation), and possession remains part of some Christian traditions today.

An increasing interest in supernatural phenomena and visions of the afterlife, in angels, demons, and spirit mediumship gained popularity during Gothic Romanticism and especially the Victorian era throughout Europe. According to Christopher Partridge, Western “occulture” now combines ideas and practices ranging from the Kabbalah to belief in UFOs (Partridge, 2004).

Mediumship and Possession in *Supernatural*

Supernatural tells the story of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who fight against supernatural evils in what can be described as an apocalyptic environment. Jewish and Christian elements, such as demons and angels, holy water or the four horsemen of the Apocalypse dominate the storyline. Elements of the horror genre dominate the storyline of the first season in particular, with four episodes explicitly addressing spirit possession.

In the following, I will analyse the different elements of spirit possession and the depiction of mediumship within *Supernatural*’s narrative in selected *mise-en-scène*. Through becoming part of a new narrative content and structure within the narrative of *Supernatural*, and then being transplanted again through fan culture and discussion, the connotation and denotation (Saussure, 1967, p.77) of these elements can – but does not necessarily have to – change.

Mediumship and possession are depicted in two ways in the show. First, for an angelic, demonic, and spirit possession, the human body is only a so-called *vessel*, a container for the supernatural entity. These supernatural beings are able to possess nearly every human being, though there are some restrictions: angels need the consent of the human being, for example. Being or becoming a vessel in *Supernatural* is mostly a negative (or at least ambivalent) event

because the supernatural beings possessing the human body are almost always demonic or ambivalent creatures, like vengeful spirits or evil angels. Second, the medium Pamela Byrnes is not taken over by the supernatural entity but is portrayed as being able to communicate with supernatural beings.

In many depictions of ghosts and spirits in the series, the supernatural creature is linked or attached to an object, such as a family painting or a remaining item from their previous lives. In 4.13 “After School Special”, for example, a spirit possesses humans who happen to be near to some of the spirit’s mortal remains (a lock of his hair). In episode 1.05 “Bloody Mary”, the brothers discover that the ghost of a girl named Mary is trapped inside a mirror (Dundes, 2002, p.77):

Dean: Isn’t there an old superstition that says mirrors can capture spirits?

Sam: Yeah there is. Yeah, when someone would die in a house people would cover up the mirrors so the ghost wouldn't get trapped.

Dean: So Mary dies in front of a mirror, and it draws in her spirit.

Sam: Yeah but how could she move through like a hundred different mirrors?

Dean: I don’t know, but if the mirror is the source, I say we find it and smash it. (5.01 “Bloody Mary”)

This dialog is an excellent example of how knowledge is portrayed in different ways in the series. Here the knowledge originates in popular folk belief. Until the 20th century it was common for people to die at home. Because of that many rituals developed around this rite of passage (van Gennep, 2007). In many regions it was a common belief that mirrors or anything reflective had to be turned around or covered, so that the spirit was not distracted on its

journey (Zakrzewski Brown, 1999, 89; Simpson and Roud, 2000). As Supernatural writer Eric Kripke comments, “There’s something about mirrors, about stealing people’s souls that is very hardwired in the primal group consciousness of humanity” (Knight, 2007, p.44). At this point in the series spirits are represented as supernatural entities with extraordinary powers, not as possessing humans.

Possession and mediumship in *Supernatural* are not limited to spirits and ghosts. The narrative demands that both angels and demons too need a human vessel to manifest on earth and become embodied. *Supernatural* draws on Rabbinic traditions, Talmudic traditions, and other texts from the Hebrew Bible as inspiration for the character of Lilith, the powerful Leviathans, and various other supernatural creatures we encounter throughout the series. The conception and representation of this form of possession in the narrative is even more interesting than spirit possession, because it incorporates elements from a Gothic conception of mediumship.

Angels in *Supernatural* are not able to occupy a human vessel without his/her permission, but demons do not need this approval. The angel Castiel comments on this form of possession in a scene during episode 4.01 “Lazarus Rising”:

Castiel: That was my mistake. Certain people, special people, can perceive my true visage. I thought you would be one of them. I was wrong.

Dean: And what visage are you in now? What, holy tax accountant?

Castiel: This? This is... a vessel.

Dean: You’re possessing some poor bastard!?

Castiel: He’s a devout man, he actually prayed for this (4.01 “Lazarus Rising”).

Supernatural understands demons and angels to be disembodied entities. During angelic or demonic possession, the human soul is suppressed and only able to witness the event. The human body may incur physical damage while the demon or angel is present, including fatal injuries, but usually survives. Since the human soul is suppressed during this kind of possession, one can also observe a slight change of personality while the angel or demon inhabits the human body. For observers, the supernatural entity is invisible and the human may appear almost normal (in particular to those who do not know the person being possessed). If the entity wants to reveal itself, then the eyes of the possessed appear in a different color or shadowy angelic wings frame the body.

While possession in *Supernatural* predominantly has negative implications, mediumship itself is depicted as a positive ability and often a gift. However, a medium is not safe from bodily harm. In episode 4.01 “Lazarus Rising” the medium Pamela Barnes’s eyes are burnt out when she looks at the angel Castiel’s true form. At this point, the depiction follows the Biblical tradition of the angel as overwhelming: “After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory” (Rev 18:1); “And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened” (Luke 2:9).

This incident happens during a séance ritual. The scene depicts Pamela Barnes and three main characters of the television series, Dean and Sam Winchester and Bobby Singer, sitting around a table, holding hands and summoning the yet to-be-known angelic being. They place candles on the table, which is engraved with different mythical, religious, and cultural

symbols. The medium Pamela summons the supernatural entity by repeating an incantation commanding the spirit to appear.

Pamela: I invoke, conjure, and command you, appear unto me before this circle, [...]

Castiel? No. Sorry, Castiel, I don't scare easy.

Dean: Castiel?

Pamela: Its name. It's whispering to me, warning me to turn back. I conjure and command you, show me your face.

Bobby: Maybe we should stop.

Pamela: I almost got it. I command you, show me your face! Show me your face now!

(4.01 "Lazarus Rising")

After the command to show his face, Pamela sees Castiel's true form and loses her sight because of the overwhelming glory of the angel's appearance.

This scene is inspired by Jewish and Christian elements, but also draws on broader social ideas of mediumship, depicting Gothic rituals and occult symbols as part of the summoning of a spirit. Other religious elements such as Zoroastrian symbols or Voodoo practices could have been relevant for the narrative of *Supernatural*, but none of them influence the depiction of mediumship and possession. Rather, the language and iconography is dominated by Christian ideas. However, the medium here is depicted as female, following the ancient oracle of Delphi that still influences the imaginations of Western societies. This is particularly meaningful because not many female characters appear in the narrative of *Supernatural*.

***Supernatural's* Digital Fan Culture and Knowledge**

The discursive process regarding religion and mediumship does not end with the narrative structure of the television series but continues in fan culture (Weber and Dixon, 2007). Fans take information from the television series' narrative, which contains already transformed and reinterpreted religious elements, and supplement it with their own knowledge and research to transform characters and elements or to continue parts of the source text. Some fans show a high engagement and commitment to the media narratives, meticulously debating and analyzing every detail of each episode and disseminating their findings through articles, blogs, fan fiction and wiki sites like <http://www.supernaturalwiki.com> that aim to describe and connect all elements of the television narratives. Supernaturalwiki.com was accessed 9,681,961 times by April 10, 2014 according to its own data (Supernatural Wiki, 2014). Religious elements and gender depictions from the source text, the television narrative, may be retained unchanged, but subversive and transgressive interpretations of religion and gender also appear in fan culture.

When modern media such as television series pick up religious ideas and incorporate them into often highly successful narratives, the audience can adapt elements of knowledge they gain from the television narrative to reconstruct their perception (or knowledge) of religious practice. These elements of knowledge can also enrich fan experience by immersing viewers in the narrative and the spiritual world of the television series. Common knowledge about religious phenomena is produced through television narratives such as *Supernatural*, whose fans meticulously process every detail of each episode into articles, blogs and fan fiction.

I argue that the discursive relations between the real life performative experience of various religious systems throughout the world, their adaption into Western television narratives and

the presence of these ideas in digital fan culture represent significant contemporary social developments, especially demonstrating a transformation in how knowledge is constructed and what sources people draw on (Capurro 2010, 35-42). This transformation in the production of knowledge raises several questions, such as what is regarded as knowledge and how we can critically analyze it.

Television series often need to adapt actual religious elements and practices to the storyline and the producer's ideas. Broadcasting the television series disseminates these newly generated religious practices among a wider audience where they contribute to what the audience perceives as religious knowledge. Digital fan culture does not necessarily deconstruct these combinations of actual and fictional elements. Rather, by describing and explaining the plot, fan websites form part of the series' knowledge universe.

The production and transformation of knowledge does not remain within the narrative universe of *Supernatural*. Rather, through the peculiar mix of religious, mythical, and fictional elements and the individual's prior knowledge, this transformation leaks into fan culture in different ways. As an example, I look here at how fan culture transforms religious elements and related male characters, drawing from the television narrative as well as other online and offline texts.

Many contributions to the fan-operated homepage supernaturalwiki.com terminologically distinguish between the *possession* of the human body by spirits or demons and the *occupation* of human bodies by angels. An angelic occupation is explained as being different from a demonic or spirit possession, because angels need the approval of their human hosts. Despite this distinction, angels still possess humans (at least the term "possession" is used) in

some kind of way as one contribution explains: “A vessel is a human that an angel possesses in order to manifest on Earth.” (Supernatural Wiki, 2013a). Yet, in the majority of definitions we find in fan-based sources, possession is defined as a demonic:

“Possession is identified throughout human history and its innumerable religions as the act by an outside force, either demonic or spiritual in nature, of taking physical control of an individual's body or an object. Humans, animals, even places and objects alike are susceptible to these supernatural forces.” (Supernatural Wiki, 2013b).

This definition does not only refer to the television narrative but also to what is believed by the authors to be factual religious and historical information.

We also see that the fan-based knowledge production is shaped by generalisations that are rooted both inside and outside the television narrative. Another passage on supernaturalwiki.com renders obvious how the author's own knowledge and interpretation contributes to this transformation and production process. In an entry on the “Brief History of Possession”, we read:

“Though belief in possession is spread throughout the world within various cultures, if you ask most people on the street about possession the concept of demonic possession as understood by the Catholic Church will come to mind. During the Middle Ages cases of demonic possession ran rampant throughout Europe.” (Supernatural Wiki, 2013b).

For the purposes of this article, I am not interested in whether the knowledge produced here is correct and can be held up to scholarly scrutiny. Rather, I am interested in where the different

elements come from and how (and by whom) they are combined. The main source is obviously the narrative of *Supernatural* and how the television series produces and reinterprets religious practices. The depiction of demonic possessions and exorcisms is closely linked to Christian demonology, practised through elements such as Latin incantations and holy water that remind the viewer of the Catholic Church. Other important sources for fan-based online websites are other online sources, and most contributions use non-fan websites as references.

The contribution on angels, for example, shows that the author draws on a variety of different websites. The entry concludes that “Angels or divine beings described as messengers of God, or guardians of souls occur in many religious traditions” (Supernatural Wiki, 2013c), listing the following websites as its references: Wikipedia, the New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia, islamawareness.net, a private site of a librarian from Ontario about angels in Judaism, and the homepage angels-online.com that collects stories about actual experiences with “angel encounters, spiritual awakenings, self discoveries, and healing miracles” (Anon, 2013). This shows that knowledge in this context is a complex structure and a collaborative effort that goes beyond the television series’ narratives. What the audience sees on television and what they read on fan forums contributes to their perceptions of *true* and *accurate*. The definition of ghosts and spirits on supernaturalwiki.com offers another example of how fan culture operates in order to explain what fans assume to be behaviour of supernatural entities:

“A ghost or spirit remains connected to the mortal realm because it is attached to it through unfinished business or an unwillingness to move on. Many have a desire for revenge against those who they perceive to have caused their deaths, or will target

people like them [...] Others [...] are evil in life and continue this after death.”

(Supernatural Wiki, 2013d).

This definition, again, is strongly influenced by popular belief, spiritualism and the Anglo-American Gothic tradition as well as by how the television narrative of *Supernatural* adapted these beliefs for its own purposes.

The dimension of religious knowledge is presented in different ways within the narrative text and also transformed in fan culture. One source of knowledge in the fan culture of *Supernatural* deserves closer attention: the fictional diary of John Winchester that appears in several episodes of the television series. His fictitious diary takes transmediality to a new level, because the book from the television narrative was actually published as paperback in 2009, written by Alex Irvine (Irvine 2009). This allows fans not only to see this journal as an essential knowledge source within the narrative but now also to interact with the fictitious book in reality. It rapidly became a vital part of fan culture, repeatedly being cited on fan homepages.

Episode 1.04 “Phantom Traveler” is a good example of how the printed version of the diary changed fan interaction. In this episode, Sam reads from the journal performing an exorcism to fight a demon. The published journal now allowed fans to read up on the Latin passages used and find out more about this ritual from the source – the journal – itself, drawing fans deeper into the show’s universe. In this chapter of the journal the fictitious author John describes his first encounter with a Catholic exorcism, mentioning that some parts of the original Roman Ritual had been removed (Irvine 2009, 34). Fans take information from this journal, citing it on fan homepages as their reference. For example, the instructions on how to

prepare a séance from John's journal are published in a contribution on supernaturalwiki.com (Supernatural Wiki, 2013e). In the published book, he also addresses the topic of exorcism: "Initial studies indicate that this anti-curse was particularly helpful in ridding the individual of unwanted guests" (Irvine 2009, 34). Later in the chapter, John warns the reader of the powers of an escaping demon after an exorcism, making him or her aware of the fact that demons can enter the human body through the body's natural orifices such as eyes or mouth. While the explanatory text mainly focuses on information already embedded in the narrative of *Supernatural* itself, the journal also draws on academic sources and elements from Christian demonology and exorcism (Böcher 1972, 55). In doing so, the journal contributes to the blurring of boundaries between the real, the fictional, and the mythical and becomes part of fan knowledge. What we see here, then, is that the television series transforms existing religious elements and performs them in a new way. Further, they are delivered to the audience not only through the television narrative itself but also on paper, as in the released *John Winchester's Journal*, or digital publishing on homepages.

This knowledge is transferred in numerous literary works of allegedly high historical value. As a result, transmediality is a central subject within the narrative of *Supernatural*. Not only are books extremely important sources of knowledge within the narrative, so is the brothers' descent from a secret society called the Men of Letters. This supports Irina O. Rajewsky's definition of transmediality as "the appearance of a certain motif, aesthetic, or discourse across a variety of different media" (Rajewsky 2005, 46), further illustrated by the frequent use of Latin and other ancient languages in the narrative text of *Supernatural*.

An example for this production of knowledge is the *Rituale Romanum* in the context of *Supernatural's* narrative. The *Rituale Romanum* is a book of rites used for the celebration of

the sacraments or the giving of blessings. It also contains a section on the performance of exorcisms, fighting demons with prayers and religious symbols. The narrative of *Supernatural* adopts some parts of the actual rituals and transforms them by adding entirely fictitious elements. For example, the importance of accuracy when reading Latin passages in *Supernatural* fan literature in comparison to Roman Catholic texts is striking. This becomes clearer when we read an explanation of the *Rituale Romanum* published in John Winchester's journal, the alleged diary of one of the main characters in *Supernatural*, claiming that the *Rituale Romanum* was "widely used in the mid- to late 13th century in most of eastern Europe until the church banned its use in the beginning of the 14th century." (Irvine 2009, 34). The ascription of time and location is inaccurate and the statement as a whole is exactly what it is supposed to be: more fiction than historic reality. Nevertheless, the mere fact that the *Rituale Romanum* is, in fact, a European artefact serves as a bridge between facts and fiction giving fiction a *realistic aura*. Moreover, the fan homepage supernaturalwiki.com (Supernatural Wiki 2013f) accurately describes the *Rituale Romanum* as the official book of the Roman Rite (though it puts the emphasis on exorcisms and leaves out all the other rites). The Latin texts and incantations used in *Supernatural* are partly correct. What we see here then is some parts of the television narrative correlating to actual religious practice while others are completely fabricated. Fans use this mix to construct their own version of knowledge.

With regard to the importance of intertextuality in *Supernatural*, I agree wholly with Nybro Line Petersen (Petersen 2013). Transmediality and intertextuality play a central role in the narrative and are therefore also an expression of an altered access to knowledge and knowledge acquisition. Peterson first describes the religious elements shown as having been transformed by "a mainstreaming of occulture" (Petersen 2013) and uses Partridge's concept of the occulture to interpret the exorcism scene in 1.22 "The Devil's Trap". The visual

representation of symbols does indeed refer to religious-philosophical and occult traditions mostly based on alleged secret knowledge built upon or within well-known religious systems. However, I do not agree with Petersen's reflections on all points: the exorcism performed by Sam in this scene is an actual, actively performed ritual of the Roman Catholic Church, not part of a sub-culture or the occulture.

Another example of knowledge and its tradition is the *Key of Solomon*, a magical book about summoning and controlling Judeo-Christian demons written in the 17th century, but said to be written by King Solomon himself (Waite 1995, 70). In the narrative of *Supernatural* there are two main different types of devil's traps within the visual depiction: the heptagram and the pentagram, which are enriched with symbols and pictograms from the *Key of Solomon*. The book itself is used as a source of knowledge in *Supernatural* and corresponds to an external representation of historicizing books that carry religious and mythological ancient knowledge. It has an oversized format and a worn leather cover on which are the intertwined letters in the title *Key of Solomon*. The resulting extracted symbols, signs and pictograms that can be used against the supposedly evil, are made up of religious and mythological characters of Judeo-Christian religious and cultural history – although the Jewish elements shown in the *Key of Solomon* are often fictitious.

In addition to the blurring between actual religious practices and fictional elements, *Supernatural* fan culture picks up these new narratives creating new fan knowledge (which is not necessarily the same as historic/factual knowledge). An example of such a (re)production of myths and knowledge can be found when fans repeat *Supernatural*'s assumptions in a contribution on the *Key of Solomon* on a fan homepage:

“The most famous and important of all Grimoires, or handbooks of Magic, containing the actual words and instructions of King Solomon Himself. He instructs his followers on how to summon and master spiritual powers.” (Supernatural Wiki, 2013g)

With this first example I argue that this translation (or dissemination) process is shaped by a mutual relationship between practiced religious reality and fiction contributing to a transformation and mediatization of both the depiction of religious elements and knowledge of religious phenomena. Within fan culture especially, information and further knowledge is influenced by the close interrelation of real and fictitious elements within the narrative of the television series (Hills 2002, 65). Some elements of this empirically unverifiable knowledge may originate from actual religious belief systems, but some are mythical parts of popular culture or contemporary lore supplemented by the series’ own narrative and the fans’ interpretation of the television series.

Fan engagement with the series’ narrative is a complex process. After watching the show, fans often search for further information, in particular on the religious elements within the show, to improve their knowledge. The transformation of religious elements from an actual religious system to the depiction in the audio-visual level within the television series does not end at the level of the individual. Fans create knowledge communities through digital media and fan homepages/forums explaining plot details or what they think the meaning of a symbol or artefact might be. By so doing, religious, mythical, and fictional elements become part of a broader discursive development of knowledge transformation.

Conclusion

Knowledge in general and in particular knowledge about religious elements is depicted and transported within the narrative of *Supernatural*. These elements, emerging primarily from the context of the Jewish and Christian religious systems that are still part of a hegemonic power discourse, point to the fact that a religious meta-narrative is still important in American society. American television series such as *Supernatural* establish and satisfy the need for grand narratives, especially in the post-9/11 era.

The success of the fantasy/mystery/horror genre lies in the general social need for stability, norms and values. Religion or religious elements deliver all of these needed dimensions and therefore have been used explicitly in many productions during the last decade. But television influences, not only within its own society but further afield, are part of a transnational discourse that disseminates specific knowledge worldwide. In the case of *Supernatural*, concrete religious elements, taken from a Judeo-Christian context, spread transnationally and are an example of the worldwide dominance of American television productions as well as the dominance of models of knowledge that are presented as universal ones (Wahling, 1995, p.240).

Knowledge in the case of *Supernatural*, particularly the portrayal of religion and religious elements, is of special interest to many in the fan community. By publishing their findings about different religious phenomena on different fan homepages, they continue the process of knowledge transformation. The mediatisation of religious elements and knowledge within the narrative of *Supernatural* reveals the re-interpretation and re-enforcement of religious elements taken from actual religious systems such as Judaism and Christianity. This discursive development demonstrates that society's knowledge and perception of religion does not only

originate in religious scriptures like the Bible, or more or less well-researched printed books, but now is also influenced by television narratives and digital fan culture.

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¹ Quote taken from a dialog between the archangel Michael and Dean in 5.13 “The Song Remains the Same”.

² An extended version of the argument presented in this paper can be found in Kienzl (2014).