

Between “Despair” and “Carry On”:
What the Final Season of *Supernatural* Tells Us about the Relationship Between Fandom
and Production

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Supernatural (2005-2020) is an American television series created by Eric Kripke that was first broadcast on The WB Television Network and later on The CW Television Network. It tells the story of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who hunt monsters and occult beings. Over the course of the series, they are joined by the angel Castiel and the nephilim Jack who soon become part of their family. Together, they stand up against several supernatural threats and even God. At the time of introducing *Supernatural*, it was yet unthinkable how loyal and consistent of a following it would gain. Over the years the series set up a close connection with its audience, especially with the active fandom part of it, and quickly achieved the status of a 'cult' TV show. Because of the viewers' great interest, the show was renewed for a total of fifteen seasons, making it the longest-running fantasy TV show of all time. Yet when its last episode aired on November 19, 2020, the uproar that followed was vast. The finale has the second-worst rating of all 327 episodes on *IMDB*. Viewers continue to wish for a reboot, unsatisfied with how the series has come to an end. Months after the last episode aired, *Supernatural*-related hashtags are still trending on *Twitter*. Campaigns like '#somethingtosay' or '#theysilencedyou' have been set up. Internet articles are written about *Supernatural* in connection with terms such as 'queer tragedy' and 'the trauma of silence' (Deidre). Especially the fandom is expressing frustration and disappointment, for example on fandom-oriented blogging platforms such as *Tumblr*.

The intense response of the show's audience is closely tied to the last three episodes of *Supernatural*. In these, one of the male lead characters, Castiel, confesses his love to one of the other male protagonists, Dean, and then dies. Since all of this happens in seconds, Dean does not get the chance to respond to the love confession, making any reciprocation impossible. Later in the finale, he dies as well due to an accident. While in the show there are possibilities to avoid permanent death, he chooses to not be saved. Many of the fandom's reactions condemn the immediate death of a character after coming out as queer and the alleged silencing and unhappy end of Dean, referring to a television trope called 'bury your gays'. The term describes that queer characters are killed off or meet another type of unhappy ending, implying that queer identities are not allowed happy endings and/or are viewed as more expendable than their non-queer counterparts. Another point of criticism is that, although Dean has been constructed as queer by the show, encouraging fan's queer readings of him, he has never been explicitly stated as queer in the text. This also transfers to the homoromantic relationship between Dean and Castiel that has been highly wished for by a significant portion of the fandom but has never explicitly been followed through by the

show. While *Supernatural* repeatedly integrates the fandom and its interests in Dean and Castiel's relationship into a meta-narrative, pushing dialogue between fandom and the show, Dean's inability to reciprocate Castiel's feelings denies their romantic relationship to be verbally stated in the series' canon. The fandom, which is to a great amount queer itself and has been wishing for Dean and Castiel's romantic relationship to be acknowledged for years, therefore criticizes not only the traumatic death of a textually queer character to be unresolved but also the suppression of Dean's queer identity and through that the recurring issue of missing representation, the feeling of powerlessness, and the silencing of queer identities in media.

In my thesis, I want to answer the following questions: Which visual and narrative elements are used by the creators of *Supernatural* to suggest Dean and Castiel as queer characters to a queer fandom? How has the representation of Dean and Castiel's relationship been influenced by the ongoing interaction between the show's creators and the fandom? Lastly, what do the events in the final season suggest about fandom as a shaping force?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To answer the first question, I will pay attention to theories associated with Intersectionality and Queer Studies. For the latter, groundwork consists of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, as well as *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler points out gender as constructed and performative, whereby the performance is not just a singular act but a ritualized production that takes place in the form of "words, acts, gestures and desire" (136). Gender as performance is "manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (136) and is thus constantly produced anew. This further applies to the construction of identities such as homosexual and heterosexual identities. In addition, Butler describes in *Bodies That Matter* identity categories as tools of oppressive regulatory systems, as "gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints" (10). Here, heterosexuality is an imitation of an idealized concept. I will use Butler's writings to analyze how Dean's identity is constructed as queer, and further, in which ways his identity is oppressed. Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* is another relevant publication. In this, she challenges the concepts of binary oppositions in sexuality and discusses closeted queerness connected to classic texts with a focus on characters performing queer identities. This is significant in how Dean and Castiel are presented and alluded to over the course of the show as well as the fandom's readings of their

sexualities as somewhere in the queer spectrum. It is also tied to Dean's gender performance in a way that it is overtly masculine and appealing to heteronormative society in some aspects, while he also is perceived as queer by other men and the show's audience. By applying these texts in my thesis I will point out the complexity around Dean's gender identity and sexual identity, which can in many be considered conflicting, and how these conflicts also come back to the fandom and its relationship with the show.

To focus more on the last two questions and the discourse between the fandom and *Supernatural's* creators that has evolved around the relationship between Dean and Castiel, Stuart Hall's *Representation* has to be used as well. In his writings, Hall describes two systems of representation: in the first "meaning depends on the system of concepts and images found in our thoughts which can stand for or 'represent' the world, enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our heads" (17). The second system of representation refers to language, which does not only consist of spoken systems but also of visual images, facial expressions, gestures, or fashion (18-19). According to Hall, language is used to exchange meaning between members of a culture through codes that are culturally constructed, indicating that meaning is produced and relational instead of being simply given. I will show how meaning is constructed between creators and fandom through codes related to Dean and Castiel, and how these play an important role in the show's history. The question of how the representation in the show has been influenced by the discourse between creators and fandom also calls to take into account Roland Barthes' *The Death of The Author*. Barthes predicts a shift in the relation between author and reader, opposing the idea of centering a text's interpretation around the author. Meaning, according to him, depends rather on the reader than the creator. While Barthes' intention was particularly to detach a text's interpretation from the author, I want to rather focus on the shift in society from giving the author power over meaning to giving it to the reader, as shown in this thesis by the shifting power relations between creators and fandom. These power struggles on meaning that are happening around the relationship between Dean and Castiel continue until the show's final season and even until after, as shown in the fandom's negative reactions.

Considering the theoretical framework, there also exists literature on *Supernatural* itself. Specifically, there have been academic writings published on *Supernatural* and the topics of fan fiction, fandom, and queerbaiting. Judith Fathallah discusses in "‘I am a God’: The Author and the Writing Fan in *Supernatural*" the relationship between the author and fan with a focus on what she calls the 'creating fan', thus the fan who creates transformative works around *Supernatural* such as fanfiction or fanart. She does this by specifically looking

at two characters as the representation of fan and author and how those are integrated into the show's meta-character. However, it does not yet consider the recent developments regarding characters and fandom. *The Complex Relationship Between TV Producers and Slash Fans as Demonstrated by Supernatural* expands the relationship of the creating fan and author onto the general notion of the relationship between *Supernatural's* fans and the production. Here, what is discussed is how 'slash', defined as stories that posit a same-sex relationship, is treated in the show as well as what inspires and attracts the viewers to these same-sex relationships. Similar to Fathallah, this text looks at transformative works as a tool of wrestling for control in the power-relation between the author and the fan (46). It is stated that there is a progressive evolution in the dynamics between 'slash' fans and producers from initial rejection to a more supportive stance where "over the years, *Supernatural* producers have progressively stopped trying to silence their transformative fans and have begun to explicitly encourage slash both from within the series and in paratexts" (99). Yet, just as Fathallah, it does not cover the show's most recent events and developments, such as Castiel's homoromantic love confession and Dean's inability to reciprocate these feelings. Therefore, it also does not cover what this means to the interaction between fan and creator and the developments around power and control that have happened before.

With this thesis, I want to contribute to the existing field of research on *Supernatural* with a unique approach to power dynamics in that I connect the discourse between fandom, specifically the fandom around Dean and Castiel's relationship, and the production to Butler's ideas on relations of power, gender, sexuality, and identity and concludingly combine two different ways this show has been analyzed. More importantly, however, I will discuss how the developments in the final season reflect on the shift in power relations between the production and the fandom. This has not been done yet. The only academic writing I could find that included some parts of the final season was *The Complex Relationship Between TV Producers and Slash Fans as Demonstrated by Supernatural*, but even there it was only briefly touched upon and not directly related to Dean and Castiel or the final episodes. I will thus add to the academic discourse by looking at how the final season contributes to the influence of the fandom and the relationship between fans and producers. Additionally, I will also relate this to concepts of gender, sexuality, and identity in that I analyze which meanings are conveyed by first making a character canonically queer and then silencing the character's relationship. This also hasn't been done before, since the finale only aired in November 2020.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter consists of a brief overview of the theoretical framework, methodology, and an introduction to my thesis, which revolves around the dynamic use of language between fandom and creators in regards to the portrayal of the relationship between Dean and Castiel, with emphasis on the final season. In the second chapter, I focus on what has been prior to the fifteenth season: I will do that by looking at Dean's performative masculinity and the relationship between Dean and Castiel. This will be done in the context of the relationship between fandom and production to show how Dean and Castiel are shaped by a continuous dialogue between those parties and how the fandom's influence has become more powerful over the later years. In the last chapter, I will then take into account how the final season depicts fandom and the relationship between Dean and Castiel. Since *Supernatural* often communicates with its fans in a meta-plot that is closely tied to Dean and Castiel, I will analyze such a scene from the final season's episode "Atomic Monsters" and set this in relation to Castiel's confession and Dean's death.

To answer my research question, I will make use of both film analysis and discourse analysis. Through using methods presented in *Film Art* by Bordwell and Thompson, I want to examine the cinematography of relevant scenes to analyze how Dean and Castiel are performing queer identities and how the fandom is depicted by the show. This will be done by focussing on how Dean and Castiel look at each other, which is often called 'eyefucking' by both the production and fans, and how Dean and Castiel are framed. I will also analyze specific scenes from the fifteenth season episode "Atomic Monsters" with regards to the dialogue. The discourse analysis will be based on Stuart Hall's *Representation* and James Paul Gee's *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. By looking at the use of language and dialogue between fandom and production, such as specific terminology like 'eyefucking' or methods like framing, it will be examined which values, beliefs, and assumptions are communicated between both parties and how it relates to Dean and Castiel's relationship.

Supernatural has a strong cultural impact. Over the course of its fifteen years-long existence, a lot of conventions in television changed. What was aired in 2005 is of course very different from 2020. This can also be directly reflected in the relationship and growing interaction between the series and fan culture. *Supernatural* has a close connection to fandom in several countries, with a significant part of it being LGBTQ+ (Tenberge). The fandom is sometimes even seen as a family, as one major concept in *Supernatural* is that family 'doesn't end in blood.' However, while the show has been discussed in academia before, the

love confession, as well as the finale aired only recently, and the strong reactions to it have yet to be addressed. How big of an impact the recent events of the show had can also be seen in the ongoing need to discuss and work through the trauma that is connected to the final season. With my thesis, I want to discuss a new aspect of the relationship between queerness and *Supernatural*. The word queer is here used as the reclaimed umbrella term.

Chapter 2 - Meaning-Making on Dean and Castiel

THE PERFORMATIVE MASCULINITY OF DEAN WINCHESTER

In this chapter, I will point out the changes around Dean's queer identity and his relationship with the character of Castiel and how these relate to the fandom. By doing so, I will illustrate that there has been a shift in language and interaction between production and fandom and that the fandom has influenced the way these characters are portrayed on *Supernatural*. However, I will also point out the conflicts between fandom and production and the power struggle around it.

The character of Dean Winchester is, especially in the earlier seasons, portrayed as a good-looking, flirtatious, adventurous womanizer who lives on the road from job to job, continuously in motion. He drives around in an American muscle car, a 1967 Chevrolet Impala, wears a leather jacket, owns a trunk full of weapons, has a self-assured, cocky attitude, and frequently shows his love of fast food and beer. This fits Jowett's vision of Dean in "Love/Hate: Supernatural THEN and NOW", where Dean is described as "macho and brusque" and as someone who "hates emotions and feelings, he verges on sexist, racist, homophobic, he rejects social norms, is seen living almost entirely among men and is exceptionally violent" (72). Dean is a white, able-bodied, conventionally attractive man who plays into the stereotypes around dominant and toxic masculinity through acting out anger issues, while at the same time also suppressing his feelings, as well as making sexual innuendos and occasionally jokes that are sexist. This way of acting applies mostly to the first seasons. As an example, in the pilot episode, he comments on Sam with "no chick flick moments" after his brother apologizes for saying something hurtful. By doing this, he attaches Sam's expression of emotion to gender stereotypes such as women being emotional and accommodating. Moreover, he communicates not complying with norms of masculinity as a sign of weakness, and thus constructs already in the first episode an identity that, seen through the lens of Butler's theory, is very centered around the identity categories that tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes (309). Early on, Dean's use of violence is rarely

criticized, since it serves his role of the American action hero who saves others, often also helpless women, which again plays into dominant stereotypes on gender roles. His masculinity is presented in an exciting, desirable way, something out of the ordinary. He is aware of a Supernatural world that is presented as abjected, dangerous, and also often eroticized, as seen with the Woman in White, vampires, or demons, but only known as a myth to the average human. In this world, he functions as the one who defies the threatening other in order to save who is human.

However, as Jowett states as well, the show “demonstrates that masculinity is a performance” (73). Dean’s acting on masculinity is indeed just that, an act. The impala, his leather jacket, his taste in classic rock music, as well as hunting the Supernatural are all things his now-deceased father John has handed down to him with the expectation to take over his role. Dean is subjected to John’s ideas even after his death. While his brother got the chance to run away and obtain an academic education, Dean is continuously expected to show obedience towards his abusive and absent father while at the same time also performing his father’s toxic masculinity. For instance, after his mother dies, he is often expected to take care of Sam and cook for him while John is on a hunt, and therefore show domestic behaviors that are often seen as feminine. Yet at the same time, he has to already solve his first cases and learn how to shoot a gun. While he exercises violence, he is also subjected to it, becoming unable to settle down and leave the road since he cannot find peace with new antagonists appearing every season. He is also continuously sexualized, objectified and feminized by his enemies, or even fellow hunters. In “Exile on Main Street”, he is told “you have delicate features for a hunter”. The demon Abaddon confronts his obedience in “Devil May Care” while at the same time threatening to take away his autonomy, possess and “use” his body for acts of violence. In “Clap Your Hands If You Believe”, the soulless version of Sam makes a gay sexual assault joke directed at him. Dean isn’t someone who fits into established normative structures. He’s an outcast who has problems with male authority figures, for example with the policeman in the Pilot episode, John Winchester, and later also God himself, and continuously tries to free himself from performing the masculinity that is attributed to him by others.

Deans masculinity is often parodied by the show itself. For instance in the season 2 episode “Playthings”, where Sam and Dean are mistaken as a homosexual couple. When Dean asks why people assume he’s gay, Sam answers with “well, you are kinda butch, but I just think you’re overcompensating” (09:05-09:13). Another time, Sam makes fun of Dean by asking “you gonna... look at more anime? Or are you... strictly into Dick now?” (Time

after Time 07:33-07:40), mocking both Dean's obsessive interest in hentai as well as the season's villain Dick Roman, while at the same time implying his sexuality to be other than heterosexual. When Dean meets his alternative universe self, he makes sure of his identity by telling him a secret only he would know: "She made us try on her panties. They were pink. And satiny. And you know what? We kind of liked it" (The End 13:11-13:50). Most of the time when the show parodies Dean's "tough-guy facade" (Dodson and Baily, 87), these jokes are set in the context of sexuality. Playing into gay stereotypes or stereotypes around gender and sexuality is nothing new in filmmaking (Rudy 62), although it has diminished, showing that dominant ideas on sexuality and masculinity are shifting. This shift is also becoming more visible in the characterization of Dean as the show moves on, also through Dean becoming more comfortable to show his emotions around others, especially Castiel. Dean is still sometimes presented as insecure when being flirted at by men, however, it is less to poke fun at homosexual stereotypes or his masculinity and more directed at Dean finding his identity. In many ways, Dean also opposes dominant ideas on masculinity, especially in the later seasons.

The way Dean's identity is presented is thus changing from being made fun of in an often homophobic way towards a serious exploration of sexuality and gender connected to his relationship with Castiel. However, through being constructed as not openly queer he still suffers a feeling of powerlessness, subjection, and restriction that other characters do not encounter: he is continuously pushed into performing masculinity that idealizes heterosexuality and stereotypically masculine traits because of his fear of rejection. Consequently, while the changes in Dean's performative masculinity present the gain of power and understanding towards queer audiences and fandom, keeping Dean's queerness subtext only denies potential representation. Instead, it rather services oppressive regulatory systems around identity categories. To help deconstruct dominant ideas and give visibility to queer audiences, Dean would have to break free from the way he is subjected in his identity performance and actively vocalize his queerness.

TEN YEARS OF 'EYE-SEX': THE DYNAMIC LANGUAGE BETWEEN FANS AND PRODUCERS

As Hall expresses in *Representation*, meanings are produced and communicated as language, whereas language includes not only written or spoken word, but consists of different elements such as sounds, notes, gestures, expressions, or clothes (21). Language functions as a practice that works through representation and is closely tied to identity and knowledge.

Both Butler and Hall approach meaning, as well as identity, as constructed instead of simply given or found. With this in mind, the question can be asked how these aspects of meaning-making function in *Supernatural*. In specific, how does the show make use of gestures, framing, and spoken language to produce an intimate relationship between Dean and Castiel? Additionally, how does this play into fan's interpretations of them, given that Hall emphasizes that language is a circulation of meaning and shared values? For this, I will not only look at the cinematography and gestures but also at their function concerning text and subtext.

When looking at the relationship between Dean and Castiel, it has to be kept in mind that their identities and stances toward each other are continuously shifting over the course of ten seasons and that meaning-making is a discursive and dialogic process; the meaning of the show is produced by the fandom as well, not only by the makers. The aspect of 'eyefucking' has been assembled as a significant aspect of Dean and Castiel's relationship, especially in the earlier seasons. The term is used by the fans as well as by the production team to describe the intense stares between both characters. Members of the fandom have made compilations on YouTube of Dean and Castiel looking at each other (bakasara, Fandom Business). Jensen Ackles and Misha Collins who portray Dean and Castiel have mentioned during conventions that the term is also written in the script (Hasnaa 0:36-1:22). This demonstrates that writers are aware of the meaning that is created by adding the 'eyefucking' to the show and even encourage it as a manner of communicating with fans. Collins stated during a *SPNDEN* convention panel as an answer to a Destiel-related question: "The scripts over time have increasingly just been like 'okay we know what's going on'. So the text will say things like 'Dean and Cas eyefuck'." (Gayled_it 42:30-45:45). Collins also adds to this that a shift has happened from Destiel being a taboo topic to being more openly discussed and positively notes that the writers now "can talk about it". By doing so, he points out a continuing change in language considering both what happens in the show, with the homoerotic tension and the close relationship between the characters being more embraced over time, as well as in the discourse around fandom and shipping. However, as *The Complex Relationship Between TV Producers and Slash Fans as Demonstrated by Supernatural* points out as well, many writers and producers still stay silent on the subject of slash fiction (86), and the, albeit lessening, jokes around the topic reinforce both the stigma around fanfiction as simple pornography well as deeming homosexual pairings as laughable and disillusional (92). The silence on Destiel that is described here mostly applies to events outside of the show, such as Comic-Con panels or social media presence, where fans have the possibility to directly ask

questions about the production process and the writer's intentions not only directed at actors, such as the very open and Destiel-supportive Collins, but also at writers and directors who may have said less about it.

Yet fans are not the only ones who contribute to the homoerotic tension and long stares. By including the 'eyefucking' in the show, it explores the relationship between Dean and Castiel. It is used in two different ways: Firstly, it is applied to add humor to tense situations and to demonstrate Castiel's initial troubles to understand human relationships. An example for this would be when Dean calls Castiel in "My Bloody Valentine", only for Castiel to teleport in front of him and the two then staring at each other while still on their phones (10:04-10:20). When Dean is guarded by the other in "Point of No Return", Castiel stares at him, whereas Dean responds "Oh Cas, not for nothing, but the last person who looked at me like that - I got laid." (18:00-18:07). This makes the angel stare even more intensely, causing Dean to wink at him. These forms of 'eyefucking' are often played down by verbal commentary and do not add further to the episode's storyline. They may convey the meaning that the homoerotic tension between the two characters is something simply to be laughed about and brushed aside. While *Supernatural* is not explicitly stating it, this again plays into ideas of homosexuality as something funny and the use of jokes on gay people in film. Just as the ridiculing of Dean's sexuality and masculinity, they contribute to the harmful idea of performing homosexuality as laughable. At the same time, these kinds of scenes only appear in seasons four to six, implying that both a shift in their relationship has happened as well as a change in cultural and fandom context. To better understand this, one must look at the second form of 'eyefucking' in the show: instances in which it conveys romantic meaning to its audience or deepens the relationship between Dean and Castiel. Such moments often deal with losing or finding each other and occur far more often than the first example. Here, Dean and Castiel look at each other as a way of communicating wordlessly. This also may be needed in situations in which they disagree or call for their bond in favor of making decisions, as for example in "Lucifer Rising". These uses of 'eyefucking' are relevant for the narrative and not just placed into the episode to create a lighthearted moment. Other moments like this include when Dean finds Castiel to be alive in "The Born-Again Identity" or in "Advanced Thanatology", but also for example when Castiel heals him in "Swan Song". They are generally fond and may be accompanied by physical touch, although seldom. Both versions of 'eyefucking' show a form of communicating that is exclusive to Dean and Castiel, the gradual shift towards the second form however also indicates the way in which the characters continue to make decisions in favor of each other and grow closer,

with Castiel's staring being less about misunderstanding what is associated with human behavior and more about becoming part of the found family. Additionally, it shows a change in the language that is used in the meaning-making process between fans and the production, with the idea of Destiel as a ship being less ridiculed and instead even embraced.

Supernatural demonstrates the impact of fans on meaning-making and the production of a show. Fandom is no longer a closed-off space on the internet that is often treated with shame and reclusion but appears to be in dialogue with writers and producers about aspects such as 'eyefucking'. This also becomes visible when looking at transformative works such as fanfiction: In connection with othered identities or identities that are constructed as outside the norm through disciplinary techniques, fanfiction also has suffered from being ridiculed in the past, since it often includes these identities and is perceived as low-culture, unreal or alienated from the original work. *The Complex Relationship Between TV Producers and Slash Fans as Demonstrated by Supernatural* adds to this that "originally, fanfiction writers were mostly seen as trying to steal the story away from its original author" (47) and that fanfiction "is often seen as power struggle between fans and producers over the control of the meaning-making process" (46). Fanfiction thus raises the question: to whom belongs the story? This question is especially asked since transformative works often oppose established power structures and dominant ideas on gender and sexuality.

The increasing visibility around Destiel makes it possible to include identity into the discourse around it. This is demonstrated in that fandom is often seen as a safe space by queer fans to talk openly about their queerness and find acceptance. Many transmasculine fans also identify with Dean Winchester, and many bisexual, pansexual or lesbian women also express their queer identity through supporting Destiel as a queer ship. With fandom now being more present than ever before, it allows extending the dialogue around *Supernatural*. LGBTQIA+ issues as well as the lack of representation of women and characters of color in the show can be vocalized. It becomes also possible to criticize the way these characters have been killed off in the show as a way to drive the plot forward. This is not only discussed online but also in convention panels. For example, Misha Collins criticized "why do they have to say 'bitch' and kill all the women? You know? It seems there are certain small ways in which the show is sort of gratuitously misogynistic when it doesn't need to be" (Joalario 0:46-1:30), bringing forward as well the show's complex and often ambiguous relationship with gender and sexuality. In a *JIBCon* panel he and executive producer, director, and occasional writer on *Supernatural*, Robert Singer, talked about the death of the character Charlie Bradbury, who was a gay woman, and displayed conflicting

opinions. Collins once again challenged the killing-off of non-heterosexual and/or female characters while Singer insisted that it wasn't because of Charlie being gay (todokanai01). This dialogue demonstrates that the production is not just a simple unit but rather consists of many different writers, producers, and directors who understand and make meaning differently from each other and also have different relationships with fans and audiences. Some may be known in the fandom as very Destiel-supportive, such as Robert Berens, Meredith Glynn, Robbie Thompson, or Eric Charmelo, who has repeatedly liked Destiel fanart on *Twitter*, while others are known as more against Destiel such as Robert Singer, Sera Gamble or Eric Kripke. The fandom here has created its own discourse around the writers, including posts on *Tumblr* on how much writers subconsciously or intentionally write Destiel scenes, such as "The Queerbait Matrix" (thylaa).

The shift in language on Dean and Castiel's relationship shows the impact of fandom on the production of *Supernatural*. This goes so far as that the fandom and its views on the relationship between Dean and Castiel have been integrated into the show itself in a meta-textual way. As an example, there is the season ten episode "Fan Fiction" in which Sam and Dean investigate a case at a theatre, only to find out that there is a musical written by fans about their lives. The episode discusses concepts around fandom through the musical: the show's characters are portrayed by actors while the actual characters of Sam and Dean watch. During the episode, Sam and Dean reflect on what they see and interact with the characters who wrote the play, symbolically representing the creators of the show interacting with the writers of transformative works. Dean and Castiel's relationship is reflected upon as well. For instance, Dean sees the actresses who portray Dean and Castiel hugging and asks if that is in the show. Thereupon the director answers "Oh, no. Siobhan and Kristen are a couple in real life. Although, we do explore the nature of Destiel in act two. [...] Oh, it's just subtext! But, then again, you know, you can't spell subtext without.... s-e-x." (13:24-13:56). The word 'Destiel' is also discussed later in the episode between Dean and Sam. 'Destiel' or 'DeanCas' is the terminology the fandom uses when referring to Dean and Castiel in a romantic relationship or as in love. Through this episode's use of fandom language and portrayal of queer characters, *Supernatural* acknowledges the fandom's influence, honors its loyal queer audience, and shows the awareness around fan's interests in a romantic relationship between Dean and Castiel. It conveys a stance in which transformative works are accepted and embraced and the show is even called a transformative work itself (12:23-13:24). The general idea that is conveyed here is 'you do you', in the sense that writing Dean and Castiel in a romantic relationship is portrayed as an alternative, also valid, version or interpretation of the

show. However, since this episode has no greater influence on the general plot of the show or on how Dean and Castiel's relationship progresses, 'Destiel' stays to some extent separated from *Supernatural* as the television series. While there has been a significant gain of power and influence of the fandom on *Supernatural* and its portrayal of the relationship between Dean and Castiel, in the end, the process of meaning-making is still controlled to some extent by the creators of the show. How does this reflect on the final season?

Chapter 3 - Coming Through

PRODUCTION AND FANDOM IN SEASON FIFTEEN

In the series final season, fandom and creators of the show are again portrayed in a meta-textual way as in dialogue with each other. This happens through the character of God, the fifteenth season's main villain. God has been first introduced in season four. Back then, he appears as the prophet and author Chuck Shurley who writes based on divine visions of what will happen to Sam and Dean and publishes this as a low-selling book series that is also called *Supernatural*. Only later in the eleventh season, he is revealed to be God himself, after much speculation by fans about Chuck's real identity. Over the course of the later seasons, the image of Chuck slowly shifts into that of a villain, until it is revealed that he has been controlling the character's lives from the beginning, "causing them to doubt how much free will they actually have" (*The Complex Relationship*, 28). It is further disclosed that he is planning on writing his final story, with the ultimate goal to have one brother kill the other to complete his narrative. He continuously tries to force Sam and Dean into the roles given by him.

Since his first appearance, Chuck, as a meta-textual author figure, represents the way meaning-making is linked to the production of the show and allows for the creators behind *Supernatural* to insert themselves into it and, again, include the fandom into the series. This is especially possible due to the introduction of another character, Becky Rosen: Becky, who appears first in the fifth season, is a fan of the *Supernatural* books that Chuck has written and a slash fanfiction writer herself. As explained previously, slash is a fanfiction genre that focuses on same-sex romantic or sexual relationships (*The Complex Relationship*, 5). In "'I am a God': The Author and the Writing Fan in *Supernatural*", Fathallah explains the way in which Chuck and Becky enter into a dialogue, depicting the power-relations between the author Chuck as a visionary or God and the slash fan Becky as writing secondary or false texts (161). For Fathallah, the depiction of the author in the show is one more powerful than

the transformative fan, who is presented as “excessive, excitable and feminine” (160), thus performing an identity that is constructed as inferior by gender stereotypes. This would mean that while *Supernatural* acknowledges the existence of the fandom through the symbolic figure of Becky, it is presented it subordinate to the show’s production, here appearing in the symbolic figure of Chuck. However, there are multiple aspects that Fathallah does not take into account. Firstly, Fathallah focuses only on the show’s creator Eric Kripke as the author and the person that Chuck represents. By doing so, she does not take into account the many different writers that have created an episode for the show and also does not include the directors, the television network, or other parties involved in the show’s production. Looking only at a single writer is too simplistic when it comes to the dialogue between the fandom and production. Secondly, Fathallah only looks at the events of the early seasons and therefore does not consider the shift that has been happening in the power dynamic between fandom and the show’s creators.

The fact that the author has been made a villain in the fifteenth season is a great example of such a shift of power towards the fandom. He is now the one that is wrong. The way he has been meaning-making becomes irrelevant since it evokes the need to be defied, to be proven wrong, and to be overcome. The characters confront him and withstand him, pointing out the ways in which the author’s intention does not matter anymore. Once again, Becky and Chuck engage in a dialogue, but now it is not Becky who is ridiculed. In the season fifteen episode “Atomic Monsters” they have a conversation about writing and the ideas on a good ending. Chuck visits Becky to get feedback on his writing, only to learn that Becky now successfully makes a living with an etsy-shop that sells self-made models of *Supernatural* in the whole world. Her fan creations are not only something she can make money with, but it also displays to the viewer that creating something transformative is still a form of work. She states that she is now happy and that she has changed: Becky Rosen is no longer constructed as excessive, excitable, and feminine as she has been in the early seasons, instead, she has matured. Since Becky’s character is symbolic for the fandom, this also shows a change in how the fandom is framed in the show: from the immature teen that was made fun of, she has shifted into a self-determined adult that critically reflects *Supernatural*. When Chuck asks if she is still obsessed with his work, Becky answers:

“You mean, my work. Look, what you were writing was real, like, really real. You sort of channeled Sam and Dean’s lives because you’re a prophet. [...] And sure, I got a little obsessed and it took me to a dark place. [...] So instead if reading your stories,

I kept writing my own. [...] Where the guys didn't have to hunt monsters all the time. They just sit around and do laundry and talk, you know? I mean, that's what people like the most anyway." (14:20-15:12)

Her words demonstrate a significant contrast to the original author - fan relationship that Fathallah writes about. Instead of her writing secondary texts that derivate from the truth, her transformative works are no longer subjected to Chuck himself, having freed herself from the author's, or the creator's, influence. Like the fandom, she has gained power, albeit being a bit more separated from the creator than the fandom. Her ideas on *Supernatural* are portrayed as at least equal to Chuck's, if not as superior. Chuck even asks her to make him feel big again (16:19-16:35) and voices his feeling of powerlessness (23:07-23:23), implying the dependence of the production on the fandom, which Becky then denies with the words "I don't need you" (17:11-17:16), as she has distanced herself from his intentions. When she points out that she is a writer as well, and Chuck responds with "I mean, fanfic, it's not really the same thing", she states that "writing is writing", which Chuck then agrees upon (24:21-24;27). Becky also voices her concern with the way the characters in *Supernatural* are subjected to a greater power, as to Chuck who channeled their lives, or the monster-hunting lifestyle. She invites the characters to break free from their restraints as well and become their happier self. This connects to my analysis of Dean in chapter two, in which I demonstrated that Dean struggles around his identity and his inability to break away from oppressive masculinities and violence, albeit willing.

Chuck then continues to give Becky his ending of *Supernatural* and asks her for feedback. Becky condemns it with the words "no one even mentions Cas[tiel]" among other points of criticism (29:27-29:56). Chuck, who takes her feedback personally, rewrites the ending into a dark, evil version in which everyone is killed off, stating that "fans are gonna love it" (35:33-35:37). However, Becky is appalled by it: "It's awful! Horrible. It's hopeless. You can't do this to the fans. What you did to Dean? What you did to Sam?" (35:40-35:55). Chuck, delighted by her dismay, then disintegrates her and her family with the help of his powers while saying "I'm god" (36:44-36:45). What does this suggest about the shift in power relations between fandom and production? While before it seemed like the transformative writer or the fan has gained significant influence on the story, the characters, and their relationships, Chuck is still able to silence Becky within seconds, removing her from the screen. Does that mean that in the end, the fan is actually powerless? It has to be kept in mind that Chuck is the villain of the season, not the hero. His ending is still portrayed

as bad, and his character is depicted as evil. His way of controlling the characters is criticized as obsessive and violent. Through the way both characters are portrayed, the show displays an agreement with Becky's opinion rather than Chuck's, implying that Chuck is wrong. The quest of this season is for the characters to overcome Chuck's claim of authority and defy him, rather than play into his attempt to regain power. How does this relate to the depiction of the relationship of Dean and Castiel?

DEAN, CASTIEL, AND THEIR POWER STRUGGLE WITH FREEDOM

As mentioned earlier in my thesis, Chuck has been revealed to have controlled Sam and Dean Winchester's lives. However, it is also disclosed that there is one character of all that he has no power over: Castiel. Early on, Castiel is established as symbolizing free will, including both positive and negative consequences. While angels are usually programmed to obey, Castiel develops feelings for Dean and interest in humans that make him question his orders and develop a strong own will. He chooses to rebel against heaven and the him-given commands in order to save Dean and continues to present the impact of making decisions for himself. Castiel is repeatedly shown to intervene with what is told to be destiny. As he says himself: "The grand story. And we ripped up the ending, and the rules, and destiny, leaving nothing but freedom and choice" (The Man Who Would Be King 02:33-03:00). However, the character of Castiel does not only symbolize free will in the show, but also in the relationship between production and fandom: He was only introduced because of an unplanned occurrence. During the making of the third season in 2007, writers for film and TV shows began a strike that continued for over two months and also affected *Supernatural*, causing it to be shortened. The original concept was changed and Castiel was created. While he was originally intended to only be in three episodes, he appeared in 147 in total, and soon became a series regular and fan favorite. Although he had died multiple times, he always was brought back due to negative fan responses. It can be said that without Castiel, *Supernatural* probably would have never reached fifteen seasons, since many fans only continued to watch the show because of Castiel and his relationship with Dean. Therefore, he always has been an important asset in the power struggles between fandom and production. As I have demonstrated earlier, Dean is a character who is complex in his identity, and while becoming more secure with himself through the help of Castiel, he still is subjected to an abusive father and to God. He is simultaneously coded as queer and forced into conventions of hypermasculinity. Ultimately, Dean is a character that is oppressed, as he is desperately fighting to regain power over his identity but is unable to definitely break free. In many

ways, he reflects the relationship between Destiel-enthusiastic slash fans and producers, in that while there has been a shift and an increase in influence, Dean and Castiel had never been verbally stated as romantically interested in each other. The final season heavily emphasizes Dean's struggle with being controlled by a dominant male figure which also symbolizes the author or creators behind the show. There is only one way for him to break free: through his relationship with Castiel and the ability to perform a queer identity.

In the 15x18 episode "Despair", a promise for this finally happens. While on their mission to defy God, Dean and Castiel end up in a situation that will resolve in their certain death. Then Castiel remembers that he has made a deal with the empty, a cosmic entity that will allow him to save Dean if he manages to become finally happy. As the deal demands, his happiness will immediately resolve in his own death, however. Castiel finds his happiness by confessing his love to Dean and speaking his truth:

"I know how you see yourself, Dean. You see yourself the same way our enemies see you. You're destructive, and you're angry, and you're broken. You're 'daddy's blunt instrument.' And you think that hate and anger, that's ... That's what drives you, that's who you are. It's not. And everyone who knows you sees it. Everything you have ever done, the good and the bad, you have done for love. You raised your little brother for love. You fought for this whole world for love. That is who you are. You're the most caring man on Earth. You are the most selfless, loving human being I will ever know. You know, ever since we met, ever since I pulled you out of Hell ... Knowing you has changed me. Because you cared, I cared. I cared about you. I cared about Sam, I cared about Jack... I cared about the whole world because of you. You changed me, Dean. [...] I love you." (36:27-38:15)

Not only does Castiel address the way Dean is repeatedly subjected to and abused by dominant masculinities and authority figures, he also addresses Dean's performative masculinity and his desire to be openly queer and to love unconditionally. He helps to deconstruct the oppressive system that holds Dean in place. Castiel's self-sacrifice, his homoromantic love-confession, allows Dean to live on and to defy Chuck, the author and God. Through that Castiel frees Dean, the fandom around Destiel is also freed from a year-long power struggle around meaning-making: Castiel's love is textual and vocalized. It is no longer accused of being subtext, false, or an alternative truth, it is not ridiculed or made fun of like homosexuality on the show has been before. It is no longer only hinted at to

attract a queer audience. Instead, the ongoing interaction between producers and fandom has ultimately influenced the way in which Castiel is depicted, namely as openly queer. Not only that, but his queerness is depicted as helping both Dean and Castiel in their self-acceptance and as a way to overcome Chuck. Queer romance is the one thing that exists beyond the power of production and is at the core of free will.

THE END - YET A TRAGEDY

If Castiel has been openly stated as being in love with Dean, and the fandom is depicted as having gained power and influence over Dean and Castiel's romantic interest, why is the fandom response so negative? First of all, because of Castiel's deal with the empty, the coming out as queer is immediately connected with death. The moment that Castiel is allowed to be happy and perform a queer identity, he is killed off and removed from the show. The character who expresses his queerness is silenced afterward. Also, Castiel only got the possibility to come out as queer and in love with Dean when it was already known that the show would end. In this case, there are no long-term consequences of what has happened because the story is completed anyways. Is it really representation when a character never gets the chance to act on not being straight? Furthermore, questions are asked around the trope of 'bury your gays', since Castiel didn't get to survive. However, 'bury your gays' refers to a history of tragedy and pain, Castiel though has become happier than he ever was before through his confession, finding an end that is connected to self-acceptance rather than suffering. Additionally, with the fact that he has confessed his love, the nearly ten years of continuous queer readings of him by fans have been justified to a greater audience, an audience that still mainly orientates itself at the production's intentions rather than look at transformative works as valid or as equal as the show itself.

The bigger issue revolves around the character of Dean and the fact that he never got the chance to discuss the confession. In the following two episodes after "Despair", which are also the last of the show, he never once mentions the love confession or its impact. Moreover, has no chance to reciprocate Castiel's feelings since the other dies in mere seconds after his revelation. While Dean manages to defy Chuck and leave him powerless, he still dies at the end of the story: in "Carry On", the series finale, he gets into a vampire hunting accident. Usually, vampire hunts are nothing special or challenging to the Winchesters and their fifteen years of fighting supernatural beings on screen. All the more out of place it seems that Dean is shoved into the end of a rebar by a vampire and dies through the related injury. While in *Supernatural* there are possibilities to revive humans, he

explicitly begs Sam to not be brought back. Opposing Castiel, Dean's death is not meaningful in a way that it helps to save or defy someone, instead, it is an accident, something that should not be happening. While him finding his end frees himself from the restraints and the years of subjection to the hunting lifestyle, it seems like he is giving up. Rather than finding his freedom through his relationship with Castiel, he ceases to exist. In this way Chuck has gotten his ending: It is hopeless, something terrible happens to Dean, and Castiel is not mentioned. The way in which Dean is killed rather fits the trope of 'bury your gays' than Castiel's sacrifice, since he is not granted the possibility to find a happy end.

What does the show's ending suggest about fandom as a shaping force? In the dialogue between Becky and Chuck and the general tone on the relationship between Dean and Castiel, it seems like the fandom has gained power. Becky's version of *Supernatural* seems to be the right one. With the confession scene, something has been integrated into the show which has been desired for years. All in all, it seems like the fandom has gained significant influence on the meaning-making around *Supernatural*. It also seems like this influence is acknowledged by the production in the way that the figure of the author has become a villain, criticizing the way in which he always believes to be right. Yet the occurrences in the final episodes seem to be going against everything desired by the fandom when it comes to the character of Dean and the incomplete romantic relationship between Dean and Castiel. In retrospect, the dialogue between Becky and Chuck looks like a foreshadowing or warning of the finale. An explanation for this could be what I have mentioned in the second chapter: there is not one single creator or producer. Writers differ in their opinions, and they also differ from the directors and other parties involved in the production of a television show. Above all, the television network is a great source of power that decides whether certain things are allowed in a show or not. It could have been that writers were trying to engage with the fandom and transfer their power to the transformative fan, but eventually could not complete this action due to network interference. Chuck would then not symbolically depict the writer, but rather the network interfering and forcing its end upon the story. There are many theories in the fandom that center around the finale. COVID-19 is discussed as an active influence on the show's production, and fans suspect that there have been scenes cut out of the final product. Alleged script leaks imply that there were fourteen omitted scenes in an earlier draft of the finale (Wilkinson), scenes that some fans think could potentially have contained a romantic reunion between Dean and Cas. However, little is actually known. Chaos Machine Productions, a production company formed by the actor of Dean, Jensen

Ackles, and his wife, Danneel Ackles, has announced to be working on a *Supernatural* prequel (Andreeva). Fans are skeptical after the events of the finale, however, since Chaos Machine's head of development Renee Reiff is a founding member of the new LGBTQIA+ advocacy group 'Out in Hollywood' (Andreeva) and since Chaos Machine Productions presents itself as very LGBTQIA+-friendly, there is hope for positive and especially visible queer representation. If this means a potential return of Dean and Castiel's relationship on screen and a discussion of Castiel's love confession is unclear. Though, at the end of the day, the fandom's enormous influence on and close interaction with the show cannot be denied.

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