



Breaking the Mirror Metafictional Strategies in *Supernatural*

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Like those guys, from the book. What are they called?
Uh . . . *Supernatural*! Two guys use fake IDs with rock
aliases, hunt down ghosts, demons, and vampires.

What are their names? Uh . . .

“The Monster at the End of This Book” (4.18)

When the seller of the “Golden Comic” bookshop describes the protagonists of the novels written by Carver Edlund, viewers share the surprise of Sam and Dean, the protagonists of *Supernatural*, the TV show. With the characters’ realization that their own lives are being reflected in the books, the illusionist mirror created by this fantasy series of horror and adventure is shattered.

Illusionism, argues Robert Stam, “pretends to be something more than mere artistic production; it presents its characters as real people, its sequence of words or images as real time, and its representations as substantiated fact” (1). But what happens in the “The Monster at the End of This Book” is not an isolated occurrence. Because one of the

most unique narrative strategies of *Supernatural* is the way it creates a break with the mirror that characterizes traditional fiction and turns it in upon itself, underscoring its own fictitiousness. This rupture occurs, in varying degrees, throughout the entire series and proves essential in the Winchesters' battle against the army of darkness.

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis, meanwhile, use the term "reflexivity" to refer to "the process by which texts foreground their own production, their authorship, their intertextual influences, their textual processes, or their reception" (200).

These definitions identify the main characteristic of metafiction: its attempt to lay bare the conventions of realism and the artifice produced by fiction. Accordingly, in *Supernatural's* metafictional fragments, the "demarcations between text and context, story and interpretation, and writing and reading can become blurred or reversed" (Martin 174), introducing into the heart of the TV series realities coming from outside the work itself.

Although it is a widespread phenomenon in the audiovisual universe, metafiction cannot be defined as a genre unto itself like detective fiction, horror, or comedy. It is, rather, a transverse category that runs across a work. As a result, this essay will discuss comic episodes ("Tall Tales," 2.15), drama ("Swan Song," 5.22), reality television ("Ghostfacers," 3.13), and even retro pastiche ("Monster Movie," 4.5), all examples of different genres that are, at the same time, metafictional. I will analyze how the elements that define illusionism are cast into doubt or directly challenged in *Supernatural* because metafiction is born from pushing the boundaries of the classic artistic tension between illusion and reflexivity (Stam 1). It is an attempt to unveil the mechanisms that shape such an illusion, negating the idea of transparency and realism that has traditionally been granted to fiction.

With this theoretical background, this essay attempts to sketch a

map of the reflexive strategies that the creators of the series gradually employ: the juxtaposition of fictional and real worlds, the recurrent intertextuality, the satire of the television medium, the self-consciousness of the story, and the breaking down of the fourth wall.

“How are we in Heaven?”

Firstly, *Supernatural*'s narrative exhibits a conventional format, where characters live in a fictional world and act out fictional plotlines. However, there are some episodes that call into question their boundaries by contrasting the fantasy world and that of the “real world” (the fictional world of the story). These are episodes where the writers slowly break the illusionism little by little but not totally. The characters move within the plotline from the “real world” to the “fantasy world,” but they never address the camera or step out of character. Thus the viewer is simply an outside observer looking into this two world diegetic¹ story.

These alternate realities — a convention of the fantasy genre — occur for the first time in “What Is, and What Should Never Be,” (2.20) where Dean is attacked by a djinn, a kind of genie from Arabian mythology, that knocks people out and makes them dream peacefully. Dean enters a fantasy world without demons where his mother is alive and his relationship with Sam is cold and distant. While this alternate reality is in many ways preferable, he comes to realize that it is not real and he needs to wake up. This narrative strategy causes a stinging melancholy for a life that might have been but is not. Something similar happens in “It’s a Terrible Life” (4.17) in which the brothers live dull and boring lives in an alternate reality. This time, a number of hinge elements present in both universes — such as the Ghostfacers’ website or the Winchesters’ recurring dreams of hunting things — cause them to become aware of existing in a parallel world. An even more hallucinatory dream takes place in “When the Levee Breaks” (4.21), in which Sam is confined in order to overcome his addiction to demon blood and, in full withdrawal, imagines being tortured by

Alastair, visited by a young Sammy, and supported by his mother. There is still a final, diegetic leap into an alternate reality in “Dark Side of the Moon” (5.16) when the Winchesters are killed and relive happy memories in a heavenly journey through their pasts. “How are we in Heaven?” Sam asks Dean, surprised by the new geographical surroundings. This juxtaposition of “fictional” and “real worlds” does not want to make the viewer aware that he or she is watching a TV show, but rather to reinforce to the viewer that the character has come from “reality” and has moved to a “fictional reality.” This is just the first degree of playing with the illusion.

In this cartography, I will leave aside the temporal leaps presented in episodes such as “After School Special” (4.13) or “In the Beginning” (4.3) because they don’t weaken the illusion very much, since time-travel is a part of the fantasy genre. However, the narrative structures of *Supernatural* employ one formula that tarnishes the illusionistic mirror: storytellers who become entangled in the story. Thus, the episodes that play with perspective and temporality cause the viewer to suspend their belief in the illusion to focus on the constructed nature typical of every narrative.² “Tall Tales” chronicles the playful spells of the Trickster; in this episode, narrative form and content combine to offer a story that plays with the point of view of every character. The illusion is constantly broken when the delegated narrators (Sam and Dean) stop the action to discuss the events they are relating and shape them to make plain the subjective nature of a memory that ridicules the other brother. For example, when Sam portrays his brother as a glutton, stuffing his mouth full of snacks, Dean interrupts Sam’s narration complaining: “C’mon! I ate one . . . maybe two!” while Sam answers: “Just let me tell it, okay?” In fact, one of the favorite mechanisms of the self-conscious narrators rest precisely in the way they “call explicit attention to the shifting relations between the twin time schemes of story and discourse” (Stam 140), so that the humor of the episode consists in an element of metatextual distancing within the story itself and its different versions.

The episode “Roadkill” (2.16) acts in a similar way, although it does

not have a narrator: the story conceals vital information from the viewers to maintain the suspense and surprise. At the beginning of the episode, Sam and Dean meet Molly, a woman who has just suffered a car accident and is running away from a bloodied and eviscerated man. By the end, the events of the episode are retold and a vital piece of data is added: Sam and Dean knew that Molly was a ghost who would not accept her death and, consequently, they decide to play along with her game to unveil her true identity.

“Like my man Jack in *The Shining*”

“Roadkill” is also one example of the strong intertextuality that forms part of *Supernatural*, which plays an important role in its popularity. As Peirse affirms, “*Supernatural*’s success can be partially attributed to its popular culture references, exploration of urban legends, and incorporation of horror film tropes” (264).

Intertextuality breaks down the illusion when the show makes allusions that cause viewers to recall references outside the show itself. In its attempt to question the relationship between reality and fiction, intertextual references emphasize the idea of language as a constructor of reality. Consequently, these audiovisual texts offer several meanings for a single signifier, a “semantic superimposition” that operates on two levels: “that of the narrative, where it continues to signify like any other utterance, and that of the reflection, where it intervenes as an element of metasignification” (Dallenbach 44). For one level to live off the other, more competence is required of the audience, who, by hearing a particular word or phrase, immediately recalls other pop culture allusions relating to it. In the case of *Supernatural*, external references are endless: from the now-classic presentations of Sam and Dean with the names of rock stars³ to re-interpretations of movie titles, *Supernatural* is a *horror vacui* of cultural events from music, television, and popular cinema.

Standalone episodes predominate over the first season — brief adventures that draw a map of evil teeming with witches, spirits,

vampires, zombies, and other monster-of-the-week cases — an ideal approach for embedding re-readings and tributes to the genre. Thus, “Dead in the Water” (1.3) includes shots reminiscent of *Jaws* (1975), “Bloody Mary” (1.5) uses the visual imagery of *Ringu* (1998),⁴ “Asylum” (1.10) has a similar premise to *House on Haunted Hill* (1999) and makes several explicit references to the films of Jack Nicholson, “Scarecrow” (1.11) takes elements of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and “The Benders” (1.15) alludes to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and *The X-Files* episode “Home” (4.2).

The second season, marked by the internal evolution of Sam and the fight against the yellow-eyed devil, boasts more continuity. The visual references are still present in “Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things” (2.4), which recalls Romero’s zombie films; “Croatoan” (2.9) is constructed with figures from infection movies like *28 Days Later* (2002); and “Playthings” (2.11) borrows the barman from *The Shining* (1980) and *The Others* (2001) dead children.

Among the allusions of the third season, highlights include the titular comic book by Frank Miller, which emerges from the plot and the viscous moral tone of “Sin City” (3.4); “Bedtime Stories” (3.5) recycles numerous fairy tales; “Mystery Spot” (3.11) honors *Groundhog Day* (1993); “Jus in Bello” (3.12) remakes *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976); and the villain of “Time Is on My Side” (3.15) seems to be a Highlander-inspired version of Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

The fourth season, the most baroque of the series, is also rich in semantic relationships that demand the viewer’s familiarity with multiple references in order to be completely and correctly interpreted. “In the Beginning” (4.3) could not be understood without knowing *Back to the Future* (1985); “Wishful Thinking” (4.8) represents ironically the shower scene from *Psycho* (1960); “Family Remains” (4.11) contains plot elements of *The Evil Dead* (1981); and “It’s a Terrible Life” (4.17) turns the classic *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) on its head.

In the fifth season, although the intertextual fecundity decreases slightly, “The Curious Case of Dean Winchester” (5.7) recalls the plot of a film of similar name (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

[2009]); “Changing Channels” (5.8) reuses the premise of *Stay Tuned* (1992) and an episode of *Doctor Who* (“Bad Wolf,” 1.12); and “Sam Interrupted” (5.11) takes its psychiatric idea from *Girl, Interrupted* (1999). Beyond this list, which is not intended to be exhaustive, there are episodes that feature a story where the world of fiction itself becomes the driving force of the plot.

“I hate procedural cop shows”

Faced with the narrative exhaustion announced by John Barth, the medium of television has now turned back in on itself in search of originality for its narratives, with deliberately illusionistic stories whose plots are about the fictional universe in some of its different manifestations: the shooting of a film, a pastiche of classic horror films, and television satire.

“Hollywood Babylon” (2.18) shows us the world behind the screen. The Winchester brothers observe the filming of *Hell Hazers II: The Reckoning* in order to solve the mystery of a series of paranormal deaths. The opening scene of the episode adopts the thematic conventions and style of a typical horror film to show the dark picture and the cliché of a young woman alone in the forest. But abruptly, the voice of the director yells “cut!” and the spectator realizes the images are from the filming of a terror movie. The viewer is first drawn in by the illusion — a process Coleridge called “the willing suspension of disbelief” (Cuddon, 413) — and then jolted back to reality when the mechanisms upon which the fiction is built are revealed. In general, the entire episode is a scathing “making-of” applied to the horror genre, because the viewer sees how visual tricks involving color or make-up are constructed, how corny the director is, the main actress’s difficulties in producing a believable scream, naïve studio executives who ask how ghosts can hear the chanting, and scriptwriters who borrow their material from “real life” just to have it ruined onscreen.

Semantic overload also occurs through parody, as in “Monster Movie.” At times like this, metafiction can be regarded as parody when

it becomes “a ‘mirror’ to fiction, in the ironic form of the imitation of art in art, as well as by more direct references” to authors, movies, and viewers (Rose 65). The episode recycles classic elements and characters from the genre, with explicit references to the classic myths of Dracula, Frankenstein, The Mummy, and werewolves. Furthermore, it is a special episode in which the visual continuity of the series is broken from the black and white opening credits that call for a nostalgic reading by the viewer, aware that Kripke is subverting the referents and adapting them to the playful environment of *Supernatural*. Consequently, “Monster Movie” is a kitsch⁵ product, a work of terror from the ’30s, but without the terror — all the monsters the shape-shifter recreates are “grand and elegant” while, at the same time, quite antiheroic and not frightening at all: Dracula, for example, rides a scooter, and uses a coupon to pay for the pizza he ordered (without garlic, of course).

“Changing Channels” (5.8), in which Sam and Dean, victims of one of the trickster’s spells, are literally trapped inside TV Land, is an exercise of style that satirizes other TV shows by emulating the grammar of sitcoms, police procedurals such as the *CSI* franchise, medical dramas like *Grey’s Anatomy*, and even TV ads. As a result *Supernatural* becomes a parodic mosaic of quotations. Dean, dressed as *CSI: Miami*’s Horatio Caine, complains: “I hate procedural cop shows. There are like three hundred of them on television. They are all the freakin’ same.” This episode is a highly meta-fictional artifact, ranging from playful references to *Knight Rider* to denouncing humiliating game shows from Asia. But this CW series also knows how to laugh at itself, as my discussion of the self-consciousness of “The Ghostfacers” and the use of amusing cameos appearances will make clear in the next section.

“I could really go for pea soup”

Cameos are a common practice in television fiction and many actors have played occasional roles on TV series. But these cases do not cease

to be actors playing a role and, although the confusion of seeing a familiar face in a familiar universe not associated with that actor can be somewhat disruptive to the illusion, cameos maintain the pact between the author and the viewer inherent in any work of fiction.

There are three especially significant appearances that, in varying degrees, serve to shatter *Supernatural's* fictional mirror by employing the simulacrum of the self; that is, an actor who plays with his own identity, both real and fictional. In "The Usual Suspects," (2.7) Linda Blair plays a cop who helps the Winchesters. At the end of the episode, after saying goodbye, Dean says she looks familiar and that "for some reason" he "could really go for pea soup." It is an obvious allusion to Blair's role in *The Exorcist*, which used pea soup to simulate the thick, green vomit her possessed character hurled at Father Karras. In the aforementioned "Roadkill," Tricia Helfer's role resembles the one she played in *Battlestar Galactica*, a story also built on the ambiguity of identity, where some humans do not know they are Cylons. In this way, Molly is related intertextually with *Battlestar's* Number Six for she is a ghost who does not know she is dead. In both cameos, *Supernatural* writers could feel confident that the audience would "get" these references, considering the show attracts both horror and fantasy genre fans.

More complex is Paris Hilton's ironic cameo in "Fallen Idols" (5.5). In keeping with such HBO series as *Entourage* (2004–), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–), and *Extras* (2005–07), which playfully break the fictional illusion by introducing into the heart of the diegesis a star who has fun with the sham of playing themselves, Hilton plays herself in a plot in which historical individuals and celebrities attack people, but ends up losing her head. The three examples cited (Blair, Helfer, Hilton) parody projected film or public images, crossing the borders between not only reality and fiction, but the person, the character, and the cameo.

"Fallen Idols" in particular shows the extent of the series' self-referential winks to the audience. Dean claims to have seen *House of Wax* (2005), a film in which Hilton works alongside Padalecki, the

actor who plays Sam. Thus, this simulation of the self is extended with little jokes about the past of the show's actors themselves. Similarly, in "Hollywood Babylon," Sam gets nervous when it is announced that they will visit the set of *Gilmore Girls* (2000–07) and perhaps see some of its stars; as fans of the show know, Padalecki was an actor in that series. In this episode, there is another inside joke that demands metatextual understanding of the fan. Sam asks Dean: "Does this feel like swimming weather to you? It's practically Canadian," referring to the filming of the series in Vancouver. There are even jokes involving the producers and writers: in that same episode, Tara Bentsley declares "Oh, God, what a terrible script!" in reference to *Boogeyman* (2005), a film written by Kripke just prior to his work on *Supernatural*. In the same way, the director of the false *Hell Hazers II* is McG, one of the executive producers of the series, while, in the episode where Chuck appears for the first time, the Winchesters are having a lunch at a diner called, not coincidentally, "Kripke's Hollow."

"The Dean and Sam you've been writing about"

By self-referencing, the series goes one more step toward breaking the fictional mirror, further blurring the relationship between text and context for the audience. These metafictional devices turn the show in upon itself and make visible what was previously invisible to the viewer (Dallenbach 15): the author and the production process (Chuck's appearance and farewell), the viewer and the reception (the jokes about "sick" slash fandom), or the conventions of the genre ("The Real Ghostbusters" plays on how the fans are aware of the terror movie code).

Although there are other small self-referential winks,⁶ the point of no return is the Pirandellian "The Monster at the End of This Book," in which the protagonists arrive at Chuck's house, revealing themselves to "the prophet" who authors the "Winchester gospels" to be "the Dean and Sam" he has "been writing about." Despite the baroque quality of the episode, the text always stays within the diegesis and

does not break the fourth wall. The structure presents an initial narrative instance, the overall story presented as the series *Supernatural*, which gives rise to a second instance, the story of Chuck's novels . . . which in turn reveals the mechanisms of creation in the first instance. There's even a moment where two bodies collide. Chuck reads in his notes:

Sam and Dean approached the run-down, ramshackle house with trepidation. Did they really want to learn the secrets that lay beyond that door? Sam and Dean traded soulful looks. Then, with determination, Dean pushed the doorbell with forceful determination.

And that's exactly what we see as spectators, with Chuck's voice-over narrating events as they unfold so that the subordinate and the main narratives overlap in a textual paradox that creates a disturbing impression of a work-in-progress as it reveals its structures and mechanisms. The apparent impasse is overcome because Chuck is not a creative author, but a prophet, a passive subject who brings to the role whatever the Creator dictates. So the arc of Chuck's story does not initially affect the story of the Winchesters, but the way it is received does, as illustrated by the parodying and self-allusive episode "The Real Ghostbusters" (5.9).

Although the show's fans had already been satirized (and, as Felschow's study observed, "neutralized") in "The Monster at the End of This Book," "The Real Ghostbusters" is where they now become the center of the message in a fictional "*Supernatural* Convention." The humor of the episode comes from a self-conscious text (the *Supernatural* novels that parallel the television series) that confronts *Supernatural*'s most loyal fans, making fun of the show itself by revealing its tics and recurrent conventions. In doing so, some stylistic and thematic codes from the series itself are laid bare: for example, all the wannabes speak in grave voices, emulating Sam and Dean. They also realize how easily the protagonists lose their weapons in the climax

of every episode, and take the recurrent use of fake IDs with rock star aliases to an absurd extreme. However, Chuck's passive status changes in "Swan Song" (5.22), in which the fourth wall finally collapses.

"The bold new future of reality TV"

The most radical move *Supernatural* has permitted itself has been its direct address to the viewer. In this case, the fourth wall disappears and the exchanges between the audience and the television set are immediate. Interactivity with the audience breaks down the illusion, radically exposing the artificial nature of the TV series. But we must also distinguish two different ways of breaking down the fourth wall. On the one hand, the episodes masked by other forms of televised discourse, which happens structurally when the series counterfeits another format. There are cases, as in *The Office* (2001–03), *The Comeback* (2005), *Parks and Recreation* (2009–), and *Modern Family* (2009–), in which a declarative mechanism — television fiction itself — pretends to be another: a docu-show, a device which, by means of frequent indicators that change the focus from primary to secondary statements, ends up making them coincide "to the extent that they occupy the entire space and time of representation" (Savorelli 173). In these mockumentary moments, the viewer is addressed directly, and we are reminded that a camera is always present.

In *Supernatural* the same thing happens upon emulating a reality TV format in "Ghostfacers!" This particular episode of *Supernatural* is instead presented as a television program filmed by Ed and Harry, who introduce the "revolutionary" show as an alternative to the "crippling writers' strike" of 2008, referring here to the actual strike by the Writers' Guild of America.⁷ "The unsolicited pilot you are about to watch is the bold new future of reality TV," they claim. The footage is made up of constant blurring of fiction and reality that is consistent with those that occur in reality TV programs: repeated takes of the same shots, questions directed at the film crew, the constant appearance of cameras, slates, and microphones in shots, backstage footage

. . . even the characters, including Sam and Dean, speak *spontaneously* to the camera, aware that they are being recorded. Thus the episode employs many of the rhetorical techniques proper to the mockumentary format, reminding us that what we are watching is a fictional television show.

“I’m telling you, they’re a raging pain in the ass”

On the other hand, the fourth wall can be broken when the characters, albeit sporadically, directly invoke the audience. Therefore, metafictional culmination comes at two different moments when *Supernatural* breaks the fourth wall without the necessity of having to disguise it as just another mechanism. The first occurs in the hilarious coda to “Yellow Fever” (4.6). The textual authority that drives the story, until now always invisible, announces the complete breakdown of the illusion following the identification of Kripke and Singer as executive producers in the end credits. The music starts as we read the sign “*Supernatural* presents Jensen Ackles.” The actor begins a goofy performance to the music of “The Eye of the Tiger,” climbing out of and onto his Chevy Impala while lip-syncing. The laughter, applause, and voices of the production team can be heard in the background throughout the clip, reminding us that we are watching the real-life actor, and not the character he plays on TV.

The second address to the audience is less playful, almost melancholy. Although Chuck’s episodes generally place the text of *Supernatural* at the center of the story, only his monologue in “Swan Song” may be understood as breaking the fourth wall. With the script on his desk, the author explicitly addresses the audience in a metatextual reflection, speaking of his own books and the art of storytelling:

Endings are hard. Any chapped-ass monkey with a keyboard can poop out a beginning, but endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can. The fans are always gonna bitch. There’s always gonna be holes. And

since it's the ending, it's all supposed to add up to something. I'm telling you: they're a raging pain in the ass.

These words are a farewell from *Supernatural's* author, both in fiction and in reality. In fiction the writer acts like a god. Kripke, the creator of the series, says goodbye from the mouth of Chuck, his alter-ego. Kripke's characters have grown so much and achieved such success that they are now more important than the author and can emancipate themselves. Through Chuck, Kripke affirms that things have gone as far as they can go, as he had announced would be the case as he told *Entertainment Weekly*: "Despite what the network and studio may or may not want, I don't have more than five seasons of story." And he does it by leaving clues as to how *his* series will end: in Lawrence, closing the tragic circle, epically facing Lucifer — their greatest enemy — and with Sam sacrificing himself to save Dean. But then Kripke deliberately and clumsily resurrects his characters (Bobby, Castiel, and finally Sam) in a *deus ex machina* that enables another "God-creator" (Sera Gamble) to continue the series. For this reason too, Chuck/Kripke ends up fading into just another implausible and anti-illusionistic plot twist after typing "The End."

"Nothing ever really ends, does it?"

"*Star Wars* in Truck Stop America" (qtd. in Hannah-Jones 55). From the beginning, Kripke sells the series by invoking its intertextual component, with Sam and Dean as imitations of Han Solo and Luke Skywalker in an earthly, rock version of Lucas's adventure story. But the initial references and jokes continue growing until the astonishing turn of events that lead to Sam and Dean's realization that their lives are being novelized. From that point until Chuck's farewell, *Supernatural's* metafictional strategy transcends the merely playful, and also serves to delve into classical philosophical preoccupations: Who are we? Where do we come from? Can we escape our destiny if it is already written? Is there life after death; that is to say, does "nothing

ever really end,” as Chuck concludes in his monologue?

The map I have drawn also makes clear how metafiction has become one of the most important strategies of the series. Using the reflexive resources that cinema and commercial television have already developed, *Supernatural* reflects different aspects of the way in which its own discourse functions: the identity of the author, the critical problems of the work, the process of production and reception, or the story at the time that it is being made. Supported by intertextuality, self-awareness, or direct appeal to the audience, many of *Supernatural*'s episodes reveal the fictional illusion and the conventions of artistic realism, audiovisually capturing the tension between representation and reality and transforming the story itself into one more stop in the fascinating journey of the Winchester brothers.