

NOT JUST SPOOKY

The collaborative aesthetics of 'Supernatural' fandom on Runet

Everyday on Runet (the Russian-language internet), fans log in and participate in communities whose members share an interest in a variety of television shows. Tv-supernatural.ru is one such fan community of over 25000 members, formed with the purpose of engaging with the television show 'Supernatural,' an American occult melodrama that draws its inspiration mainly from urban legends and biblical myths.

The larger study, of which this paper is a part, looks at multiple Runet fan sites to study the articulation and communication of popular knowledges embedded in discourses of power and identity, such as conspiracy theories, urban legends and occult narratives. Preliminary research suggests this articulation of popular or stigmatized knowledges routinely takes place on fan sites for television programmes that foreground similar ideas. For instance, some X-Files fan communities on Runet tend to host special threads for the specific purpose of sharing theories about government subterfuge and UFOs. Fan communities, thus, become spaces where media texts and pop knowledges intersect, act upon and are acted upon by fan interactions.

Persisting with this line of inquiry, in this paper I am interested in exploring how fans on tv-supernatural.ru pool their views, share knowledges and collaboratively articulate an aesthetics or mode of engagement that involves reading the TV series 'Supernatural' as a televisual text but also as a symbolic universe, negotiating modern epistemological binaries of science/faith, reason/belief, and real/unreal in the process.

Tv-supernatural.ru: fan community

'Supernatural' has aired on the US network CW since 2005 and began to air on Ren Tv in Russia in 2006. In the series, the brothers Sam and Dean Winchester are demon hunters who begin a quest to destroy the yellow-eyed demon (YED) responsible for their mother's gruesome death. On this quest, they encounter the malevolent spirits of urban legends which they fight and quell, saving many human lives in the process. By the third season the YED is dead but the brothers must prevent the apocalypse, their story thus welding urban legends to biblical myths. The Winchester brothers are middle-class heroes who are suddenly plunged into a world of exorcisms, firearms filled with salt, devil's traps and shape shifters. It is a world where gothic creatures like vampires and werewolves are commonplace and conversations about Lucifer and the apocalypse are standard banter. As if this imagery was not rich enough, characters display paranormal

abilities such as prophetic dreaming and parakinetic powers. This colourful world of urban legends and millenarian predictions is frequently situated in mid-west America. The show has multiple Runet fandoms devoted to it on LiveJournal, which is exceedingly popular in the Russian blogosphere, and also on fan sites created for the show. Among the latter, tv-supernatural.ru is one of the largest fan communities, and figures among the initial results in a yandex and google search.

Research about the Russian-language internet has so far been concerned primarily with its engagement with politics or with the literary devices of internet writing. Online media fandom largely remains beyond the purview of Runet scholarship, although it is a crucial and widespread form of social interaction with its own political underpinnings.¹ At the outset it is critical to understand how online fandom works and in what ways tv-supernatural.ru acts as a fan community. Online fandom is not different from offline fandom; rather, it replaces or coexists with older forms of fan activity, amplifying and giving that fan activity more public expression.² In online fandom, since readings of a show tend to be posted, edited, responded to, and debated upon, fans' views are not merely a statement of fact but necessarily shaped by the interaction and the presence of an immediate audience for the post. The online community therefore «perform(s) its fan audiencehood, knowing that other fans will act as a readership for speculations, observations, and commentaries».³ Online fandom offers “concentrated niche spaces,”⁴ that provide room for views of the show, self-reflection as well as an additional set of cultural texts based on their initial and subsequent readings of the show.⁵

In fan communities, fans show diverse interests but are described in some works on fandom as arriving at a unified, interpretative position because they function as a community.⁶ This has been interrogated by other scholars who posit a more faction-ridden fan community as the norm.⁷ However, it is possible for a fan community to

1 Some scholars who have written about Runet fandoms include Natalia Sokolova, “Runet and Television Fans: The Space of /without Politics,” *Russian Cyberspace Journal*, 1, no.1 (2009): 71-80 and M.Pipenko, “Fenomen molodezhnykh virtual'nykh fanovskiykh praktik,” *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noi antropologii* IX, no. 1, 34 (2006): 139-150.

2 Sam Ford, “Soap operas and the history of fan discussion,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 1 (2008): 8.2-8.7 .
<http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/42> (accessed 15 May 2009)

3 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002): 177

4 Ford, “Soap operas and the history of fan discussion,” 7.2

5 Elizabeth Bird, *The audience in everyday life: Living in a Media World* (New York: Routledge, 2003): 81

6 John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* (London: Routledge, 1995):287

7 Derek Johnson, “Fan-tagonism; Factions, Institutions, and Conservative `hegemonies of Fandom,” in Cornel Sandvoss, C. Lee Harrington and Jonathan Gray (eds.) *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 287.

demonstrate a unified position on one aspect of a show and divided interests on another aspect of a series. What one does observe is a 'collaborative aesthetics', a phrase I use to refer to the interactive process of building interpretations; in the fan forum, people pool their views, and what results may or not be consensual. The pleasure is in the posting of the initial comments, replies, and in interpretations adjusted or reasserted in the face of those other views. Yet, although collaborative, the forum space is not a free-for-all or even egalitarian. On tv-supernatural.ru, for instance, there is an implicit hierarchy created through the interactive process so that a particular view or manner of posting is considered successful in the forum, while others are not. The success or popularity of a post or its poster becomes evident in the number of responses it evokes. A less successful or unsuccessful post may be deleted by the moderator for being unsubstantiated or meaningless, which Runet fans call *'flud'* (from 'flood' in American slang, as in 'inundate' with numerous posts devoid of meaning). In this manner, a majoritarian view comes to prevail over others in each thread. Therefore, fan communities are collective and interactive, but their performances of their subcultural identity⁸ are bounded by certain parameters, and there are guidelines for what is considered responsible involvement in the forum.

These rules of engagement also articulate a fan community's 'mattering maps', a phrase used by Lawrence Grossberg to suggest "a socially determined structure of affect which defines the things that do and can matter to those living within the map".⁹ Mattering maps differ from one fan community to another, showing the way for what is of intense interest to members of a community. For instance, while tv-supernatural.ru accommodates the meta-text of views on the occult, another major Supernatural fansite farscape.ru does not permit such discussion.¹⁰ As the board administrator shared with me in a private correspondence: "I don't allow it because I'm a believer." Here, threads focus on the brothers' relationship instead for debate and discussion. The channel Ren TV's own fan forum for the shows it broadcasts has fans of Supernatural initiating threads about urban legends, and in this forum there is some excited discussion about the supernatural.¹¹ Posters discuss spotting a ghost in their office restroom, and many claim

8 Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005): 80.

9 Lawrence Grossberg, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place: popular conservatism and postmodern culture (New York: Routledge, 1992): 398; Grossberg, 'Is there a fan in the house? The affective sensibility in fandom', in Lisa Lewis (ed.), *The adoring audience. Fan culture and popular media* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992): 50-65. See also Joke Hermes, "Audience Studies 2.0: On the theory, politics and method of qualitative audience research," in *Interactions: Studies in Communication and Culture*, 1, no.1 (2009): 111-127.

10 www.farscape.ru

11 www.ren-tv.ru

that government conspiracy and supernatural beings are a reality. One poster on Ren TV's forum writes: "what we're told are lies and misinformation; we don't know everything out there."¹²

Tv-supernatural.ru has several threads to this effect. Through the act of posting messages on the topic and posing questions for debate, fans create a social environment whose mattering maps encourage and legitimize these discussions of the paranormal and other popular cultural beliefs. While it does not make explicit in its mission statement an interest in the occult, the spectrum of discussion threads opened for the purpose of discussing everything that can be categorized as the occult indicates that the themes find resonance with a considerable number of members. Thus, the collaborative process of evaluating the series is about articulating fan identities and hierarchies but also about demarcating forum boundaries between multiple fan communities.

The evaluative discourse of fan interactions on tv-supernatural also shows the fan site to be a space for the exercise of connoisseurship or expertise. Online communities are cosmopedia; "they are expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies in response to various artefacts of contemporary popular culture."¹³ Key to this collective production of meaning is the display of knowledge as cultural capital. Fans demonstrate knowledge and through knowledge and its sharing they demonstrate authority, and articulate what it means to be a fan of the show.¹⁴ On tv-supernatural.ru fans bolster their posts by sharing what they know about the genre and the series, and drawing on 'bodies of information' that are outside the text but pertinent to it - in this case what fans have known, understood and read about the occult, the paranormal and organized faith in general. This exhibition of knowledge, whether based on personal experience or some other array of facts, marks them out as connoisseurs or as serious participants who have a genuine contribution to make to fan interaction.

Thus, through the articulation of a supernatural aesthetics in the forum, fan cultures such as these can become a space for the circulation and perpetuation of popular knowledges, that is, ideas and arguments that fall outside the parameters of official discourses and challenge dominant forms of knowing. In *Power Plays/Power Works*, John Fiske describes fan cultures as producing knowledges and beliefs that undermine the status of scientific

¹² <http://www.ren-tv.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=14355&st=80>

¹³ Henry Jenkins, "Interactive Audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans" in Dan Harries (ed.) *The New Media Book* (London: BFI Publishing, 2002): 158.

¹⁴ Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror*, 79-80

rationalism as the only prism for understanding the world.¹⁵ On tv-supernatural.ru, fans use the series to dissect the paranormal, laying bare their views, sharing anecdotes, rumour and personal experiences of the occult and undercutting fixed oppositions of truth and myth. What also plays a role here is fans' willingness to allow the source text/the series to reel them in to participate in its performance or narration. Their engrossment in the dramatic entertainment of the spectacle or their immersion in the performance of the series also accounts for their willingness to contemplate about what the supernatural means to them.¹⁶

These dynamics of online fandom become evident in fans' evaluative discourse on the 'Supernatural' as horror show and as a symbolic universe. It is this evaluative discourse that the paper will explore by considering 1) fans' readings of the supernatural as peripheral knowledge and liminal world, 2) their articulations of their fear of the supernatural and 3) their sharing of knowledges in a bid to perpetuate and spread popular understanding of the supernatural.¹⁷

I. Peripheral knowledge, liminal world

The horror genre especially of the supernatural kind inherently subverts the rational order, because it makes it difficult for its protagonists to engage with the world on rational terms.¹⁸ Additionally, while hinting at what is plausible beyond the material world, American TV shows on the occult or the paranormal generally discourage scepticism.¹⁹ In 'Supernatural,' characters in the show who are faced with an unusual situation that has no logical explanation, are eventually won over to believing the mystical explanation for it. Yet in the process the series foregrounds the debate on what is unreal and what is real, by having the main protagonists, the brothers, discuss and question conventional assumptions on the subject. Fans follow suit. In fact, folklore studies of the legend-genre demonstrate that the successful narration of a legend is

15 John Fiske, *Power Plays/Power Works* (New York: Verso, 1993):181.

16 There are interesting parallels in works on pro wrestling. In 'Mythologies,' Roland Barthes articulates the element of dramatic play and spectacle in pro-wrestling which encourages audiences to suspend disbelief and participate in the spectacle, all the time knowing that it is a staged performance; their pleasure derives from this liminal position between knowing it is staged but playing with the idea that it is real for the sake of the performance. Also see John Fiske, 'Television Cultures', where he makes the argument that pro wrestling invites the audience to "evade, resist, or scandalize ideology and social control" (240), an act that they derive pleasure from.

17 It should be noted at this point that these fans do not make strict distinctions between the occult and organized religion. There is a post-modern interest in a pastiche of otherworldly phenomena, be they religious or paranormal, Judeo-Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, seeing these as complementary systems.

18 Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror, Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997): 23-25.

19 Emily D. Edwards, *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005): 196.

contingent upon its audience becoming engrossed in the liminal world between reality and unreality and engaging in interpretative acts that question its claims. Parallels can be found here in theories about ritual and theatre as performative acts that involve 'the fusion of the 'dreamed-of and lived-in orders of reality,'²⁰ situated as they are between reality and imagination.²¹ The legend genre, it has been said, encourages a meta-textual debate on whether or not the legend in question can be true; it does not require uncritical belief, it only asks that the audience not disbelieve.²² This makes the televised legend text of 'Supernatural' prime for fans' interactive speculation and evaluation online.

By initiating separate threads on the occult, the members of tv-supernatural.ru foreground this particular meta-text of the discursive supernatural, making clear that their mattering maps encourage such an engagement. Members of the forum also communicated in separate messages to me that the fan community is a useful space for those keen on discussing the supernatural to do so without embarrassment. In a discussion thread entitled 'all things evil,'²³ a lengthy exchange of confidences erupts in which fans tell each other how awkward it is to talk about the occult in most circles, as people still pretend to not notice unusual, inexplicable, supernatural phenomena. Some examples follow:

why are people afraid of things they do not know? Maybe this is subconscious fear, imbibed since birth? Or maybe people just succumb to social influence. Crowd and mob pressure are more insidious than any demon(f., 16 September 2007)

People try to ignore these phenomena but the bravest do dare talk about the supernatural, only to become objects of ridicule, become subject to medical controls and treatment, or become alienated – can think of thousands of such examples.» (C., 16 September 2007)

Such posts and their responses clarify these members' subcultural identity as fans willing to discuss the paranormal or occult in the face of widespread unwillingness to consider it discussion-worthy. Deeply embedded in such articulations is the constant playing with concepts such as logic, truth and knowledge, which fans of Supernatural assert are subjective and unstable categories. Note these posts:

20 Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a culture system', in M.Banton (ed.) *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Press, 1966): 28, quoted in Felicia Hughes-Freeland (ed.), *Ritual, Performance, Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998): 12.

21 Felicia Hughes-Freeland, "Introduction," in *Ritual, Performance, Media*, 12.

22 Mikel Koven. "Most Haunted and the Convergence of Traditional Belief and Popular Television," *Folklore*, 118, no.2 (2007): 183–202

23 <http://tv-supernatural.ru/forum/3-426-7> (accessed online in June 2008)

Prefer to assume the most incredible, something that is not instantly visible. Of course, that «something» exists. What we see – is not all there is to the universe. Speaking of logic...what I mean is there is logic in everything, but we don't necessarily see it always (S., 15 September 2007)

It is not only scientific laws that govern this world, there are also other, lesser known laws, but they are no less logical for that reason (s., 15 September 2007)

Fans here defend the symbolic universe that informs Supernatural by asserting that knowledge is but a social construct, and someone out there is responsible for what we accept as knowledge and for the proverbial 'cover-up.' Here their posts clearly articulate their sense of being distant from the arbiters of knowledge – scholars – who they see as responsible for propagating and sustaining the 'regime of the real' and then almost conspiratorially dismissing as irrelevant that which they cannot explain. In response to the above posts, another fan concurs:

I agree completely. Many scholars are unable to explain a lot and they brush it aside so no one knows about it. But undoubtedly there is something out there ! (I., 15 September 2007)

It is interesting to see the members of tv-supernatural.ru position themselves at a critical distance from both perceived centres of knowledge power and what they see as the unthinking mob that simply succumbs to social pressure. They consider themselves able to penetrate through the social and cultural structures that produce and promote one set of knowledges at the expense of others. One fan points out, the difference between knowledge and myth can be elided. She writes that what is now considered 'otherworldly' or unreal will one day be a prosaic and mundane science, just as what we now know as the legitimate discipline of physics was once perhaps the material ancient legends were made of (B., 15 September 2007). Their skilful negotiation of the reality and myth binary becomes evident in posts where they exhibit 'reason' in their understanding of the origin of myths, but also display doubt about existing epistemic classifications and the knowledges they seek to discredit.

Earlier if people (individuals) saw things, narrated about them, each could add something juicy to the story. And so these stories, like others, became myths, legends. Yet, in each myth, in each legend there is a spot of truth. This explains the eternal debates on whether they're true or untrue. (S., 25 September 2007)

What provides even more material for their metatextual meditations is the manner in which Supernatural emphasizes in many instances that an evil character was once human. Gothic characters like vampires are particularly appealing to fans on tv-supernatural.ru because they dissolve the human/non-human binary, making them as real as they may seem unreal. In the same thread on all things evil, fans discuss vampires

as the most real of the Supernatural creatures, and in the words of one fan, “they become more real with each passing day.” (f. 10 September 2007). The gothic supernatural also provides plenty of opportunity to speculate about the boundaries of reality as we know it because its creatures, occupying moral borderlands, are not viewed as antithetical to the human experience but as a distortion of it. Fans routinely post that they understand vampires’ motivations and behaviour and have compassion for them. Their empathetic and credulous exchanges exhibit a pluralistic cultural language that tries to accommodate a greater range of plausibilities than dominant epistemic systems will allow.

This metatextual debate, so critical to the art of legend-narration, is enabled by the dynamics of online interactions. Fans may not always express outright belief or disbelief but their contemplations about the parameters of possibility become the pre-eminent view that is collaboratively articulated and that, furthermore, perpetuates a hierarchy of fan positions. Sceptics or those not keen to play along in entertaining the supernatural write very brief posts and are usually open to persuasion to revisit their position on the occult.

II Horror disembodied

Engaging with the supernatural text also involves an articulation of its affective power. In the cultural hierarchy of tastes, horror of the supernatural or other variety that generally relies on corporeal impact or the pathological response of its audience is considered low-brow.²⁴ For this reason, cult fans in many other horror fandoms privilege a metaphorical reading of horror over a literal reading that simply treats the show as scary. On tv-supernatural.ru fans show no such reluctance to openly talk about fear, but they still employ knowledge, a trope of high culture, to lend credence to their expressions of dread or terror. There are many members of the forum who freely admit to watching episodes with their knees drawn up and their eyes shut. However, posts that simply express terror and offer no foundation or explanation for that emotion find disapproval on the board. The administrator at once demands that the fan not write empty, unsubstantiated posts. Some fans, not all, say they feel no fear because they recognize many legends in the plot as symptomatic of emotional fears or personal catharsis. But the preferred reading or the successful postings are those that do express fear and then go on to substantiate that expression by drawing on a range of knowledges related to personal experiences and ideas about the world beyond the ‘regime of the real.’ In general, fans are expected to and

²⁴ Marc Jancovich, “A Real Shocker: authenticity, genre and the struggle for distinction,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 14 (no.1), 2000: 25-26

do treat the frightening elements of the show reflexively, cataloguing, dissecting and debating those elements.²⁵ Thus, fans on tv-supernatural.ru engage with the supernatural mixing affective and cognitive responses creatively. They talk about fear (feeling or not feeling it) by displaying their knowledge and connoisseurship with regard to the genre. But their expressions of being terrified by the spirits in an episode are also simultaneously tied to fans' personal views on whether a smug sense of security is really justified if what we know is far surpassed by all the things we have little or no knowledge about.

To imagine and speculate with dread about legends coming true is a pleasure particularly enhanced in an online forum because fans enjoy being talked into or out of that fear. This is evident in fan interactions after the episode 'Bloody Mary' which broadcast in season 1.²⁶ In this episode, whenever someone chants Bloody Mary thrice to a mirror, the vengeful spirit of the murder victim Mary is released from the mirror. She then scratches their eyes out and goes on to kill people who have murdered but never paid for their crimes. After viewing the episode, fans share their personal beliefs about the mirror as a supernatural prism, which they effortlessly link to their readings of the episode. Their enjoyment of this interaction with other fans derives from their liminal position between conformity to norms of reason on the one hand and succumbing to the allure of the supernatural on the other. The pleasure lies in this middle-ground where 'common-sense knowledge' and boundless speculation about the 'what ifs' manage to co-exist.

I always believed in evil spirits. I don't know about 'others' but approaching the mirror at night is dangerous; there are always shadows in the mirror, it's not all quite okay. That is why I don't have a mirror in my room ! My friend has a mirror near her bed, and her dog often barks, gets restless and flings himself at it! (T. 22 April, 2007)

I personally believe that the mirror is connected to another world....have you ever looked in a three-way mirror, when multiple reflections seem to end in a long corridor leading nowhere? No? Try it...I would recommend doing that at night, so the bed's reflection does not showthink about it, if someone dies, they cover the mirror in the apartment...there's no smoke without fire! (D., 22 April 2007)

Clearly, 'Supernatural' appeals to fans' discursive competencies²⁷ or the cultural assumptions, vocabulary and tastes they already possess, encouraging them to engage with the text in a self-reflexive manner, such as in the posts described here. In this very

25 Matt Hills, *Pleasures of Horror*, 85

26 <http://tv-supernatural.ru/forum/2-45-1> (accessed online in June 2008)

27 John Fiske, *Television Culture: Popular Pleasures and Politics* (London: Methuen & Co.,1987): 95

personal elucidation of how the occult engrosses or terrifies them, the importance of play in the testing of myths and legends cannot be discounted. Those who enjoy legend-tripping or visiting haunted mansions by night with a ghost radar and video camera may actually believe the legend in question or they may be willing to suspend disbelief in order to be engrossed or immersed in the pleasures of such trips. In such instances, there is fear, but it is a fear that never completely shakes off either reason or the element of play, making the horror they might experience enjoyable and shareable with other fans.²⁸ Thus, this ludic element stems not only from the symbolic content of the series but also the interactive nature of the forum; claims of being terrified provoke an exchange of personal revelations and confidences that add to the dramatic enjoyment of the show.

The successful threads on the terrifying aspects of horror suggest shared assumptions within the community that apprehensions and fear are not misplaced when the answers to all the mysteries of this universe remain elusive. Can one really dismiss the possibility of Bloody Mary appearing in the mirror, without experiential confirmation of some sort? Thus expressions of being spooked invariably challenge the discursive boundary between myth and reality. In the same thread, when one fan says, “explain to me...how mindless do you have to be to stand in front of the mirror and chant Bloody Mary (v., 2 April 2008),” she is quickly countered by others who agree that it may seem ridiculous to test the legend but claim that fear of the unknown is a great motivator. Through their articulation of their fears these fans collectively define and mark once again the parameters of their fan identity. It is not only after the Bloody Mary episode but after other episodes involving spirits inhabiting everyday material objects and spaces that fans confide many personal fears, always deconstructing them and clarifying to other fans why these fears are real to them. After an episode involving a spirit in the lake, some fans discuss their fear of water; other episodes lead to revelations about the fear of clowns, dolls and glassy-eyed children. The comments about personal fears are often jocular and apologetic to begin with, if members are not sure how they will be received. But when more and more fans share their personal fears, the self-deprecation gives way to more confident posting. Since most active members of the forum concur that there is a world, often morally incomprehensible, beyond the human, material one, the fan forum ultimately welcomes expressions and dissections of the emotions of dread and fear of the occult.

²⁸ Bill Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts and Cults: the Legends We Live* (University Press of Mississippi, 2003): 173.

III. Can we make a deal with the devil, or must we exorcise it?

Fans think the unknown, however, is knowable and the exchange of trivia and 'how to' tips is essential in their interactions about the supernatural. As has been demonstrated in studies of soap opera fandoms, the circulation of knowledge within a fandom stems from epistemophilia or fan's interest in not just knowing but in letting others know what they know.²⁹ Fans ascribe themselves roles within a forum, and some of them on tv-supernatural.ru surf the internet for information about the spirit world of western and non-western cultures, which they share in lengthy posts in threads initiated for the purpose. I am reminded here of Pierre Levy's description of the knowledge culture of a fan community. I quote: "These communities...are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge. [They] make available to the collective intellect all of the pertinent knowledge available ... at a given time." Where members of a community do not have trivia to share, new information is actively sought using "invention and innovation."³⁰

The perceived verifiability of biblical representations, for instance, prompts fans to use information at their disposal to assess the show's textual authenticity. Textual authenticity can be measured in terms of a show's fidelity to established aesthetic canons in character and plot development. But it can also refer to the narrative content and its conformism to the original sources that inspire it. 'Supernatural' does not always strictly adhere to the canon in its depiction of demons, angels and their powers, allowing itself some creative license in these representations. Some fans on tv-supernatural.ru recognize that it is the nature of narratives to be retold in a modified form and with new goals. But the main discussions in the forums privilege the painstaking exercise of matching the text of the series with the source of its inspiration. The quest for veracity and fidelity naturally assumes a belief in an original, external text that is seen as stable. That source may be canonical like the new testament, but it may also be the sum total of pop cultural texts that have perpetuated enduring representations of biblical and occult figures. Aspects of the story-line that lack clarity are explained by fans using such inter-textual references. As Susan Clerc writes in her work on X-Files fans, "the frustration of not having all the threads tie together is also a source of pleasure ... giving rise to

29 Nancy Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2000): 91

30 Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Percus Books, 1997): 20 quoted in Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 27

speculation and analysis of the gaps in the narrative.”³¹ Dissecting a source text for discrepancies and inaccuracies and correcting these using knowledges they have accessed constitutes a large part of their collaborative interactions.

In season 2 in the episode ‘Crossroad Blues’, various protagonists make a deal with the devil at the crossroads, whereby they attain success and renown or an ailing loved one’s life is saved, but in return for which they must agree to have the grim reaper visit them in ten years’ time. Fans debate the realism of this incident, using what they know and have understood of the Christian world view to judge if such a thing is possible. They ask: Is it possible to make a deal with the devil? Is that not a sin? Some suggest that their faith allows for pacts with the devil if they are meant to save loved ones, as some protagonists are trying to do. But this fan’s voice is drowned out by another who says one must not interfere with the will of god; to do so is a huge sin.³² This kind of ‘nit-picking’ is standard for internet forums where fans derive pleasure from displaying their critical skills as well as their familiarity with external knowledges that are pertinent to the series.³³ Again, in season 4 in the episode “It’s the Great Pumpkin, Sam Winchester,” angels display dubious behaviour and fans wonder how they must respond to the idea of god’s messengers being anything but unimpeachably noble. On the fan site a debate erupts about whether these characterizations coincide with those in the bible, with some members actively citing biblical references to make their point. They ask each other: Are angels supposed to be only sympathetic? Do their actions show human frailty rather than divine intervention?³⁴ These meta-textual debates and the give-and-take on what the bible may say or not say, how angels must look and behave and whether hell is a warm place are the layers of additional cultural texts that get tagged on to the text that is the source of all this interaction – the TV series. The person who confidently shares knowledge pertinent to the series stands out in the forum, gets grateful responses and several queries from others about the veracity of other canonical representations in the series.

Another trigger for the exchange of information is the vast symbolic realm of endless possibilities that is the occult. Fans with information capital initiate threads about the supernatural realms and if successful get the most responses and follow-up questions. Their choice of topics for threads is a good indicator of shared assumptions within the

31 Susan J Clerc, “DDEB, GATB, MPPB, and Ratboy: The X-Files’ Media Fandom, Online and Off” in David Lavery, Angela House and Marla Cartwright (eds.), *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996): 38.

32 <http://tv-supernatural.ru/forum/4-182-1> (accessed online in December 2008)

33 Mikel J Koven, “Have I Got a Monster for You!: Some Thoughts on the Golem, The X-Files and the Jewish Horror Movie,” *Folklore*, 111, no.22 (2007): 223.34 <http://tv-supernatural.ru/forum/77-2603-1> (accessed online in January 2009)

fandom. Aside from informing curious members about who a *rakshasa* is, what the Latin chant is to exorcise a demon and how werewolves are different from shape-shifters, fans also hold polls to assess 'public opinion' on the board. The question posed to members in one poll is whether they would like information, confirming the existence of supernatural evil.³⁵ The three optional answers that members can select from are very indicative of the commonly-held views that underpin the forum. One option is, "Yes, because I want to sleep peacefully and can do without constantly looking over my shoulder"; option two is "Yes, because I do not want it to catch me off-guard"; and a third option goes: "To hell with it! I just want to know that someone is looking out for me from up there!" The question and the three options fans can choose from do not require members to state *whether* they believe or disbelieve. Fans are asked instead whether they would prefer to be informed or whether they would prefer to simply trust that benevolent forces will preserve them from such an eventuality. The answer options preclude to a large extent the participation of the more circumspect among the fans or those not keen on playing along with this engagement with the occult. Most members' responses to the query in this thread are a call to be well-informed about the occult and other such phenomena because, as they frequently assert in their messages, "knowledge is power." They routinely undercut fixed oppositions of truth and myth, as they justify their desire to know more about occult phenomena.

Haven't you ever wondered, why we know some things and do not know other things at all! And what we know we actually only imagine we know; in reality this knowledge is only our imagination!!! (p. 17 November 2008)

I accept that not everything in this world Is what it seems, and if we know what we're dealing with we can confront it better. (o., 2 august 2008)

I most certainly want to know! To know is to be armed,.... or something of the sort. Life shows us that a rose-coloured vision is not always advisable (s., 20 December 2008).

Successful threads on such topics reflect common ground within the forum and demarcate the boundaries of this fandom's subcultural identity. Encouraged by the intimacy of online interaction, in responding to informative posts in an interpretive manner, forum members draw on personal anecdotes to demonstrate that theirs is not simply blind faith but grounded in observation. In a thread on pentagrams, fans write that amulets with this symbol of a five-pointed star (which the Winchester brothers use frequently on their demon hunt) have helped them avert death, and they narrate

³⁵ <http://tv-supernatural.ru/forum/73-2280-1> (accessed online in January 2009)

ominous anecdotes about people who did away with their talisman only to meet with a horrible fate. This style of posting is an attempt to provide a reasoned narrative to legitimize their serious contemplation about the occult, and it indicates that fans perform their readings all the time aware that what they are saying falls outside the boundaries of knowledge and truth discourses. Many fans write of their desire for experiential confirmation that such spirits exist; again, play might be a more influential factor than a literal desire to experience the legend coming true. Yet, they are quickly cautioned by others who warn that the occult is a serious matter and not to be trifled with. Fans hear of acquaintances and friends whose engagement in mysticism and occult, they are told, has led to a host of misfortunes – “family conflict, emotional instability, accident trauma and ill-health” (b. 12 February 2009)! This is not an exhortation for scepticism but an appeal for caution given that supernatural threats are yet to be disproved by science, a view held by most of the active posters. And the stories keep coming, usually ending with questions that defy potential sceptics in the forum to disagree. Using the example of the mysterious disappearance of objects from her home, one fans ends on a sinister note: «I know it was not my fault. Then ... who took them???(M., 20 March 2009). Perceptions of personal experiences are entirely subjective, and this means no one counters or questions views based on such apparently intimate knowledge of inexplicable phenomena. The fact that others find these messages riveting means the forum is a safe haven for people who wish to inform members of their brush with the occult or their reading of perceived anomalies in human experiences.

Conclusion:

Fans on tv-supernatural.ru perpetuate intra-fandom cultural hierarchies where those with access to trivia and a repository of personal experiences articulate the boundaries of what it means to be a Supernatural fan on this site. This they do in an interactive process where, by ‘trial and error,’ fans figure out which kinds of posts work to further interaction and which fail to move along online discussions. This collaboratively negotiated supernatural aesthetics lays bare their ‘mattering maps,’ demarcates the boundaries of their sub-cultural identity and also determines the borders of the source text. In fact, in the cultural environments they create, every fandom constructs and shifts the borders of the source text differently³⁶; while some fandoms may concentrate on the televisual product or show, others may see the text as a springboard for evaluative discourses driven by the larger ideas that inform the series. In this manner, the source

³⁶ Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: the mirror of consumption* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2005): 131-132

text is not bounded by its script but is instead a stepping stone to the production of metatextual readings and debates that cover much greater ground. This is how a horror TV series produced in America can become the focal point, elsewhere on Runet, of self-conscious interrogations of epistemic hierarchies that privilege smug rationalist certitude over faith, and reason over belief. Obviously, the purpose of the fan forum is not explicitly to challenge dominant modes of knowing. But in the give-and-take on the tv series in the forum, fans venture into discussions about science and superstition, reality and unreality, displaying a delicate balancing act between reason and uncritical belief, and enjoying the debates this ambivalence engenders.

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