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# *Supernatural* and the Apocalypse: Observations from the Bunker

**Stacey Abbott**

"God threw one last apocalypse at us and we beat it."

— Dean, "The Rupture" (15.3)

Writing about *Supernatural* and the apocalypse from amidst lockdown during the global pandemic of 2020 seems to be appropriate and an entirely Winchester thing to do. Years of watching horror film and TV have been ideal preparation for a global pandemic, and the retreat into social isolation that characterised lockdown seems in keeping with the Winchesters. As I write, I imagine myself holed up in the Bunker, researching the apocalypse and all manner of horrors, which is not too far from the truth. I am, after all, a Woman of Letters.

2020 has witnessed the globe bombarded by ecological disasters, sickness, intolerance, racism, violence and horror. None of these individually are new but the twenty-first century has been marked by a growing culture of apocalypse that seems to have hit a peak during the pandemic. As events have unfolded in quick, and sometimes surreal, succession, anxiety, anger, and frustration levels have been brought to a peak, enhanced by twenty-four-hour news and social media. The world weariness surrounding the scale of the problems facing the globe calls to mind the exchange between Sam and Dean in "Two Minutes to Midnight" (5.21) as they prepare for their next set of missions in the battle to avert the apocalypse:

**Dean:** Good luck stopping the whole zombie apocalypse.
**Sam:** Yeah—good luck killing Death.
**Dean:** Yeah.
**Sam:** Remember when we used to just hunt Wendigos? How simple things were?
**Dean:** Not really.

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It is difficult to remember when things were simpler and, in fact, they never were. I find that as I reflect on the events of 2020, while also anticipating the end of *Supernatural,* my mind repeatedly turns to notions, approaches and understandings of apocalypse. While the Apocalypse, drawn from Revelations, suggests the end of everything, James Berger argues that there is a second meaning of apocalypse, which refers to "catastrophes that resemble the final ending" as they mark an end to something, often a way of living or understanding the world, representing a break or fissure that "separat[es] what came before from what came after" (1999, 5). It is this understanding of the apocalypse that underpins most dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature, film and television. For there to be a *post*-apocalypse then something must come after.

*Supernatural* merges Revelations' conception of an ending to everything with this more secular approach to apocalypse. This essay will, therefore, examine how *Supernatural* has been shaped by global events and an evolving cultural conception of the apocalypse as the world has leapt from one cataclysm to the next over the fifteen years that the show has been on the air. In turn, it will consider what *Supernatural* has taught us about facing the apocalypse(s) and how to confront and channel our anxieties and despair into action. As 2020 continues to bring forth new challenges, what have we learned from Sam and Dean?

Coming on the air in 2005, two years after the final season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and one year after *Angel*'s conclusion (1999-2004)*, Supernatural* seems to be their natural successor. This is in part because, like Buffy and Angel, Sam and Dean are the Chosen ones, Champions destined to protect humanity from all manner of monsters. It is also because, as with *Buffy* and *Angel, Supernatural* is preoccupied with the apocalypse in its many forms. On *Buffy*, each seasonal narrative involved the slayer staving off the Big Bad's master plan to end the world. In contrast, on *Angel*, Angel and his team realise that the apocalypse isn't a master plan "announced with a gong" ("Underneath" 5.17) but is a slow and insidious attack on humanity's good will that must be countered by a team of Champions "living as if the world were as it should be to show it what it can be" ("Deep Down" 4.1). The work of saving the world never ends. *Supernatural* seems to be a composite of these two approaches as Sam and Dean are confronted by a veritable lexicon of apocalyptic imagery, through which, as Eve Bennett notes, the show taps into a cultural climate that has characterised twenty-first century television:

> While world destruction and the annihilation of the human race have habitually existed as threats in the science fiction and fantasy genres, on television as well as in other media, in the past they typically

> remained as such: threats, posed by villains whose plans would be thwarted by the heroes at the end of the episode or season. In the early twenty-first-century wave of American apocalyptic programmes, however, the threat is far more concrete (2019, 1).

While Lucifer, the Leviathan, the Darkness, and even God have their master plans to bring about the end of humanity which operate on seasonal arcs, Sam and Dean are also regularly confronted by other markers of the apocalypse—biblical, viral, ecological and corporate—which slowly chip away at their strength of will and against which they must constantly fight. These threats are more concrete, relentless, and decidedly familiar.

The most obvious example of the type of cataclysmic event described by Berger that has made its mark on *Supernatural* was the terrorist attack on the United States on 9/11 2001. The show began production only a few years into the wake of these events, causing, as Bennett argues, *Supernatural* to be embroiled in discourses surrounding 9/11 and masculinity (2019). In particular, the series reshapes the biblical conception of the Apocalypse from Revelations, which unfolds from seasons 3 to 5, in the light of the Iraq War and the War on Terror, both of which were a direct response to the events of 9/11. For instance, in "Good God, Y'All!" (5.2), Sam and Dean are called to a small Colorado town that is supposedly overrun by demons. When they arrive, the place looks like an abandoned battlefield; devoid of people but with cars overturned and blood on the streets. Trying to find an explanation for what has transpired, Dean is told about recent biblical omens, such as a river becoming polluted and a comet flying overhead, that signal the coming of The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. This is confirmed when Dean consults Revelations, causing the local priest to query 'Are you saying that this is about THE Apocalypse? … Wait back up, it's the Apocalypse?' As the episode progresses, however, THE Apocalypse becomes increasingly intertwined with more earthbound recognisable conceptions of war. While initially the lines between human and demon seem clear, when Sam is captured by a group of supposedly possessed people, he realises that they are not possessed but instead think that he is the demon. It is revealed that War, one of The Four Horsemen, has tricked everyone in the town into seeing the other side as the monsters—the other—fuelling paranoia and prejudice so they try to destroy each other. He tells Sam that there aren't any demons in town, "just frightened people, ripping each other's throats out. … Last week this was Mayberry, this week they're stabbing each other's children." War alludes to his presence at conflicts in Europe and the Middle East and while he does not mention Iraq specifically, the connection is made clear by the presence of a former marine, who informs Dean that he did two tours in Fallujah. The episode also alludes to torture when Sam is tied up in

a chair by fellow hunters Rufus and Jo who, believing he is possessed, repeatedly douse him in holy water to make him talk, suggestive of the kind of torture associated with the War on Terror and the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. By conveying how each side in this battle mistakenly see the other as the monster, the series challenges seeming clear cut distinctions between good and bad, Heaven and Hell, by highlighting the fragile distinctions between "them" and "us" during war. It also signals, as indeed did the aftermath of 9/11, how fragile "normal" society is and how quickly it can disintegrate when the seeds of fear and distrust are sown. As Linnie Blake argues, on *Supernatural* the lines between hunter and demons are blurred to illustrate how "the non-American other has been made monstrous in the wake of 9/11," revealing "the monstrosity that has been seen to lie, since Abu Graib at least, in the hearts of Americans themselves" (2015, 232). As a result, the Apocalypse narrative of the series begins with a biblical conflict between Heaven and Hell that is progressively presented as a questionable religious war, an ideological battle in which each side believes absolutely in their righteousness, regardless of whose lives are destroyed in the crossfire.

Alongside this reimagining of a biblical apocalypse, the series plays with other types of imagery, most notably the zombie and its many different cultural interpretations. Zombies are a recurring device on *Supernatural* that surfaces in different forms to suit a range of narrative threads. Some are small isolated cases designed to explore episodic themes such as obsession and revenge ("Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things" 2.4) or grief and loss ("Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid" 5.15), but all connected to the series' broader focus on family and free will.[1] In other cases, the show taps into the generic legacy of the zombie apocalypse narrative that was experiencing a resurgence in the early 21st century with films such as *Resident Evil* (2002), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). While many critics have linked this generic revival to 9/11 (see Briefel 2012; Wetmore 2012), I have argued elsewhere that to focus on 9/11 is limiting and ignores broader cultural anxieties and traumas (Abbott 2016, 74-91). *Supernatural*'s engagement with the zombie apocalypse narrative fuses together many of these elements. For instance, in "Croatoan" (2.9), Sam and Dean visit a small town to find that the locals seem to be infected by a virus that causes them to become violent and homicidal. While the title of the episode refers to the sixteenth-century mystery surrounding the Lost Colony of Roanoke, the episode's siege narrative, violent infected people, medical explanation and mise-en-scène is suggestive of twenty-first century zombie apocalypse narratives. After a series of unexplained acts of violence, a local doctor examines the blood of one of the aggressors under a microscope and notes the presence of a virus

[1] For a more detailed discussion of these episodic narratives on *Supernatural* see Abbott 2016, 101-103.

along with a residue of sulphur, indicating to Sam and Dean that the virus is demonic rather than natural in origin. This medical mise-en-scène is in keeping with *I Am Legend* (2007)*, 28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Mutants* (2008), *World War Z* (2013), and *iZombie* (2015-2019)*,* while the viral explanation conforms to *28 Days Later*'s conception of the zombie outbreak as explained by survivor Selena:

> It started as rioting. Right from the beginning you knew this was different—because it was happening in small villages, market towns. Then it wasn't on the TV anymore. It was in the street outside—it was coming through your windows. It was a virus, infection. You didn't need a doctor to tell you that. It's the blood—or something in the blood.

The Croatoan virus emerged in a small town; is located in the blood; and is transmitted through exposure. While initially appearing to be a monster-of-the week narrative in which the infected suddenly disappear at the episode's end like the original colony of Roanoke, a coda to the episode reveals that this is part of an unknown demonic experiment and the medical mise-en-scène of the episode hints at the apocalyptic events to come.

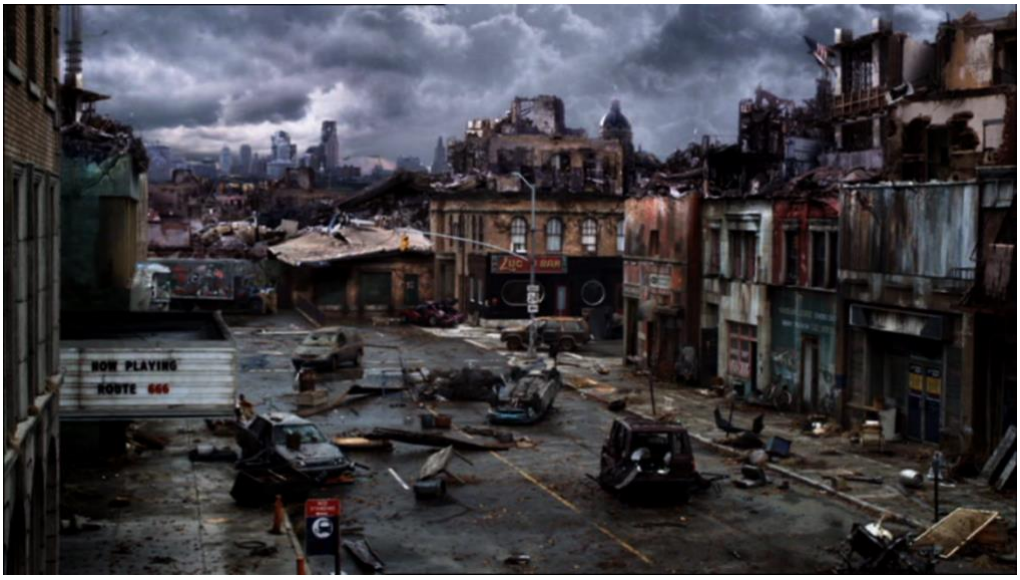



Figure 1: A post-apocalyptic landscape in "The End."

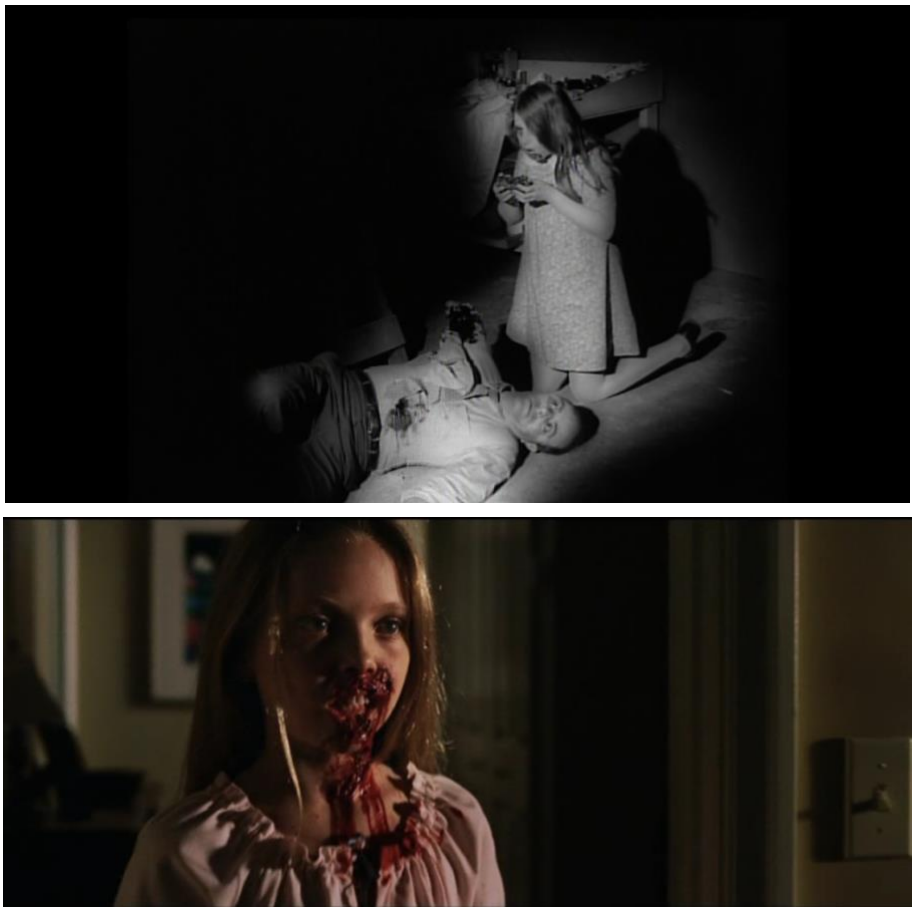
The zombie narrative introduced in "Croatoan" integrates with the overarching biblical narrative in "The End" (5.4), when the Angel Zacharia offers Dean a glimpse of what will happen if he does not play his part in the battle between Heaven and Hell by sending him five years into his future.

Dean wakes up, like Jim in *28 Days Later* and Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead* (2010-), in a post-apocalyptic landscape (Figure 1). The city is empty of life, the buildings have been bombed, cars have been torched, and the streets are filled with debris and decay. Unclear as to what has transpired, Dean finds a young child crouching over a teddy bear and when he approaches to help her, he suddenly sees blood dripping from her mouth as she turns and violently attacks him. This scene is notably similar to the opening of the television series *The Walking Dead* ("Days Gone By" 1.1), including the child and teddy bear and Dean and Rick both calling out "little girl" as they approach the zombie-child (Figures 2 and 3).[2]

Figures 2 and 3: Dean and the zombie child in "The End" (top); Rick Grimes and the zombie child in "Days Gone By" *The Walking Dead* (1.1) (bottom).

[2] "The End" was first broadcast on 1 October 2009 and "Days Gone By" was first broadcast on 31 October 2010.

Both owe a debt to Karen in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) who murders and eats her parents and, arguably, Vivian the zombie-child in Snyder's *Dawn of the* Dead, whose emergence from the shadows wearing a bloody nightgown and bite marks on her face similarly marks the protagonist's first confrontation with a zombie (Figures 4 and 5). "The End" therefore positions *Supernatural* within an extensive tradition of zombie apocalypse narratives. After Dean knocks the little girl down, he sees the word Croatoan graffitied on the wall just as a large group of infected adults turn up and chase him through the city, linking the pre-apocalypse experiment of "Croatoan" with this post-apocalypse vision. Dean may have gone to sleep in a world preparing for a holy war, but he woke up in a zombie apocalypse in which humanity is destroyed or transformed through viral infection.



Figures 4 and 5: The zombie children in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (top) and the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (bottom).

The lexicon of catastrophic imagery continues in "Hammer of the Gods" (5.19), with a threat that seems even more concrete and familiar. As

Sam and Dean realise that to stop Lucifer they need to find the two remaining Horsemen of the Apocalypse—Pestilence and Death—the episode cuts away to an older man, suffering from flu, as he enters a gas station convenience store. His skin is blotchy, suggesting fever, and he has a dripping red nose (Figure 6). As he moves through the store, he repeatedly sneezes and leaves a trail of mucus over everything he touches. A newspaper is glimpsed in the scene with a headline declaring that a new strain of flu is spreading across the USA. The flies that collect around this man signal that he is Pestilence and that his contribution to the coming Armageddon is in the form of a pandemic.

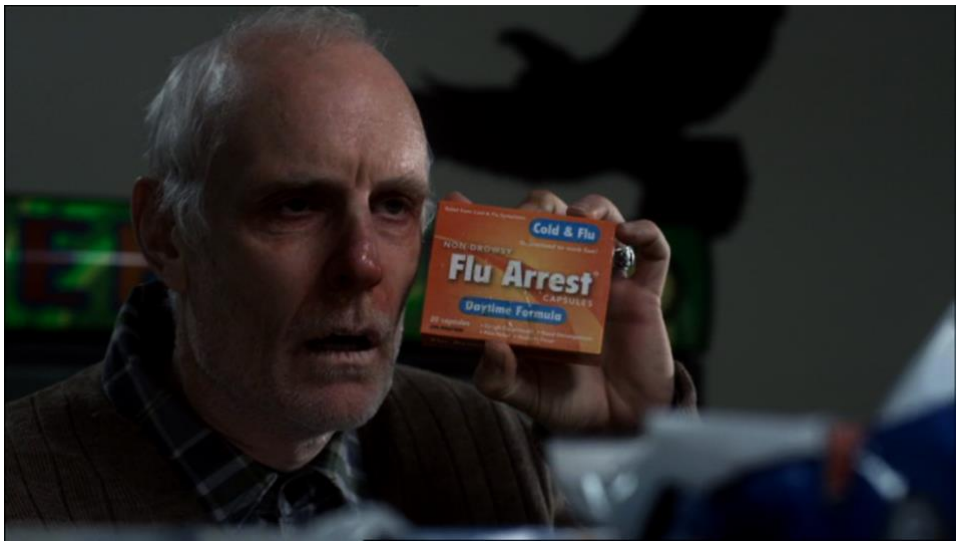



Figure 6: The flu pandemic in "Hammer of the Gods" 5.19.

This pandemic imagery continues in "The Devil You Know" (5.20) when Sam and Dean visit a hospital to investigate the quickly spreading flu that has seen 70 cases emerge in 24 hours. The hospital is filled with people, including the gas station attendant, displaying flu symptoms, while the doctors and Sam and Dean wear face masks. Sam and Dean suspect the Croatoan virus but are informed it is a mild form of swine flu, referring to the pandemic of 2009 but now possessing a heightened contemporary resonance. What initially was perceived by Sam and Dean as a comparatively mundane form of apocalypse—the flu—is now notably triggering. The imagery of a crowded hospital, the quick spread of the virus, Sam and Dean in face masks is evocative of the global impact of Covid-19.

The penultimate episode of season 5, "Two Minutes to Midnight"—a title which refers to the Doomsday clock and thus draws connections between the Cold War, the narrative's battle between heaven and hell, and the contemporaneous War on Terror—weaves together this apocalyptic

imagery, while introducing new elements. The episode begins with Pestilence, posing as a doctor in a care home—imagery that once again has contemporary relevance in the light of the Coronavirus pandemic—who reveals that he is using the home and its patients as a lab to experiment with the viruses with which he will infect the country. While initially, Sam and Dean do not understand the purpose of spreading a treatable form of the flu, they eventually discover that the demonic plan is to mask the Croatoan virus as a flu vaccine. This will facilitate a quick and efficient spread of the zombie infection, thus throwing the country into the zombie apocalypse that Dean witnessed in "The End."[3] Sam, along with Bobby and Castiel, must fight off a group of workers infected with Croatoan in order to stop the shipment of the vaccine around the country.

At the same time, the brothers discover that Death—the last of the Four Horsemen—is planning to unleash the "storm of the millennium on Chicago," which will destroy the city and set off a "chain of natural disasters," thus introducing an ecological thread to the Apocalypse alongside global pandemic. When Dean prepares to stop Death, he finds the Horseman enjoying pizza in a local Chicago pizzeria. The violent storm imagery that can be seen through the windows shows the type of extreme weather that is increasingly associated with environmental disaster and climate change. This episode draws the biblical, viral, and ecological apocalyptic threads together in a cacophony of imagery and anxieties that continue to pre-occupy twenty-first century culture. Following season 5, as the globe has become increasingly preoccupied by climate change, *Supernatural* returned to more ecological apocalypse imagery in later episodes, starting with "All Along the Watchtower" (12.23). This episode introduces an alternate universe—Apocalypse world, which becomes central to season 13. In this world, Sam and Dean were never born and as a result the battle between Heaven and Hell took place, Lucifer lost, and the earth was laid waste by the Angels. The earth is scorched, the air is filled with dust, the landscape is grey, the trees and plants are dead, and the sky is filled with clouds and lightening. While the cause is biblical, the depiction of this universe is suggestive of nuclear or ecological disaster.

Finally, responding to the economic crisis of 2007-8, seasons six and seven (broadcast in 2010-11, 2011-12 respectively), introduced the notion of

[3] This demonic plot is reminiscent of *I Am Legend* (2007) where the "Krippin virus" was a genetically rewritten form of measles virus engineered to cure cancer but subsequently mutated, killing 90% of the population and turning the remaining 10% into zombie-like creatures. Ironically, current developments for a Covid-19 vaccine suggest a similar approach "by using a harmless virus as a kind of Trojan horse to carry the genetic material of a pathogen into cells to generate an immune response" (Baker 2020). Let's hope it has better results.

an economically-driven apocalypse. This is first introduced in "The Third Man" (6.3). While the battle between Heaven and Hell was circumvented, skirmishes for power continue with a pending civil war building in Heaven, which threatens a trail of disaster for humanity. At the same time, Sam and Dean investigate the suspicious deaths of three corrupt police officers in Pennsylvania, who shot a young black man and then covered up the crime by planting a gun to support their case for justifiable homicide. Each of these deaths is localised and violently abject. The first melts into a puddle of skin and *blood*; the second's body becomes covered in *boils*; and the third's brain and skull are eaten from the inside by *locusts*; channelling each the plagues of Egypt respectively. What begins as looking like Biblical vengeance against the police officers is eventually revealed to be the result of an economic transaction. The angel Balthazar—escaped from Heaven with stolen artefacts—has sold the staff of Moses to the victim's younger brother in exchange for his soul, thus exploiting a very real and all-too-familiar crime against a young black man for profit. The politics around race and the economy are evoked through Balthazar, presented as a white arms dealer profiting from injustice against the black community.

When asked why he is collecting souls, Balthazar explains "In this economy? It is probably the only thing worth buying. Do you have any idea what souls are worth? What power they hold?" Souls are reframed from something precious and spiritual to a commodity for exchange—a factor touched on in previous seasons through the presence of Crossroads demons like Crowley, but here signalling the ubiquity of commodity culture through its adoption by the Angels: first Balthazar and then Castiel. It is eventually revealed that Castiel is similarly collecting souls, of humans and monsters, in order to accumulate enough power to win the heavenly civil war. As such the series explores the economic apocalypse through the increasing commodification of souls. The reframing of the apocalypse from the biblical to the capitalist, is further developed in season seven, which introduces the Leviathan, ancient monsters accidentally released from purgatory by Castiel in his bid for power. When Castiel is unable to contain them, they escape, mask themselves as humans, and infiltrate Corporate America. Their grand plan is to subjugate the human population through the production of fast food filled with addictive additives that render consumers passive, thus preparing humanity to be farmed and consumed. Erin Giannini equates the Leviathan-narrative to the economic crisis of 2007-8, describing the Leviathan as a corporate villain that is embodied in a "small group (1% if you will) living off of, and eventually devouring, the rest (99%)" (2014, 84). Rather than demons, angels, or zombies, Sam and Dean must confront corporate monsters who literally feed off the masses and whose rapacious

hunger and self-interest is visualised in the Leviathan's transformation into a giant, gaping maw.

All these examples illustrate how *Supernatural* presents a landscape through which Sam and Dean must repeatedly face and come to terms with the numerous threats that have come to characterise twenty-first century living—war, pandemic, climate change, economic crisis. It embodies in its narrative framework the relentless nature of the apocalypse, not starting with a gong but chipping away at our will to keep fighting. While often seemingly outmatched or overwhelmed by more powerful forces, Sam and Dean repeatedly resist these forces by insisting on controlling their own actions—saying no to being Michael's vessel, refusing to kill Lucifer's son Jack, resisting God's games and promises. Over the years their choices have contributed to their complicity in global events and catastrophes, but they also take responsibility and ownership of their actions, choosing not to succumb to the nihilism of these events but to resist and carry on fighting. The apocalypse is so familiar as a recurring trope in the show, that in "Back and to the Future" (15.1) Dean questions the value in the family business, hunting things and saving people, "just so he [Chuck/God] could throw another end of the world at us and then sit back and chug popcorn?" to which Sam responds, "Yes, well what's one more apocalypse, right?" For a show that is known for its meta narratives, Chuck/God is as much a stand in for the audience, sitting back and looking to be entertained, as he is for the creators of the show, trotting out yet another apocalypse for their delectation (Garcia 2011, 146-160; Macklem and Grace 2020). But the way in which Sam and Dean keep fighting is also a lesson in the work that is involved in saving the world, calling to mind Angel's final words in the *Angel* season finale "Not Fade Away" (5.22). As his team face a legion of demons from hell, Angel steps forward with his sword in hand, declaring, "Let's go to work," as he lashes out and the scene cuts to black. Arriving on television—on the WB, the same network as *Angel*—a year later, Sam and Dean have picked up Angel's sword and gone to *work*, saving the world, *a lot*.

*Supernatural* was scheduled to come to an end in May 2020 but the production was suspended on account of the Coronavirus pandemic. In an interview in which Padalecki assured fans that the production team and cast were committed to returning to complete the series and the Winchester's journey as soon as it is possible, he also acknowledged the similarity between global events and the plots of *Supernatural*, noting that the pandemic could have been one of their storylines (quoted by Adam Tamswell 2020, 14). As I have shown, however, it has, in fact, been a major thread to their narrative from the start. While fans anxiously await the broadcast of the final episodes, it somehow seems appropriate that the end of *Supernatural* has been delayed

on account of apocalypse. The final season has teased audiences with possible endings, offering glimpses of bleak conclusions involving Sam and Dean killing each other ("Atomic Monsters" 15.4) or the earth descended into a monster's playground ("Galaxy Brain" 15.12), but the name of the title of the final episode—"Carry On" (15.20)—suggests a more hopeful conclusion. The work of saving the world is slow and extended but while Sam and Dean are out there fighting the good fight, there continues to be hope. Perhaps that is the message that *Supernatural* offers in 2020 amidst all the anxiety and chaos in the world. So, as we face down our own demons and apocalyptic threats in 2020, I remind every fan of *Supernatural* to think "What would Sam and Dean do?" Carry on wayward sisters and sons—carry on.

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