Navigating and Subverting the Male Gaze in a Hostile Media Landscape, as Examined Through *Supernatural*

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*Supernatural* is a ten-season television show with a cult following that consists primarily of women. It revolves around Sam and Dean Winchester, two brothers who began hunting monsters after their mother’s violent death at the hands of a demon. Apart from its impressively long run and its primarily female audience, *Supernatural* is notable for its heavy use of metafictional elements, its melodrama, its references to Christian mythology, and its emphasis on the survival narrative. It is also, unfortunately, known for its absence of female characters. The mystery, then, is how to reconcile this absence of onscreen women with its incredible popularity amongst female viewers. This question is not exclusive to *Supernatural*—it often comes up when investigating modern television, most of which favours male characters but still draws in female audiences. How is it possible for women to enjoy and draw strength from television that excludes them?

It is sometimes suggested that this is simply the result of internalized misogyny, but I think this is unwisely dismissive towards *Supernatural’s* 2.81 million viewers. Another common explanation, which deserves some thought, is *Supernatural’s* tendency towards what could be called the scopophilic female gaze. A notable example of this reversal occurs near the beginning of Sera Gamble’s career as *Supernatural’s* first female show-runner. Typically, even apparently sexualized images of men are designed to display physical power rather than vulnerability. This effect is accomplished through a variety of techniques, including the use of static cameras rather than the moving

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1 The zenith of this was an episode entitled ‘The French Mistake’, in which Sam and Dean were transported onto the nonfictional set of *Supernatural*, where they were frequently mistaken for their own actors.


3 Scopophilia refers to the filmic techniques which objectify women through the process of pleasurable looking. For example, a director might use a shot that displays a woman’s breasts, but not her face. Although this typically involves sexualization, its root is the power imbalance that it creates. The viewer is intended to be pleased that the body will be either taken care of or destroyed by a male character, as the situation demands. In all cases, it both creates and depends upon a power imbalance.
ones usually reserved for women and the shots from below, as if the man were looming over the viewer. Moving cameras are named such as they emulate the movement of the viewer’s eyes, implicating the viewer in the spectacle. In one scene, Sam is shot from above with a moving camera. The scene then cuts away to reveal a static shot of a woman watching him. This kind of reversal is important because the scopophilic gaze does not exist primarily for the sake of visual pleasure – it exists to construct and reinforce patriarchal structures. As such, reversing the gendered nature of the scopophilic gaze temporarily places that power into the hands of women. However, given this show’s incredible success and popularity, it seems likely that there is something deeper at work than this momentary thrill. To investigate what that element might be, I’d like to take a closer look at the character from that scene.

Most of Sam’s storylines revolve around the loss of bodily autonomy, and the violence which often occurs when reasserting it. He has been possessed by three separate entities, and nearly all of his triumphant moments revolve around regaining control of his body and mind. This theme is not relegated to the fantastical as he is also a survivor of sexual assault. Through all this, Sam remains a powerful character with motivations and storylines both related and unrelated to these events. His storylines are male storylines because he is at the centre of them, but our cultural context also makes them feminized storylines, dealing in thematic content that is immediately familiar to most women. As such, I’d suggest that many female fans wishing to see themselves reflected in media have rightfully claimed characters like Sam, appropriating male-dominated storylines to create something that resonates with them. While the instinct to feel discomfort when discussing a man in relation to female oppression is appropriate, the fact is that few female characters have arcs where trauma and lifelong oppression changes but does not define them. Identifying with a male character who experiences feminized oppression allows women to


5 A demon, Lucifer, and the angel Gadreel (who in certain religious texts let the devil into the garden of Eden). The connection between possession and sin is important when one considers the religious overtones of the madonna/whore complex (in which women are divided into the diametrically opposed categories of sexually chaste and sexually depraved), and the parallels between sex and possession that the show often draws.
visualize and interact with this oppression in a context where the character will not be reduced or dismissed. This, clearly, is not the ultimate answer; in an ideal world, there would be enough differentiated women onscreen to make this kind of psychic transference unnecessary. With that being said, I think that it would be a mistake, and a profoundly disrespectful one, to reduce the resonance *Supernatural* has with many women to internalized misogyny rather than acknowledging the construction of identification in the face of misogyny.

To a certain degree, this can also account for the viewership’s apparent disownment of female characters. When characters such as Sam become the emblems of female oppression, female villains become the emblem of the male oppressor. Their violence is masculinized, often centring around possession, emotional manipulation, and sexual aggression. They display the same negative characteristics that male characters often do, but because they aren’t men, these characteristics aren’t protected by the social structures that excuse or even valourize predatory male behaviour. In this way, their negative reception should be seen not only as a response to their female bodies, but to their patterns of behaviour as well. The effect of this is compounded by the appropriation of male characters, like Sam, by female viewers. This creates a space where viewers may examine gendered violence without the obstruction typically formed by normalizing patriarchal structures.

We can also look towards *Supernatural’s* metafictional elements, which disrupt the self-enclosed structure that dominates most television shows. In season two, the Winchesters discover a series of novels written about their lives. These novels are essentially a proxy of the show within the show. *Supernatural’s* fictional proxy is edited and published by woman, and its covers – which emulate those of romance novels – suggest a female audience. Because of this, the characters often interact with fans, most of whom are women. A recurring female fan has also helped the Winchesters several times. In this way, *Supernatural* actually imagines itself as dominated by and controlled by the female perspective, and by women’s actions. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey remarks that women can hardly “view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret,” as this form is designed to uphold

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6 Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 344
7 The in-universe explanation is that the novels are written by a prophet who is tuned into the Winchester’s lives.
8 Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 352
the patriarchal male gaze. Given the startlingly new potentiality this unusual dynamic creates, it is difficult to disagree.

Often remarked upon is the astronomical death rate of women in *Supernatural*. *Supernatural* concerns itself with hunters – an amorphous network of people who, as their name suggests, hunt monsters. Hunters almost universally begin their careers after the death of a female loved one. The exceptions to this rule represent a diversion from heteronormativity – for example, Charlie, a lesbian, and Castiel, a genderless angel. This structure lends itself to the sadistic plot described by Mulvey, in which a woman is killed so that a man may regain his power. It also serves to ‘solve’ the problem of the superfluous woman before it begins. Mulvey points out that, as most fictional women are not fully realized or given active storylines, their existence typically works against the plot. Instead of fixing this problem by fleshing out those characters, most media opts to destroy the woman altogether. This series opens with a classic example, where the family matriarch, Mary, is burned to death by a demon named Azazel. This prompts her husband to begin hunting, bringing his toddler and his infant son along with him. Sam stops hunting when he turns nineteen, but he is brought back three years later when his fiancée, Jessica Moore, is murdered in an identical manner by the same demon. Again, we have to wonder why women might enjoy a show that violently dispenses of them.

Here, we might think about the subversive potential of this statement’s presentation. In season two, Azazel gives the following speech: “Sweet little Jessica, she just had to die. You were all set to marry that little blonde thing … I needed you sharp, on the road, honing your gifts… [your mother] was bad luck. Wrong place, wrong time. It was about you. It’s always been about you.” Sam visibly recoils, and spends the following eight years attempting to atone for his involuntary participation in their deaths. There are patriarchal structures underlying Azazel’s speech, such as the address of Jessica as a “thing,” and the notion that the deaths of at least two women were “all about” Sam. However, there are also complications which allow for a more favourable reading.

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9 Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 349
10 In the show, Azazel is attempting to unlock the gates of Hell to free Lucifer. In certain religious texts, he is one of the Grigori, a race of fallen angels responsible for distributing weapons and makeup.
11 *Supernatural*. Directed by Sera Gamble (2007; Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.
First, it is important to note that this speech is not condoned by the narrative. The speaker is quite literally a servant of Lucifer. He is also lying; as we later learn, Mary’s death was the culmination of a demon deal she made ten years earlier. Beyond that, the structure of the scene presents us with a number of possibilities. Because Sam is the focal character of this scene, we experience spectacle through his eyes. In this case, the spectacle is emotionally based, and – as it relates to his mother – contains objectification without the sexualization that typically accompanies it. Through Sam, we are forced to view Mary and Jessica as objects. Unlike most instances of spectacle, we are intended to be horrified about this reduction of their characters. The mechanisms behind the sadistic plot and the superfluous women are not hidden. We are clearly told that Jessica was killed because her presence would impede Sam’s ability to act. Her status as bearer of the look is explicit. Again, none of these things actually fix the problem; at the narrative level, the end result is still an absent woman and an active man. All the same, the potential for subversion is there, and it has been embraced by fans. Instead of expecting the viewer to revel in their narrative freedom from the female ball-and-chain, as is common on television, the casual violence of the constant erasure of women in media is treated as a key element of a horror plot.

Overall, we can see that, while Supernatural does not solve the problem of the male gaze, its structure and character development allows for the possibility of subversive readings. This is not to deny the presence and prevalence of the male gaze in media, or to suggest that Supernatural is doing anything particularly revolutionary. I suspect that with close enough attention, similarly subversive elements could be found in many pieces of media. This is not the endgame. All the same, this act of subversion is important. It is a reassertion of power in a system that so frequently silences female voices, and it is a survival tactic in a hostile media environment. Instead of dismissing this as shallowness or internalized misogyny – as many critics are wont to do – we should acknowledge and respect the active role female fans take in the consumption of their own culture.

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12 This serves the secondary purpose of fleshing out the character of a sacrificial woman.
Bibliography

