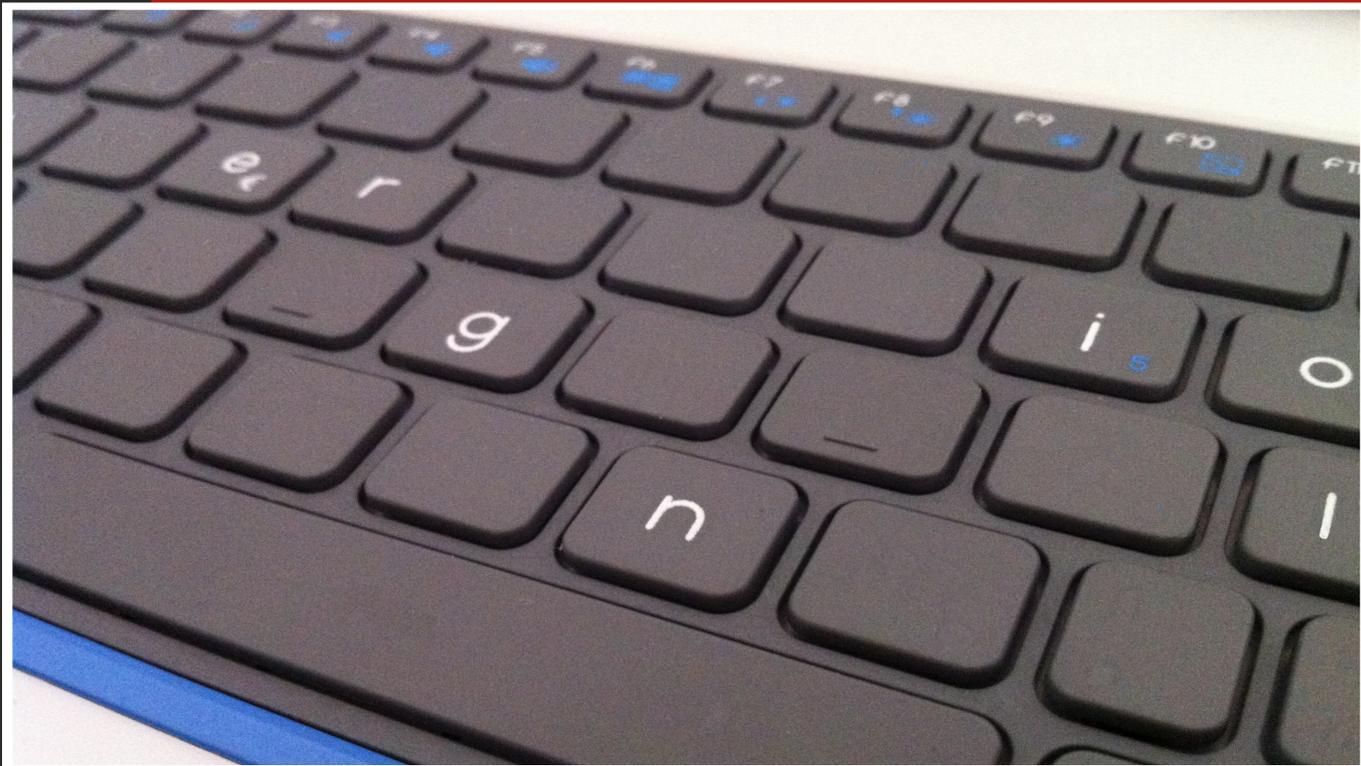




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Digital Participatory Culture: Transnationality, Fandom & Diversity

Religion and Gender in German-written Fan Fiction and Fan Forums

Lisa Kienzl

Abstract

The focus of this paper is to discuss the mediatization of religious elements and gender in popular US television series and German online fan culture (specifically fan fiction written in German) as part of an overall transnational participatory culture on the Internet. For the purposes of this paper, examples from the television series *Supernatural* and its German online fan culture have been selected to analyze the similarities and disconnections in the discussion of religion and gender in a transnational media discourse. At this point, the Foucaultian of power within the discourse representing religion in narrative texts and discussions is prominent. This idea reveals significant insights into a transcultural reciprocal development regarding the audiences' interpretation of mediatized religious elements and gender in online participatory culture.

Keywords

religion, mediatization, television series, gender, participatory culture, fandom

1 Introduction

With regard to the relationship between religion and gender in modern media, I had to ask myself a central question at the beginning of my reflections: Why have productions of genres such as mystery, horror and fantasy, or productions enriched with key elements of these genres, gained such popularity in contemporary Western societies? *The Lord Of The Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games* – to name only a few major movie productions of recent years – show a trend towards grand, mythical and sometimes also religious narratives. But not only in Hollywood do we

find this development; it is also an essential part of current television productions. In contemporary television narratives, the religious motif of the apocalypse or the struggle of a (usually) male mythical hero against (supernatural) evil is once again of vital significance. Considering the small screen, it is clear that in the last decade there has been a marked increase in the appearance of narratives that are heavily influenced by religion and thus, so-called grand narratives have found their way into television productions. For example, the narratives of the television series *Supernatural* (2005 – onw.) are clearly oriented towards traditional power structures and thus, reproduce already known social traditional discourses, even though they also break with them frequently. The representation of religion and gender is a central theme in established discourses of power within western societies. In my opinion, it cannot be assumed that individuals explicitly force this discursive representation, but that the trend towards these narratives is influenced by social discourses of power.

Supernatural's narrative tells the story of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, fighting evil in an apocalyptic Judeo-Christian setting and in a world populated by demons, angels, as well as many supernatural characters taken from various mythologies and religious systems. With this television series as an example, I am concentrating especially on the genres of fantasy, horror and mystery, not only because of their attachment to grand, mythical narratives but also because of their intense fan culture. Fan homepages are built to explain the religious and supernatural elements within the narratives and in the fan culture some parts of the representations are continued in an interpretive as well as partially reproductive way. Following the reasoning set forth by the transformation of religion and the depiction of gender in popular television series, I hypothesize that there is a significant relationship between these two discursive categories. The often traditional depictions of gender are sometimes accepted by the fan community in fan fictions, but are just as readily neglected and transformed into new storylines. Interestingly, there is a different assumption on the acceptance of religious elements, since it is remarkable that they are mostly not transferred, changed or ignored within fan culture but rather preserved.

2 Transnationality and Fandom

Primarily, popular Anglo-American television series dominate the television market around the globe and thus distribute a Judeo-Christian belief system, specific moral norms and gender roles, especially through the Western world. The influence of this on a worldwide scale and particularly on European culture has been neglected to a great extent within the scientific community, but I believe it is important for contemporary socio-cultural developments. Broadly

speaking, I agree with Jean K. Chalaby that the transnational impact is a result of global broadcasting through cross-national television and satellite ventures (Chalaby 2005). But as Annkatrin Bock points out, access to television narratives is not restricted to the medium of broadcasting anymore but DVD's, books, comics, or television series websites are part of a transnational transmediality too (Bock 2013, 391). Moreover mobility and flexibility of human behavior is not only recently part of the repertoire. Transnationality has been increasingly considered from a real-life perspective, for example, in migration research and examined in terms of policy changes and the impact of these developments on social and cultural discourses. However, these transnational aspects have only been brought to our attention in the last few years. In particular, Aihwa Ong has noted in this regard that discursive power processes are not interrupted by transnationality. "Indeed, even under conditions of transnationality, political rationality and cultural mechanisms continue to deploy, discipline, regulate, or civilize subjects in place or on the move." (Ong 1999, p. 19)

In the global market of film and television productions in general, the dominance of American productions is to be recognized. Of course, many European countries also have an important influence on important television productions or produce their own television series and films, but American productions are by far the most frequently watched worldwide. However, the influence of the UK and Canada as important countries of production should not be underestimated. This leads to the conclusion that Anglo-American films and television series and furthermore, productions in the English language dominate this media sector. By the term 'Anglo-American' I am not referring to one specific state but geographically the North American continent, USA and Canada, as well as the UK. All other Western countries play a minor role in the media market and in particular in the (for this paper) relevant genres of horror, mystery and fantasy television series.

The dominance of Anglo-American productions consequently results in productions being influenced in their content by the prevailing social conditions. A specific interpretation of religion, and gender roles in particular, is evident in the mystery, horror and fantasy genres, all of which come from the social dimension of Western societies. Therefore many productions are explicitly defined by Christianity, and to a certain extent, as in the example of *Supernatural*, also partly by Judaism and religious elements taken from this social context. This does not mean that these television series are productions of active religious communities; on the contrary. But it spreads a particular interpretation of these religious elements in a specifically Western view of religion globally. This dissemination of religious elements as well as gender depiction throughout the world has an impact on different societies and shows the significance of transnational developments.

When thinking about religion and media we need to discuss the idea of mediatization of religion as Stig Hjarvard suggests in his well-known paper presented at the IMRC in 2006. He argues that the depiction and transformation of religion in modern media is hardly an expression of

a new re-sacralization, but an expression of religion's mediatization (Hjarvard 2006). I agree with him, but have to state that when discussing the mediatization of religion, I would not use the term 'banal' religion to describe it - especially when there is such an intense attempt at accuracy in the definition of a religious origin as in *Supernatural's* narrative and fan culture. This transformation of religious elements is not a return to "primary and fundamental" (Hjarvard 2006, 6) religious ideas but a recirculation of (often institutionalized) religious knowledge. Here I agree with Tomas Axelson, that we have to be careful with the use of the term 'banal'. It is necessary to establish that "this kind of meaning-making takes place commonplace in everyday life but is complex enough not to be treated with awkward pejorative labels" (Axelson 2014, 3). However, I am not sure if it is better to define this meaning-making process as "vernacular" (2014, 3), like Axelson suggests.

Returning to the discussion on the transnational dimension of American television series and its influence on parts of European societies, we need to consider the definition of the term transnationality carefully.

Transnationality means that some agents are characterized by relatively dense and continuous cross-border transactions. This could have implications for other heterogeneities and raises the question whether, and to what extent, markers such as ethnicity, nationality, religion and so on are all (also) constituted across borders of national states (Faist 2013, 43)

Accordingly, it is clear that transnationalism contributes discursive power processes across regional and national boundaries. In the context of this paper, this now means that Anglo-American, and in particular American, productions play an important role for the global audience. According to Jeremy Tunstall the influence of American television has changed and is declining (Tunstall 1977; Tunstall 2006). Nevertheless, I argue that the influence of Anglo-American television productions still is extremely important.

Today, especially American television series dominate the television market beyond the Western hemisphere. In October 2011 Alice Jester started a call on her website thewinchesterfamilybusiness.com for *Supernatural's* fans from all over the world to answer some questions about the distribution of this television series in their home countries. This indicates that *Supernatural's* audience is not only found in Western societies but all over the world. Fans from more than 50 countries, such as Chile, Canada, Finland, United Arab Emirates, South Africa, as well as Russia and South Korea responded to Jester's request and posted information about airings and the latest Season on her homepage.¹ Digital technologies (including illegal downloads) make

1 See: <http://www.thewinchesterfamilybusiness.com/index.php/news/27-news-and-announcements/16511-supernatural-fans-outside-the-us-i-need-your-help>. Further also see: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460681/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_ql_10#releases.

the series accessible to a global audience from Canada to Iran, Kazakhstan, to Malaysia, promoting Christian as well as Jewish ideology, redesigned, transformed, and remediated by this television narrative. At this point, I also recognize illegal downloading as part of this distribution, primarily because it reveals the audience's interest in the television series. If you are not fascinated by something you would not download it illegally, also because the illegal market is massive. For example for the year 2011, the file-sharing company Rapidshare published numbers of 42 million users per day.²

Despite that, the influence of American culture in the form of television narratives on a worldwide audience has only partly been discussed, as previously mentioned. Due to my location in a German-speaking area, I wanted to analyze this influence on this part of Europe, in particular, on the German-written fan fiction as part of fan culture. I believe that the ideas of religion and gender brought to the German-speaking area conveyed by an American television series can be seen as a reflection of broader developments of transnationality. In this connection, not only my European point of view of an American television series and its narrative construct, but also the semiotic approach of deconstructing signs and codes within this narrative (Peirce 1998) is the emphasis in this paper. Above all, the semiotic perspective on the transformation of religious elements from our real society into a fictitious television narrative gives an insight into the discursive practice of transforming and mediatizing religion. These narratives that hold religious, mythical or supernatural elements, obviously work in a globalized world after postmodernism. Even though *Supernatural* is a Western production, its audience is part of a worldwide transnational discourse of television distribution and reception. And because of that, the narrative disseminates Western ideas of religion and gender all around the world. As Connell argues in terms of gender: "On a global scale, the most profound change is the export of the European/American gender order to the colonized world." (Connell 1995, 199). We may assume a similar discursive process for the distribution of the Western concept of religion.

The assumption that these Western television narratives have a universal element and that they may be considered as disconnected from socio-political and cultural developments is problematic and reminds us of ethnocentric, colonial perspectives on the world. We should not assume that anything happens without a connection to specific social discourses because nothing exists in isolation, even less when we consider transnational and global developments. Maybe these television narratives should be defined not according to their supposed universalism but as part of a transformational transnational discourse that obviously addresses a greater audience around the world even though it is – as we see in the case of *Supernatural* – defined by Western and especially Judeo-Christian ideals of narration and gender.

2 See: http://www.cnbc.com/id/41356625/Piracy_Rules_the_Web_Dominating_23_8_of_Internet_Traffic. For further information on this matter see: <http://jetzt.sueddeutsche.de/texte/anzeigen/436859>.

This analysis uncovers cultural transnationality as well as the influence of American dominated popular culture on the German-speaking fan community. Contemporary societal developments, especially regarding religion and gender, emerge in these discourses (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 2013; Hills 2002). Within this general transformation discourse we see that there is still a special interest in religion or religious elements within the audience. Maybe this is an expression of the changing role of religion within Western societies. Religious traditions as well as religious institutions are no longer anchored in everyday life as they once were for the majority of European and North American societies.

The central question to be examined in this paper is how fans address religion and gender within participatory culture. Therefore we should differentiate between the terms ‘fan culture’ and ‘participatory culture’ which are similar but not totally alike. We have to see participatory culture as defined by the keywords: affiliation, expression, collaborative problem-solving and circulation, as suggested by Jenkins (2009, xi-xii). Fan culture and participatory culture often show similar aspects of an identity or community-building process. For example, participatory culture is based on low barriers to engagement, the support for creativity and sharing one’s artistic creations (2009, 5) which is also important for fan culture. Furthermore, the social aspect of being part of a community and believing in the significance of one’s work is important for many contributors. Also a form of informal mentorship may be part of these communities, “whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins 2009, 6). However, participatory culture may also be experienced in communities connected through political or civic engagement. Besides that, a further analysis of the religious dimension of fandom itself would be interesting. Due to a lack of space, it is not part of this investigation. A fuller discussion of religion and fan culture will appear in a later publication. For further insights on this matter see also Matt Hills (2000, 73-84) or Jennifer Porter (2009, 271-280).

3 Participatory Culture

People read books, watch movies or television series and play video games in part for pleasure (also a very important aspect) and in part to immerse into another world. Content and emotions conveyed in these different media give people the feeling of being part of the narrative. Thus, the most appealing quality of media is to address people and pull them into a different state of mind, so that time and space appear different from everyday life. The psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi defines this flow experience as especially appearing in sporting activities: “In contrast to normal life, flow activities allow a person to focus on goals that are clear and compatible”

(Csikszentmihalyi 1997, 30). He defines these experiences as active and states that passive activities like watching television rarely cause this state. At this point I partly disagree with him. Of course there is a difference between active and passive activities and the flow generated by both, but this alternative state of mind is exactly what is important for the audience of a television series. This condition of the flow requires a commitment to the cause that, however, creates a discursive interaction: people integrate their ideas and beliefs in the storyline of a narrative and since this is a reciprocal process their notions are influenced by it (Dill 2009, 14).

I understand the relationship between television series and fan culture as a discursive process that transfers elements from actual religious belief systems into television narratives and then into fan culture. Fans may also draw on their own religious experiences to describe and interpret religious elements within the television series. Similarly, they may identify with religious elements and gender depictions from the television narrative to enrich their fan experience. However, immersion in the television narrative goes beyond merely watching and identifying with the show. Many fans interact with and contribute to the wider fan community on the Internet. This collaborative creativity and community-building often happens on fan webpages based on wikis that explain most of the elements of the television series' narratives. All the webpages share the name wiki or wikia somewhere in their name and are distributed by the company Wikia, Inc.³ The webpages enable fans to contribute, publish and be part of a greater participatory culture. These communities intensify the relationship with the fan object and connect them with kindred spirits. While being part of a participatory culture, many fans show a high engagement and commitment to their fan community by publishing their ideas in blogs, discussions, as well as fan fictions. In the case of *Supernatural*, fans are particularly engaged in writing fan fictions to continue, disrupt or change the series' complex narrative.

Some examples of fan culture emphasize the representation of religious elements and the representation of gender. Discussing the transformation of all these elements in fan culture would be fascinating, but would go beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore only the relationship between the representation of religion and masculinity has been analyzed in this paper. Selected examples of fan fiction that are relevant for the main theme of this paper have been selected for exploration. Here discussions taken out of fan forums especially were extremely interesting.

Even though there is a rich participatory fan culture within the German -speaking area, this form of fan culture seems to be a phenomenon that presents itself internationally, but is dominated by the English-speaking world., This however should not lead to the conclusion that German fan culture is less committed or less interested in *Supernatural's* narrative. I strongly disagree with such an assumption. What is clear however, is that information is often taken from English texts and thus

3 See: <http://www.wikia.com/Wikia>.

from the Anglo-American conception of these. At the same time on the English homepage, efforts are made to recognize the multilingual dimension of transnational fandom by establishing a German section on the English homepage.⁴ This shows that the German society is shaped not only by television series originating from an English-speaking context but also that fan culture of this television series is strongly connected to the Anglo-American cultural background.

For the analysis of this transnational development, fan fictions from two different German Internet forums and webpages, *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiction.de* have been selected to analyze the similarities and disconnections in the portrayal of gender in a continued religious narrative. At this point, the Foucaultian idea of power within the discourse representing religion and gender in different narrative texts is prominent (Foucault 2008). I should mention that all elements taken from fan fictions are openly accessible on these webpages. So, no private texts or discussion elements have been used in this paper. Every passage or paragraph used in this analysis has already been published by the respective author online and is accessible to a wider audience.

3.1 *Online Discussions: Transnationality, Media and Gender*

Within fan culture, we find elements of *Supernatural*'s narrative not only in fan fictions but also in fan forums and the excited online discussion culture of the audience. I want not only to study the narratives of fan fiction but also the even more active and fascinating online discussion forums. I analyzed different discussions in fan forums on the already mentioned homepages *myfanfiction.de* and *fanfiktion.de* in general and one discussion in particular caught my attention. Here, the question of gender representation in the narrative of *Supernatural* and sexism is discussed in a thread. The discussion's title immediately points to a critical examination of gender in *Supernatural*: How sexist is *Supernatural*? (and do you watch it anyway?)⁵. Particularly exciting in this discussion is that even the question itself appears to be unclear to the German audience. When the initiator of the discussion posts a link to references of an ongoing discussion in English-speaking fan culture, these facts are dismissed.

4 "This page is a pilot page for German/multilingual entries in this wiki. If you are interested in joining the project, please contact the Super-wiki admin Jules." Here should be noted, that Jules is not from a German-speaking country but from Australia. <http://www.supernaturalwiki.com/index.php?title=Staffeln>.

5 FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wie sexistisch ist Supernatural? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

Participants in the German discussion define these critical discourses as unimportant or exaggerated.⁶ First of all, the accusation of sexism is either rejected or objected to and defined as social reality.

Ich finde Supernatural nicht sexistisch, es spiegelt in dem Bezug eigentlich die Realität wieder. So wie Dean mit den Mädels umgeht, kenne ich das ebenfalls von hier, wenn ich mit Freundinnen zusammen weggehe. Es ist nun mal so.⁷

Furthermore this statement also argues that in the fight against evil, there is no gender discrimination because demons have to be fought regardless of their gender. The general rejection of trends and themes in English-speaking fandom is particularly fascinating in terms of a transnational discourse. While this discourse is defined as positive in terms of the television series itself as well as information about it, serious social discussions of English-speaking fan culture are rejected.⁸ This may originate in a generally critical European attitude towards the politics of the US. Further, that rejection could be related to the fact that the German-speaking region is still strongly defined by Adorno and Horkheimer, and their negative notion of media. These different positions with respect to the interpretation of television series are also due to variations in the social access to mass media (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973).

Thus, even with all the interest in American culture and its popular productions, there is a simultaneous rejection of uncomfortable themes, especially regarding the desired fan object, the television series. What is interesting is that this rejection also includes the English-speaking fan culture, or the choice of topics in the discussions there. Participants in the German discussion argue that it can be assumed that not many viewers actually deal with such issues. Nevertheless, towards the end of the discussion, the following comment argues that the accusations of sexism could possibly be true, but are not relevant to the audience.

Darüber habe ich, wie vermutlich ein Großteil der Leute, die die Serie sehen, nie nachgedacht. Ich meine, selbst wenn wir alle zusammen überzeugt werden, dass Supernatural sexistisch (!) ist (und ich

6 Anonymous user: “And besides, who cares if fictional creatures are discriminated against anyway? *Needless*” (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wie sexistisch ist Supernatural? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

7 HunterBabe1989: “I think Supernatural is not sexist, in the reference actually reality is reflected. Just as Dean handles girls, I know this also from when I go out together with girlfriends. It is how it is.” (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wie sexistisch ist Supernatural? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), started on 08. January 2009, last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

8 Topics on the English website are e.g.: “Workshop: M/F dynamics in M/M fic: wrongly applied gender roles and how to avoid them” or “Masculinity and social class”, <https://delicious.com/metafandom/spn_gender>.

glaube, dass ist es), [...] man möchte doch unterhalten werden und sich nicht über die Gesellschaft, in der wir leben, Gedanken machen.⁹

This statement concludes that watching television should be entertaining and not a serious reflection of actual social situations. The admission of believing that *Supernatural* is sexist underlines the actual relevance of this topic. Yet, one of the next comments declares that it is not sexist even though the portrayed one-night stands indicate ambivalent depictions of sexuality. However, the women know exactly what they are getting involved in.

Ich finde es auch nicht sexistisch. Okay, Dean hat in fast jeder 2. folge ne andere Frau aber es ist ja nicht so als wüssten die Frauen nicht worauf sie sich einlassen.¹⁰

In summary, it is clear that this issue is not as alleged, does not exist or is not defined as important in German fan culture, at least as presented in this discussion. This discussion obviously occupies a central part of the perception of our real society in the television narrative. Nevertheless, in the argument of the discussion no relationship between reality and fiction is allowed. Interestingly, within the discussions investigated here, gender roles and their distribution are recognized as real and relevant issues, but that however does not affect the narrative of the television series or subsequently the fan fiction. This assumption is really fascinating for me.

The participants of this discussion recognize and accept the existence of a socially problematic distribution of gender roles, but simultaneously do not allow this topic to be discussed in fan culture. With this rejection, they seem to ignore their already -made reinterpretations of gender within their own fan fictions (such as integration of female characters, reinvention of masculinity, homosexuality,...). This argumentative position of rejecting the ambivalence of gender representation in *Supernatural* does not coincide with the results of the analysis of the fan fictions, even though participants in the discussion also wrote fan fictions that are part of the analysis. At this point I had to question and investigate whether the analysis was faulty or whether my assumptions of fan culture are superficial. Compared with Line Nybro Petersen's studies, similarities can be seen in the presentation of religion and gender roles within the studied fan fictions (Petersen 2013, 82-95). However, she does not report of such discontinuities within the same fan community. This fan

9 Blackninja: "Furthermore, I, like probably many of the people who watch the show, never thought of that. I mean, even if we all are convinced that *Supernatural* is sexist (and I believe that it is) [...] one wants to be entertained and not have to worry about the society in which we live." (translated by the author) FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – *Supernatural*, Wie sexistisch ist *Supernatural*? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

10 Jesaku: "I also think it's not sexist. Okay, Dean has in almost every episode another woman but it is not as if the women do not know what they are doing", (translated by the author) FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – *Supernatural*, Wie sexistisch ist *Supernatural*? (und guckt ihr trotzdem weiter?), <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/1567>>.

community distances itself from a critical examination of the narrative of the television series, but at the same time writes critical fan fictions, in which female characters are integrated into the storyline or the heteronormative representation of the male characters is deconstructed. The fact that this contrary relationship between the narrative of the television show and the topics of the fan fictions is not recognized is surprising. It is doubtful that such a reflective level does not exist. The analyzed online discussion deals with the social dimension of gender representation in our society, but does not establish a connection to the gender depiction in the narrative of *Supernatural*. Accordingly, different approaches to the binary positions of reality/fiction, society/television in relation to gender roles must exist in both societies (US and Germany) and lead to these differing interpretations.

3.2 Online Discussions: Faith, Religion and Television

In relation to recent reflections on the modified terms of a contemporary knowledge discourse, to what extent is information about religious elements carried by a television series and fan culture and how is this information received by the audience? This question is difficult to answer, since watching television to a large extent is still part of the private dimension of the living room, a scientifically elusive area. Within the fan culture, we can obtain elements that are part of the narrative structure in online published fan fictions, information websites or discussion forums. To analyze the acceptance of religious elements and information about them in fan culture, I again analyzed the extremely valuable source material in discussion forums taken from *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiktion.de*. When selecting the threads, once again the religious dimension and the question of the representation of gender were in the foreground. Accordingly, I chose eight discussions from *fanfiktion.de*, which deal with three overarching themes: What is the fascinating thing about *Supernatural*, religion in *Supernatural* and finally the question of the distribution of gender roles in the narrative. On *myfanfiktion.de* only two relevant discussions were found, which argue with the fans' belief in the supernatural cosmology and the authenticity of *Supernatural's* narrative.

In the first discussion on *fanfiktion.de* the question of whether *Supernatural* is just a teen television series or something more than that was investigated. Many participants in the discussion argued that they expressly like the interpretation of mythology and the combination of different genres, where the fantasy element stands out. In addition, a critical examination of religion seems to be of interest to the viewer, even if the dominance of the religious narrative is viewed critically. Interestingly, it is pointed out that the distinction between reality and fiction in the self-definition as a fan has significance.

Realität kann ich aber noch von Fiktion unterscheiden.¹¹

11 Gaya Lupin: "I still can distinguish between reality and fiction", (translated by the author) FanFiktion.de, Forum /

Regarding this subject of fiction and reality in a different discussion it is explained that in the intertextuality between fan fiction and the narrative of the television series, the lines often blur.¹² To that effect, it is also assumed that reality and fiction as well as real society and the narrative of *Supernatural* cross over. The relationship between reality and fiction, however, is frequently addressed in fan discussion. On the homepage *fanfiktion.de*, fans discuss that the representation of Lucifer in *Supernatural* has changed their idea about the devil. It is clear that the portrayal of the character, Lucifer has had an influence on the panelist's everyday life. One discussion participant argues that in official school education, the devil is portrayed entirely different as he is portrayed in the narrative of *Supernatural*. *Supernatural's* depiction changed the user's view about him and reveals how television narrative influences individual religious notions.

Ja klar du hast recht, er ist natuerlich trotzdem boese, aber ich kann ihn ein bischen besser verstehn, im Religionsunterricht habe ich nie gehoert dass Luzifer verstossen wurde weil er Gott zu sehr geliebt hat.¹³

This makes it clear that the representation of the narrative within the fan culture encourages the audience to question dominant religious ideas but simultaneously also reinforces Judeo-Christian elements within Western societies. Furthermore, television is perceived as another source of religious knowledge in their everyday life. The impact of the depicted religious elements on the audience is further discussed in four forum discussions.¹⁴ For example, the question is raised whether *Supernatural* is based on an actual religion.

Ein paar Freundinnen von mir und ich haben uns letzgens gefragt, ob es vielleicht eine Religion/Sekte/ was auch immer gibt, die vielleicht an die Begebenheiten von Supernatrual(!) glaubt? Zum Beispiel das mit den Engeln, Dämonen, der Apokalypse etc. Das würde mich nämlich echt mal interessieren, das wäre doch echt verdammt cool!¹⁵

TV – Serien – Supernatural, Was ist so gut an Supernatural? <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/10367/1>>.

- 12 ShyLee: "Allerdings hat das bei mir zur Folge, dass die Serienrealität immer weiter mit der Fanficillusion verschwimmt. Ich weiß stellenweise gar nicht mehr, welche Handlungen tatsächlich in der Serie vorkamen und welche ich hier nur gelesen habe." "However, this has the consequence that the reality of the television series for me blurs with the fanfic-illusion. Sometimes I do not remember which actions actually occurred in the series and which I have just read in fanfics." (translated by the author). FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Wenn Wahrheit und Fiktion miteinander verschwimmen, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/16160/1>>.
- 13 Anonymous user: "Yeah you're right, he is of course still evil, but I can kind of understand him better, in religious education, I have never heard that Lucifer was outcast because he loved God too much." (translated by the author) FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, Was ist so gut an Supernatural? <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/10367/1>>.
- 14 The topics of these discussions are "Is there a Supernatural Religion", "The Supernatural Hell", "Do you think Season 5 feels differently about Lucifer," as well as "demons and other creatures of hell." (translated by the author.), last accessed on 1. September 2014, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/f/26>>.
- 15 Melilein: "A few friends of mine and I have recently wondered if there might be a religion/cult/whatever out there

One answer to this question is that Christianity is the main model for the religious elements presented in *Supernatural*, while another answer differentiates between various religious systems, but refers in general to the Bible as the source for the religious elements in *Supernatural*. Nevertheless, one answer explains that all major religions include these kinds of religious elements, which again refers explicitly to the Abrahamic religions and not *all* religions.

Auch alle anderen „großen“ Religionen kennen Engel, Dämonen, göttliche Gerichtsbarkeit etc.”¹⁶

Furthermore, the discussion arises whether Sam and Dean belong to a specific religion. While one user thinks Sam and Dean are Protestant¹⁷, another one argues, that they don't need a specific religion or have to believe anything because they already know what is true.¹⁸ In the last discussion, addressing the subject of religion, “Do you believe all of this?”¹⁹, it becomes clear that a desire to believe in a higher power is a crucial issue. In addition, it shows that especially the Judeo-Christian origin of the depicted religious elements in *Supernatural* is awarded credibility.

so an die art wie sie in der serie dargestellt werden (engle [!], dämonen, Gott) glau (!) ich nicht drann (!)... [...] aber ich glaube schon daran dass es engel, „dämonen“, und auch gott gibt.²⁰

This user comments decidedly on the belief he holds in angels, demons and God, even though not in the visual depiction of the television series. Here we see that mediatized religious elements in television series as well as actual religious narratives may not coincide all the time. Nevertheless, they address similar and well-known themes in Western societies.

All of these examples of textual passages from different fan webpages for *Supernatural* reveal that the mediatization process of religious phenomena is a complex and collaborative discourse of contemporary Western societies. We see that the audience is not necessarily interested

which might believe in the events presented in Supernatural (!)? For example, the angels, demons, the Apocalypse, etc. That would interest me really, that would be pretty damn cool!”(translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

16 LadyLaduga: “All the other ‘big’ religions know angels, demons, divine justice etc.”. (translated by the author)FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

17 Anonymous user. FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

18 Ametista: “Außerdem müssen sie ja gar nichts ‘glauben’ - sie wissen.” FanFiktion.de, Forum / TV – Serien – Supernatural, *Gibt es eine "Supernatural- Religion"?*, <<http://forum.fanfiktion.de/t/12802/1>>.

19 Myfanfiction.de, Supernatural, *Glaubt ihr an all das?* <<http://www.myfanfiction.de/gruppen.php?gruppenid=350&thema=906>>.

20 Murphyne: “I do not believe that they are as they are shown in the series (angles, demons, God)... [...] But I do think that angels, “demons”, and God exist.” (translated by the author)Myfanfiction.de, Supernatural, *Glaubt ihr an all das?*, <<http://www.myfanfiction.de/gruppen.php?gruppenid=350&thema=906>>.

in being part of an institutional religion, however, religion itself is of interest. And even though a discussion of the definition of religion now would be rewarding, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

3.3 *Fan Fiction: Religion, Gender and Diversity*

Not only are discussions in fan forums fascinating but also fan fiction delivers an interesting insight into participatory fan culture. Fan fictions are written contributions that allow fans to reflect on their approval of or refusal to accept the original storyline. Jenkins puts forward the view that “fan writers do not so much reproduce the primary text as they rework and rewrite it, repairing or dismissing unsatisfying aspects, developing interests not sufficiently explored” (Jenkins 2013, 162). To assume that fan culture would only confirm and pass on traditional power discourses would be wrong. The production of texts within fan culture is to a certain degree based on hegemonic ideas about how knowledge is conveyed. This construction of knowledge is separate from an interpretation of this information as we will see in the next chapter. Especially in fan fiction but also in various fan forums, elements of the narrative are deconstructed and reinterpreted. In addition, traditional religious elements are re-interpreted and put into new contexts.

In particular the portrayal of masculinity in the apocalyptic narrative structure is of specific interest for me. The question as to what extent elements of *Supernatural*'s narrative change or remain the same in fan culture will be addressed. Of course, a comprehensive analysis of the entire source material of German fan culture regarding the television series *Supernatural* is not possible. Therefore, examples have been selected to demonstrate the transformation process of religious elements and to illuminate the acceptance or deconstruction of narrative images of gender in German fan culture.

To start with, a short reference to the two main homepages *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiktion.de* is necessary. From *Alarm für Cobra 11*, a German crime series, to *Zorro*, on the homepage *www.fanfiktion.de* more than 250 different television series can be found. The most popular television series are *Vampire Diaries* and *NCIS*, each with over 3,500 published fan fictions, closely followed by *Supernatural* with 3187.²¹ On the webpage *myfanfiction.de* we find nearly 250 stories and fan fictions about *Supernatural*.²² The content of these pages is not only focused on discussing film or television but also offers the possibility of publishing stories and fan fictions on film, literature or sports.

We have to realize that the discursive process regarding religion and gender does not end with the narrative structure of the television series. Within the reception of these categories in the

21 See: <http://www.fanfiktion.de/TV-Serien/c/101000000>.

22 See: <http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural>.

audience, this discourse continues in fan fiction in different ways (Weber and Dixon 2007). On the one hand religious elements and gender depiction from the source text, the television narrative, are retained unchanged and often support hegemonic power and heteronormative discourses. On the other hand subversive and transgressive interpretations of religion and gender – based on the same source texts – appear in fan fiction. Summarized, fan fiction either develops new storylines by transforming characters and elements or continues with the well-known parts of the source text. Hellekson and Busse suggest three main areas of fan fiction: *gen*, *het* and *slash*. These terms are used to define the three categories within fan fiction. The characters in *gen* fan fiction are not primarily engaged in any way, and romantic feelings or sexual interactions are not the focus. *Het* refers to fan fiction that explicitly broaches the issue of heterosexual attraction, while in *slash* stories queer (regarding identity as well as sexuality) is at the center of interest (Hellekson and Busse, 10). This process of fan writing focuses on desire and imagination (Kaveney 2010, 243-247), but in the last two categories in particular, gender is an important element.

From this wealth of fan fiction and discussion forums, I have tried to focus on fan fiction with a religious narrative as this is the focus of this paper: stories with a religious or apocalyptic background therefore are of major interest to me. Furthermore, I was particularly interested in the representation of gender, and masculinity in particular, within these fan fictions. For the concrete analysis, I decided at first to have a general look at fan fiction represented on the two homepages *fanfiktion.de* and *myfanfiktion.de*.

Here, I chose two different approaches. First, I had a brief look at all 247 fan fictions addressing *Supernatural* on the homepage *myfanfiction.de* to consider and get an overview of the representation of religion and masculinity.²³ Second, I looked at the more than 3100 fan fictions regarding *Supernatural* on the homepage *fanfiktion.de*, concentrating particularly on the depiction of gender/masculinity within a religious/apocalyptic narrative. I was able to examine the different interpretations of the original television narrative and to narrow the selection down to 36 fan fictions that explicitly dealt with an apocalyptic, religious narrative. Rather than attempting to do a detailed sub-analysis of the fan fictions, given that some of them run to 100,000 words, I felt it more useful to give a general overview of the fan fiction with some detailed highlights and examples to underline broader developments.

I have concentrated on three aspects of the depiction of masculinity in the fan fictions, questioning firstly if the representation of the two male main characters of *Supernatural*, Sam and Dean, had changed in terms of their sexuality. Secondly, I focused on whether male characters established sexual or romantic relationships with other male characters or whether they continued to support heteronormative representations of sexuality. Thirdly, I investigated whether only the

23 See: <http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural>.

original characters of the television narrative were taken into the fan fictions or if new, invented characters had been integrated.

In the 247 fan fictions published on *myfanfiction.de*, it was clear that there is a focus on the integration of new characters. Of the 247 fan fictions read, 40 % introduced a new, almost exclusively female character to the storyline. These female characters are assigned different positions within the narrative, but almost always stand beside the two main male characters, Sam and Dean, to complement and extend the dominant masculine narrative. In most cases, the female character appears in the active role of a young woman who comes into contact with the brothers or is even a hunter²⁴ herself. Also, a representation as a sister of the brothers appears in some cases. The focus, however, is on the fact that a large part of the female audience apparently feels that female characters are missing in the narrative.

The deconstruction of heteronormativity, especially in regard to a religious narrative, also seems of interest to fans. One user, Helena, asks herself, what would change for Dean and the story of the apocalypse if Sam were a Sally? Interestingly, hardly anything changes within her fan fiction that is taken directly from the basic themes of the Winchester family. At the beginning of Season 1, Sam is described as being in a relationship and living a life outside the hunting community, much like Sally in this fan fiction. The relationship between Helena's two siblings is also interpreted in a similar way to the television narrative. In the fan fiction, Dean visits Sally and asks for her help. In addition to that, the memories of the girl's past show that it appears to be reminiscent of the childhood of the Winchesters. The patriarchal masculinity images displayed in the narrative of the television series are not broken in this fan fiction even though Sam's character now is female. Furthermore, they are similarly handed down. On one hand, this shows that it takes more than just the introduction of a female character to change hegemonic structures and on the other hand, patriarchal dimensions are reinterpreted as Sally can adopt an equally central role in this religious narrative.²⁵

It is interesting that 33% of the fan fictions stick to the preset of the television narrative or convert the characters of the narrative only minimally from their original depiction. To this end, only characters, who are actually present in the narrative of *Supernatural* occur in these fan fictions. However, variations of the narrative are often evident. 13% of the stories deal with further cross-fiction (e.g. mixing with characters from other television series), real-life fan fiction or deviating elements taken from *Supernatural*'s narrative structure. Essential at this point is that the nature of

24 The brothers are called 'hunters' since they not only fight evil but actually hunt supernatural, evil creatures down.

25 "What if Sam were a Sally. If the Winchesters were not two brothers, but Dean had a little sister. What would change? For Dean, for the story of Lucifer?" (translated by the author), <http://www.myfanfiction.de/texte/supernatural/just-one-change.244364.html>.

the characters, as well as the action, does not change comprehensively. In conclusion, the fact that 14% of fan fictions question heteronormativity and include slash stories is fascinating.

The 36 specifically selected, apocalyptic fan fictions from the homepage *fanfiktion.de* show similar results to the general overview on *myfanfiction.de*. These 36 stories were selected out of a total of 3187 fan fictions addressing *Supernatural*.²⁶ Because the source material was too extensive to examine even in an overview, for the fan fictions on this homepage, I focused on the narrative structure of the stories and looked at fan fictions that followed *Supernatural*'s apocalyptic narrative. By applying that selection criterion, 36 fan fictions, which explicitly address an apocalyptic setting, have been given a closer analysis. Similar to the previous analysis I look at the representation of the male characters from the television series and their portrayal in the religious and apocalyptic storyline. Again it turned out that in nearly half the fan fictions, - 44% - a female character was integrated, for example in the fan fiction about the huntress Christa. The prologue of the fan fiction portrays a female heroine and huntress called Christa, working with the brothers to fight evil in an apocalyptic setting, similar to that depicted in Seasons 4 and 5. This scene depicts her in the monastery at the end of Season 4, when Lucifer rises. At first she interprets a light she sees as a category of good and divine, but realizes that this is not the case. Dean tries to save her but a shadow shape explaining that God abandoned humans long ago pushes him away.

Und Gott sprach: Es werde Licht. Der Satz ging ihr immer und immer wieder durch den Kopf. Das Licht war Gottes Werk, symbolisierte das Gute. [...] Dieses Licht, das hier und jetzt auf sie zukam, war keineswegs warm, friedlich oder in irgendeiner Hinsicht gut. Sie hörte das Brüllen aus den Tiefen der Hölle. [...] „Christa!“ Die Jägerin hob ihren Kopf. Es war Deans Stimme, die durch das Kreischen der Hölle hindurchbrach. Erleichtert atmete sie auf. Sie war nicht allein. „Dean“, hauchte sie. [...] Wieder hörte sie ihren Namen. Doch es war nicht Dean. Sondern jemand anderes. Vor ihr erschien eine Schattengestalt. Christa kniff die Augen zusammen, wollte erkennen, wer auf sie zutrat. *Herr, du bist mein Hirte...* „Gott hat dich schon längst verlassen. Genau wie alle anderen“, sagte die fremde Gestalt.²⁷

26 See: <http://www.fanfiktion.de/Supernatural/c/101083000>.

27 “*And God said, Let there be light.* This was the sentence she went over and over again in her head. The light was the work of God, symbolizing the good. [...] This light, which came towards her now was not warm, peaceful or good in any way. She heard the roar from the depths of hell. [...] “Christa!” The huntress lifted her head. It was Dean’s voice that broke through the shriek of hell. She sighed with relief. She was not alone. “Dean”, she breathed. [...] Again, she heard her name. But it was not Dean. It was someone else. Before her appeared a shadowy figure. Christa narrowed her eyes, wanted to know who approached her. *Lord, you are my shepherd...* “God has abandoned you long ago. Just like everyone else”, said the strange character.” (translated by the author) HunterBabe1989 2009, *Fan fiction. Supernatural - When God is Gone and the Devil Takes Hold*, <http://www.fanfiktion.de/s/4aa0376d00004cbc06514438/1/Supernatural-When-God-is-Gone-and-the-Devil-Takes-Hold-Ep-12-Season-5-Season-9->

Christa is portrayed as similar to the brothers within the apocalyptic fight against evil. The religious elements in the beginning and at the end of this paragraph echo The Book of Genesis and also address God in the first line of a well-known psalm. This establishes an even closer and more direct religious structure than that within *Supernatural's* narrative. However, when Christa starts praying, the shadow voice answers that God has abandoned her. Again this fan fiction stays true to the television narrative discussing important religious discourses about God's absence. Therefore this story clearly continues the religious elements from the television narrative and reinforces them.

Almost a third, 32 %, of the analyzed fan fictions from *fanfiktion.de* is based on *Supernatural's* representation of masculinity – again with variations, however, remaining within heteronormativity and hegemonic representations. I will not discuss them in much more detail because they evidently stick to the main elements of the television narrative. A significant difference is evident in the presentation of slash fan fiction. Nearly 22% of the apocalyptic fan fictions published on *fanfiktion.de* address this theme. This may be related, among other things, to the website management. For example, *fanfiktion.de* is much more structured and has severe restrictions and protections of minor users. This makes it a more attractive platform for the publication of sensitive material, such as that of slash fan fictions. Within these slash fan fictions, not only is sexuality at the center of interest (Hellekson and Busse 2006, 10), but also desire and the imagining of a love story (Kaveney 2010, 243-247). The religious and apocalyptic context of the fan fictions draws directly on the subject of obedience and good and evil. Central to the final battle against evil - here represented by demons and angels – is that the outcome does not depend on obedience to God, but on the love of the people.

Wo war ich nur gelandet? Wie bitte war ich hier hingekommen? Ein Engel des Herrn kämpft gegen Dämonen. Für ihn machte ich es. [...] Ich liebte meinen Vater und meine Brüder zwar aber ich kämpfte auch für das was ich wollte. [...] Er hatte mir ein Leben gezeigt, wie ich es noch nicht kannte und ich wollte es nicht missen. Ich kämpfte zwar gegen Dämonen und meine eigenen Brüder aber ich wusste wofür.²⁸

What is remarkable about this text, and also the other apocalyptic narratives which were investigated, is that despite changes in the characters, the apocalyptic narrative does not change. The text passage is a monologue by the angel Castiel, addressing his love for the human, Dean. It

28 “Where did I end up? How did I get here? An angel of the Lord fighting against demons. For him I did it. [...] I loved my father and my brothers but I fought for what I wanted. [...] He had shown me a life, as I did not know and I did not want to miss. I fought against demons and my own brothers but at least I knew why.” (translated by the author) Brandzess 2013, *Brüder, Engel, Dämonen, Du und Ich - OS-Sammlung*, <http://www.fanfiktion.de/s/511a2021000239c006514438/3/Brueder-Engel-Daemonen-Du-und-Ich-OS-Sammlung>.

describes Castiel as a soldier of Heaven, who changes his priorities because of love. Again we see some resemblance to the television narrative and the idea that love may change everything.

Within the analyzed apocalyptic fan fictions, there are generally three important dimensions. First it is clear that for the authors of these texts the integration of female characters in the storylines is of central importance. The fans' textual productivity can be described as a largely female domain. Camille Bacon-Smith analyzed female fandom and concludes that in her survey 90% of the authors were female (Bacon-Smith 1992, 23). To establish a female character and add it to the original narrative provides a way to either become part of the story or to change it in relation to one's own ideas of the distribution of gender roles. This is echoed in Line Nybro Petersen's finding in her analysis of romance and spirituality in the fan culture of *Twilight*. Fan fiction offers the possibility to find a "new space for negotiating gender values and norms" (Petersen 2013, 82). Her conclusion regarding rejection and simultaneous approval of the existing gender roles in the narrative and religious ideas in *Twilight*, can be transferred to the German-speaking fandom of *Supernatural*. However, I still have to analyze the complex relationship between the depiction of religion and masculinity in the religious/apocalyptic narrative.

Second, it seems as if religious elements no longer encourage only traditional gender roles, but also strengthen other forms of gender depiction. Now, female heroines and homosexual relations between angels and humans are addressed in the narrative. Nevertheless, simultaneously in a good third of the fan fictions on both homepages, the hegemonic patriarchal representation of masculinity is maintained. This representation, however, does have other deviations from the original television narrative indicated by variations of the action or changes to the settings within the text. This makes it clear that approval of depicted forms of religion and masculinity does not simply lead to an unquestioned acceptance and continuation of the narrative.

Third, masculinity is deconstructed in relation to sexuality and thus new interpretations reject heteronormative ideas. This can be seen as a general trend in the fan culture. The productivity in fan culture, especially regarding fan fictions is caused, according to Henry Jenkins, by a combination of admiration and frustration. According to this assumption, the fans use the texts of the dominant popular culture and tailor them to their needs. In most cases, it is referred to as the reason for the subversive modification of a missing or under-representation of certain groups in society. On the one hand, this connects fans emotionally with the object of their desire, on the other hand, this calls for changes, de-continuation or expansion of the object itself (Jenkins 1992, 23).

These three dimensions affect the depiction and the relationship between religion and masculinity in various fan fictions. The apocalyptic narrative in relation to the television series itself should be seen as a separate dimension, a religious element. Furthermore, in fan culture this dimension becomes increasingly detached from a hegemonic, patriarchal and institutional religious

system. The apocalyptic narrative itself obviously satisfies an essential need for an epic, mythological or religious narrative. Essential here, however, is that the male, traditional hero is rejected, in his hegemonic role and is replaced by progressive, reflexive and modern male heroes. Second, he may retain this traditional role to some degree in the fan fiction, however, he shares his hero position with a female hero. Well over half of the studied fan fictions support this hypothesis and confirm the need for the adaptation of this narrative in the broader audience. Nevertheless, it should be noted at the same time that a religious narrative, such as the important apocalyptic narrative, carries essential Western norms and values that are associated with the representation of gender roles. We could summarize that for the depiction and the representation of masculinity in German fan culture, religious norms and values dominate regardless of whether hegemonic patriarchal or progressive-reflexive gender representations are integrated in the fan fictions. That means that religious elements, in particular ethical and moral ideas, are crucial for the narrative of the television series as well as fan fictions and therefore are judged as essential by the audience. Furthermore, the message that love can overcome all obstacles highlights the religious narrative.

4 Conclusion

Within the academic field of Religious Studies the topic of religion and media is a well-researched area, mainly focusing on the representation or the influence of religious groups on mainstream media (Hoover 2006). Studies often concentrate on media or television in general and not on individual programs. For example, Forbes and Mahan analyze the different dimension of the relationship between religion and popular culture, e.g. religion in popular culture and vice versa as well as popular culture as religion, but they do not concentrate on television narratives in particular (Forbes and Mahan 2000). I argue that there is a significant difference between the forms of representation of religion and gender in different types of media (Hoover, Stewart and Lundby 1997). Even with a focus only on television, there are still so many different categories and genres to look at (News, Reality, Crime,...), Popular television series in particular have received little scholarly attention from a religious studies' point of view and have not yet been discovered as the interesting and rewarding research area it is. Furthermore, the transformation and mediatization of religious elements and their relation to the depiction of gender within the narrative of popular television series, is a barely recognized field of research within religious studies. The transformation of television source texts and the representation of religious elements and gender in fan culture in general is a particularly enriching research area.

Participatory fan culture not only engages in discursive transformation processes of the mediatization of religion, but also reproduces, reconstructs and reinterprets gender depiction. In a number of fan fictions, the line between television narrative and social reality often becomes indistinct. We have to conclude that the narrative of *Supernatural*, heavily influenced as it is by religion, often supports traditional gender roles, even though the narrative challenges them consistently. While in the television narrative a new interpretation of hegemonic and heteronormative depictions of masculinity are evident, in fan fiction, either acceptance or a reflexive deconstruction of this power discourse appears. Specific religious themes, such as self-sacrifice, resurrection, good and evil, as well as ethical and moral values, are relevant in the depiction of religious narratives on both levels. Therefore, not only the transnationality of fan culture but also aspects of diversity in the discussion of religion and gender obviously leave room for further investigation.

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