THE SUPERNATURAL FOLKLORESQUE:

FOLKLORE, POPULAR CULTURE, AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEF

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Building upon the study of the folkloresque pioneered by Michal Dylan Foster, this thesis examines a sub-type of folkloresque popular culture that is inspired by supernatural folklore, termed here "the supernatural folkloresque." Drawing on the existing research from the fields of sociology, folkloristics, religious studies, history, and popular culture studies, as well as examining supernatural folkloresque films and television shows prominent within American popular culture of 1995-2022, I argue that supernatural folkloresque programs tend to signal dissatisfaction with a "disenchanted modernity" and advocate for re-enchanting the world and bringing back the (perceived) lost magic and meaning, which is to be achieved through accepting supernatural belief and reclaiming traditional knowledge preserved in folkloric beliefs and practices; and that such popular culture constitutes a creative and playful mode of exploration of supernatural beliefs, borne out of – and therefore suitable for – the contexts of Western culture in the 21st century.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING THE SUPERNATURAL FOLKLORESQUE

Introduction

Western popular culture in recent years has been exhibiting a significant interest in

folklore and the supernatural. Countless films, books, comics, and video games endeavor to

portray magic, fantastic creatures and the supernatural – and many of these portrayals implement

folkloric elements, motifs, and allusions, as if striving to appear folkloric. Some examples

include *Harry Potter, The Supernatural, Twilight, Ghostbusters, The Witcher, Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer, The Craft, Once Upon a Time, Grimm, Merlin BBC, The Magicians, Charmed, and

numerous Disney adaptations of fairy-tales.

Because "the mass media is both a 'shaper' and 'product' of the same culture" (Berger

and Ezzy 2009, 504), trends in popular culture are not mere reflections of the creators'

preferences, but also reveal audience interests and sympathies. As folklorist Michael D. Foster

points out, "in order to be 'popular,' popular culture must succeed" (Foster 2015, 25). From a

folklorist's standpoint, it is interesting that "certain popular cultural forms succeed because they

act like folklore" (Bird 2006, 346; Foster 2015, 14), and in this case – because they act like

supernatural folklore.

Folklore and the Folkloresque

While popular culture products can *appear* folkloric, these products are not folklore in

the academic understanding of the word. In the discipline of folkloristics, folklore tends to be

understood as "informal traditional culture" – verbal, customary, and material culture (e.g.,

traditions, stories, jokes, art) that is created by people and passed on informally, not via

institutions such as the media or schools (McNeill 2013, 13; see also Wojcik 2002[1] and Santino 1996[2]). Specifically because folklore is transmitted informally, it always has dynamic and conservative elements – that is, aspects that change with each re-creation (e.g., with each retelling of a story), and parts that stay the same (e.g., the "skeleton" of the story). Folklore reflects the unique personalities of people who transmit it (e.g., tell the story, or express other forms of verbal, customary, or material lore), while also demonstrating the bigger patterns, traditions, and values of the folk group.

In this context, Disney's *Cinderella* or *The Supernatural* TV series do not adhere to this understanding of "folklore," since they are commercial products that are transmitted via media. These works are created by a certain group of people, fixed in shape, and marketed to a large audience that does not have an opportunity to alter the story according to their values or personalities. When *Cinderella* travels through cinema across the world, it still stays the same – no matter how many times it is aired, it does not begin to reflect the culture and values of its audience.

Nevertheless, Disney's fairy-tales (and other popular culture reworkings of folklore) are still commonly associated with the *idea* of folklore. And while some folklorists might be opposed to such popular culture interpretations of folklore as "fake" or "inauthentic," other

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[1] Folklorist Daniel Wojcik helpfully summarizes the consensus understanding of "folklore" as follows: "The term *folklore* has been defined in varying ways, and folklorists are known for their ongoing debates about the problematic nature of the word, but most agree that the concept refers to vernacular culture and expressive behavior that is largely informal, usually related to communal or local identity, and frequently regarded as traditional. Folklorists study cultural heritage, traditions, and symbolic behavior in everyday life, and provide critical analyses of important cultural practices that often have been neglected or devalued" (Wojcik 2002).

[2] As folklorist Jack Santino explains, "Many of those who consider folklore as unmediated, small group, face-to-face expressive culture, and popular culture as large-scale, mass-mediated forms, view the two [pop-culture and folklore] as antithetical" (Santino 1996, 577). In this view, "storytelling (or another genre of folklore) is seen as active and creative, while consuming mass-mediated forms is described as passive and numbing" (ibid.). Santino, however, argues that in reality folklore and popular culture exist on a spectrum, where one feeds the other: pop-culture borrows from folklore, and folk culture embraces and creatively reinterprets pop-culture. More of such an interplay as pertaining to the supernatural folkloresque will be discussed in the pages to come.

scholars enthusiastically attempt to study them as unique phenomena in their own right. Folklorist Michael Dylan Foster proposes an especially useful approach by proposing the concept of "the folkloresque," which describes "creative, often commercial products or texts that give the impression that they derive directly from existing folkloric tradition" (Foster 2015, 5). Such products have "the feeling of folklore," as Foster notes (Foster 2015, 4).

Foster suggests that we should understand folkloresque works from the emic perspective and in a non-pejorative way, since those works express the folk's "own perception and performance of folklore" (Foster 2015, 5) – and folklorists, after all study the folk – people and their practices and behavior (Foster 2015, 9).[3] Foster also challenges us to consider the following questions: why does popular culture strive to appear folkloric, and why are people searching for this "feeling of folklore"? (Foster 2015, 9)

Since folklore is "informal traditional culture," and culture can take many different shapes – such as stories, songs, art and customs, which can in turn belong to wildly different genres – it is impossible to find a single answer to the question of why people are seeking the "sense of folklore" in general. Instead, in this study I want to focus on one aspect – the portrayal of folklore as related to the supernatural. I will refer to this as "the supernatural folkloresque," by which I mean popular culture and other creative works that appear to portray supernatural folklore. It should be noted that "the supernatural" will be used as an umbrella term to refer to the wide variety of phenomena that do not adhere to the conventional naturalistic understanding of the world – including magic, the paranormal, the occult, as well as other unconventional beliefs in phenomena that, from the current Western scientific viewpoint, defy laws of nature – but which at the same time fall outside of institutionalized religion.

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[3] Since creators of pop-cultural works – and their audiences – are not folklorists, their representation and interpretation of folklore reflects a non-academic, "folk" understanding of "folklore."

In the remainder of this chapter, I will first draw on existing research from various fields (folkloristics, religious studies, history) to consider some possible reasons behind the fascination with the supernatural folkloresque and the functions it may perform. Second, I will outline some gaps in the existing research, which will later guide my analysis. In the second and third chapters, I will analyze actual examples of the supernatural folkloresque as case-studies, looking at how these tropes and functions may manifest in specific works.

<center>*Folklore(-sque) and the Supernatural*</center>

First, how is folklore(-sque) related to the supernatural? As folklorist Jeffrey A. Tolbert points out, "the folkloresque frequently hinges on the issue of supernatural belief, which is very often portrayed as coterminous with folklore itself," and "in popular use, folklore and related terms tend to refer specifically to supernatural legends, magical practices, and 'the occult'" (Tolbert 2015b, 125-126). Another folklorist, Timothy H. Evans, also notes that items of folklore (or of what appears as folklore) in supernatural fiction "prime readers to expect the supernatural" (Evans 2005, 120; Tolbert 2015b, 126).

It is also noteworthy that in popular culture depictions folklorists themselves are frequently associated with the supernatural. As Tolbert points out, "folklorists are often seen as occult experts whose knowledge is both powerful and dangerous" (Tolbert 2015b, 127). He also demonstrates examples from folkloresque videogames, showing how "folklorists provide answers to some of the games' most important supernatural mysteries, thereby advancing the plot and helping the protagonists eventually overcome their ghostly adversaries" (Tolbert 2015b, 126).

This means that, although folklore as a phenomenon of human culture encompasses so much more than only stories of the supernatural, popular culture and its audience are often

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particularly interested in the supernatural aspect of folklore, creating, appraising and reinforcing more and more images of this kind – so much so that "folklore" begins to be equated with "the supernatural," and folklorists are portrayed as "occult experts." And this raises the question that is central to my research: why is the supernatural interpretation of folklore appealing for the public to the extent that all other meanings of the word "folklore" are often eagerly brushed aside? And what are people actually searching for, when they are searching for the "sense of folklore" in the supernatural?

Literature Review

Folkloresque Studies

The study of the folkloresque is still relatively new (the term was coined in 2015), and the role of the folkloresque in pop-cultural products relating to the supernatural has not received much scholarly attention. In the few cases when it has been studied, it seems to have mainly been in regard to the horror genre[4] – e.g., H.P. Lovecraft's horror fiction (Evans 2005), Slender Man (Tolbert 2015a), and *Fatal Frame* horror videogames (Tolbert 2015b).

As mentioned before, scholars have suggested that the function of the folkloresque in horror products is to "provide background, create an atmosphere of suspense, and prime readers to expect the supernatural" (Evans 2005, 120; Tolbert 2015b, 126), while also intensifying "the experience of terror" (Tolbert 2015b, 126). Yet the question of why the folkloresque has such an effect has not been addressed in detail. Tolbert has also usefully pointed out that, since folklore is understood as a source of "cultural authority," creating the "feeling of folklore" in pop-cultural

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[4] A number of scholars have also examined instances of what would fall into the category of supernatural folkloresque (e.g., folkloresque portrayals of fairies (Manning 2015), the folkloresque in Neil Gaiman's work (Evans 2015), J. K. Rowling's *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* as folkloresque (Holl-Jensen and Tolbert 2015), all of which technically have to do with the supernatural), but these did not concentrate on the role of the supernatural and the functions of the supernatural folkloresque specifically.

products adds a "dimension of realness" to fictional supernatural monsters, imbuing them with a "possibility of belief" (Tolbert 2015a, 40).

This, however, nevertheless leaves us with questions: what are the functions and features of the supernatural folkloresque outside of the horror genre? Why are supernatural folkloresque works appealing, and what are people seeking when they are searching for the "feeling of folklore" in such works? Why do supernatural phenomena need to appear believable and supported by cultural authority? What is the relationship between the supernatural folkloresque and real-world belief systems and practices?[5] What pre-existing associations does the public have with supernatural folklore, and how might those associations be influencing production of and engagement with supernatural folkloresque works? And why the interest in the supernatural in the first place?

The Supernatural and Disenchantment of the World

In order to consider the role that the supernatural folkloresque plays in the lives of people in contemporary Western societies, we first need to understand the status and meaning of the supernatural in this context. The modern Western world is frequently perceived – and theorized – as "disenchanted," where the belief in the supernatural has been eliminated, and "rational," "scientific" thinking dominates over other interpretations of reality. Religious studies scholar Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, who has carried out extensive and insightful research on how the concept of modernity came into being (Josephson-Storm 2017), summarizes this attitude as follows:

> Scholars — modernizers and postmodernists alike — often contend that what most makes the modern world modern is that people no longer believe in magic and spirits. The age

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[5] Tolbert has helpfully examined the role of the folkloresque in regard to the real-world beliefs in Slender Man (Tolbert 2015a), but here I am also interested in considering a broader context, such as the relationship between the folkloresque and new religious movements (e.g., neopaganism, neo-shamanism, Wicca, etc.), traditional religion, and the search for alternative spiritualities in general.

of myth is allegedly over, the gods have died, vibrant nature has been subjugated, and instrumental rationality and mechanistic materialism rule in their place. When pressed on the specifics, there is little consensus as to when this disenchantment set in, but scholars often admit that it only applies to a constrained geography (namely, Western Europe and North America). (Josephson-Storm 2017, 304)

This understanding of the modern Western world as devoid of belief in the supernatural, however, doesn't match up with the existing sociological data, as has also been pointed out by Josephson-Storm and other researchers. For example, Dennis D. Waskul and Marc Eaton's work, *The Supernatural in Society, Culture, and History* provides an overview of various survey data regarding supernatural beliefs in the US. Depending on the research, 50%, 68% or 73% of Americans hold at least one supernatural belief, such as the idea that places can be haunted, that the living can communicate with the dead, or that fortune-tellers or psychics can foretell the future (Waskul and Eaton 2018, 2).

Moreover, Josephson-Storm's *The Myth of Disenchantment* (2017) persuasively argues that supernatural belief is not just somehow "reappearing" in the 21st century, but in fact seems to have never been eliminated in the first place – neither at the point of Enlightenment, nor at a later stage. Drawing on biographies and extensive archival materials, Josephson-Storm shows how the very figures who are now considered to be representative of the idea of "scientific revolution" and "rational thinking" (e.g., Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, Giordano Bruno, etc.) were in fact driven by their own "magical" ideas, and did not assume that there should be a conflict between "science" and what might be broadly termed "the supernatural." Josephson-Storm argues that the idea that the Enlightenment project eliminated belief in the supernatural is in itself a "myth," a falsehood which was created considerably later (around the 18th-19th century) and then projected backward into the previous epochs (Josephson-Storm 2017, 311).

Nevertheless, as Josephson-Storm himself asserts, the disenchantment narrative continues to prevail, influencing the way many people – both inside and outside of academia – perceive and conceptualize the modern Western world (Josephson-Storm 2017, 4, 304). Belief in the supernatural itself may have never actually disappeared, but it seems that many Westerners genuinely believe that it did. And while some understand the (presumed) elimination of the supernatural in positive terms as "progress" and "triumph of science over irrationality," others associate it with a loss of something important.

Many theories that follow this pessimistic understanding of modernity are inspired by Max Weber's concept of the "disenchantment of the world." Weber famously argued that "it [disenchantment] means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable powers that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation," and that people "need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits" (Weber and Kalberg 2005, 322).

Drawing on Weber's ideas, many scholars proposed that the loss of magic and belief in spirits also meant a loss of meaning, purpose, wonder, and mystery. As cultural historian Michael Saler writes, "Enchantment was associated not only with transcendent meaning and purpose, but also with wonder and surprise; those were the qualities that modernity, with its emphasis on inviolable natural laws, threatened to extirpate" (Saler 2012, 8). Without enchantment, "ordinary existence threatened to become an arid and soulless 'iron cage'" (ibid.).

It should be noted that the interpretation of the "disenchantment of the world" specifically in terms of loss of wonder as mystery does not necessary correspond with Weber's argument. Weber seemed to understand magic as more of an instrumental tool that is born out of a pragmatic desire to achieve a certain result in the real world (e.g., performing a ritual to ensure

a good harvest), and not something associated with wonder and mystery (Josephson-Storm 2017, 277). However, the popularity of this interpretation – that the modernity's "disenchantment" stripped the world of its mystery and wonder – is perhaps telling, and might suggest that some people do feel this way, even though this is not necessarily what Weber was trying to describe.

As for the part of the argument that connects "disenchantment" with the loss of meaning, it seems that this interpretation can indeed be directly supported by Weber's text:

> The more intellectualism suppresses the belief in magic and hence 'disenchants' the operations of the world—so that they lose their magical meaning and only 'are' and 'happen' but no longer signify anything—the more urgently the demand grows for the world and 'the orientation toward life' (Lebensführung) to appear ordered in a meaningful and significant way." (cited in Josephson-Storm 2017, 283)

Also, Josephson-Storm argues that what Weber sees as the source of disenchantment is not scientific knowledge per se, but "a subjective sense that the world is predictable or rational" (Josephson-Storm 2017, 283). He specifically emphasizes Weber's words: "there are no mysterious unpredictable powers that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation." Josephson-Storm posits that what Weber actually meant is that modern people tend to believe that there should be a scientific explanation for any given phenomenon, even if they do not understand the cause, and that they are much less likely to assume the cause to be supernatural (ibid., 282).

If interpreted this way, Weber's "disenchantment of the world" can still be used as a helpful framework for understanding the modern Western world. Even if the belief in the supernatural has never really disappeared, people generally tend to be brought up and educated in a way that makes them largely rely on scientific interpretations. Moreover, as the scientific worldview doesn't ascribe meaning to phenomena – it merely explains their natural causes – it cannot by itself provide people with an orientation in life, and it is plausible that this will give

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birth to a search for an alternative source of meaning. As Josephson-Storm sums it up, "we live in a disenchanting world in which magic is embattled and intermittently contained within its own cultural sphere, but not a disenchanted one in which magic is gone" (Josephson-Storm 2017, 305).

<p align="center">*Re-enchantment of the World through Folklore*</p>

The conceptualization of the modern world as "disenchanted" (whether this description was accurate or not) has successfully fueled numerous attempts to "bring back" the magic. Some instances include the rise of Spiritualism (Josephson-Storm 2017, 19), Aleister Crowley's "revival of magick" (Josephson-Storm 2017, 159-169), and various modern revivals such as neopaganism, neo-shamanism, and Wicca. In these examples, people have tried to "re-enchant" the world by actually "bringing back" the belief in the supernatural.

It is noteworthy that folklore – or, more precisely, folklore studies and adjacent disciplines – have played an important role in this process. For example, Aleister Crowley's desire to revive magic was largely inspired by folklorist Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* (Josephson-Storm 2017, 152). Also, neopaganism draws upon folklore as a means to connect with the magical past, as a "repository for bits and pieces of ancient religion," and an "index of authenticity" (Magliocco 2012, 156). In this way, folklore is not understood as a mere collection of knowledge, but a practical tool employed in one's own spiritual practice.

Moreover, in some cases academic scholarship is directly responsible for the creation of new belief systems that aspire to re-enchant the world. Such is the case with neo-shamanism, which was born out of the fascination with academic scholarship – or with what was perceived to be scholarship. This started with Michael Harner, Carlos Castaneda and a number of other figures, who held PhDs in anthropology and wrote a number of highly popular books on

shamanism. These books were presented as "ethnography" and scholarly research, but in reality they significantly reframed, adapted or perhaps even created from scratch the practices that they presented as shamanistic, modifying it all with a modern audience in mind. It is noteworthy that such representations advertised shamanism not as a culture-specific phenomenon, but a broader spiritual system accessible for modern Westerners as well (Hytönen-Ng 2016; Von Stuckrad 2002; DuBois 2009; Linquist 2005).

Thus, folklore has frequently been associated with – and directly involved in – the creation and exploration of supernatural beliefs. Perhaps, then, some people may be drawn to the supernatural folkloresque based on these associations, as folklore can be seen as a way to re-encounter the supernatural and re-enchant the world by "bringing back" supernatural belief.

Another important aspect of folklore and the way it may be used in the supernatural folkloresque relates to the power of folklore to "authorize" practices and beliefs. This has been termed "vernacular authority" by folklorist Robert Glenn Howard, who states, "The concept of vernacular authority is based on the idea that any claim to being supported by tradition asserts power because it seeks to garner trust from an audience by appealing to the aggregate volition of other individuals across space and through time" (Howard 2013, 80).

This means that, if supernatural beliefs are understood as "folklore," they become associated with a certain community of people who believe these notions to be true and "authentic" and important, and thus the beliefs begin to carry extra weight in the eyes of the public. This role of folklore as a means to lend legitimacy to the supernatural is also evident in the instances of the folklore-inspired revivals discussed above – neoshamanism, neopaganism, and Wicca all use folklore as an authorizing force. It is also plausible that the same reasoning applies to the popular culture striving to portray supernatural phenomena as folkloresque, as

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doing so will again lend legitimacy and believability to otherwise fictional characters and ideas (specific examples will be discussed in the following chapters).

Another important aspect of folklore's "vernacular authority," as Howard formulates it, is in that "vernacular authority emerges when an individual makes appeals that rely on trust specifically because they are not institutional" (Howard 2013, 81). In this way, vernacular authority constitutes a power alternative to that of the dominant institutions. To take the example of beliefs in the supernatural, one can say that folklore is an alternative authoritative source that challenges the dominant narratives of the institutions regarding such beliefs. While the Western educational system may label the supernatural as "superstition," folklore can preserve a different view of the question, which is deemed somehow authoritative based on its cultural authority.

This antithetical function of folklore is also important in the context of the re-enchantment of the world as a "fight against modernity." If modernity is perceived to be to blame for the loss of meaning, wonder or mystery, it follows that folklore, which has frequently (even if wrongfully) been associated with pre-modern times, becomes of special importance as the "essence" of that time. As folklorist Regina Bendix pointed out, "Folklore has long served as a vehicle in the search for the authentic, satisfying a longing for an escape from modernity" (Bendix 1997, 5). She also points out that the "quest for authenticity is oriented toward the recovery of an essence whose loss has been realized only through modernity, and whose recovery is feasible only through methods and sentiments created in modernity" (Bendix 1997, 5). Similarly, supernatural folkloresque pop-culture is a modern creation that attempts to bring back the essence of an enchanted past by drawing on folklore: when understood as connected to folklore, fantastical fictional phenomena are linked to this imagined past, and become tools in escaping the disenchanted modern world. Yet, such pop-culture is a product of its time, which,

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ironically, uses the methods and frameworks of modernity to resist the presumed changes brought about by modernity.

Reconciling Reason and Enchantment

While one reaction to the perceived disenchantment of the world is to "bring back" supernatural belief, Saler argues that it also gave birth to an alternative movement to "reconcile reason and enchantment" (Saler 2012, 15). He suggested that some people felt the need to create a new form of enchantment, "modern enchantment" that "delighted without deluding" (Saler 2012, 30). Discussing the 19th century fantastic literature of the "New Romance" (such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*), Saler proposes that in these texts, "readers found the wonders and marvels that realist literature and scientific naturalism disavowed," and yet such literature "did not disdain modern science and rationality" (ibid., 14). The texts "adopted the rhetorical modes of fact-based science, by including footnotes, maps, photographs, glossaries, and appendices," bringing together "the tropes of fantasy with those of objectivity" (ibid., 15).

This type of enchantment, unlike neopaganism, Spiritualism or the practice of magic, didn't require one to accept supernatural belief. Rather, one engaged with the fantastic reality through what Saler termed "ironic imagination": "Those who turned to the ironic imagination in the late nineteenth century, however, did not so much willingly suspend their disbelief in fictional characters or worlds, as willingly believe in them with the double-minded awareness that they were engaging in pretense" (ibid., 30) According to Saler, this secured "a sense of wonder without compromising the rational and secular tenets of modernity" (ibid., 31).

Saler also suggests that this literature became a large source of inspiration for such genres as science fiction and fantasy fiction (Saler 2012, 15) – and this comes especially close to the supernatural folkloresque, as both these genres frequently tend to have supernatural folkloresque

elements. Perhaps one more reason for the popularity of the supernatural folkloresque, then, is that it allows one to enter a supernatural enchanted reality, without requiring abandonment of one's naturalistic understanding of the world. In other words, the supernatural folkloresque can become a way to "reconcile reason and enchantment" for those who are not willing to suspend their disbelief entirely.

<center>The Supernatural, Religion, and Spirituality</center>

Dennis Waskul and Marc Eaton have observed that the supernatural is becoming increasingly employed to substitute for or supplement traditional religion, especially among those individuals who do not find mainstream religious systems fitting for their needs:

> As self-reported religious beliefs and church attendance decline in the United States and Europe (Bruce 2002; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009), supernatural beliefs can serve as a functional alternative (Emmons and Sobal 1981; Hergovich, Schott, and Arendasy 2005) or supplement (McKinnon 2003) to mainstream religious beliefs. A recent series of studies indicates that supernatural beliefs are highest among people who do not regularly attend church but nonetheless do not identify as atheists (Bader, Baker, and Molle 2012; Baker and Draper 2010; Glendinning 2006; Mencken, Bader, and Kim 2009; Mencken, Bader, and Stark 2008). It seems that the supernatural's marginality to religion provides believers with the freedom to develop their own metaphysical worldviews without the baggage of doctrinal authority, proscriptive rituals, or paying of literal and figurative dues. This flexibility allows believers to mix and match aspects of supernatural and conventional religious belief systems. (Waskul and Eaton 2018, 5)

These findings suggest that another aspect fueling the public's fascination with the supernatural folkloresque is in this understanding of the realm of the supernatural as an alternative to religion. The very world "religion" in the 21st century is often perceived to carry negative associations (Orsi 2005, 187-188), and increasing numbers of people choose to distance themselves from it and pursue other forms of spirituality, such as the spiritual-but-not-religious movement (see Fuller 2001), New Age spirituality, and paganism. Taking this tendency into account, it is reasonable to assume that the supernatural folkloresque can become yet another ground for an

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exploration of the topics and concepts that fall outside of the conventional "scientific" understanding of reality.

As Waskul and Eaton put it, "the supernatural refers to everything that we cannot make understandable using socially legitimated means of knowledge production – especially, in our era, the application of science, technology, and reason" (Waskul and Eaton 2018, 7). Cultural language describing supernatural phenomena (such as myths, fairytales – and I would add, supernatural folkloresque products) create "plausibility structures" that help people put a label on and categorize these supernatural phenomena (Force 2018, 28) in positive ways that have cultural capital. A number of scholars have spoken to the importance of such a cultural language. For example, Waskul has pointed out that people who believe that they have experienced the supernatural are significantly reassured when the fieldworker explains that the phenomenon has a specific name and thus can be "labeled" in accordance with a certain existing cultural belief (e.g., poltergeist) (Waskul 2018, 74).

Another noteworthy example is folklorist David Hufford's study of ESE ("extraordinary spiritual experiences"), which demonstrated not only the benefits of having a cultural language for describing the supernatural, but also the dangers of marginalizing such beliefs. As Hufford shows, ESEs – such as near-death experiences and "visitations" from the dead – happen to a much higher number of people than one would expect, but people tend to keep these experiences to themselves due to the stigma associated with events that the predominant Western worldview sees as supernatural (Hufford 2014).

Moreover, Hufford shows that the lack of accepted cultural language that could be used to discuss such experiences, as well as the common association of supernatural experiences with mental illness, not only prevents people from discussing ESEs in a meaningful way, but also

leads to personal fear-based interpretation of their experiences. He demonstrates that in cases when ESEs are validated by culture, they can in fact be psychologically beneficial to the person (e.g., communicating with one's diseased relative in a dream can help the living to accept the loss and overcome depression easier). People are often unable to benefit from these experiences if their culture stigmatizes them (Hufford 2014).

This discussion of the need for a cultural language to describe the extra-ordinary or supernatural experiences also connects with the supernatural folkloresque. Perhaps, one function of supernatural folkloresque products is to provide a shared language to describe ideas and experiences that are not accepted as part of the naturalistic worldview. If, for example, supernatural belief in the US is indeed as high as the survey data suggests – from 50% to 73% (Waskul and Eaton 2018, 2), it means that a significant number of people hold beliefs – and perhaps even have personal experiences – that are stigmatized, and they also may lack the cultural language to discuss them meaningfully.

Popular Culture and Belief in the Supernatural

A number of scholars outside of the discipline of folkloristics have considered the question of the relationship between popular culture and belief in the supernatural. Some prominent works include *The Re-enchantment of the West* (Partridge 2004), *The Postmodern Sacred* (McAvan 2012), *Mutants and Mystics* (Kripal 2011), *Authors of the Impossible* (Kripal 2010), *The Sacred in Fantastic Fandom* (Cusack et al. 2019), *Paranormal in Popular Culture* (Caterine and Morehead 2019), and *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Clark 2003). Although these studies do not analyze the role of folklore and the folkloresque in particular, they can nevertheless provide helpful background for understanding an audience's relationships with the supernatural folkloresque.

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In his book *The Re-enchantment of the West* (Partridge 2005), religious studies scholar Christopher Partridge discusses the role of "occulture" (popular culture that relates to the occult, magic, mysticism and other hidden and oppositional beliefs[6]) in the modern West, and argues that "popular culture is a key sacralizing factor which has a far more influential role in the shaping and dissemination of contemporary occultural thought than is often acknowledged" (Partridge 2005, 62). He suggests that "occulture" is "not a worldview, but rather a resource on which people draw, a reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols" (ibid., 84). Partridge believes that this conceptual pool is becoming a "lingua franca" for different people: "Western spiritual seekers are starting to speak the same language" (ibid., 186)

One of the reasons for the success of the occultural ideas is that they represent concepts in a way not associated with the baggage of traditional religion (ibid., 4). Using the examples of Hollywood's recent portrayals of witches, Partridge discusses how popular culture imbues such previously stigmatized figures and their practices as magic with an air of "coolness," which inspires people to become open to the idea of the supernatural and even actively pursue witchcraft (ibid., 134). Overall, Partridge suggests that the re-enchantment that the occulture provides is "not a return to previous ways of being religious, but rather the emergence of new ways of being religious, ways which meet the new wants and needs of new Western people" (ibid., 44).

Another prominent work that examines the connection between popular culture and belief is Emily McAvan's *The Postmodern Sacred: Popular Culture Spirituality in the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Urban Fantasy Genres* (McAvan 2012). McAvan proposes the term "postmodern

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[6] Partridge describes the scope of the term as following: "occulture includes those often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices, many of which are identified by Campbell as belonging to the cultic/mystical milieu and by Stark and Bainbridge as belonging to the occult subculture" (Partridge 2005, 68).

sacred" to denote "pop-culture spirituality, a strain of spiritually inflected unreal texts that have

been remarkably central to the popular culture of the last decade or so which are marked by a

number of post modern characteristics" (McAvan 2012, 5). Some examples of such texts include

The Matrix, Harry Potter, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and *The X-Files* (ibid.).

McAvan argues that these pop-cultural products "are consumed in part for their spiritual

content, for an experience of the transcendent ambivalently situated on the boundary of formal

religious and spiritual traditions" (ibid, 6). She proposes that the postmodern sacred belongs to

the "age of cultural agnosticism," where people are "neither willing to commit to a meta-

narrative of theology nor to entirely discard the idea of God" (ibid., 5). This feeling is

exemplified by *The X-Files* and its motto of "I want to believe," which illustrates the desire to

believe in the supernatural *as well as* the inability to fully discard a rational worldview (ibid.,

56).

McAvan insightfully suggests that part of the appeal of such works is in their ability to

create "hyper-real" representations of the sacred: "through tools like CGI, texts of the

postmodern sacred are able to graphically represent the spiritual as though it were literally real"

(ibid., 24). Graphic effects make magic, God, and the supernatural appear real, and thus

"postmodern sacred 'does' religion (instead of merely citing it), as an ecstatic, peak experience

for its audience" (ibid., 34). However, unlike Partridge, it seems that McAvan sees "popular

culture spirituality" as inherently inferior to "real-life" belief systems and practices:

> [T]he postmodern sacred is a paradoxical attempt at accessing spirituality, using the
> symbols contained in explicitly unreal texts to gain a secondhand experience of
> transcendence and belief. This second-hand experience displaces the need for belief or
> real world practice into a textual world, requiring little of its consumers. While they seem
> to suggest a desire for a magical world outside of capitalism, the wonder produced by
> these texts, however, is only temporary; eventually the consumer must return again to
> purchase another text. (ibid., 19)

While this sentiment is understandable, my thesis will explore people's engagement with the supernatural folkloresque as a complex phenomenon in its own right, which need not be seen as "inferior" (or superior, for that matter) in comparison to traditional forms of spirituality. As Partridge puts it, it is more about "new ways of believing in societies in which the old ways are inhibited and declining" (Partridge 2005, 1). Moreover, while McAvan seems to presuppose that the audience passively "consumes" the messages and experiences that popular culture offers, there is significant evidence showing that people's relationship with popular culture is far more meaningful and complex than that.

First, as noted above, Partridge has already demonstrated that popular culture can challenge the stereotypes people have about stigmatized belief systems and even motivate individuals to pursue these practices in real life. Second, folklorist Sabina Magliocco's research points out that neopagans can draw inspiration from fantasy fiction and science fiction (Magliocco 2012, 158), which shows that those who are already following a form of spirituality may additionally actively draw on popular culture as a resource. Third, the public's fascination with a pop-cultural product can lead to the creation of real-world spiritualities, such as was the case with belief systems inspired by authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert A. Heinlein, and Terry Pratchett (Cusack and Robertson 2019, 7).

Furthermore, as Carole M. Cusack shows in her analysis of the podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, "unreal" fictional texts can be intentionally read explicitly as sacred and used for meaning-making (Cusack 2019). Also, practitioners of Chaos Magick (who draw heavily on popular culture) hold that something does not need to be "true" in order to be effectively employed in one's personal practice (Conley 2019, 71). Moreover, those individuals who are practitioners of Lovecraft-inspired belief systems posit that creators of fictional texts (even

atheists) may unknowingly "channel" occult truths (Conley 2019, 78). Also, religious studies scholar Jeffrey J. Kripal has shown that authors of pop-cultural products, such as comic book writers, can consciously use their books as a medium to express and transmit their paranormal beliefs and experiences (Kripal 2010; Kripal 2011).

Conclusion: A Theory of the Supernatural Folkloresque

Many perceive the modern Western world as "disenchanted" – devoid of meaning, mystery, and wonder. For some, this feeling results in the desire to "bring back" magic, which manifests in various forms, from attempts to actually revive belief systems associated with imagined "magical" pre-modern times to re-enchantment through popular culture.

While popular culture is often seen as "just entertainment," research shows that people can in fact have meaningful and complex relationships with fictional works, which influence and inform their belief systems and practices, and can even lead to the creation of new spiritualities. Moreover, some authors of pop-cultural products deliberately use their work as a medium to express and transmit their supernatural beliefs and experiences.

Despite the common idea that modernity is defined by the departure of the supernatural, sociological data shows that supernatural beliefs are still very common in the West. It is, however, frequently stigmatized, which results in people's inability to meaningfully express and discuss their beliefs and experiences.

At the same time, as discussed above, the supernatural's marginal status also makes it appealing, since it is perceived to be oppositional to religion. As exemplified by the spiritual-but-not-religious phenomenon, many Westerners choose to distance themselves from religion and pursue alternative forms of spirituality. The supernatural becomes one place for the exploration

of unconventional beliefs, and it is employed as an alternative or supplement to religion (see Waskul and Eaton 2018, 5).

As shown by Hufford, people can have a need for a culturally approved language to describe supernatural phenomena. It seems that popular culture representations of the supernatural is becoming one such language, as it constitutes a reservoir of ideas shared by people of various backgrounds, believers and non-believers alike.

Furthermore, popular culture allows people to engage with and talk about the supernatural "as if" it was real through what Saler terms "ironic imagination" and "double consciousness" without actually adhering to the supernatural belief. In an "age of cultural agnosticism," when people often find themselves unable to either fully commit to a belief system or dispose of the idea of "something beyond" altogether, this may be especially appealing.

Accordingly, as Kripal puts it, the supernatural has retreated to the "safety" of popular culture (Kripal 2011, 217), and now "[p]opular culture is our mysticism" (Kripal 2011, 6). Noteworthy, however, is the role of folklore in such pop-culture. Why do so many creators of pop-cultural products choose to present this mysticism as folkloric? Taking into account the research reviewed in this chapter, I will now propose some possible reasons. Then, I will elaborate further in my discussion of the examples of the supernatural folkloresque presented in the following chapters.

First, folklore is often associated with pre-modern "magical" times – a feeling that is fueled by the discourse of folklore-inspired revivals (such as neopaganism and neoshamanism) and works of such myth theorists as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell. All of such discourse collectively paints a picture of folklore as symbols of an enchanted past and a source of lost mystical knowledge. If modernity is perceived to be the reason for the "disenchantment of the

world," folklore exemplifies its opposite – the pre-modern mythical past, and thus becomes an ideal resource for re-enchantment.

Second, folklore is imbued with "vernacular authority" and thus has the power to "authorize" beliefs. Since the supernatural is marginalized, and pop-culture is "just fiction," supernatural folkloresque products benefit from their appeal to "vernacular authority," gaining legitimacy through their perceived connection to traditional beliefs and practices. Further, supernatural folklore constitutes a repository of alternative, rejected knowledge – a pool of ideas oppositional to the modern naturalistic understanding of the world. Again, if one is dissatisfied with the modern Western worldview, supernatural folklore is a readily available alternative, imbued with vernacular authority.

In the chapters that follow, I will elaborate on this theory and discuss specific examples of how the supernatural folkloresque functions in modern Western culture.

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CHAPTER II

MAGIC AS MEANING IN *THE MAGICIANS*

While many pop-cultural creations fall into the category of supernatural folkloresque, particularly significant to the current discussion is the TV series *The Magicians* (2015-2020).[7] Like many other fantasy series of this kind, the show features folkloric creatures (e.g., dragons, fairies, leprechauns), an enchanted land, and a story of a discovery of magic in the "ordinary" world. One thing that makes it especially interesting for this study, however, is that it focuses on the protagonist's relationship with what is essentially supernatural folkloresque literature.[8] *The Magicians*, thus, provides "emic" insight and metacommentary on the genre – it is a supernatural folkloresque pop-cultural product that discusses the role of supernatural folkloresque pop-culture.

The TV series follows the story of Quentin Coldwater, an aficionado of fairytales, magic and fantasy. In the beginning of *The Magicians*, he suffers from depression, which seems to largely stem from his feeling that the "real world" has no place for "fairytales" and is deprived of meaning. Quentin is even undergoing treatment at a mental hospital and is about to give up on his "childish fantasies," when he suddenly receives an offer to enter a graduate program at Brakebills University to be trained as a magician, and discovers that not only is magic real, but so is the magical world portrayed in his favorite childhood book series *Fillory and Further*.

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[7] The television series was adapted from the best-selling series of novels *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman. All the three novels are *New York Times* bestsellers (Lev Grossman 2022b; Lev Grossman 2022a; Lev Grossman 2022c), and the first novel has now been published in more than 25 countries (Lev Grossman 2022b). The TV adaptation consisted of 5 seasons (65 episodes total), which aired on Syfy 2015-2020, and was nominated multiple times for Best Fantasy Television Series (Saturn Awards) (IMDB 2022). As this study mainly focuses on the portrayal of the supernatural folkloresque in TV series and films, this chapter will concentrate on the TV adaptation of the series rather than the novels, although I will also draw on the interviews with the author of the original books to provide some additional context.

[8] Needless to say, such creative works are not labeled as "supernatural folkloresque" within the series, but I am categorizing them in this way based on their content, as will be discussed below.

The *Fillory and Further* books describe Narnia-like adventures of three children — Jane, Rupert, and Martin Chatwin — who traveled through a portal clock from England to the magical world called Fillory. The land of Fillory is portrayed as folkloresque: it was created and led by gods, inhabited by magical creatures (both such recognizable ones as fairies, and others, vaguely folkloresque), had magic, and was set in a landscape reminiscent of that of fairytales, with kings, queens, a fantastic medievalesque castle, and a magical forest.

However, after becoming a magician Quentin learns that in reality fairytales and magic are not always as harmless and benign as he had imagined, and that the magical world of Fillory in fact poses a real threat to his world, as a monster from Fillory enters his everyday reality. Quentin's knowledge of the supernatural folkloresque (*Fillory* books) becomes then essential to solving this real-life crisis, and he must work together with other magicians – students, professors, and self-taught practitioners – to avert it. Supernatural folkloresque pop-culture is presented as something that contains invaluable truth about the existence of magic in the real world.

As immediately becomes apparent, *The Magicians* both draws on various tropes of fantasy works (such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*), and challenges them at the same time. Lev Grossman, the author of the original novels, openly acknowledges it: "On some level all *The Magicians* books are written as a conversation with Lewis and Rowling. It's a complicated conversation – sometimes it's affectionate, occasionally it's rather heated" (Compulsive Reader 2014). In reading multiple interviews with Grossman, it appears that one of his goals was to imagine a version of our world where magic exists, but which would still be as realistic and believable as possible:

> I'm very committed to the project of making the Magicians [sic] books feel real, and to
> that end I made a deal with myself: everything that's real in our world would be real in

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Quentin's. And that means including contemporary technology, cell phones and the Internet and so on. (Compulsive Reader 2014)

[T]he Magicians books ask hard questions about fantasy. What kinds of people would really do magic, if it were really [sic], and what would the practice of magic do to them? What would really go on in a school for magic, with a bunch of teenagers in a fairy castle being given supernatural powers? What would happen if you put in all the depression and the violence and the blowjobs and the drinking that Rowling leaves out? (Compulsive Reader 2014)

Moreover, Grossman's quest for a practical, unromantic approach to magic is not limited

to Earth, but also extends to his portrayals of Fillory – the novels' Narnia-like magical land:

Part of it was just, let's take Narnia, but let's take it maybe a little more seriously than Lewis did. Let's try to imagine what the politics and economy and ecology of this world would really be. What would happen if you took a group of children and just plopped them down in this country, which is in the middle of an entrenched, decades old civil war, and these kids try to intervene in it. What would happen to them? Probably complicated, not good things. (Vox 2022)

These statements create the impression that *The Magicians* is an attempt to reconcile the desire

for magic with a contemporary, disillusioned understanding of the world. In fact, Lev Grossman

explicitly mentions that he himself once dreamed of finding a way to Narnia – but eventually had

to make peace with the reality that this will not be possible. In his own words, "writing The

Magicians was in a way working through my acceptance of the fact that I never would get to

Narnia. Quentin essentially does, and what happens to Quentin is that his problems come with

him" (Seliger 2010). Indeed, although in the world of *The Magicians* magic exists, crises still

cannot be solved by a mere "wave of a magic wand" – the magicians' direct involvement, skills,

mental discipline, and research are required; and sometimes even all this combined is not enough

to prevent a tragedy.

It is not surprising, then, that despite the wish-fulfillment-type of a setup – Quentin's

discovery that magic is real, and his receiving of an invitation to study at a school of magic – the

narrative quickly takes a dark turn, and the life of the magicians is increasingly deromanticized.

But what is exceedingly significant is that despite all the complications, suffering, and horror that magic continuously brings to Quentin and others, the characters in the series persistently choose to make great sacrifices and risk their lives in order to *save* magic and the magical land of Fillory, when the existence of those are threatened. Even if it is not all-powerful and does not offer easy solutions to problems, magic is nevertheless presented to be something of supreme value. It is consistently described to be what brings meaning, wonder, "light" and "color" to the world, which is the point I want to focus on in this chapter. In doing so, I will also discuss how the way magic is conceptualized in the series is largely in agreement with the disenchantment narrative that was discussed in the previous chapter.

<div align="center">

A Believer in Magic: Quentin

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In the first episode of the series, we see Quentin Coldwater as a patient of a mental health hospital. Suffering from depression, he has entered this institution seeking help, as "the feeling of not belonging anywhere was overwhelming," and he perceived himself to be "the most useless person who ever lived" (Cahill 2016). From the beginning, we see (and this is reinforced later in the series) that Quentin seems to represent a figure who doesn't fit in the "normal" society, and cannot find purpose in the ordinary world. This setup provides hints into the reason for his fascination with fairytales, magic, and fantasy, of which we learn later.

Eventually Quentin decides to leave the hospital and discusses the terms of his dismissal with the doctor. When asked why he believes his condition to have improved enough, Quentin's reply implies that the crucial change that he believes had happened to him is that he is now ready to give up his "childish fantasies" and "grow up":

> I mean, I get it. You're a kid, and your whole life is ahead of you, and you have these notions about what life is, what it could be. But eventually you have to let all that go. So that's what I'm – that's what I'm going to do. That's what I'm doing. It's a part of

growing up, you know, selling the comic-book collection and getting serious. (Cahill 2016)

This answer gives the impression that, at least in Quentin's understanding, the reason for his depression was in the mismatch between the consensus reality and what he wished the reality to be. Quentin – as we also learn from other scenes of the episode, such as one showing bookshelves in his room filled with books on magic and fantasy – is fascinated by the supernatural, and wishes it to be real, and suffers because it is not so. In the conversation with the doctor, Quentin expresses a belief that normal society requires him to let go of his love for the supernatural and otherworlds in order to be accepted. In Quentin's case, this process of gaining social acceptance by abandoning belief in the supernatural is not vague or abstract, but rather concrete: literally, in order to be released from the hospital and physically to return to normal society outside its walls, he needs to let go of the desire to have magic. Thus, Quentin lives in a very disenchanted world, where the only socially acceptable worldview is understood to be the scientific worldview, which leaves no place for the supernatural.[9] Moreover, this way of thinking is portrayed as depressing and reductive.

However, even his attempts to give up magic do not seem to bring Quentin happiness or help him feel accepted. When we observe Quentin leave the hospital and return to normal life, it becomes clear that he is still not fitting in socially: although there's a party in his apartment, he retreats to his room to read the *Fillory* books. We later learn that he is in fact reading the books for the last time before selling them, which signifies that his plan to "sell the comic-book

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[9] It should be noted that science itself is not always necessarily "disenchanting": one may find a sense of wonder and enchantment in the scientific descriptions of the world. Also, some scientists may be personally interested in the supernatural, and in certain cases might even attempt to study it from the scientific standpoint. Here I use the term "scientific worldview" to denote merely the commonplace view that a modern, "rational," science-based understanding of the world is incompatible with belief in the supernatural (it being seen as a mere superstition).

collection and get serious" is still in action, although it is clearly hard and painful for Quentin to do so.

As he reads the first of the *Fillory* books, we receive more insight into the fictional world of Fillory and understand how and why this resonates with Quentin. The books describe the life of three children – Jane, Rupert, and Martin Chatwin. Quentin reads: "from a young age, Martin Chatwin had a gloomy nature, and to combat his melancholy, he would lose himself in stories of wonder." This seems to mirror Quentin's situation: he also has "a gloomy nature" (he is depressed), and he "loses himself in stories of wonder" (fantasy books) – it seems, for the same reason: "to combat melancholy." The very premise of both the *Fillory* books and *The Magicians* suggests that stories of wonder help to fight dissatisfaction with life and depression; they are tools in fighting the disenchanted world.

But while Martin Chatwin is a "believer," and thus akin to Quentin, the other two children are not, or at least not in the beginning of the story. Rupert was wounded in the war and was the first one to "put away childish things," and their sister Jane was a "family skeptic." This establishes the tension between the figure of the "believer" and the "skeptic" – or rather, "skeptics," as at this point Martin is outnumbered (which may yet again hint at the marginalized position of the supernatural aficionados). However, in this story fantasy turns out to be real, as the magical world of Fillory exists, and the Chatwins travel there. They go through a clock portal and find themselves in a different world: "This was Fillory. A land of magic."

The Chatwins' discovery of a magical world right next to the ordinary one, of course, foreshadows what is about to happen to Quentin. While Quentin is trying to take the last step in his acceptance of the normal life, we see him come to an interview for graduate school at Yale, but to his shock he finds the interviewer… dead. The paramedics who arrive at the scene point

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out that the person has left something for Quentin – a folder, which turns out to be a manuscript

of the sixth *Fillory* book, entitled "The Magicians." As there are only five books in the *Fillory*

series and the sixth one has only been rumored to exist, these print-outs are of immense value,

and when one of the pages is blown away by the wind, Quentin immediately rushes after it. The

page, however, behaves strangely – it keeps flying away and makes Quentin chase it through the

streets, and then through a forest, finally leading him to the hidden grounds of the Brakebills

University for Magical Pedagogy. Quentin learns that all of this did not happen by chance, and

he was in fact meant to take an exam at this university that would test his capabilities of

becoming a magician. A work of fiction – supernatural folkloresque – thus, has actually bridged

the gap between the ordinary reality and the magical one, and Quentin learns that magic is real.

As part of his exam, Quentin is asked to "show some magic," and as he only believes

himself capable of stage magic, he proceeds to do card tricks, but the dean corrects him: "real

magic." This shows the tension between the understanding of magic as illusion (the only socially

acceptable version of magic in Quentin's consensus reality) and "real magic," which turns out to

be real, albeit hidden and inaccessible for most people.

Trying to motivate Quentin to find and access his real magical power, the dean warns him

of what he will lose if he is unable to participate in the magical reality:

> Quentin, do you like this place? Do you have a gut feeling it's something special? You
> want to go back to Columbia? That pointless, miasmic march to death you call life?
> Family that never calls, and friends that don't really get you, and feeling alone and wrong
> until it crushes you?

Thus, normal life without magic is described as "pointless," deprived of meaning; it is

very disenchanted, both in the sense of the absence of magic and the lack of purpose. Brakebills

(the magic university), on the other hand, is implied to be "special," opposed to normal life, and

a source of real meaning. Here, *The Magicians* establishes a correlation between

absence/presence of magic and meaning, which has already been alluded to, and will prove even more significant to the series as it progresses.

This link between magic and meaning is also highly reminiscent of how many theorists of disenchantment (discussed in the introductory chapter) similarly suggested that the loss of magic results in the loss of meaning. As previously noted, while supernatural belief may have never actually vanished, for many people it has become a commonplace to perceive the modern Western world as disenchanted, deprived of purpose and orientation in life – and this sentiment is reflected in *The Magicians* almost word-for-word, as will be discussed in detail below.

Moreover, Quentin (and it is notable that it is this character who is put in the center of the show) seems to exemplify the figure of a "believer" living in such a disenchanted world. As the dean, the doctor, his friends and even Quentin himself consistently reiterate, Quentin fails to find a sense of belonging and meaning in the normal, magic-less life. He is longing for something more – otherworlds, magic, the supernatural – and feels marginalized and isolated for holding such a passion. *The Magicians* suggests that such a spiritual crisis leads to a larger dissatisfaction with life and even depression.

It is noteworthy how the show also proposes that the crisis of the materialistic disenchanted world cannot be solved by the methods of this world. While science and rational thinking supposedly replace magic, we see that they are portrayed to be powerless to cure Quentin's depression and longing for "something more." While Quentin becomes a hospital patient and medicates, his condition does not actually seem to improve; while he is trying to let go of his love of magic and fantasy in order to be accepted in the society, this clearly pains him, and he is also ready to forget these attempts as soon as he gets a glimpse of a new *Fillory* book, and then – of the real magic.

It is only this actual reconciliation with magic, and real "re-enchantment" of the world –

his acceptance into Brakebills – which finally brings actual change. As Quentin says: "Brakebills

is the first place that feels right to me that that is not literally a fairytale." And the dean openly

suggests that Quentin's depression originated from having to live his life in the disenchanted

world:

> Now, your meds. Quentin, you haven't been depressed. You've been alone. And you are
> not crazy. You are angry. And you are correct. Everyone medicates… out there. Here, we
> hope you won't need to. (Cahill 2016)

This suggests that it is not only Quentin who needs magic, but all people. In the normal, magic-

less world "everyone medicates," as they experience life as deprived of magic and meaning, and

the tools provided by the scientific worldview (e.g., medications) are powerless to actually fill in

this void. Moreover, the materialistic understanding of the world persuades people that believing

in magic is "crazy," severing them from the one thing that actually is the solution. And

"believers" such as Quentin, who realize what it is that is missing (magic and meaning), are

marginalized for their beliefs, and are left to feel "alone" and "wrong," while they are in fact – it

is implied – the only ones who "got it right." Quentin expresses the anxiety, hurt and difficulties

associated with such a life when he says: "It's amazing I survived so long not knowing I was a

magician" (Smith 2016a).

Thus, *The Magicians* (or, at least, its premise) seems to contain a subversive message,

which challenges and criticizes the dominant modern scientific worldview. It places a

marginalized figure (Quentin), who exemplifies much of what this dominant worldview is

perceived to stand against (the desire to believe in magic) in the center of the story,

acknowledging and validating the difficulties associated with such a life, and finally insisting

that it is the beliefs of the marginalized that were correct.

The importance of magic is again underscored in the episode "The Source of Magic" (Smith 2016a), where Quentin finds himself on the verge of being expelled from Brakebills for breaking school rules. Those who face expulsion are to have their memory of Brakebills and magic removed, and the following dialogue with another Brakebills student shows the reason why Quentin finds this so dreadful:

> Quentin: I don't know, I keep trying to tell myself this is somehow better, you know, not to know. 'Cause who would want to know that – that magic exists if there's nothing you can do about it, you know, if there's no one to teach you or help you?
> Eliot: I don't know what to say.
> Quentin: Of course you don't, because *nobody would rather not know. You don't see color and want to go black and white*. (Smith 2016a, emphasis mine)

The world with magic, then, is described as full-colored and true – while the magic-less world is a mere black-and-white shadow. This again clearly signifies a lack, inherently present in the disenchanted world, suggesting that only life with magic is complete.

Magic and Skeptics: Julia

This desperate need for magic is not only articulated by Quentin. As foreshadowed in the first episode, when the dean suggested that "everybody" needs magic (including those who do not realize it), this idea is then further exemplified by the character of Julia and her relationship with the supernatural. Although it was Julia – Quentin's childhood friend – who was initially fascinated by *Fillory*, in the beginning of the series she has long let go of this love, and very much unlike Quentin, she seemed to represent a normal person, who "belongs" in society and comfortably adheres to its standards and values. In the first episode, we see her in a happy romantic relationship, preparing for graduate school in Yale, and lecturing Quentin to finally "start living his life" instead of obsessing with *Fillory*. Julia is the person one would least suspect of having a hidden longing for magic – and yet, as soon as she learns that magic is real, she suddenly finds herself ready to give up her normal life in the pursuit of it.

First, when Julia fails her entrance exam to Brakebills and is about to have her memory of the existence of magic erased, she hastily cuts her hand just to have the wound help her later remember, as she later explains to Quentin: "I wouldn't let myself forget" (Cahill 2016). Although she is denied access to Brakebills and is back to the normal world, she nevertheless remembers about magic, and is desperate to find a way to reconnect with it. At first, she attempts to persuade Quentin to make Brakebills reconsider, and it is in their dialogue that we learn what magic means to Julia. Replying to Quentin's suggestion to just forget about Brakebills (who is understandably confused about why magic is suddenly so important to her), Julia explains why she could not possibly do it: "Do you love magic? Is it in your soul? Is it like the secret heart of what you always were? Yeah. So you know how I feel" (Smith 2016b).

While at the beginning the two characters seemed so different – as Quentin was a marginalized figure who loved fairytales and didn't belong in the "ordinary world" and Julia was the skeptic, who rejected fantasy and seemed comfortable being part of normal society – their interchange above suggests that for both of them magic is the "secret heart of what they are," part of their soul, and something that they deeply love. This hints again at the idea that all people inherently need magic, even those who are unaware of it, which would again tie in the larger disenchantment narrative, where the departure of the supernatural is associated with an inherent lack that needs to be filled.

While at first Julia seemed perfectly satisfied with living a normal life, the discovery of Brakebills appears to reveal to her some kind of a hidden truth about the world, making her aware of what she didn't realize she was missing: magic. After this point, Julia time and again lets go of the aspects of her life previously incredibly important to her, such as prestigious

graduate school ("I can't just go to Yale if I know this place [Brakebills] exists!" (Cahill 2016),

devotes her days to studying magic, and eventually loses her partner.

<div align="center">*Loss of Magic*</div>

As was already noted, despite the uplifting "wish-fulfillment" setup (Quentin's discovery

that magic is in fact real), the show quickly takes a dark turn, largely deromanticizing magic. The

actual study of magic turns out to be extremely hard, the mistakes that the magicians make have

much bigger consequences than those of ordinary people, and the very fact of being involved

with magic makes the students an immediate target for malevolent supernatural creatures. In

short, magic brings seemingly endless complications, suffering and even death to its

practitioners, and the audience may start to wonder if normal life is in fact preferrable to the life

as a magician. However, when magic actually disappears from their world, the magicians are far

from relieved: quite to the contrary, they are desperate to find a way to bring magic back. This

suggests, again, that magic is perceived as something of a higher value, and the very fact of its

existence somehow outweighs and justifies the complications and suffering it may bring.

One scene that is especially revealing of the implications of this loss of magic is the

episode where we see a Brakebills professor despair and use the last magic "battery" to perform

a series of random spells and miracles (Fisher 2018). The students follow her trail of magic in the

hope of getting hold of the battery, and after talking to the witnesses they learn of the professor's

motivation: "They said she was talking about the loss of magic, and the need for wonder" (Fisher

2018). Here, *The Magicians* literally recreates the disenchantment trope: magic was present in

the world, it was lost, and now people are in need of magic to return the sense of wonder. Earlier

we saw how the series associated magic with meaning, and now, with the added link between

magic and the sense of wonder, it seems as if *The Magicians* literally draws on the vocabulary of

the disenchantment theory. For example, as theorist of disenchantment Michael Saler put it,

"Enchantment was associated not only with transcendent meaning and purpose, but also with

wonder and surprise" (Saler 2012, 8). *The Magicians*, similarly, connects magic with meaning,

purpose, and wonder, and suggests that a magic-less world is lacking in these.

The importance of magic is further elaborated upon in a following scene. As students

come upon the professor, she is preparing to commit suicide, having used up all the remaining

magic. Quentin, trying to comfort her, says that he understands why she used the magic battery

so recklessly: "I get what you did, you were raging against the dying of the light,"[10] and the

professor desperately nods: "Yes, yes." Quentin continues: "We really didn't know how good we

had it, did we? We whined and complained about everything that magic couldn't do because we

couldn't see that a world without it was dark and mean and pointless," and the professor agrees

again: "Yeah, exactly" (Fisher 2018).

The disappearance of magic is described here as "the dying of the light," and the world

without it is "dark, mean and pointless." Magic, then, gives meaning and somehow illuminates

the world – and the magicians seem to continue to feel this way despite all the suffering that their

pursuit of magic has actually brought them. As Quentin puts it himself, the magicians may have

been dissatisfied about the ways in which magic did not fulfill their expectations, and yet this

world that *had* magic – even if imperfect – was meaningful and illuminated.

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[10] Quentin is clearly alluding to the poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by the famous poet Dylan Thomas. The poem's refrain ("rage against the dying of the light… do not go gentle into that good night") has been interpreted as an appeal to actively resist death (Westphal 1994, 113). However, a personal account of an acquaintance of Dylan Thomas claims that the poet was in fact referring to his father's approaching blindness rather than death (Gibson 1989). In either case, the poem creates the sense of need to actively fight the departure of something vitally important, which suggests that Quentin's use of these words imply, first of all, that he believes the disappearance of magic to be a loss of something crucial. Depending on the interpretation, magic would then be equated with either literal "light" and ability to *see* the world, or even with life (as the antonym of death) itself. Moreover, by describing the professor's actions as "raging against the dying of the light," Quentin is de-facto appraising her desperate (and reckless) attempts to artificially recreate a sense of magic in the world as an honorable act of active resistance towards the disappearance of something indispensable.

The Supernatural Folkloresque

What is the role that folklore and the folkloresque play in *The Magicians*? The supernatural folkloresque manifests in the series mainly in two ways. First, as already noted, the world of Fillory (and the fictional books describing the world) can be easily categorized as supernatural folkloresque: it features folkloresque supernatural creatures and magic, and the setting is reminiscent of that of a fairytale (using Foster's terminology, Fillory seems to be constructed through the "fuzzy allusion" mode of the folkloresque). This supernatural folkloresque world plays a crucial role in the plot of the series, and the characters interact with it in multiple ways. While Quentin is interested in magic and fantasy in general, it is the books of Fillory that are of special importance to him, and that initially inspire his love for magic and eventually guide him on his path of becoming a magician. Moreover, Fillory turns out to be real and actively interacts with the world of Earth – thus Quentin's knowledge of the books is of immense value for solving the supernatural crises that arise. Even more, with time the magicians begin to travel back and forth between Fillory and their world, eventually becoming the rulers of the land and helping save this magical world from disappearance.

This is to say, *The Magicians* vividly paints a relationship with supernatural folkloresque literature that suggests that the latter is not only a set of wonder-stories to "combat melancholy," but in fact has larger real-world implications. The series describes a disenchanted world lacking in magic and, hence, wonder and meaning, where (because of the marginalized status of the supernatural) people do not realize that what they are lacking is in fact magic, and fruitlessly attempt to fill in the void through other methods. It seems that supernatural folkloresque pop-culture is portrayed as one of the few means to retain the memory of magic and inspire a search for it in the modern world.

In the case of Quentin, he learns about the idea of a world filled with magic through the *Fillory* books, and is thus able to realize what is "off" with his normal magic-less world, and strive for a world where the supernatural is possible. When he is accepted into Brakebills, he is able to identify that his reality is now complete, "right" specifically because of its resemblance to the supernatural folklore(-sque) that he is familiar with: "Brakebills is the first place that feels right to me that is not literally a fairytale" (Cahill 2016).

The *Fillory* books do not only provide a clue that magic is real and help solve the real-world supernatural crises; they also contain the hidden truth that the otherworld itself – Fillory – is real. Quentin senses this from the beginning: "The books, they are just - they always felt realer than anything" (Smith 2016a). This, again, proposes that the role of the supernatural folkloresque literature – as articulated in *The Magicians* – is not simply to entertain: it also contains crucially important truths and hints of the magical reality that otherwise cannot be expressed in the disenchanted world, where supernatural belief is marginalized. This is reminiscent of Kripal's suggestion that in the modern world, the supernatural has retreated to the "safety" of popular culture (Kripal 2011, 217), and popular culture becomes "our mysticism" (Kripal 2011, 6).

Second, the magicians interact with the supernatural folklore(-sque) not only through Fillory – as the show progresses, they learn that many of the creatures and figures they thought to be only part of folklore and mythology exist in the real world – on Earth – as well. Throughout the series, they encounter such mythological creatures as vampires, werewolves, dragons, leprechauns and the Lamia, and also interact with mythological gods and heroes such as Bacchus, Persephone, Hades, Prometheus, Aengus, and Iris. Again, the rediscovering of the reality of what folklore describes proves to be crucial for solving otherwise unsolvable supernatural crises.

These disparate supernatural figures – gods and mythical beings of different traditions –

are of special importance to the series specifically because of their shared connection with

magic. The gods, for example, are portrayed to be the ultimate source of power that the

magicians can access. However, we see that here *The Magicians* again follows the

disenchantment narrative, suggesting that while "once" gods were near, it is almost impossible to

find them in the "modern world":

> Richard: Here's the deal: people used to petition gods all the time to bestow power to
> work stuff that we'd never dreamt of. Now, they're it… the biggest source there is. At
> least they were, question being…
> Kady: Where the hell are they now?
> Richard: Exactly. No one's spoken to a god in centuries. They disappeared. (Tapping
> 2016)

It is noteworthy that the way that the magicians are then advised to reconnect with gods is

through folkloric supernatural creatures, who are understood to be gods' creations:

> Richard: Humans aren't their [gods'] only children; there are others who are older and
> might know more.
> Kady: Magical creatures.
> Julia: You mean like vampires and unicorns?
> Richard: Uh, I think unicorns are a myth. But yes. Find something high up enough in the
> hierarchy, they might actually remember when gods and humans were on speaking terms.
> (Tapping 2016)

It seems that mythical creatures remember the older, magical times – the "enchanted"

world, where people and the supernatural were close – and therefore they can now work as a link

to (re)connect people with this enchanted reality. Significant is that these magical beings are not

just any fictional supernatural creatures – they are specifically folklore(-sque). This is only

logical, since the narrative tries to make a case for a lost "magical past," and thus an appeal to

folkloric tradition helps support the claim (through the power of vernacular authority). Myths,

then, are not understood as mere stories: they retain the memory of magic and the enchanted

past, and simultaneously work as a link to connect people to this magical realm. Knowledge of

myth and folklore, then, is proposed to help the magicians reunite with magic in the disenchanted (or "disenchanting") world. And since magic in the series is so closely linked with meaning, purpose, and wonder, the fact that myths and folklore contain "hidden truths" about magic means that these stories have a special status – instead of being mere entertainment, they practically aid in connecting with something of supreme value.

The themes of god(s) and religion is repeatedly brought up in *The Magicians*, but it is notable that gods are often portrayed as distant, removed, and unsympathetic to humans; even more, they frequently turn out to be cruel, selfish and deceitful, and it's more than once that they become the source of the magicians' problems, instead of providing them with help. While such influential theorists of religion as Clifford Geertz and Mircea Eliade associated religion with the function of providing meaning and purpose[11], the gods in *The Magicians* (and their relationships with the practitioners) do not seem to provide either. The gods generally pursue their own interests, and while we see the magicians address them, say prayers and perform rituals to summon gods, this is done, again, for the purpose of attaining magical power or otherwise gaining some practical help in solving another supernatural crisis, not for the sake of finding meaning or other spiritual reasons. That is to say, while the show seems to place a great focus on meaning and purpose, it also suggests these are not to be found in institutionalized religion or worship of gods.

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[11] For Mircea Eliade, religion is closely connected with the search for the sacred; it provides orientation in life and purpose (as opposed to the meaninglessness of profane existence) (Pals 2009, 271-308). Clifford Geertz discusses how religion is a system of cultural symbol that imbues life events, such as illnesses, with meaning, and therefore helps one endure suffering (Geertz 1973, 87-125). While in *The Magicians* characters meet gods and address prayers to them, these interactions do not provide meaning, purpose, or help in enduring difficulties. Here, reliance on gods is criticized, gods often are the source of the problem, and meaning is to be found elsewhere (specifically, in magic and one's independent search for it).

The Magicians explicitly articulates this frustration with stereotypical religion in the

following scene, where Julia criticizes a chaplain's – Richard's – preaching at a rehabilitation

hospital:

> Richard: Now, we don't like to hear it, but we need something or someone to lean on that is bigger than ourselves.
> Julia: Just say it. God.
> Richard: Well, that's one way to putting it.
> Julia: You know, there is a word when you lean on something – a crutch. Replacing drugs or booze or porn, or whatever with a "Higher Power," it's just swapping one crutch for another.
> Richard: That is a bummer way of looking at things.
> Julia: Why don't you just tell these people the truth? Maybe we just need to accept the world for what actually is.
> Richard: Oh, what about making the world what we want it to be? You know, with a little effort, a little faith.
> Julia: Give a man hope and a nickel, you got a nickel. (Eliasberg 2016)

Thinking Richard to be an ordinary chaplain (as this is their first encounter), Julia eagerly

attacks the popular rhetoric of God being something bigger to lean on. She sees this idea as

misleading and disempowering, and suggests that people need to recognize the fact that there is

no benign higher power that would help them. This is consistent with the larger philosophy of

the show: while in this world higher powers do exist, they have no interest in helping humans,

and people, including magicians, are required to find a way to solve various issues (those of the

supernatural kind as well as the material ones) on their own. Even when magic practitioners

petition gods to receive power, their success is dependent upon their own skill and wits, not on

their faith or the gods' mercy. Magic, as opposed to religion (in the sense of putting one's faith in

gods) is portrayed as requiring one to shift one's mindset from passive expectation of help to

taking matters into one's own hands. Independent and personal engagement with the

supernatural seems to be favored over blind reliance on gods (associated with institutionalized

religion).

This distrust towards institutionalized religion and the shift towards an independent search for an alternative source of meaning present in the show may be mirroring what was discussed in the introductory chapter: in the contemporary US, for example, the word "religion" often carries negative connotations, church attendance is declining, and many people choose to seek alternative forms of spirituality – and for some it is the pursuit of the supernatural that becomes a "functional alternative" to religion (Waskul and Eaton 2018, 5). In some cases, for example, with Wicca, this engagement with the supernatural also largely involves the practice of magic.

Moreover, as folklorist Sabina Magliocco notes in her study of neopaganism, one of the most prominent aspects of this movement is "a search for personal, ecstatic, and embodied spiritual experiences" (Magliocco 2012, 154).

The Magicians similarly demonstrates a desire for an independent search for magic and wonder, and frequently signals frustration with institutionalized religion. Taking into account the elevated terms in which the show repeatedly describes magic (as a source of light, color, wonder and a "secret heart of what you always were"), it seems that it is magic itself that provides meaning and purpose, and it is the existence of magic and engagement with it which is seen as having supreme, spiritual value.

Conclusions

Both folklore and the folkloresque in *The Magicians* are portrayed as containing hidden truths that are unknown to or rejected by the dominant paradigm. They both offer practical clues on reconnecting with magic in the disenchanted world. Rather than being mere entertainment, such stories – folkloric and folkloresque ones – are understood to retain memory of magic and to work as a refuge for non-institutional beliefs regarding the supernatural, which in the series turn

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out to be "real." Moreover, as magic in *The Magicians* is closely connected with meaning and wonder, the reconnection with magic that folklore and the folkloresque facilitates stands for more than just reconnection with magic itself: it also means bringing meaning, "light" and "color" to the world, completing it. Folklore and the folkloresque function as an important bridge that links with something of supreme value; they are tools in fighting the meaninglessness and colorlessness of the disenchanted world.

We also see in *The Magicians* the reflection of the stigma around supernatural belief, discussed in the first chapter. As noted before, despite the fact that belief in the supernatural is very much alive in the 21st-century West and many are drawn towards it, at the same time it is still largely stigmatized, and people feel unsafe discussing this topic, fearing to be misunderstood. Moreover, as shown by Hufford, this situation may be psychologically damaging to many people. *The Magicians* seems to be conscious and reflective of this atmosphere: the show puts Quentin Coldwater, a life-long aficionado of fairytales and magic, in the very center of the story, demonstrating in detail the struggles and adversity that such a person may experience in the "disenchanted" world. Quentin repeatedly feels pressured into giving up his beliefs and even being barred from participation in society until he succeeds in letting go of his passion for the supernatural. He also experiences depression, which largely stems from the mismatch between the "consensus reality" (disenchanted world) and the way he wishes the world to be (enchanted reality). For Quentin, a magic-less world is devoid of meaning and wonder, and thus the society's demand to give up on his supernatural belief means giving up on the hope for a meaningful, colorful world.

The show not only validates the feelings and struggles of believers in the supernatural in the modern world, but also creates a wish-fulfillment-type of narrative, where it is the

marginalized supernatural afficionado who turns out to be right, and whose previously stigmatized knowledge is the one that actually reflects reality, and in the end helps to save the day. Moreover, *The Magicians* suggests that fascination with the supernatural is not just a hobby or a personal whimsy of certain people – it stands for a much bigger longing for "something more," for meaning and wonder in the disenchanted modern world. As demonstrated by the story of Julia, the series suggests that in fact *everybody* needs magic, regardless of whether they are aware of this or not. Mirroring the sentiment of many disenchantment theorists, *The Magicians* paints a picture of a disenchanted modern world, where the departure of the supernatural means loss of meaning and wonder, and rediscovery of magic is needed in order to complete the world. Moreover, this rediscovery needs to happen through personal, independent engagement with the supernatural rather than through adhering to institutionalized religion.

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CHAPTER III

COMMON TROPES OF THE SUPERNATURAL FOLKLORESQUE

In this chapter I focus on common patterns of the supernatural folkloresque. As the scope

of this study does not allow for a comprehensive overview of all supernatural folkloresque

products and patterns of the genre, here I consider several prominent or particularly illustrative

films and television shows that aired between 1995 and 2022 in the US.[12] My goal is to

demonstrate how the previously discussed research regarding the meaning of supernatural

folklore (etic perspective) relates to the pop-culture's own performance of supernatural folklore

(emic perspective). We will see that many pop-cultural works (1) reinforce the idea of the pre-

modern world as an enchanted past, (2) reflect and criticize the stigma attached to supernatural

belief, (3) present the supernatural as a solution to the problem of meaninglessness, (4) portray

folklore as a critical source of alternative knowledge about the supernatural, and (5) constitute an

opportunity to experience re-enchantment and facilitate supernatural belief.

"Enchanted Past"

Many supernatural folkloresque products appeal to the idea of a lost "magical past" and

portray the pre-modern period as the time of magic. For instance, some television shows are

explicitly set in this "enchanted past," such as the American TV-series *Xena: The Warrior*

Princess (1995-2001), which draws on various mythologies, primarily Greek. In this case, each

episode opens with the phrase "In a time of ancient gods, warlords, and kings…." Another

example is the British television series *Merlin* (2008-2012), which loosely draws on Arthurian

legends and is set in a vaguely medievalesque landscape. The show opens with the words: "In a

land of myth, and a time of magic…" These episode introductions prompt the feeling that the

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[12] I mostly focus on American films and television show but will also use examples of supernatural folkloresque
products from other countries, which also gained significant popularity in the US.

audience is about to "enter" a different – magical – time, where, it is suggested, the gods were closer, people believed in magic, and the supernatural was part of everyday reality.

While other supernatural folkloresque TV shows are often set in a contemporary setting, many of them still allude to the idea of the lost magical past. One good example is the British television series *A Discovery of Witches* (2018-2022), which tells of the lives of demons, vampires, and witches of the 21st century. Despite the fact that here the modern world is portrayed to be inhabited by supernatural creatures, the premise of the show is still that magic is disappearing, and that supernatural beings are growing weaker. The opening credits of *A Discovery of Witches* begin with the words: "Once the world was full of wonders, but it belongs to humans now. We creatures have all but disappeared – daemons, vampires, and witches. Hiding in plain sight, ill at ease, even with each other." Throughout the show, we see these supernatural creatures search for a way to "bring back" the magic and supernatural knowledge of the past, and at a certain point the protagonists have to literally travel to 16th century London in the pursuit of otherwise unobtainable magical secrets. Again, despite the fact that the modern world is not shown to be completely devoid of the supernatural, the strongest magic is nevertheless located in the past.

This prevalent connection of magic with the past is highly reminiscent of the disenchantment theory, which, as discussed earlier, associates the pre-modern world with magic and wonder, and suggests that the departure of belief in the supernatural results in the desire to "bring back" the enchanted past. In this case, shows that are set in magical pre-modern times (such as *Xena, Merlin*, or *The Witcher*[13]) and narratives that "reintroduce" magical beings and

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[13] *The Witcher* (2019-) is a Polish-American television series, based on the series of books by Andrzej Sapkowski, focusing on the adventures of Gerald of Rivia, a monster-hunter called a "witcher." The show is set in a medievalesque setting, features magic, and draws heavily on various folkloric traditions, introducing such

practices of the past to the modern world (e.g., *A Discovery of Witches*, *Harry Potter* (2001-

2011)*, Once Upon a Time*,[14] *American Gods*[15]) can allow for re-enchantment, providing an

opportunity to imagine and experience a magical reality by either entertaining the thought of an

enchanted past, or imagining the modern world as filled with magic.

One important result of the use of folklore in these films and television series is to

connect ideals of enchantment with real-world locations, practices, and beliefs. This raises the

idea that magic is not just something that belongs to the fantastic world, but can also be found in

the ordinary, seemingly magic-less world. To take the example of *Merlin*, the television series

enchants the landscape by portraying magicians and supernatural folkloric creatures in real

world-locations of the UK, connecting the magical reality with actual reality. Moreover, as the

show is inspired by Arthurian legends, which are also linked to real-world places, the viewers

can to some extent partake in the enchanted reality even outside of the digital reality of the show

by exploring the historical folklore associated with Merlin and Arthur and visiting locations

associated with the lives of these legendary figures (i.e., "legend-tripping"). Additionally, such

films and television series as *Harry Potter*, *A Discovery of Witches,* and *American Gods*

similarly enchant the familiar modern-day (often urban) landscape by suggesting that there is a

hidden magical world existing alongside the ordinary one – for example, that there is a secret

mythological creatures (most of whom function as monsters that Gerald needs to defeat) as *kikimora* and *leshy* (Slavic folklore), *djinn* (genie), basilisk, and dragons, among many others.

[14] *Once Upon a Time* (2011-2018) is an American television series, telling the story of fairy-tale character such as Prince Charming, Snow White, and Little Red Riding Hood, who were transported to modern-day US as the result of a magic curse, losing their memories and the knowledge that magic is real. The central character of the series, Emma Swan, a skeptic, needs to learn to believe that magic exists and that stories from fairytales actually happened, lift the curse and help the fairytale characters remember their true nature.

[15] *American Gods* (2017-2021) is an American television series, based on the novel by Neil Gaiman, which describes the struggle of the "old gods" (e.g., gods from Scandinavian, Irish, and African mythology who were brought to the US by immigrants) to avoid fading in the face of the prevalent belief in the "new gods" (e.g., Media, Technology, Money) in the US.

platform 9 and ¾ at London's King's Cross Railway station, that some of the faculty members at the University of Oxford are in fact vampires and witches, or that old Norse gods are walking the streets of the United States today.

<p align="center">*Stigma Regarding the Supernatural*</p>

Many supernatural folkloresque products seem to be conscious and critical of the existing stigma surrounding supernatural belief. Television series and shows such as *The Supernatural* (2005-2013), *The Magicians* (2015-2020), or *Ghostbusters* (2016)[16] portray characters who are constantly ridiculed and ostracized for their interest in the supernatural. Contrary to the mainstream narrative, however, these shows often propose to look at the life of the marginalized believers from within, demonstrating difficulties and, often, loneliness brought upon by such a stigma.

In *Ghostbusters* (2016), for instance, protagonist Erin Gilbert (a physicist) is denied tenure after the university learns that she had previously published research on ghosts. Later, two other characters are fired from their positions – again, because of their interest in paranormal investigation. The film demonstrates a constant tension between the widely-accepted "scientific worldview," exemplified by academia, and supernatural belief, which is stigmatized. The characters in the film are highly conscious of the fact that their beliefs are not socially accepted: time and again they express the concern that they would be considered "crazy" if they admitted to their belief in ghosts, or remark that they had been mocked in the past for speaking about the supernatural. This reflects the cultural self-awareness that belief in ghosts is unacceptable and

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[16] While the original *Ghostbusters* (1984) film is also folkloresque in that it revolves around such folkloric beings as ghosts and (demi-)gods, here I focus on the 2016 remake as it is particularly illustrative of this trope (the criticism of the stigma regarding supernatural belief).

associated with mental illness by dominant societal institutions, and that there is a constant fear surrounding opening up and talking about one's experiences of the supernatural.

The story of Erin Gilbert in *Ghostbusters* is particularly noteworthy, as her interest in ghosts is shown not to be stemming from imagination or wishful thinking (which seems to be the common stereotype), but rather from personal experience. Specifically, Erin saw a ghost as a child. While this was a traumatizing experience, worsened by the fact that most people did not believe her and she was mocked and nicknamed "ghost girl," the event became the beginning of Erin's interest in paranormal investigation. This narrative describing interest in the supernatural as originating in personal experience is very similar to a pattern reported in fieldwork on actual ghost hunts. For example, in her study on "dark tourism," folklorist Rachael Ironside puts it as follows:

> For others, ghost tourism offers a chance to better understand previous experiences. When asked why she attended a ghost hunt, Louise answered, "A few weird things have happened through my life... unexplained feelings, sensations, noises, that sort of thing, that makes you realize that there are things that we do not understand." For Louise and others like her, ghost tourism facilitates a shared experience of spiritual exploration. (Ironside 2018, 108)

Erin's story is presented in a way that the audience is invited to sympathize with the hardships of somebody whose experience is rejected by society. The film then shows how the "ghostbusters," all of whom were to some extent marginalized, finally find a sense of community and belonging among each other. Moreover, it also follows a wish-fulfillment type of narrative, where gradually the belief in the supernatural is embraced by the larger society (ghosts are proven to be real), and the marginalized believers' experiences and knowledge become valorized (it becomes crucial to saving New York City).

Overall, *Ghostbusters* (2016) seems to mirror the existing sociological data and research on supernatural belief. As outlined by Hufford and other researchers, supernatural belief in the

21st century in the West exists, but is largely stigmatized and often associated with mental illness – so much so that people who believe they have experienced the supernatural are extremely reluctant to share their experiences, which often carries negative psychological consequences. Hufford argues for the need to normalize such experiences. Films such as *Ghostbusters* demonstrate and criticize the stigma surrounding the supernatural as well as the marginalized status of believers in the supernatural, and offer a way to sympathize with those whose experiences are stigmatized.

<div align="center">

The Supernatural and Meaning

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Another recurrent motif in supernatural folkloresque productions is that the supernatural is frequently presented as the solution to the problem of meaninglessness.

First, the supernatural is frequently employed to ascribe meaning to seemingly natural events. While in the naturalistic worldview things such as natural disasters, illnesses and other misfortunes are perceived to strike randomly (i.e., they simply *happen,* and there's no meaningful, hidden logic behind such occurrences, as well as no way to control them), supernatural folkloresque texts often paint the cosmological framework as meaningfully organized, where things happen for a reason.

One good example is the episode "Bugs" (Manners 2005b) from the TV show *The Supernatural*, where a series of strange insect-related deaths is happening around a new housing development. As all involved in the project are "skeptics," they fail to recognize the hidden meaning behind these events, and therefore the misfortunes continue, nearly leading the whole community to a larger-scale catastrophe. It is only through the investigation of the hidden, supernatural side of the occurrences, led by those who think beyond the scientific explanations (Dean and Sam), that it becomes known that the deaths are happening because the houses are

built on the sacred Native American land, unrightfully taken away from the indigenous people. Therefore, seemingly unconnected events – deaths of those involved in the construction – are revealed to have hidden meaning (punishment for injustice), and with this it becomes possible to stop the series of misfortunes (by means of stopping the construction). Thus, recognition and acceptance of the supernatural is shown as providing an insight into the hidden logic behind the events, and to a certain degree gain control over it.

A second theme in a significant number of supernatural folkloresque narratives features the concept of destiny. Even more so than in the previous example (which pertained to the meaning of a specific event), destiny-driven narratives are strongly evocative of the idea that the world as a whole is meaningfully organized. As folklorist Daniel Wojcik argues in his discussion of deterministic beliefs that involve destiny, "Fatalistic modes of thought provide a framework for interpreting events otherwise considered to be haphazard, uncontrollable, or incomprehensible, reducing uncertainty and offering a sense of control and meaningful explanations for situations" (Wojcik 1997, 135). Supernatural folkloresque programs, then, offer an opportunity to visualize such a world, imbued with a sense of order and purpose.

In such television series as *The Witcher* or *Merlin*, for example, destiny is portrayed as an invisible but powerful force, whose workings are in most cases unknown to people. The characters may often be skeptical of the existence of destiny, or may attempt to fight it, but in the end the destined course of events prevails. One example is the main character of *The Witcher*, Geralt, who in the beginning of the series is extremely skeptical of the existence of destiny – in his own words, "[d]estiny helps people believe there is an order to this horseshit. There isn't!" (Garcia Lopez 2019) – but later on, the unfolding events prove him wrong, and Geralt accepts his

destiny. Such narratives, again, express the idea that, although various occurrences in life may seem random, in fact there is a hidden meaningful interconnectedness between them.

It is noteworthy that pop-cultural works that portray supernatural folkloresque worlds tend to portray such worlds as imbued with meaning – in other words, enchantment often comes hand-in-hand with meaning. This is reminiscent of the sentiments expressed by many theorists of the "disenchantment" theory: the enchanted world, filled with spirits, magic and supernatural forces, is often understood to be inherently meaningful, while the loss of the supernatural belief results in the loss of meaning and orientation in life:

> The more intellectualism suppresses the belief in magic and hence "disenchants" the operations of the world—so that they lose their magical meaning and only "are" and "happen" but no longer signify anything—the more urgently the demand grows for the world and "the orientation toward life" (Lebensführung) to appear ordered in a meaningful and significant way. (Max Weber, as cited in Josephson-Storm 2017, 283)

I suggest that the fascination with creation and consumption of enchanted worlds can be partially attributed to this desire to (re)create a meaningful cosmological framework, which represents a worldview different from that of the "cold world of science." Viewing supernatural folkloresque films and television shows enables one to imagine, even if temporarily, a life in a world that is animated with meaning.

Scientific Worldview as Deficient and Powerless

As noted above, a significant number of supernatural folkloresque products criticize the disenchantment of the world and the scientific worldview. We have previously seen films and television series of the genre showcase the stigma attached to supernatural belief, suggesting that it is oppressive to the marginalized group of believers. It is important to note that a number of supernatural folkloresque products also make a point about the harmfulness of the stigma on society as a whole. The scientific worldview is portrayed as a deficient framework: not only is it powerless in understanding supernatural phenomena, but the bias borne out of it prevents one

from adopting a more comprehensive worldview, resulting in unnecessary problems for everyone.

Such television series and films as *The Supernatural, Ghostbusters* (2016), and *The Magicians* show characters who live in a world perceived as disenchanted, where scientific thinking is dominant and supernatural belief is seen as a silly superstition at best and sign of a mental illness at worst. The believers are clearly outnumbered, mocked and marginalized, and yet, as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that the supernatural is real and can also pose a real danger to people. Scientific thinking alone proves to be deficient for understanding the world and powerless against a supernatural problem.

The Supernatural is an especially good example of this trope, as each episode features a new supernatural mystery that the two protagonists, Dean and Sam, need to solve to save the lives of those who are blind to the supernatural causes of the dangers. The two brothers travel across the US, following reports of strange cases that the police, local authorities, and common sense cannot solve. Dean and Sam pick up where scientific thinking proves powerless, discover the supernatural causes of the events, and try to prevent the looming tragedy.

Dean and Sam's work is also heavily affected by the stigma surrounding the supernatural. The brothers have to constantly keep their real activities a secret. As they cannot announce themselves as supernatural specialists, they have to disguise themselves as police officers, journalists, government officials and so forth in order to gain access to places and information needed for their investigation. Here, the broader societal distrust towards supernatural belief is portrayed as not merely something that hurts the feelings of the believers – it actually stands in the way of averting real-life danger for the community. While Dean and Sam not only devote their time and resources but also risk their lives in order to save people who are helpless against

the supernatural, the brothers' work must be secretive, it is unrecognized and uncompensated, their resources are extremely limited, and occasionally they have to transgress the law in order to continue with their mission.

Dean and Sam's work is further complicated by the fact that the very people that they are trying to help are mostly "skeptics." Time and again, these skeptics resist the brothers' help or are reluctant to assist in their investigation, refusing to believe in the possibility of a supernatural occurrence. For example, in the episode "Dead in the Water," we see a character criticize the brothers' theory as unscientific: "To say that I have anything to do with these drownings, with Chris, because of some ghost – it's not rational" (Manners 2005a). In another episode, "Phantom Traveler" (Singer 2005), we see that a witness of a supernatural attack, who could be of immense help to the investigation, refuses to accept his own supernatural experience as real, dismissing it with the words: "I was delusional, seeing things." This general distrust towards supernatural belief significantly complicates and slows down the brothers' investigation. Dean and Sam often have to tell lies and come up with fake explanations to find a way to help people without revealing the true nature of their inquiry. Sometimes this results in their failure to help the victims – something, the show seems to suggest, that wouldn't have occurred if the supernatural was socially accepted rather than stigmatized.

Some of the people Dean and Sam are trying to help eventually confront the supernatural and accept the reality of it. While theoretically this should make the brothers' work easier, as from this point on they ideally could be honest about what is really going on, in practice these revelations often cause additional complications. The people who experience such a significant paradigm shift are shown to often go into shock, refuse to believe what happened, and/or come to think that they are "going mad." Dean and Sam have to help them deal with the aftermath of

their overwhelming and destabilizing revelation while also trying to protect them from a supernatural catastrophe. In another scene from the episode "Dead in the Water," for instance, we see a survivor of a supernatural attack immediately link their experience to mental illness: "It doesn't make any sense. I'm going crazy" (Manners 2005a). Or, for example, in the episode "Bloody Mary," another victim of the supernatural (in this case, of Bloody Mary) expresses her anxiety as follows:

> Charlie: Am I insane?
> Dean: No, you're not.
> Charlie: Oh God, this makes me feel so much worse. (Ellis 2005)

Here, we see that the realization that the supernatural is real is extremely disconcerting to the victim – so much so that any alternative, even a depressing explanation (mental illness), would be preferrable. This points to the fact that the acceptance of the supernatural as real means a complete change of one's worldview, which is highly unsettling. The scientific worldview is such an important "default" mode of their comprehension of the world that anything that poses a threat to this way of thinking is threatening to the mental stability of those involved.

On the other hand, there are cases where the victim is already aware and accepting of the supernatural cause of an unfortunate event, but they are unwilling to share the information (and therefore help the investigation) because of the stigma surrounding the supernatural. In the episode "Wendigo," for example, Sam and Dean try to persuade a survivor of what they suspect to be an attack by an evil supernatural being known as a wendigo to reveal the truth (the newspapers claimed it was a grizzly bear). Dean gives the following reasoning:

> Dean: If we knew what we were dealing with, we might be able to stop it.
> Survivor: I seriously doubt that. Anyways, I don't see what difference it would make. You wouldn't believe me. Nobody ever did. (Nutter 2005)

Here, the survivor believes that all his attempts to reveal the truth of the supernatural are by definition futile, and is hesitant to share information vital for the investigation. Moreover,

even after he tells the truth about the wendigo, and Dean and Sam manage to defeat it, in the end the brothers – and other witnesses – have to report the attack as, again, "grizzly bear." Even after confronting the supernatural themselves, they realize that the police are not going to believe in the reality of the wendigo, so they are forced to play by the rules of the scientific worldview.

Overall, no matter what the situation – whether the people involved are initially skeptics or believers, and whether they eventually accept the supernatural or not – the dominant paradigm of the scientific worldview manages to create unnecessary obstacles, which get in the way of Dean and Sam's efforts to save people from the supernatural danger. Time and again, *The Supernatural* gestures towards the limitations of scientific thinking, portraying it as ineffective or even harmful.

Folklore as an Alternative Source of Knowledge

We have seen that many shows present scientific thinking as deficient and somewhat powerless, which suggests that an alternative kind of a worldview is necessary to fully understand the world. Oftentimes, it is folklore that is portrayed as this vital source of alternative knowledge – one that allows for the existence of the supernatural and opposes the dominant scientific worldview.

There are many television series that follow the trope that folklore about the supernatural is real. As pointed out earlier, shows such as *Discovery of Witches*, *The Magicians* or *American Gods* portray the modern world to be inhabited with supernatural entities from folklore. Another example is the American television series *Grimm* (2011-2017), which speculates that the fairytales recorded by the brothers Grimm describe actual supernatural events and monsters ("The stories are real. What they wrote about really happened"), and the protagonist needs to

accept the truth of folklore in order to defeat the malevolent supernatural creatures roaming the city of Portland in the 21st century.

Of significance to this specific discussion, however, is that a number of shows do not simply reinhabit the modern world with folkloric creatures, but also show their protagonists regularly turn to folklore as an essential source of knowledge. Folklore is frequently portrayed as containing information about the supernatural which cannot be found elsewhere. While dismissed as silly superstitions or old wives' tales by many, it provides clues essential for solving supernatural questions.

Arguably the most famous show to utilize the trope of folklore as a source of supernatural knowledge is *The Supernatural*. While the series occasionally features newly created (although often also folkloresque) creatures, an overwhelming number of episodes are devoted to supernatural beings specifically from folklore. Each new episode tends to introduce one new folkloric creature – such as wendigo, Bloody Mary, or Hook Man, who are eventually revealed to be the cause of the dangerous supernatural mystery that the brothers are trying to uncover. In their turn, the brothers often do research into folklore to find a way to defeat these supernatural threats.

In the episode about Bloody Mary (Ellis 2005), for example, Dean and Sam are searching for a way to stop the attacks of the spirit, who is here portrayed to be killing people by gouging out their eyes. Knowing that Bloody Mary appears in mirrors, Dean and Sam consider the larger mirror folklore: "There's a lot of folklore about mirrors – that they reveal all your lies, all your secrets, that they're a true reflection of your soul, which is why it's bad luck to break them"[17]

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[17] It should be noted that the "folklore" Dean and Sam are referring to here is not necessarily "real" folklore (e.g., borrowed directly from an existing tradition). These beliefs may as well be folkloresque creations of the authors – but the point here is that they are presented specifically as folklore in the show, which hints at the importance of the status of a belief perceived as folkloric over a purely fictional one in these television series.

(Ellis 2005). Then, they remember about "an old superstition that says mirrors can capture

spirits" (Ellis 2005). While until this point the investigation was at a dead end, the knowledge of

folklore supplies the necessary clues that allow Dean and Sam to finally unravel the specifics of

how the Bloody Mary spirit is operating and makes it possible for them to stop the attacks.

While supernatural folkloresque films and TV shows often argue for the truthfulness of

folklore, not all folklore is always portrayed to be accurate. In some cases, protagonists have to

actively engage with folkloric narratives and discover in a practical way which parts of the

stories are actually useful as sources of supernatural knowledge. One example is the following

scene from *The Magicians*, where magic practitioners Julia and Kady threaten Lamia, a

malevolent supernatural creature (originally a character from Greek mythology, here described

as a psychic):

> Julia: If you can read my mind, then you know we both have knives in our pockets
> dipped in gold and silver and coated with shark's blood.
> Lamia: Jesus, that's overkill.
> Julia: *We weren't sure which legends were true*. (Tapping 2016, emphasis mine)

Another instance that reflects the same necessity to separate the folkloric "wheat from the chaff"

is in the following episode, where a group of magicians discusses the possibility of contacting

certain supernatural beings:

> Kady: Magical creatures.
> Julia: You mean like vampires and unicorns?
> Richard: Uh, *I think unicorns are a myth*. But yes. (Tapping 2016, emphasis mine)

Such scenes entertain the thought that while in some instances folklore may be untrue, it

can also contain crucial nuggets of knowledge about the supernatural aspects of reality. In either

case, folklore is presented as something that should not be easily dismissed. While folklore may

be commonly looked down upon as silly old-wives' tales, irrelevant to the modern world,

supernatural folkloresque programs frequently challenge this notion by giving folklore the status

of an essential resource of supernatural knowledge – one foolishly overlooked by "modern" scientific thinking. Folklorists Carlea Holl-Jensen and Jeffrey A. Tolbert have pointed out this trope:

> [F]or many contemporary audiences, folklore is not understood simply as traditional literature. While folklore's literary merit and potential to reflect cultural values may be readily acknowledged, it is also often suspected of harboring arcane truths, its purpose not simply to entertain or educate but to transmit secret factual information. (Holl-Jensen and Tolbert 2015, 163-164)

The question, however, is – why folklore? What about it inspires creators of television shows to portray it as an indispensable source of supernatural knowledge?

As was discussed earlier, folklore is popularly associated with the imagined pre-modern "enchanted" past, which was ruled by belief in the supernatural rather than the scientific worldview, and where the world itself was perceived to be meaningfully ordered. In this view, pre-modern times are portrayed as the exact opposite of the "clockwork universe" of disenchanted modern life. Folklore was for a long time viewed as "survivals" of the pre-modern era – as fragments of culture, beliefs and thinking preserved from the time before the advent of modernity. Many folklorists believed that these survivals could be used to reconstruct the "original" beliefs and customs of pre-modern people, resulting in endless searches for the "Ur-forms" (original forms) of folkloric narratives (Dundes 1969, 5).

It seems that the same logic (that folklore preserves beliefs reflective of a pre-modern worldview) inspires many creations of the supernatural folkloresque, where folklore is shown to be a source of lost supernatural knowledge. Akin to the folklorists who tried to reconstruct the pure "original" beliefs from the "contaminated" and "distorted" folklore found in their time, many characters in supernatural folkloresque shows examine folkloric narratives in search of the bits of true supernatural knowledge. Folklore is presented as the essence of what was lost – the enchantment, the meaning, and the acceptance of supernatural belief; while it may sometimes

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describe the "truth" in a distorted way which needs decoding, it nevertheless remains a precious resource for rediscovering the lost magical worldview and accessing knowledge of the supernatural.

Another aspect that may inspire creators of pop-culture to portray folklore as a resource of supernatural knowledge is the power of cultural authority associated with folklore (as was suggested in the introductory chapter). As Foster puts it, "'vernacular authority' is central to the selling power of the folkloresque because it invests the ephemeral commercial product with a more trustworthy, authorized, and 'authentic' (as perceived by the consumer) raison d'être based on its (perceived) connection to tradition" (Foster 2015, 23). Whether the folklore that the characters utilize in their investigations of the supernatural is "real" or was invented by the creators of the show, the fact of it being presented as folklore imbues the marginalized supernatural belief with an air of legitimacy.

The appeal to the vernacular cultural authority of folklore is additionally empowering due to its intrinsic oppositionality toward dominant institutions. As Howard explains it, "vernacular authority emerges when an individual makes appeals that rely on trust specifically because they are not institutional. Trust is justified by the assertion because the claim does not rely on any authority arising from formally instituted social formations like a church, a newspaper company, or an academic journal" (Howard 2013, 81). Audiences who have grown suspicious of dominant religious, media, or academic institutions may be predisposed to trust cultural traditions that stand apart from and opposed to those dominant institutions. Thus, folklore, which lays claim to the authority of the "aggregate volition" of many people across time and space, provides an ideal vehicle for challenging the dominant scientific worldview and advancing claims about supernatural realities.

Folklore and Fear

It is hard to overlook the fact that an overwhelming number of supernatural folkloresque films are created in the horror genre or incorporate horror elements. Some examples include *Urban Legend* (1998), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006)*, Midsommar* (2019)*,* and *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019). In the popular imagination, it seems, folklore is not only closely connected with the supernatural, but also with the feeling of fear.

Jeffrey A. Tolbert has pointed out this link between folklore and fear in his discussion of folkloresque videogames in the horror genre. He suggested that folklore "deepens the player's experience of terror" (Tolbert 2015, 126), in part by asking the unnerving question of "what would you do if folklore was not *just* folklore?" (Tolbert 2015, 138). In other words, unlike purely fictional supernatural phenomena, created by the author from scratch and not made to resemble something from an existing folkloric tradition, folkloresque supernatural beings are scarier, as portraying them as real carries the implication that other terrifying creatures from folklore – commonly viewed as mere superstition – may be real, too.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the numerous possible functions of fear in supernatural folkloresque horror, one aspect that is especially worthy of note is the connection between fear and spirituality. As Guillermo del Toro, who directs films that are often folkloresque and incorporate horror elements, describes in an interview, fear can help people experience belief in something outside the scientific paradigm. In his own words, "I feel that fear is a very spiritual emotion. In a world where we are so pragmatic and materialistic, fear is the only emotion that allows even a sophisticated person to believe in something beyond" (Radish 2010).

The sentiment that the experience of belief can be triggered by certain factors is reminiscent of the observation by folklorist Sabina Magliocco, who, in her study of neopaganism, suggested that "belief is contextual, and therefore a response to particular set of factors" (Magliocco 2012, 21-22). While it is often assumed that belief is binary – one either does or does not believe in supernatural phenomena – Magliocco proposes that belief arises "from 'participatory consciousness,' a state of mind that exists alongside rational consciousness" as a response to specific circumstances (such as partaking in a ritual) (Magliocco 2012, 5, 7). Similarly, we may suggest that viewing supernatural folkloresque programs can facilitate the experience of belief – and, as Guillermo del Toro points out, fear towards folkloresque supernatural beings, created by films of the horror genre, can be one factor contributing to this process.

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, we have seen that numerous television shows and films paint a picture of the disenchanted modern world, where people suffer from the stigma that is attached to belief in the supernatural. Some of the characters are shown to be desperately longing for magic and meaning in a society that demands that one dismiss belief in the supernatural (as was the case with Quentin in *The Magicians)*. Other characters have already come into contact with the supernatural, but, being mocked and marginalized, they question their experience and hide it from society (as seen in *Ghostbusters*). Even such characters as Dean and Sam from *The Supernatural*, who are confident in their belief in supernatural experiences and actively employ their knowledge to avert supernatural threats, still suffer because of the stereotype; due to the marginalized status of the supernatural, their resources are limited, their work is uncompensated, and they have to find a way to do their job without actually revealing its nature.

Overall, supernatural folkloresque shows and films tend to criticize the disenchanted world with its dominant paradigm of the scientific worldview, portraying it as deficient and unable to provide meaning, and they invite the audience to sympathize with marginalized supernatural believers instead. This results in the need to argue for an alternative way of comprehending the world, which could substitute for or supplement scientific thinking. As we have seen, folklore is often employed in the construction of such a worldview. Due to its prevalent association with an enchanted, pre-modern past, folklore is frequently treated as a resource of lost mystical knowledge. As demonstrated in this chapter, characters from such television series as *The Supernatural*, *The Magicians*, and *Grimm* all turn to folklore in order to gain insight into supernatural mysteries, seemingly unobtainable otherwise.

Folklore is not only portrayed as constituting a crucial form of alternative knowledge, oppositional to the scientific worldview, but it is also employed as an active force for re-enchantment. Such programs as *American Gods*, *A Discovery of Witches*, and *The Magicians* reinhabit the modern world with folkloric supernatural creatures, inviting the audience to imagine their contemporary world as filled with magic and wonder. Other shows – such as *Merlin*, *Xena: The Warrior Princess*, or *The Witcher* – are set in the past, and create vibrant, engaging portrayals of a pre-modern folkloresque magical world, providing an opportunity to "time-travel" and imagine what it would be like to live in the "enchanted past." When taking into account Magliocco's argument that "belief is contextual" and Guillermo del Toro's idea that fear facilitates supernatural belief, we can propose that folkloresque portrayals of magical worlds can similarly facilitate an experience of enchantment and belief.

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CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Building upon the study of the folkloresque pioneered by Michal Dylan Foster and

Jeffrey Tolbert, this thesis has examined a sub-type of folkloresque popular culture that has not

received much previous scholarly attention: popular culture that draws on supernatural folklore,

termed here "the supernatural folkloresque." In recent years, Western audiences are exhibiting a

pronounced interest in films, television shows, books, and videogames that fit into this category,

and this study endeavors to explore possible reasons behind this fascination.

I approached this question from two different standpoints. In the first chapter, I drew

upon existing research from the fields of sociology, folkloristics, religious studies, history, and

popular culture studies in order to understand the role and popular perception of ideas of "the

supernatural" and "folklore" in contemporary Western culture, as well as tendencies in

audiences' relationship with popular culture more broadly. In the second and third chapters, I

examined a number of supernatural folkloresque films and television shows prominent within

American popular culture of 1995-2022, analyzing how ideas related to "folklore" and the

"supernatural" are constructed there.

The sociological data shows that belief in the supernatural in the West is far from being

uncommon: in the U.S., for example, research suggested that from 50% to 73% of Americans

hold at least one supernatural belief (Waskul and Eaton 2018, 2). While popular, these ideas are

frequently labeled as irrational and unscientific, leading to people's hesitation to openly discuss

beliefs and experiences that fall into the category of the supernatural. As David Hufford's

research demonstrates, this stigma and a lack of accepted cultural language to describe the

supernatural have significant negative psychological implications, leading to anxieties and fear-based interpretations of one's experiences (Hufford 2014).

This tension between the cultural need to express ideas related to the supernatural and the marginalized status of supernatural belief, in my view, at least partially accounts for popular interest in the supernatural folkloresque. Popular culture is a convenient resource for exploration and discussion of the supernatural specifically because of its status as entertainment that does not make claims about reality. This allows the audience to engage with ideas pertaining to the supernatural "as if" they were real, but without requiring one to openly accept or admit to supernatural belief (Saler 2012, 30-31; Kripal 2011, 6, 217). Such popular culture productions offer a pool of ideas and concepts relating to the supernatural, which are accessible to and shared by people of different backgrounds, believers and non-believers alike, effectively becoming a "lingua franca" to discuss topics that fall outside of the scientific worldview (Partridge 2005, 120, 186). Moreover, the supernatural folkloresque does not bear burdensome associations with religion, nor does it require serious commitment – it allows for a safe, free, and playful exploration of topics related to the supernatural.

Because of the perception that popular culture is not "serious," it may at first appear that supernatural folkloresque programs cannot have any significant impact on real-world beliefs and practices. However, existing research on popular culture relating to the supernatural suggests that such products have already meaningfully influenced people's ideas and practices. As noted previously, some examples include neo-pagans implementing elements from popular culture in their rituals; fiction writers intentionally using their work to express and transmit their supernatural experiences; cases when popular culture led to the creation of real-life religions; and even supernatural popular culture inspiring occult revivals.

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But what is added by making the supernatural in popular culture appear folkloric? The answer to this seems to be largely connected with the idea of the "disenchanted modern world," where modernity is perceived as stripped of mystery, wonder, and meaning. This imagined dichotomy of an enchanted pre-modern past versus the modern world devoid of magic has led to many attempts to "re-enchant" the world by bringing back something of the imagined wonder of pre-modern times and reclaiming magic in the contemporary world. Folklore is commonly (even if wrongly) associated with pre-modern, "magical" times, and therefore bringing folkloric topics and themes into a popular culture product creates a much-desired link with the enchanted past.

Moreover, folkloric narratives of the supernatural are imbued with "vernacular authority": they are perceived to belong to a body of alternative, traditional knowledge about the world that people relied on until the advent of modernity (see Howard 2013, 80). Not only is folklore perceived to carry more weight than any new purely fictional creation, but it is also imagined to embody a worldview oppositional to the rational scientific thinking of the modern disenchanted world, making it the perfect tool to resist the frameworks of modernity. In short, the use of folklore in pop-culture legitimizes supernatural belief through vernacular authority, appeals to an imagined lost magical past, and allows people to fantasize about an alternative, enchanted way of life.

In order to consider how these theories (from an etic perspective) correlate with representation of the supernatural and folklore in real pop-cultural products, I did a close reading in the second chapter of the television series *The Magicians*, focusing on how the show conceptualizes magic and how it depicts people's relationships with supernatural folkloresque literature. In the third chapter, I did an overview of common tropes in prominent supernatural folkloresque films and shows that relate to the research questions of this thesis.

My analysis showed that, first, many supernatural folkloresque products do reinforce the idea of the pre-modern world as a time of magic. Some shows explicitly "reenact" magical pre-modern times, and even those that are set in a contemporary setting frequently draw on the idea of the lost or disappearing magical knowledge of the pre-modern world. Second, supernatural folkloresque shows frequently highlight and criticize the stigma attached to supernatural belief (discussed above), portraying a scientific worldview as deficient, and inviting the audience to sympathize with marginalized believers in the supernatural. Third, the idea of the existence of the supernatural in such shows is frequently linked not only with a sense of mystery and wonder, but also with meaning. In accordance with the disenchantment theory, these shows suggest that the modern scientific worldview reduces the world to a soulless machine, whereas an enchanted worldview (that allows for supernatural belief) imbues life with meaning, and presents the universe as meaningfully ordered (hence the fact that supernatural folkloresque shows often feature the concept of destiny).

Regarding the concept of "folklore," supernatural folkloresque programs frequently depict it as a critical source of esoteric or lost knowledge about the supernatural, which needs to be accepted in order to understand and adhere to the "rules" of the enchanted world. Folklore is also consistently employed to construct the sense of magic, the supernatural, and the enchanted past. Moreover, as the case of *The Magicians* demonstrates, not only folklore but also supernatural folkloresque popular culture (in *The Magicians*, it is the *Fillory and Further* books) may be explicitly understood as a valuable resource that enables people to rediscover magic and wonder in a modern disenchanted world.

Overall, supernatural folkloresque programs tend to signal dissatisfaction with a "disenchanted modernity" and advocate for re-enchanting the world and bringing back the

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(perceived) lost magic and meaning, which is to be achieved through accepting supernatural belief and reclaiming traditional knowledge preserved in folkloric beliefs and practices. Such popular culture constitutes a creative and playful mode of exploration of non-conventional beliefs, borne out of – and therefore suitable for – the contexts of Western culture in the 21st century. Regardless of how accurate such shows portray "modernity," "folklore," and the "pre-modern past," they offer, for some, a much-desired opportunity to experience enchantment, even if temporarily and in a non-conventional way.

As demonstrated in this thesis, supernatural folkloresque pop-culture works often reflect and validate existing theories about disenchantment, stigmatization of the supernatural, the supernatural as a substitute for institutionalized religion, and folklore as an expression of the enchanted past. However, such works also frequently challenge and invite rethinking of such theories and concepts. For example, *The Magicians* largely deromanticizes the idea of magic and fantastical (other)worlds: in the series, magic does not solve real-life issues, and enchanted worlds are not exempt from war and suffering; magic, however, is still important as it brings meaning and wonder to these imperfect worlds. Similar desire to reconcile magic and realism can be found in a number of other shows of the genre, such as *The Witcher* or *The Game of Thrones*: these combine enchanted medievalesque landscapes with themes of violence, brutality, and corruptness of human nature. Many supernatural folkloresque works seem to draw on – and reinterpret – folkloric themes related to magic and the supernatural in order to reflect on social issues (e.g., in *American Gods*, African folktale character Anansi tells of the horrors of racism; in *The Witcher,* elves are portrayed as victims of colonialism). While disenchantment theory often presupposes an idealized vision of the pre-modern world and the belief that restoration of magic will return "rightness" to the world, some supernatural folkloresque shows simultaneously draw

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on the image of an enchanted magical past (magic, folkloric creatures, fairytale-like landscapes) and criticize that past, negotiating the role of magic and enchantment in the 21st century in the light of contemporary understandings of the world and its social issues.

Further studies of the supernatural folkloresque ideally would include fieldwork with afficionados of the genre: this will help deepen our understanding of how "the folk" interact with such popular culture, and how it impacts audiences' worldviews and beliefs. Such research will doubtless face challenges, as it would, first of all, ask interviewees to discuss ideas that many are hesitant to speak about due to the stigmatization of supernatural belief. Moreover, because of the common perception of popular culture as "not serious," interviewees might be unaware of (or hesitant to admit to) how supernatural folkloresque programs are impacting their worldview. The researcher would need to ensure that interviews are set up in a safe space, and avoid asking leading questions that are overly determined by academic theories, while also stimulating their interlocutors to consider and conceptualize their relationships with supernatural themes in popular culture in new ways. By continuing to expand our understanding of the ongoing appeal and diverse permutations of the supernatural folkloresque, such studies promise to provide further insights into the nature of belief, the relevance of folklore, and ongoing efforts to re-enchant the world in the 21st century.

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