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What's True Scooby-Doo?: Unmasking Those Meddling Kids

By Kali Koba

Dedication

To everyone who has made it possible to enjoy 'Scooby-Doo' over the years. To the team who first dreamt up that mystery solving mutt. To the artists who have spent their weeks thinking of new ways to write, animate, and realize the many adventures of Mystery Inc. To the animators who worked overtime to get things just right. To the janitors and office workers who kept things running smoothly. I appreciate you.

To my parents for letting me watch the show as a kid. To my siblings who sat right next to me while it was on. And to my lovely soul mate who has had to put up with countless hours of 'Scooby' on the TV and, even worse, my many rants and ravings about it. I love you.

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Part One: Introduction

It is hard to imagine what it must have been like to watch the original run of *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* way back in 1969. Did those lucky kids who stumbled across its premiere have any idea that one day they would be watching it with their own kids? Did anyone, could anyone, know that it would be the launching point of a massively successful franchise that would continue to inspire new iterations 50 years into the future? I have to think that they were all clueless. More importantly, I have to think that the children sitting down to watch their favorite mystery solving Great Dane simply didn't care. They were there for Fred, Daphne, Velma, Shaggy, and (obviously!) Scooby. They were there to solve mysteries in their "here-and-now."

But of course, this might be my own nostalgia tinting things. After all, that is how I watched Scooby growing up. Every new movie, every new show, was time I got to spend with my friends ("the gang"). Every new mystery was a chance for me to flex my developing intellect, to solve the case before Fred had the chance to pull off anyone's mask. I was fanatical. 'Scooby-Doo' was where I got my fix of animal cartoons (an old passion) and mystery fiction (a developing one). It was funny but not so much that I couldn't take it seriously. It was scary but not so much that it was unwatchable (Although, I did have the odd nightmare!). Throughout our lives, there are ideas or experiences that we return to. We go running to comfort food, replay old relationships in our heads, and reflect on our formative years. For me, Scooby-Doo, in all its forms, is one of those preoccupations. I love it.

Make no mistake, this is not a book about my personal love of those meddling kids, or their dog for that matter. This is a serious work of art criticism, and it is going to take as scientific an approach as possible to the questions that will be raised. This preamble is merely to

let you all in on where it is coming from. In a sense, this is yet another repetition. As a child, I wanted to solve the mysteries in each episode and movie. Now, at the advanced age of 22, I want to solve a more fundamental question about the franchise. What *is* 'Scooby-Doo'? That is to say, what is it all about? I have tested my mind against many particular ghouls, but now we must position ourselves towards the essence of the series itself, and, as it were, *unmask those meddling kids*.

However, before we can truly begin, I think there are some questions that are best to deal with here, while we are not yet in the thick of it. I will have to follow in the steps of other daring thinkers (although, I suspect they were "daring" in the sense of being adventurous, and I am more in the sense of "How dare you?") and justify my exploration. The rest of this introduction will be broken up into sections then, the beginning of each signaled by a new question being asked by some hypothetical critic of our project.

. . .

Why should we take a show for children seriously? Why make it the object of criticism and analysis?

Why take any show seriously? Why analyze any art? I don't think that demographics or target audiences should determine what we take seriously. In fact, I find this kind of talk to be inherently chauvinistic. Who exactly determines which audiences are consuming "worthwhile" or "true" art? If left to established opinion, rap music would have never developed into the expansive genre it is. Our would-be critic should remember that probably the most critically successful rap album of all time, *Illmatic*, was written and recorded before its author, Nas, was legally able to drink alcohol. Even if we abstract away the racism faced by rap artists and deal

with another genre, say grunge or punk rock, we find yet again a series of classic projects dismissed at the time as the passing fads of the youth.

The culture at large has a tendency to be dismissive of children, both in life and in art. This is a topic best explored at another time and preferably by people more informed than me, but it remains important to our discussion. If we are going to really dive in and make a real effort to study the Scooby-Doo franchise, we are going to have to shake off these pretensions. We can not imagine that art consumed by children is any less artistic than that consumed by adults.

Aside from the condescension of the question, there is another issue here. If the function of art criticism is in any way to help sway audiences and drive them to the right works, then where is it needed more than content intended for children? Most adults are rather illiterate when it comes to art, but at the very least they are able to articulate and understand their own opinions with some accuracy. Even more importantly, at least they are able to freely choose what they consume. If an adult feels insulted by a particular piece of media, they will simply turn it off. Children, on the other hand, are not so free. It is usually their parent or guardian's responsibility to be informed about the media they consume. It is the job of the grown to look after the young. And with massive ad, toy, and fast food campaigns constantly putting themselves in between children and their art, the role of the guardian as critic is perhaps more important than ever. We should remember Pauline Kael's warning that, "without criticism you're completely at the mercy of advertisers."[1]

Ultimately, whether it is for the sake of consistency or for the sake of the children, we are going to have to avoid treating this project as a joke, even if it will be fun.

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[1] Aufderheide, Pat. "Pauline Kael on the New Hollywood." *Conversations with Pauline Kael*, by Pauline Kael and Will Brantley, Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1996.

. . .

How can you claim a series this massive has one central theme, idea, or essence?

It's true. 'Scooby-Doo' is undoubtedly one of the most prolific media franchises in history. There are currently more than 40 films and over a dozen television series that fly by the sign of 'Scooby.' With the recent release of *Scoob!* and the expected release of *Scooby-Doo! in King Arthur's Court*, it doesn't seem like it will be slowing down any time soon.

That said, all of these different projects are still forced to work within the boundaries of the franchise itself. People working with certain materials will always be drawn towards certain ways of approaching them. If you ask a thousand different engineers to design a car, you will end up with a lot of variety. But, you will also end up with a thousand cars (as long as the engineers are any good!). The point being, the material itself, once set out, plays its own role in determining what forms it will take.

Even ignoring for a moment that people are consciously taking up this activity, we can speak briefly about how material determines its own treatment even against or without the conscious wishes of individuals. Suppose we don't tell our engineers to build a car, and instead we merely hand them all a block of wood and tell them to craft us something with it. They have not been given any instructions as to what to build, but everything they build will be made of wood. Why? Because that is the material they are given. This is just as true of psychological or mental objects as it is of physical ones. An engineer given wood can only make transformed wood, and the mind given an idea can only produce certain forms and variations of that idea. A thousand minds given the same life experience (trauma, love, etc) will all come out of it with different ideas about it, but they will all be merely differing interpretations of the same *thing*.

In our case then, what is a mystery to us is the experience, the event, the material itself. We are not starting with wood and then finding its many forms. We are not starting with the command to design a car and then looking at the ways that command is interpreted by different people. Instead, we are starting with the many forms, the many designs, and working backwards to find the initial impulse or event which spawned them all. This is not much different than the detective who asks every eye-witness to a crime to recount what they think they saw. For the detective, the initial event is unclear. What is clear is what points of view are available for looking back at the crime. We may, upon further investigation, find that there was no crime at all, or that certain retellings were pure fiction conjured by the witnesses themselves, but it is only through investigation that we can figure this out.

The short answer is the following. We can analyze the 'Scooby-Doo' franchise as a whole because it is a whole. It is, in fact, one thing. Despite all the different interpretations, it is still 'Scooby-Doo' at the end of the day, and the various people playing around with it are still forced, no matter what they might desire, to play within that universal sign.[23] If this work is successful, it will join the many particulars in their general character.

I will, however, give up one area for the sake of consistency. I will only be talking about the films and television shows. I will not be talking about comics or video games. This is because I think of them as secondary, and also because I am far less acquainted with them. If this project is successful apart from them, I will interpret that as their fault.

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[2] "we have seen that the many individual wills active in history for the most part produce results quite other than those intended — often quite the opposite; that their motives, therefore, in relation to the total result are likewise of only secondary importance." Engels, Frederick. "Part 4: Marx." Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, Die Neue Zeit, 1886, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch04.htm.

[3] This is also one of the great lessons of psychoanalysis. We do not always do what we want or intend to.

. . .

Is there any reason, aside from nostalgia, that you have chosen this franchise in particular?

Yes! The first and most important reason being how popular the series is. I don't know a person who wouldn't recognize Scooby, or any other member of the gang. The fact that the series has been ongoing for over 50 years at this point is proof in itself of its immense popularity. I think it is important, from time to time, to reevaluate the things we allow to become ubiquitous in our culture.

Second, the fact that most entries in the franchise are mystery-based lends itself to a certain type of philosophical analysis. Mystery fiction is all about finding truth, gaining knowledge of some type. This means they must always portray a method by which this happens, and they must make some comment about the nature of knowledge. For the sake of illustration, let's briefly look at three examples.

First, we can turn to one of the most successful detectives in fiction, Agatha Christie's famous Hercule Poirot. He is great to take as an example because he constantly waxes poetic about his own views and methods for mystery-solving. He makes it easy for us when he says things like, "It is the brain, the little grey cells on which one must rely. The senses mislead. One must seek the truth within—not without."[4] Or he might tell us that, "The true clues are within. . . All that matters is the little grey cells within. Secretly and silently they do their part."[5] From these, it is clear to see that he comes from the philosophical tradition of rationalism, the belief that reason and not experience is what is essential for learning.

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[4] Christie, Agatha. "'The Disappearance of Mr. Davenheim.'" *The Early Cases of Hercule Poirot*, Dreamscape Media, 2019.
[5] Ibid, "The Kidnapped Prime Minister"

Next, and on quite the opposite end of things, we have Shawn Spencer from the wildly popular procedural TV show *Psych*. While reason no doubt plays a part in the solving of his crimes, it is clear that experience is much more important. His ability to solve cases more efficiently than those around him is largely due to being trained to spot even the smallest details. The emphasis on direct experience is perhaps most explicit in the episode "Game, Set... Muuurder?" when Shawn is stumped on a case because he is relying on crime-scene photos taken by someone else instead of actually dealing with the crime-scene directly. This is not just a doubt of thoughtful reason, it is a doubt of other people's experience. We can then see that Shawn, and *Psych* for that matter, is much more in the tradition of the empiricists, believing direct sense-experience is the real key to truth.

Finally, we have Dale Cooper from the cult classic *Twin Peaks*. Here, both reason and experience are rejected. Instead, Cooper is able to come to breakthroughs in the case by relying on his spirituality and the power of dreams. This is a kind of "religious enlightenment" view of knowledge, where truth is bestowed or gifted from beyond rather than really earned.

With all of this in mind, we can see that a clear jumping off point for an analysis of the Scooby-verse is to take it as largely a work of mystery fiction. We can analyze what it has to say about learning, about knowledge. As we will find out in the next part, this isn't even a particularly new way of approaching the series. In fact, there is a long tradition of treating the franchise as a learning tool or a commentary about the nature of truth.

And with that, our investigation begins. From here on out we will be entering into a serious dialogue with the franchise and with different interpretations of it. In the spirit of 'Scooby-Doo,' I will wait until the third (final) part to unmask and reveal my own interpretation.

Part Two: Previous Treatments

Chapter 1: Spooky Skeptics & The Scooby That Never Was!

"If you wanna watch telly, you should watch Scooby Doo

That show was so cool

Because every time there was a church with a ghoul

Or a ghost in a school

They looked beneath the mask and what was inside?

The. . . janitor or the dude who ran the waterslide

Because throughout history

Every mystery

Ever solved has turned out to be

Not magic"

- Tim Minchin, "Storm"[6]

The lyrics above are from a song by singing comedian and self-proclaimed "skeptic" Tim Minchin. The song is from his 2009 album *Ready For This?*, a collection of live recordings from one of his comedy tours. In it, Tim is invited to a dinner party with some friends only to end up locked in a heated argument with the titular Storm, a younger new-age hippy type. While Storm insists that knowledge is all relative and the spiritual is very much valid, Tim attempts to undercut her and protest that science[7] is where real truth comes from. At the climax of the song, Tim gives her some advice, and that advice is what is presented above.

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[6] Lyrics taken from here: https://genius.com/Tim-minchin-storm-lyrics

[7] What he means by "science" is questionable. It seems only the most basic and general definition.

Minchin is just one example of this attitude. Among the "Skeptic Community,"[8] Scooby-Doo has a general place as a common sign of "Skepticism" in the media. The general idea is that the 'Scooby-Doo' franchise is all about showing kids that "supernatural" things are really mundane or commonplace. If you think you are seeing magic, or anything that breaks down your predetermined worldview, don't worry. The truth is boring and will no doubt confirm your previous beliefs. Perhaps the first person to take this position, and probably the most influential person to do so, is Carl Sagan, famed scientist and science communicator.

Way back in 1995, while criticizing *The X Files* for showing too many aliens, Sagan had this to say: "Much closer to reality, as well as a much greater public service, would be an adult series ('Scooby Doo' does it for children) in which paranormal claims are systematically investigated and every case is found to be explicable in prosaic terms."[9] Considering Sagan's central place among the "Skeptics," there is no doubt that his formulation here is the one being parroted in their community, even if it turns out he wasn't the first to put it this way.

The problem, of course, being that there are countless examples of the monsters turning out to be real. In fact, shortly after Sagan wrote his book, there was a barrage of wildly successful direct-to-video films released in which this is the case. The first of these was *Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island*, a film released in 1998 which remains to this day the most critically acclaimed of all the 'Scooby' movies.[10]

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[8] A loose collection of "intellectuals" who are united mostly by their rejection of anything not based in "science." Again, these people have no functioning definition of science, and many of them are stuck in the 1700's as far as philosophy goes.

[9] "Significance Junkies." *The Demon-Haunted World*, by Carl Sagan, Ballantine Books, 1997, p. 351.

[10] Whether or not it deserves its status as "the good one" is up for debate, in my opinion. It is wonderful, but I don't think it is really that far ahead of the pack.

'Zombie Island' came after an unusual lull in 'Scooby' media. There hadn't been a show in about 7 years, and there hadn't been a proper film or TV special in even longer. Its release was a shock to everyone, but it was a particularly brutal shock to our poor "skeptics." In the absence of new 'Scooby' content and the presence of Sagan's "analysis" of the series, many were able to fall head first into interpreting the series as some sort of anti-supernatural parable. 'Zombie Island' was merciless to them.

The backlash was immediate. In the December 1st, 1998 issue of "Skeptical Briefs," a newsletter put out by the "Skeptical Inquirer,"[11] contributor Tim Madigan gave voice to his horror over the film.[12] "I [was] stunned, shocked and appalled to find out that the entire thrust of the show has been changed." Tim cried, "No longer do the intrepid investigators prove that the paranormal is all a ruse. . . It's all such a sad betrayal of the original show's glorious skeptical tradition." Thus, a new narrative was born. In the time of Sagan, before the crimes of 'Zombie Island,' Scooby-Doo was a show for "skeptics" that said every apparently supernatural (new) thing was really natural (old). Then, the forbidden fruit was bitten, and perversion worked its way into Paradise. For the skeptics, this became the dominant view of the 'Scooby-Doo' franchise moving forward.

In 2005, Jeffrey Shallit, who describes himself as a mathematician, computer scientist, and skeptic, wrote an article for his personal blog about "The Subversive Skepticism of Scooby Doo."[13] Throughout, he praises the old run of the show for its anti-magic values but ends off with lamenting about 'Zombie Island.' Shallit explains, "A few years ago, when one of my kids was

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[11] Subtitled: "The Magazine for Science and Reason." How lucky we are to have such a magazine!
[12] Madigan, Tim. "Scooby-Doo, How Could You?" Skeptical Inquirer, 1998, skepticalinquirer.org/newsletter/scooby-doo-how-could-you/
[13] Shallit, Jeffrey. "The Subversive Skepticism of Scooby Doo." Recursivity, 22 Dec. 2005, recursed.blogspot.com/2005/12/subversive-skepticism-of-scooby-doo.html.

sick. . . I rented a Scooby Doo movie to try to keep him entertained: *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island*. I was really horrified to see that the basic premise of Scooby Doo had been violated: this time, the zombies were real. . . I was saddened by the sell-out to the paranormal."

A deeper dive into those who interpret the franchise this way starts to complicate things. While the dominant view may be that Paradise was 'Scooby-Doo' before 'Zombie Island' and that the real zombies and cat people of that film work as some sort of original sin, others simply do not pin Scooby's supposed fall from grace down to this moment. Take the 2007 article "The corruption of Scooby Doo" from ScienceBlogs for example.[14] In this piece, Scooby is simply divided into two camps: what the author saw when they were young and what the author saw more recently. The old is good and skeptical. The new is supposedly mystical and supernatural. The explanation for this change is that the writers of the series became "lazy hacks." You really have to credit our dear critic on his clear and logical approach to things! For the others, 'Zombie Island' is the point of rupture. But for this perceptive author, the 'Scooby' franchise just so happened to betray itself right around his 18th birthday!

Rich Pelley, in his 2017 article for The Guardian, denies that a big change could have happened to 'Scooby-Doo' in the films because they "don't count."[15] Ignoring the fact that apparently over 40 movies are just being taken out of the canon here for seemingly no reason, this is only done so Pelley can hold the 2010-13 series *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* responsible for the emergence of real monsters in the franchise.

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[14] pharyngula. "The Corruption of Scooby Doo." ScienceBlogs, 27 June 2007, scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2007/06/27/the-corruption-of-scooby-doo.
[15] Pelley, Rich. "When Good TV Goes Bad: Why Scooby-Doo Went to the Dogs." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 18 Dec. 2017, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/dec/18/when-good-tv-goes-bad-why-scooby-doo-went-dogs-mystery-incorporated.

In the end, we are left with only a basic structure intact. All of the skeptics so far hold really the same position in essence. 'Scooby-Doo' was originally about proving that there was nothing 'out-of-the-ordinary' in our world. It showed kids that all the mystical things they thought were out there were simply dreamt up, and time and investigation would prove them false. Then, at some point, that changed. Scooby-Doo betrayed itself and its fans and made the monsters real. It was good, but now it is bad.

Two lines of criticism immediately leap out at us. Firstly, these skeptics seem to believe that science is all about proving our preconceived notions right. Is that justifiable? Secondly, these skeptics speak of a Fall without being able to agree on when it happened. So, when was it?

Along the first line, if the skeptics are right then all knowledge is akin to debunking or catching someone in a lie. They conceive of old 'Scooby-Doo' as portraying it this way. At first, the gang is in a normal world. Then, a new and fantastical element is introduced. After investigating (and trapping), it is revealed that the new element was nothing new at all but merely something we already knew about (old men with tax schemes, etc). In this same spirit, we in the real world see a "UFO" and upon finding its crash site discover a weather balloon or a child's remote control plane.

In the skeptic worldview then, there can be nothing new. If you find a new species of fish, it really must be an already documented fish that you have misidentified. If you were to ever actually meet an alien, it wouldn't be real (even if it was). This is an image of science as a closed-system. We already know everything we need to know. Anything we try to learn about will simply reveal itself to be something we already knew about. Progress is impossible. If this really was what 'Scooby-Doo' was all about, what a pathetic and sad series it would be.

Taking the second line of criticism, we are going to have to try to identify the moment when 'supernatural' elements were introduced and the series went back on its word. As far as the films go, the skeptics seem to point to *Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island* as ground zero. And yet, that film came out in 1998, about 10 years after we got 1988's *Scooby-Doo! and the Reluctant Werewolf,* an absolutely wild film in which Shaggy is transformed into a werewolf and forced by Dracula to race a car in the "Monster Road Rally" if he wants to be human again. A few months before that, Shaggy, Scooby, and Scrappy were volunteering as gym teachers at a school for young girl monsters in *Scooby-Doo and the Ghoul School*. Even before that, in 1987, Shaggy and Scooby were teaming up with real ghosts to beat real ghosts in *Scooby-Doo Meets the Boo Brothers*. So 'Zombie Island' was not only not the first film to feature real monsters, it wasn't the second or third either, and it was beaten out by over a decade.

On the TV show side of things, the skeptics seem to wave towards *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated* as the breaking point. That show premiered in 2010. Meanwhile, all the way back in 1985, we had *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo*. The entire premise of that show was that there was a chest containing real demons, and that Scooby was tricked by comedy-relief ghosts into opening it and unleashing them. Every episode is about Scooby and the gang (Velma and Fred absent, sadly) tracking down an actual monster and trapping it back in the chest.

It is clear then that "real monster" iterations of 'Scooby' are a long and storied tradition. They aren't some super recent development and have been around for the majority of the series' history. What our line of questioning has now brought us to is this. The skeptics don't know anything about science, really, and they don't know anything about 'Scooby-Doo' either. We

could brush them off now, but for their benefit we will look at one more proponent of their worldview.

Now, we turn to someone who actually claims to be a real Scooby fan. The others may not have even known about a series like 'The 13 Ghosts,' but this one mentions it outright. As a result, we'll be spending a little bit more time with him, and quoting at length. Back in 2011, the website ComicsAlliance posted the 81st edition of "Ask Chris," a recurring segment on the site where readers could send in questions for then senior writer Chris Sims.[16] This time, the question was simply, "On Scooby-Doo, do you prefer the monsters to be real or people in costumes?" It wasn't too long before Chris was revealing himself as a "die-hard skeptic" (his words).

Chris speaks: "I will fight tooth and nail over the idea that **there should never, ever be even a trace of the supernatural in the world of Scooby-Doo**. (emphasis from the original) And as far as I'm concerned it's not a matter of preference, either -- it's so deeply ingrained into the premise of the show and the way the characters interact that if actual monsters do show up, the whole thing collapses."

Here we have a much more developed skeptic. They have actually committed themself to the task of taking 'Scooby-Doo' up in its entirety and evaluating it. And yet, all this does is further expose just how broken their entire view of things is. Again, they have to force this artificial divide and demand that a huge section of the 'Scooby' canon just isn't "real" Scooby. In fact, this entire article was written partially so Chris could vent about his love for *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, a show that eventually would introduce an entire race of interdimensional beings. By his own logic, the very show he is promoting fails to grasp "the

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[16] Sims, Chris. "Ask Chris #81: Scooby-Doo and Secular Humanism." *ComicsAlliance*, 25 Nov. 2011, comicsalliance.com/ask-chris-81-scooby-doo-and-secular-humanism/.

premise" of "the whole thing." You have to wonder if an interpretation which by its own

admission doesn't apply to a third of the canon is really one worth fighting for. But I digress.

Chris goes on to explain why introducing supernatural elements causes "the whole thing

to collapse." He says it is "Because that's the thing about Scooby-Doo: **The bad guys in every**

episode aren't monsters, they're liars (emphasis his, again). . . The very first rule of

Scooby-Doo, the single premise that sits at the heart of their adventures, is that the world is full

of grown-ups who lie to kids, and that it's up to those kids to figure out what those lies are and

call them on it, even if there are other adults who believe those lies with every fiber of their

being. And the way that you win isn't through supernatural powers, or even through fighting. The

way that you win is by doing the most dangerous thing that any person being lied to by someone

in power can do: You *think*."

For the first part of this paragraph, he is simply emphasizing the previous point again.

However, he adds in a new element, making it more specific. Apparently, the entire premise is

built around the idea that adults lie to children. This is worth questioning right off the bat. It

should be noted that throughout most iterations of 'Scooby-Doo,' the vast majority, the monsters

(fake or real) are not actually out after the Scooby gang. They are not putting up this front for

their benefit. Instead, they are using it for their own gain elsewhere and the Scooby gang happens

to be there. The co-owner of a theme park is trying to scare the other owner into selling their

shares in the park. The miner is trying to scare everyone away so he can get to some hidden oil

reserves. These are the plots being cooked up, and they don't involve lying to children

specifically at any point. Not only that, but in the very first season you have an episode like

"Foul Play in Funland," where the antagonist was actually motivated by a desire to protect children!

In the second half of the paragraph, we have another misstep, this one a failure in the view of science and knowledge held by the "skeptic." Chris says that the way out of these lies and illusions is to "*think.*" He even italicized it, so we know he really meant it! He specifically says that you conquer these plots mentally and not physically (fighting, etc). What an idealist and anti-scientific view of things! Where is the room for experiment? Where is the room for practice? For the "skeptic," it seems that divine Reason will guide you out of everything. There is no need to get up and get active. Luckily, 'Scooby-Doo' does not have so passive a view of knowledge. In most cases, the gang is only able to solve the case after physical confrontation with the monster (chase sequences) and environment (finding clues). And, even in those iterations where the monsters are simply masked men, they are usually not defeated until Fred and friends find a way to trap and unmask them, an act not completed by thought alone.

Finally, we come to the ultimate stumbling block for the skeptic. Just as before, they insist that to be "reasonable" means to explain things in terms you are already familiar with and to never learn about something new. This is really what we must interpret Chris as saying when he proclaims, "There's an underlying logic to the world of Scooby-Doo that just boils down to Reason vs. Superstition, and in that battle, superstition can never win."

The existence of real monsters would mean a win for superstition. That is the skeptic's position. They can not even imagine that proving that monsters exist, if they exist, is an act of reason. "It wouldn't work even if it were done in such a way that they were discovering the truth that real monsters actually existed against a disbelieving public," says our skeptic. We go back to

the point made earlier. The motto these "intellectuals" repeatedly chant is: Aliens aren't real even if they are. Ghosts don't exist even if they do. Monsters aren't under my bed even if the mattress is being held six feet in the air by a mass of hair and growls.

What is so peculiar is that the champions of "Reason" stop at nothing to make science the most impotent of exercises imaginable. "[If] the supernatural does exist, then suddenly [Shaggy and Scooby are] not cowards anymore. They're perfectly reasonable people (well, person and dog, but you know what I mean) who have come to a rational, logical conclusion that there are things out there beyond their mortal understanding." But this is precisely **not** the point that is made by the gang discovering the existence of real monsters! In fact, it is the opposite!

If Velma goes on to explain the case and the solution is that the villain happened to be an actual werewolf, then we *have* come to an understanding. We know that there are werewolves. We have confirmed that. We know, at least to some degree, how they work. We know what motivates this werewolf in particular. The gang still solves the case. The solution just happens to be one that expands their views of what is possible and existing in the world. 'Scooby-Doo' shows itself here to be a much more adamant defender of rationality than the skeptics. They say that the supernatural represents some sort of limit to our understanding. 'Scooby' says that the "supernatural," if it exists, is simply part of the natural and can be understood just as well.

Truth be told, this entire exhaustive analysis of the skeptic position was not actually necessary. It leads us in the right direction for the rest of this work, so it was worth doing, but a much shorter response could have been cooked up. We might simply remind our skeptics when they say "there should never, ever be even a trace of the supernatural in the world of

Scooby-Doo," or "the existence of the supernatural just doesn't work within the framework of Scooby-Doo," that both of these sentences end with the name of a *talking dog*.

To summarize all of this, the essence of the skeptic view can be boiled down to a few basic aspects. Firstly, 'Scooby-Doo' is apparently about showing that the "supernatural" (which they define as monsters, spirits, aliens, etc.) does not exist. Secondly, all learning is a return to some state of previous normalcy, everything bizarre is dispelled and nothing new is gained. Thirdly, due to these previous premises, a large section of the 'Scooby-Doo' franchise is simply not "real" 'Scooby' (We could debate how much. If it's just the versions that have real monsters, it's still a huge amount, maybe a third. But if it is any that contain even a trace of the "supernatural," then it turns out that no 'Scooby-Doo' series is a "real" 'Scooby-Doo' series because of Scooby himself!).

The other thing sitting at the core of this view is a profound ignorance of the franchise itself.[17] We are talking about multiple decade large gaps in knowledge. It isn't hard to come to the conclusion that the ultimate cure for the skeptic interpretation is simply to watch the series. Unfortunately, as Chris Sims has just shown us, even that won't save you so long as you remain committed to making 'Scooby' something instead of taking it for what it is. Luckily, the interpretation we will be dealing with in the next chapter does just that. It takes 'Scooby' on its own terms and does so with a profound love of the series. If it fails, it is only because of a lack of philosophical tact. But its honesty, affection, and effort must be commended.

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[17] And, as I hope I have shown, a profound ignorance about science, knowledge, and philosophy. It isn't enough for them to be ignorant about Scooby. They must be ignorant about the world enough to think that their brutalized and mangled concept of the franchise is even a positive. They make the franchise impotent and then celebrate it in that form. It's a sort of sick ritual sacrifice before the altar of ignorance. My advice to anyone who thinks in such undeveloped terms is this: Leave Scooby out of it!

Chapter 2: Ta-dah! Two Doos!

"Two souls alas! are dwelling in my breast;

And each is fain to leave its brother"

- Faust[18]

On May 16th, 2020, the youtube channel "NerdSync" uploaded a nearly 50 minute video essay analyzing the entire Scooby canon.[19] Throughout the video, the host, Scott, paints a picture of the franchise as being essentially about the tension between what is "magical" and what is "rational." He uses some literary theories[20] and a far-reaching knowledge of 'Scooby' to bring out and highlight this internal struggle in an attempt to prove that it is, at heart, "a franchise at war with itself." Or, as he himself described the concept for the video weeks later[21]:

"The video is about this kind of disparity, or not really a disparity, a duality I called it, a doo-ality. . . between these Scooby stories that take place in a genre that are incredibly supernatural, ghosts and monsters do exist, versus Scooby stories where ghosts and monsters aren't real. They are people in costumes. Everything can be explained away with ration and reason, scientific stuff."

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[18] Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, et al. "Outside the Gate of the Town." *Great Books of the Western World: Faust*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1952, pp. 27

[19] Niswander, Scott. "A Critical Analysis of Scooby-Doo: A Franchise at War with Itself || NerdSync." YouTube, 16 May 2020, youtu.be/cA7b9LKvP9U.

[20] Primarily, he leans on Tzvetan Todorov's 1975 book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. In this theory, as presented, there are stories which are "uncanny," containing bizarre but perfectly explainable events, "marvelous," containing irrational and supernatural events, and "fantastic," floating in the in-between and not committing to either side. While I think a critique of Todorov is probably possible, I don't think I am the one to make it. Interestingly, I believe that many of the problems we will encounter later probably stem from Scott's devotion to Todorov's categories. He wields them far too uncritically.

[21] Niswander, Scott. "Scooby-Doo HOT TAKES for Charity 🔥." YouTube, 3 June 2020, youtu.be/5uMuIDIOU6g. (About the 34 minute mark.)

Immediately, we can see the advantages this position has over that of the "skeptics." Whereas they split the series into two camps and declared one the "true" and one the "imposter," those of the "Doo-alist" school, as we might call them, split the series in two and declare the "truth" to lie in the split itself. It isn't that only those mysteries that end with a literal unmasking are "real" 'Scooby,' nor is it the equally undeveloped opposite position (that only the "real monster" mysteries are true 'Scooby'). Instead, it introduces nuance. The essence of 'Scooby-Doo' is precisely the fact that the monsters are sometimes real and sometimes not.

Throughout the entirety of the 1985 series *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo*, the monsters are explicitly real. They are actual demons who really must be sent back to their mystical prison to save the world. However, in the 2019 sequel film, *Scooby-Doo! and the Curse of the 13th Ghost*, Velma constantly throws doubt on the idea of "real monsters" from the original, and certain circumstances lead the audience to believe it wasn't as clear cut as we previously assumed. At the end, Velma is given the chance to test whether the demons were real or not, at the risk of releasing all of them again, but chooses not to. Scott celebrates this: "This is what the franchise is about! While particular Scooby shows seem to exist on one end or the other, the franchise as a whole lives and thrives in the 'fantastic.'"[22]

This approach not only allows for a bit more nuance and range with the criteria, but it also means that we can look at the franchise in something much closer to its totality. Before, half of the series had to be thrown out so the skeptics could hold onto their ill-founded position. Now, those of us who are actually interested in analyzing Scooby proper can work with all the material

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[22] Todorov's "fantastic," as talked about in footnote 20

available. There is no need to ignore certain film or show incarnations because the Doo-alists are concerned with "the franchise as a whole."

But, for its strengths, a closer examination reveals this too to be a very limited window through which to view 'Scooby.' Through examining these limits, we will hopefully be able to lay the major groundwork for our new, accurate, reading. For that purpose, let's be a bit ruthless.

To start with perhaps the most philosophically dense point, and I promise it will get easier after this, there is a question of essence here. The problem is this: If the essence of 'Scooby' is simply the ambiguity or difference between "magic" and "science," then "Scooby" is empty in-itself. It has no internal meaning or content. It is only a fluctuating gap between two points. The fact that "Scooby-Doo" is made up of both "magical" and "scientific" elements does not mean that it is reducible to them. It must constitute a third term which mediates the two and is mediated by them. Here, we should remember Hegel's warning that if two elements can not find "a middle term which would link them together" then their relation "is one of wholly unmediated pure negation" or pure difference without identity.[23][24]

Some examples will help here. If I were to ask you to define "water," it would not be enough for you to explain to me what "hydrogen" is, then what "oxygen" is, and then say "now mix the two." "Water" is something more than either of the elements which constitute it. If you simply looked at hydrogen and oxygen at room temperature, you would probably assume that water was a gas at that same temperature. After all, both of the elements which constitute it are.

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[23] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, et al. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford University Press, 1994. §590

[24] Equally, we might take Marx's comparable warning that, "If two forces act in opposing directions and cancel one another out, they have no external impact whatsoever, and phenomena that appear under these conditions must be explained otherwise than by the operation of these two forces."
Marx, Karl, and Ernest Mandel. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 3*. Translated by David Fernbach, Penguin, 1993. pp. 290

Yet, when these elements come together, they produce new qualities. You would get no closer to defining water if you started talking about how it is "the disparity" or "duality" of hydrogen and oxygen. Water needs to be defined on its own terms. That will, of course, involve sorting out its component parts, but it will first and foremost consist of figuring out what unique quality it has to itself.

Similarly, electricity has both a positive and a negative form, but it is also something more essential than either of these forms. Electricity is not the ambiguity between positive and negative charges, but is instead the universal, middle term, from which the forms of positive and negative emerge. What the Doo-alist view does is establish the two poles which swing around the core of 'Scooby-Doo,' but it stops short of defining that core itself.[25] As a result, the essence is just said to be the struggle of the poles, a mix of hydrogen and oxygen, a bit of positive and a bit of negative, and nothing in itself.

Our first task then, when it comes to formulating our own view of things, is pointed out for us. We need to find that unifying middle term which both produces and is reproduced by these opposing concepts.[26] The Doo-alists have discovered two of the key forms or elements with which Scooby works, but they have not discovered the central and driving force behind them.[27]

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[25] I know that Scott in his video mentions the "core" of the series as being about teenagers looking for the truth, but this point is basically disconnected from the main system built out in the video, as well as relatively vague and empty. It certainly isn't fleshed out enough to be satisfying.

[26] "[I]nsofar as the two extremes are opposed they are one in some third element. . . This third element, however, is such that it is everything the other two are"
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of Spirit (Jena Lectures 1805-6)*. Wayne State University Press, 1983, Marxists Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/jlindex.htm.

[27] In our role as detectives of fiction, we find ourselves in similar positions to fictional detectives, such as Hercule Poirot. "Do you not see, Hastings, that the man is a mass of contradictions? Stupid and cunning, ruthless and magnanimous – and that there must be some dominating factor that reconciles his two natures."
Christie, Agatha. *The A.B.C. Murders*. HarperCollins, 2018. Chapter 31, pp. 279

A second philosophical weakness emerges when we start to talk about the relationship between these two extremes, the super-magical and the rational-scientific. This is the inability for the strict boundaries to account for movement between the two. We have the unexplainable on one hand and the reasonable on the other, and when they come into contact it is only as a mixture or ambiguity of each part. And yet, the formula of nearly every incarnation of 'Scooby-Doo' is built around the idea of something being at first unexplainable, seemingly supernatural, and then being made to make sense. Even when the monsters turn out to be people in masks, there are still a series of initial encounters in which they appear as ghouls, vampires, and all other sorts of creep. If you only treat the series as being about a "disparity," then you lose out on these complexities. The structure of the traditional 'Scooby' mystery is not about how different the supernatural is from the natural but about how each may happen to appear as the other and transform into its opposite under the right circumstances. The mystical is demystified, not simply separated from the realm of understanding. This point, once grasped, becomes the key clue to solving our mystery as a whole. But we'll hold off expanding on it until the next part.

The third major weakness is less a philosophical point and more one of fact. Just as the skeptics before them, the Doo-alists still support the idea that the 'Scooby' franchise was somehow purely rational in its earliest versions. They still believe that there was a point where the "supernatural" was introduced to the previously mundane world of Mystery Inc. Here, I must confess to holding out in the criticism of the skeptics for the sake of drama. Because, as I hope to now convincingly show you, there was always an element of what others may call "the marvelous" in the Scooby-verse.

13 minutes and 40 seconds into his video essay, after talking about the 'Scooby-Doo' series' which fall along the "rational" side of things, Scott says that "we could talk about classic *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* as a shining example of this formula," and just past the 39 minute mark, he talks about the original series being a standard detective show with "the inclusion of superstition and fantasy later on." This claim is foundational to all of the interpretations talked about up to this point. If there is to be a split, a break, between scientific and mystical 'Scooby,' the introduction of the supernatural must have happened at a separate time from the introduction of the men-in-masks. Since we have all collectively decided the costumed criminals came first, then the introduction of the "real monsters" must have happened after that initial series.

Unfortunately for the skeptics and the Doo-alists, this is simply not the case. In the very first season of the very first series, the franchise had already established that ghosts and ghouls were, in fact, real. Allow me to explain by way of examples.

In 'Where Are You' season one, episode two,[28] "A Clue for Scooby-Doo," the gang investigates a creepy cabin only to find materials that are seemingly used in witchcraft. Among these artifacts is a can which, when opened, releases the sounds of hyenas laughing. This is unrelated to the mystery of the episode and never explained. Also, the episode ends with Scooby being able to inexplicably drink every beverage at the table simply by sucking his own straw in his own drink. The gang asks how it could be possible, say it's a mystery for another time, and then Scooby laughs while the credits roll. Two episodes in, and we already have two different seemingly magical events.

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[28] There seems to be some difference in the numbering of episodes on wikipedia versus Amazon and the 2019 blu-ray box set. I will be using the numbers from Amazon and the box set, ignoring wikipedia.

In episode three, "Hassle in the Castle," a talking skull gives Shaggy directions when he gets lost. This is never explained, and the skull does not even sound like the villain of the episode. Just after this, Shaggy wishes for a sandwich, and one floats down to him. Then he asks for mustard, and that also floats down. He wonders if he could cut the sandwich with a thought too, and then an axe falls suddenly down and carves it right in half. This is clearly supernatural for multiple reasons. Firstly, there is no way the villain could have made the sandwich and mustard and rigged them up to fall to Shaggy at just the right time. Even if there was a way, there would be no motive for doing so. Not only that, but while other floating things in the episode are explained by the existence of wires puppeted by the bad guy, Shaggy grabs the sandwich right out of the air and at one point runs away with it. It clearly isn't on wires then.

In "Mine Your Own Business," episode four, Scooby sees a creepy monster through a key-hole and then it disappears when the door is opened. While this happens, the man who will eventually be unmasked as the 'Miner 49er' is standing behind Scooby and couldn't possibly be the one beyond the key-hole. That monster is completely unaccounted for. Episode 12, "Scooby-Doo and a Mummy Too," features a sequence in which a mysterious drink, or potion, transforms Scooby into a frog temporarily. In the final episode of the season, "That's Snow Ghost," the character Fu Lan Chi tells the story of how he was chased out of Tibet by the ghost of a real yeti. Chi is not the villain and has no reason to lie. Also, it is explicitly stated that the ghost yeti of this episode is not the same one from Chi's story, and that instead it was the Tibetan tale that inspired the thieves in our modern mystery. Further, Daphne asks Fred at one point if he believes Chi's story, and Fred basically says he has no reason not to. This seems far from the apparently hyper-realistic and scientific version of the show people choose to remember!

There are other examples in the first season, many of them vague, such as the maybe-voodoo-maybe-coincidence scene in "Which Witch is Which?" where Shaggy happens to lean back into a fork just as Scooby stabs a doll of him in the same spot. The most explicit example, though, comes from the penultimate episode, "A Night of Fright is No Delight." At the end of this classic episode, the gang has just unmasked a couple of green ghosts and closed the case. Then, something extraordinary happens. Velma says that they went through a lot of trouble for a house that wasn't even haunted. Daphne replies, "Oh no? Then what's that?!" A bone materializes out of thin air and hovers above the gang. Shaggy screams, "A floating, haunted bone!" It drifts down, and Scooby, excited, simply says "Bone?" and begins to chew on it. Velma remarks, "I guess haunted bones are one thing Scooby's not scared of." The gang starts to laugh as they cheer him on.

This scene says it all. Not only did something seemingly "supernatural" appear, but the gang, both at face value and after interacting with it, accept it for what it is, haunted. The other examples were all clearly "magical" by our standards, but this one holds the distinction of being explicitly called out as such by the gang themselves. Velma, the one everyone praises for her staunch anti-mystic views, is the one to give the final line of acceptance. This leads us to a serious question that the skeptics and Doo-alists need to ask themselves. If what they would call "the supernatural" has existed in the franchise since the first season of the first show, exactly when was this time of "reason"?[29]

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[29] Keep in mind, this is "reason" as they use the term. I frequently put things like "supernatural" and "reason" in quotes because I believe that both camps so far use these terms in extremely basic ways. One of my largest points in the next section will be that neither I nor Scooby conceive of the world in these terms.

There is also the problem, brought up towards the end of the section on the skeptics, of Scooby's own status as a fantastic being. After all, talking dogs aren't exactly "normal" by our standards. While this point goes untouched in the original video essay, Scott does give a rebuttal to it in the comments of the video as well as in the separate 'Hot Takes' video mentioned and linked above.[30] For the most part, he simply reads his comment (which was a scrapped portion of the script) in the video response, so we'll treat them as one and the same. His point, ultimately, boils down to this: "Even if we don't have talking dogs in our world, it still seems normal for Scooby to talk in the fiction, so it doesn't count as supernatural."

To begin with, the fact that something is treated as natural in the world of fiction does not necessarily mean that what is being portrayed is not "supernatural" to us. We would not even have the genre of "fantasy" if that was the case. If you can simply claim that orcs, elves, and dragons are part of the ecosystem, you can hand-wave your way into saying that 'Lord of the Rings' is a strictly scientific work. It simply does not work that way. As much as we should seek to analyze art firstly in-itself, we have to admit that it is being made by people and for an audience which consists of people. How we perceive our world is going to determine how we perceive the art we encounter.

The creators of Scooby-Doo seem to have definitely considered him a magical element. After all, when trying to rip-off the Scooby formula, they consistently substituted something clearly supernatural in place of Scoob himself. His stand-ins include everything from talking cars (*Speed Buggy*), ghosts (*The Funky Phantom*), and dogs with super powers (*Goober and the Ghost Chasers*). To bolster our previous point, the fact these shows also included supernatural

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[30] See footnote 21.

elements seems to imply more strongly that the 'Scooby' series did not originate as an anti-magic parable or anything of the like.

Scooby's ability to speak has been called out several times in later iterations of the franchise as well. The trailer for 'Witch's Ghost' lists "talking dogs" alongside "witchcraft" and "ghosts" as mysterious.[31] There is a throwaway joke about it in the 'Be Cool' episode "Worst in Show." 'Mystery Inc.' gives an entire backstory to why he can talk, one which includes aliens from another dimension and the approaching doomsday. These are just the few examples I can remember off hand. For us in the audience, as well as within the franchise itself, the fact that Scooby is a talking dog is decidedly a bit weird.

This line of thinking also forces us to ask ourselves a more important question. If Scooby is seen as "normal" once we accept that talking dogs exist in that world, then why are the zombies and cat-people still treated like some sort of unexplainable and mystical phenomena even after we have confirmation that they both exist and follow certain natural laws? We made this criticism of the skeptics before, and we have to make it again. If "supernatural" things are shown to exist in the world, then they stop being "supernatural." They just become natural. They are very literally a part of nature. Fred attempting to pull off a monster's mask and realizing it isn't a mask at all does not cement the creature as magical. It does just the opposite. It places it in the realm of the world where experiment and knowledge can be attained. As Arthur C. Clarke is often quoted as saying, though he probably never said it, "Magic is just science that we don't understand yet."

And with that, we have gathered all the essential clues.

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[31] You can watch the trailer on youtube: https://youtu.be/E1MLVuEu2EY

Part Three: Solving the Case

Chapter 3: The Key

In the last chapter, we mentioned finding a "key clue" in the structure of the average 'Scooby' episode. While the skeptics and Doo-alists hold the magical to be completely separate from the rational, we find that most iterations of the franchise posit something quite different. At first, what the gang encounters appears to them as an unknown or perhaps even seemingly unknowable element. However, by the end of the episode, this new entity is incorporated into the realm of reality. Generally, this happens either by the villain being unmasked or by the gang accepting that the creatures really exist and using their newly gained knowledge to defeat them. In both of these cases, what was once fantastical is robbed of its ability to stun or frighten. The abnormal is made normal. The unacceptable is accepted. This movement is the *real essence* of the 'Scooby-Doo' franchise. The familiar is juxtaposed with the unfamiliar, and in the end, familiarity wins out.

This basic structure can easily be mapped elsewhere in the series as well. It isn't just with the villains that we find this antagonism of the strange settled within the familiar. Scooby-Doo is a talking, non-human animal. That's certainly odd, freaky even. Yet, the animal is a dog, man's best friend, a symbol of domestic loyalty. Dogs themselves are often symbols of the mixture of the wild and the comforting. Wolves, once dangerous predators, turned into loving companions.

The "Mystery Machine," a bizarre and almost frightening name for a piece of technology, is a family van that you and your friends can cruise around with. And where are you going to drive to? How about a town where nobody knows you, and yet one where you'll eventually be accepted as a hero? The gang itself is made up of colorful, brightly dressed, funny characters,

and yet they inhabit a world that seems to be almost entirely haunted. The dark, eerie backgrounds of the early seasons especially highlight just how comforting it is to see a couple bright young faces among the skulls and bats.

The first series even has an interesting element of meta to it, where the theme seems to be pointed directly to the audience. The show, a cartoon, originally aired with a laugh track. A cartoon world treated as if it were taking place in front of a live audience. The strangeness of animation and the familiarity of sitcoms placed side by side.

Those familiar with Hanna-Barbera may begin to object a bit here. They might say, "But isn't this the case with a lot of the cartoons of this era? *The Flintstones* was basically just the sitcom *The Honeymooners* set in a fictional caveman past. The *Jetsons* was basically just *The Flintstones* in space." While it is true that Hanna-Barbera used the contrast of the bizarre and average quite a bit in the era leading up to 'Scooby,' those shows lived by preserving that tension for comedic effect. At the end of every episode of *The Flintstones*, they're still in the stone age. At the end of every episode of *The Jetsons*, they're still in the future. The point of those shows was to get a laugh out of the contradiction. In the Scooby-verse, the point was always to resolve that struggle. There is an element of movement, of overcoming, which is uniquely explored by the mystery gang.[32]

Another group, the mystery fiction lovers, may also be jumping out right now. They might shout, "Isn't it true that all mystery fiction discusses this theme? At first, something is unexplainable. Then, it is made orderly and logical by the end of the story. Is your whole point

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[32] This is what I believe separated 'Scooby' from the pack early on. While those other shows were successful, none of them have had nearly the run 'Scooby' has. There is a movement within the franchise that feels like it could go in just about any direction. While 'Flintstones' and others work within one specific setting, you can keep Mystery Inc. changing locations, timelines, universes, you name it. The contradiction in the Scooby-verse isn't a gimmick. It's a theme.

that 'Scooby-Doo' is a mystery series?!" This is true, but there are a number of ways to push back on this as a criticism of our conclusions so far. Firstly, just because a theme or idea is present in those stories doesn't mean it is the point of them. Many, perhaps most, works of fiction feature a couple in love, married, or dating, at some point. But not every one of those works would be considered a work of "Romance." Similarly, many works feature jokes but are not considered "Comedies." The difference here would be that many pieces of mystery fiction feature, on some level, the idea that the strange can be made familiar. 'Scooby-Doo,' however, does not simply feature that idea. It *is* about that idea.

Second, we should remember the examples listed before of how this theme manifests in the series, and we should pay attention to the examples that will be listed later. The peculiar thing here is how the idea is not simply implied but explicit. It takes place at the level of form. You don't just experience the movement from discomfort to comfort, you *see* it. In the contrast between the characters and the setting, the nature of the titular character, it is there.

That being said, it is certainly true that this idea exists in an infantile form in most mystery stories. The best example I can think of, and one of the most explicit, can be found in Agatha Christie's 1936 novel *Murder in Mesopotamia*.[33] The narrator of the book, Amy Leatheran, travels from Europe to Iraq at the beginning of the book and returns at the end. In chapter four, on her first voyage, she says, "When I thought of our splendid arterial roads in England it made me quite homesick." Yet, in chapter 29, after returning to England, she says, "I think of the noise the water-wheel made and the women washing, and that queer haughty look that camels give you – and I get quite a homesick feeling." Is this not just what we have been

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[33] Christie, Agatha. *Murder in Mesopotamia*. HarperCollins, 2001.

talking about? The new element in her life, Iraq, is at first unwelcome but eventually the fondest of memories. This even mirrors what we said earlier about Mystery Inc. traveling to strange places but finding a place in them. And yet, this is a side remark in a novel otherwise not about the topic. It is certainly the theme that 'Scooby' will later develop but only so far in a clearly embryonic state.

Two attacks which would have reduced 'Scooby' to "just another" of some category have actually brought us to realizing how special and significant it really is. In the Hanna-Barbera cartoons of the era, we have explicitly the strange and normal side-by-side. But the conflict between them is buried. In mystery fiction, we have explicitly the movement of problem solving, but only in an underdeveloped form do we find the juxtaposition of the truly "other" with the "same." What the 'Scooby' franchise manages to accomplish is to bring the implications of both of these genres to a fever pitch and to then bring them together in a fiery explosion. 'Scooby-Doo' is not just another Hanna-Barbera cartoon, and it is not just another mystery story. It is a secret which lurks within each and only comes out once the two are forced together.

We will talk a lot more about how this idea is explored and manifested within the series in the next few chapters, but for now I think it is worthwhile to point out that there are actually examples within the series itself of this theme being explicitly stated. As early as "Hassle In The Castle," Velma says, admittedly in a way that is played for laughs, "There's a very logical explanation for all this. . . The place is haunted." Ghosts are brought into the fold of reason.

One of the final arcs for Velma in 'Mystery Incorporated' is based around learning this very lesson. After an earlier breakdown about the existence of dream-worlds and monsters,

Velma is left doubting the power of her own mind to comprehend the world around her. In the episode "Dark Night of the Hunters," she has a conversation with her mom about it.

Mrs. Dinkley: "Dear, is something wrong?"

Velma: "Well, it's just that, everything that's been happening lately, I've always thought I could count on logic, deductive reasoning, facts. But all that's gone! I never believed in the supernatural like you did and…"

Mrs. Dinkley: "Oh, sweetie, you were never wrong."

And by the next episode, "Gates of Gloom," she has learned her lesson. Now, she confidently declares, "My mom helped me see the light and be more open. Maybe this is all science fiction, but a lot of science fiction turns out to be science fact."

In the more recent rival movies, 'Return to Zombie Island' and 'Curse of the 13th Ghost,' Velma has reverted back to her naive skepticism from earlier in 'Mystery Incorporated.' However, she is consistently called out on it. 'Return to Zombie Island' portrays her rabid denial of "the supernatural" as a comedy routine. It's silly that she wouldn't accept it, given all the evidence piled up in front of her.[34] In 'Curse of the 13th Ghost,' she has a very revealing conversation with Flim Flam.

Flim Flam, trying to sell ghost-hunting gear: "Now, what can I interest you in?"

Velma: "Nothing, I don't believe in ghosts."

Flim Flam: "What do you believe in?"

Velma: "Science."

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[34] I actually think they go too far with this joke. Personally, I like my Velmas to be the intelligent core of the group, not played for laughs because of their ignorance and refusal to engage with reality. However, I'll accept it because it helps to prove my point!

Flim Flam: "Just because science can't explain ghosts yet, doesn't make them any less real."

There we have it. Previously, the Scooby franchise was treated as consisting of two halves, the supernatural and the rational. Now, we have seen that the true cornerstone and beating heart of the series is the movement from the former to the latter. The entire Scooby-verse screams out and says "All that is bizarre, frightening, unnatural, shall be explained in time." It says this to the audience on every level, from the implicit structures of the average episode to open and clear lines of dialogue in the occasional iteration. The intricacies still need to be fleshed out, and there are many different examples of how this idea impresses itself upon the many incarnations of the old dog, but that much is undeniable.

Now, we might fire a remark back at that arch-skeptic Carl Sagan. While he cried out for a program which would teach adults the same lessons that 'Scooby' teaches to kids, we will instead celebrate 'Scooby' for trying to tell children the same thing Hegel told adults over 100 years before. Namely, that "The aim of knowledge is to divest the objective world that stands opposed to us of its strangeness, and, as the phrase is, to find ourselves at home in it."[35]

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[35] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Third Subdivision: The Notion B. The Object." Hegel, *The Shorter Logic*, 1997, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/slobject.htm.

Chapter 4: Aliens and Others

"Guys in masks, real monsters, doesn't matter to me. They're all going down."

- Fred Jones, "Nightmare in Red"

We have acquired the key to the franchise. Having a key, however, is not enough. The point of a key is to open something, to grant us access to things we previously had no way of getting to. Now that we have our key, it's time to see where it leads us.

The journey we take from the alien to the earthly is one which involves both the world around us and ourselves. If we are to "find ourselves at home" in our surroundings, we will do it by affecting a change at both of these levels. The external environment will be made to fit into our grasp, and our mind and body will be made to accommodate the vastness of what we have encountered. The implications of the 'Scooby rule' we have discovered are that the otherworldly will become a part of our world through a mutual alteration of both. To start our investigation then, let us look for examples within the series of that first movement, where the 'other' is made palatable.

We have already spoken about how this happens with the average 'Scooby' mystery. The bad guy is either defeated by being unmasked and thus made human (familiar)[36] or by being understood and defeated (made non-threatening, familiar). In both of these cases, which encompass the majority of the canon, the transformation that takes place in the external world is obvious. In fact, a literal transformation takes place in most of these: unmasking, sealing away, or killing.

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[36] "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto." (I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me.) - Publius Terentius Afer

Instead of simply restating all that has been said about that before, let's instead look at some specific examples where this is pushed in particular directions. As early as 'Where Are You?' we can see this theme being played with. In "Foul Play in Funland," the evil robot Charlie is explicitly a metaphor about the fear of automation and technology. In the final act, Charlie is defeated not by unmasking or by destruction but by reprogramming. Instead of causing chaos around Funland, he peacefully pets Scooby. The fear that automation will annihilate the human element in social interaction is replaced by the idea that, properly managed, it could actually serve to improve our social life. This is a little different from the average mystery because the solution is not simply to rob the 'other' of their ability to do harm but actively to make the 'other' into a beneficial party.

More playing with the 'other' follows in "Never Ape an Ape Man." In what is actually a sort of recurring bit in the original season, after unmasking the villain, Scooby puts back on the mask of the ape man as part of a practical joke or game. After being terrified by the mask of the creature for an entire episode, it becomes so nonthreatening that Scooby is able to take hold of it and have some lighthearted fun with it. Shaggy is with him in this game, and he wears a Scooby mask (The show has its truly brilliant moments!). In the same way that Shaggy will impersonate Scooby, Scooby will impersonate the ape man. That is how little power that beast has over them. Once defeated, the monster is made an aspect of the self.

There is also, of course, the floating bone from "A Night of Fright is No Delight." It is an actual ghostly being, but Scooby immediately accepts it and eats it because it is a bone, a favorite treat for a big dog like him. This is another very explicit moment for our theme. Even this thing

that should be scary is not because it is familiar. Scooby knows what it is, knows how to deal with it, and so, as Velma says, "a haunted bone is one thing Scooby's not scared of."

'Mystery Incorporated' also has many examples of this theme being played with. In fact, probably more than any other incarnation, they run it into the ground in the best way possible. In episodes like "The Song of Mystery" and "Where Walks Aphrodite," the monster hoards are also victims of some greater monster. They may appear evil, but it is not their fault. In "The Wild Brood," we get a group of orcs who turn out to be good people using the costumes for completely non-villainous reasons. Not only that, but the gang befriends them. In a truly wonderful twist, the orc group puts their masks *back on* after they are removed and continue to go about life as the orcs. Here, the orc costume itself has been so stripped of its alienating power that it doesn't matter to us if it remains intact. We know what's going on inside, and so we're completely comfortable with what at first sight might have been startling. The titular monster of the "Scarebear" episode actually fills several of the roles just talked about. He is the victim of his story, talks with his mask on, and remains distinct in the form of the 'other' while still becoming a likable character.

There are also cases of monsters who are pushed into monsterhood by what seem to be good motives and who are forgiven at the end of the episode. In both "Attack of the Headless Horror" and "The Siren's Song," the motivation for everything is love and the unmasked antagonists enjoy a happy ending.[37] In the most extreme example of the creepy cover hiding a favorite book, Velma even takes up a disguise of her own in the beginning of season two so she can pull strings behind the scenes.

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[37] The 'Be Cool' episode "Night of the Upsetting Shorts" would also fit here.

That isn't the first time a member of the mystery gang has turned up as a monster, either. [38] One of my earliest 'Scooby' memories was when it was revealed in 2005's *Scooby-Doo! in Where's My Mummy?* that the creepy mummy was actually a member of the mystery gang trying to protect some ancient artifacts. What we see is not something entirely strange but merely the strange side of something commonplace. Upon unmasking, we re-establish that lost balance.

There is also a recurring gag, present in probably the majority of the franchise's many outings, where Shaggy and Scooby put on costumes as a way to confuse the creature of the week. The joke here derives precisely from the tension of the familiar and the unfamiliar. We, the audience, know exactly what the two are up to, and there is no way we aren't going to recognize the best buds in their make up and dress. However, the monster is not in the know and is left baffled and misled as a result. Comfortable in our familiarity, we laugh at the idea that such a thing could possibly be so disruptive.

All this being said, it isn't just in the form of monsters that we see the world change before us and fall into our understanding. Monsters are merely the most obvious case. Why wouldn't they be? After all, the word "monster" not only has roots in the Latin "monstrum," a bad omen and an object of dread, but also in "monere," to instruct, tell, or teach.[39] But even in other elements, we see this same theme poking out its head.

We talked before about the contrast between the characters and their settings visually, but we should put emphasis on the setting a bit more. In most incarnations of the show, the gang is traveling from location to location. They are on tour. This is significant because the places they are appearing in are often haunted, terrorized, and odd. However, by the end of the trip, the

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[38] It isn't even the only time this happens in 'Mystery Incorporated,' but I don't want to make this chapter too focused on a single season or series.

[39] "Monster (n.)." Index, www.etymonline.com/word/monster.

ghosts are gone, the sun is out, and a few friends and fans were made along the way. By solving whatever crime was taking place, the crew have effectively established themselves in these new frontiers.

The same basic thing is true even in the seasons which are not set on the road. *A Pup Named Scooby-Doo* and 'Mystery Incorporated' both take place in central, hometown locations. But even here, solving mysteries has the same effect. The identities of the gang are crafted and the seemingly overwhelming adult world is made to conform a bit to the needs of the developing youth. The setting, both physical and social, is changed so as to become less threatening.

There are also many instances of other basic life-processes being treated as threatening or bizarre and then unwinding to the pleasant and everyday. Marcie Fleach in 'Mystery Incorporated' starts off as a villain but is eventually Velma's lover. Shag and Scoob fall in love with aliens in 'Alien Invaders.' In the 'Be Cool' episode "American Goth," the story kicks off with a declaration that having a crush is like having a mystery to solve. The list goes on and on. For the sake of time, though, I think we can call off the search here.

One last topic should be touched on before continuing. That is the importance of practical action in the 'Scooby' system. The world doesn't just become palatable. Instead, it does so through the actual activities that the gang embark on. Monsters aren't defeated by wishing. They are unmasked, locked up, vanquished, reprogrammed, befriended, chased down, and, usually, trapped. 'Scooby' doesn't just call for a reevaluation of the alien world but for an active engagement with it. Often, Velma will have already worked out all of the clues present, and yet the job isn't done. The final step is always to act.[40]

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[40] The end of the NerdSync video has a wonderful bit where Scott explains the call to action that takes place in many 'Scooby' theme songs. It is very much worth checking out if you haven't by this point in the book.

Chapter 5: Reluctant Werewolves, Scooby Finds Himself

Robert Robinson: "Mr. Hitchcock, why do you always make mystery films?"

Alfred Hitchcock: "Life is a big mystery, isn't it? It always has been. I think people are intrigued by mystery. To find out about things they don't know anything about, that's a mystery."

Robert Robinson: "But surely not as sensational as you make it seem?"

Alfred Hitchcock: "Life is *more* sensational!"[41]

Now we deal with the second half of our problem. The movement from haunted to houses takes place not only for the external world but also for us. We may have made a home for ourselves, but to *feel* at home in it is something more. The next part to account for is how the self, the ego, the "I," comes to grips with its environment and itself. We are not looking for examples of how the gang conquers the alienation out there but the estrangement that takes place within their own hearts and minds.

With most versions of the characters, there isn't much testing that happens here. Fred, Daphne, and Velma are usually already confident in themselves and don't require reassurance. They find themselves more often representing the force that goes out and changes the external world. That being said, there are plenty of more recent incarnations where this is not the case. In 'Zombie Island,' the entire gang has been broken up and displaced, and they have to find themselves again. A similar arc follows in the first live action movie. In 'Mystery Incorporated,' they are all, especially Fred, given a lot of personal demons to overcome. Everything from being abandoned by their parents, unrequited love, and the loss of a friend is touched on.

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[41] TaggleElgate. "Alfred Hitchcock 1960 BBC TV Interview." YouTube, 2013, youtu.be/FDmpJq912fI.

In 'Curse of the 13th Ghost,' Fred is made insecure by the fact that Daphne takes on the leadership role usually reserved for him, and he has to learn to accept it over the course of the movie. He has to basically realize that his place in the group and as a person is that of support and not leadership, a friend and not a commander. Daphne goes through her own bouts of self-doubt during all this.

Perhaps most deserving of further study[42] is the recurring theme in 'Mystery Incorporated' but *especially* in 'Be Cool' of coping with childhood trauma. The episodes "Halloween," "Professor Huh? Part 1," and "Professor Huh? Part 6 ¾,"[43] all revolve around solving a mystery in the current day which helps to heal a mental and emotional scar Fred had carried with him since he was a child. In each case, a traumatic event reoccurs and is dealt with in the present, all to therapeutic results for Fred. Not only is familiarity gained with the self here, but it is done in a way which works as a metaphor for many versions of talk-therapy.

In terms of a consistent and recurring theme though, this burden has largely been carried by Shaggy and Scooby over the years. One of their main running gags is that they are afraid of nearly every monster that the gang encounters. Yet, by the end of each episode, they've conquered their fears, and usually only by becoming creature-bait (ie, being forced to confront their fears head on). There are also many instances, like in the second live action film, where they decide that they should be the ones to take charge and prove themselves capable. These are less common, but the result is the same. Scooby and Shaggy are the very embodiment of this side of the central idea. They are the self that learns of itself by besting its fears and becoming familiar to itself.

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[42] By this I mean, study performed by those other than myself outside the boundaries of this work.
[43] All from 'Be Cool'

That Norville and Scoobert carry most of the burden for this part of the 'Scooby equation' would seem to explain why they are the only ones who have historically been treated as essential. No full season has ever been commissioned without these two present, and yet many have gone on without Fred, Velma, or Daphne. After all, they are not truly needed, since the part of the theme left unattended by them is carried by the basic structure of the show. That these seasons suffer as a result appears to me a problem of balance and not one of essence. You need that transcending, going-out, force of Fred, Velma, and Daphne to really push along the self-reflexive inwardness of the Shag and Scoob show. 'Scooby' is still 'Scooby' without them, but only like a man is still a man when weak or sick. It isn't optimal.

With this in mind, we can turn to one of the weirder entries in the franchise, *Scooby-Doo! and the Reluctant Werewolf*. This made-for-TV movie differs from the entries directly preceding it in a big way. 1987's 'Boo Brothers' lends itself more to what we discussed in the last chapter. Shaggy and Scooby have to learn to work with ghosts and others to find a treasure. 1988's 'Ghoul School' similarly involves Shaggy and Scooby learning to befriend and help a group of monster girls.[44] But later in 1988, with the release of 'Reluctant Werewolf,' Scooby is given a definitive push inward, back to that realm of the struggle between self-alienation and self-understanding and confidence.

The plot of the film revolves around the fact that Shaggy has been turned into a werewolf and doesn't want to stay that way. Does the title make sense now? It goes without saying that this was a plot by Dracula to replace his previous werewolf, who retired to Florida, in the

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[44] That being said, 'Ghoul School' does feature a sequence involving an evil reflection, a "mirror monster" as it is called in the film, of Shaggy who attempts to replace him and attack Scooby. This is, very literally, Shaggy struggling with an evil reflection of himself. This works pretty directly and explicitly towards the point of this chapter.

upcoming "Monster Road Rally" race. And, as we all know, the winner of the rally is named "Monster of the Year." So it's a big deal. After Drac's hunchbacked minions, Crunch and Brunch, formally known as "The Hunch Bunch," turn Shaggy into a creature of the night, the Shagster must find a way to win the race and turn himself back into a regular human so he can live out his days peacefully with Googie, his girlfriend who will never be mentioned again, and Scrappy, Scooby's nephew who will sadly also basically never be mentioned again.

Aside from the warm fuzzy feeling one gets from describing the absolute insanity of the plot, there is something that should be latched onto here. Shaggy is forcefully made into a monster, a werewolf. His quest is to become human again. This is an intensely blatant example of what we have been talking about in this chapter. The self is alienated, made to appear 'other.' The feeling is, and it is well founded, that Shaggy does not belong in his own body. His goal is to know himself again, to become a version of his self that is familiar. Just as before, it is only accomplished through action. It is not only the monsters outside that are dealt with through practical activity, it is also the monsters of the self which are done away with through direct engagement (ie, racing).

And yet, this was not the first time a 'Scooby' project set out on this route. In 1979, the TV special *Scooby Goes Hollywood* explored this same part of the 'Scooby' sign in a very different way. In that truly broken and bizarre project, Scooby found himself wanting to branch out from creepy mystery television and into romance, action adventure, and other genres of movies. He dresses up in a lot of different outfits, parodying stars of the day, but, ultimately, they're simply *not him*. In the end, Scooby learns to accept himself as a TV actor. This, actually, is a good jumping off point for our next chapter.

Chapter 6: Scooby on Scooby

Scooby Goes Hollywood gives us a great chance to talk about a rather unique way that our "key" manifests in the franchise. Previously, we have touched on two points which will become very relevant in this chapter. First, we briefly mentioned the potential for the theme to arise at a meta and self-referential level (ie, the laugh track in 'Where Are You?'). Second, we talked about how the essence of the series lends itself to change and experimentation. The very premise of the show is that we will encounter new things and then learn to accept them. As a result, we can observe throughout the 50 year history of the mystery gang a number of moments where these two intersect and the franchise doubles back on itself.

Given such a long time and so many different chefs in the kitchen over the years, it is inevitable that there will be many different takes on 'Scooby.' Yet, as the legacy grows and the mythos of the show is further cemented in pop culture, there seems to be more pressure on the artists involved to justify their experiments. When the series is taken in a new direction, it is often up to whatever incarnation introduces it to argue its own case. We see, then, meta self-justifications for 'Scooby' itself.

This is where 'Goes Hollywood' comes in. Released in 1979, it is a form-shattering and 4th wall-breaking romp around a Hollywood studio lot. It begins with the same creepy imagery and monster chases that were typical of the show at the time. Then, all this is revealed to be a set, and Scooby and Shaggy are revealed to simply be playing parts in a monster show. From here, they step outside of the program and devise a plan to become celebrities in major motion pictures. They slide in and out of different famous films before, finally, the children of the world come together to plead for Scooby to go back to making his regular show.

Here, we have our first major work of metafiction in the Scooby canon. 'Goes Hollywood' is a TV special about how it's okay that Scooby has historically inhabited a TV world. It is about how Scooby, the character, and 'Scooby,' the franchise, thrive on 20-odd minute television episodes and are worthy of respect for it. Maybe it's just a kids show, but isn't it good to make kids happy? Isn't that worthwhile?

The episode "It's a Wonderful Scoob" from *The 13 Ghosts of Scooby-Doo* functions in a similar way. The episode aired in 1985, during a general low-point in the franchise and in one of the least liked iterations.[45] In this show, the monsters and ghosts are real. After dealing with them for so long, Scooby has a bit of a break down and quits mystery solving all together. In the world of the show, Scooby's adventures are also a sort of reality show. So, quitting mystery solving is also quitting being a mystery solving dog on TV. Similar to 'Goes Hollywood,' kids start to protest and demand he gets back in action, and eventually, after getting a glimpse of the apocalyptic future if he doesn't intervene, Scooby does get back in the game.

What is the larger message here? If 'Goes Hollywood' is the franchise's attempt to accept its role as a TV program, then "It's a Wonderful Scoob" is its attempt to justify its turn into real-monster territory. Scooby is not put off by being on TV but by facing off with real monsters on TV. When he comes back to save the day at the end, he is proudly taking on his new role as a Great Dane ghostbuster. But the meta doesn't stop there.

Before the first episode of *Be Cool, Scooby-Doo!* even aired in 2015, there was already backlash against it. Coming off of the cancelation of critically successful and fan favorite show 'Mystery Incorporated,' audiences were looking for something that kept that more serious tone

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[45] Don't ask me why! I am in the minority in that I think '13 Ghosts' is great!

going forward. Whatever was coming next was going to have an uphill climb. When they learned

that the next show launched from the franchise was going to be an absurdist comedy animated

like a Seth MacFarlane cartoon, many fans decided it wasn't even worth giving it a chance.[46]

Anyone who worked on the show or who was even around at the time will tell you about the

vicious backlash against this change in direction. Sure, 'Scooby' had been funny before, but in

such a modern and up-front way?

It seems like the episode "Silver Scream" is the show's answer to all that. The plot of the

episode revolves around the ghost of silent film star Archie Barnes. After a long lost film of his

has been found, the studio decides to spruce it up by editing in some more modern and comedic

material. The "ghost" of Barnes comes back with the apparent motive of getting this reimagining

of his work canceled. The comparisons are pretty obvious. An old classic is being remade with

modern comedic sensibilities and someone is trying to destroy it before it even has the chance to

come out. If that wasn't enough, the gang is chased by Barnes' ghost onto a film set towards the

end of the episode, and then we are treated to this exchange.

Shaggy: "Like great, isn't this the set of that sitcom, *Monkey Gets A Show Now*,

that just got canceled?"

Fred: "Yeah, it looks like this mystery just got canceled as well. Sorry, gang, we

started out in an exciting, action adventure mystery, and ended up in a failed situation comedy."

And to really drive home the meta moment, Scooby hits a button that triggers a laugh

track to play in response to Fred.

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[46] I am personally guilty of this. From the very first promotional material for it, my brother and I were turned away. I remember him looking to me and saying, "Why would they follow up 'Mystery Inc' with a show that looks like *American Dad*?!" It wasn't until years later that I gave it a chance and had to run back and tell him just how wrong we had been. It may be my favorite incarnation of the show. It is, in my view, at least in the top three.

It is right after this moment, however, that the gang manage to solve the mystery. The episode isn't about the creators' regret for defiling the memory of 'Scooby' with their comedic antics. Instead, it is about them accepting that their show is just different from previous iterations. It just happens to be its own thing. The villain is the person who would stop them from doing it. The gang's doubt is their lowest moment. "Silver Scream" is 'Be Cool' arguing its case, and I believe it does so successfully. If the franchise is really going to be true to itself, Scooby can't be restricted in the places he goes. He has to be able to go in new directions and flourish beautifully in them.

The last meta-Scooby incarnation we will deal with here is 2019's *Scooby-Doo! Return to Zombie Island*. This might be the least understood, most unjustly hated movie in the entire history of 'Scooby' media. I have seen people call it the worst incarnation of the whole franchise. This seems largely to be caused by the fact that its predecessor, *Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island* (1998), is probably the most beloved film yet produced for the gang. It was the first of the direct-to-video movies and holds special significance as one of the darkest and most mature versions of a 'Scooby' story we've ever gotten.

'Zombie Island' has its own meta-aspect. The film starts with the gang having gone their separate ways and being called together for a reunion because Daphne wants to get the scoop on a big ghost story she's heard about. There is meta on two planes here. First, this was the first time we had gotten new Scooby media in years, so the reunion that starts the movie is also symbolic of that. Second, Fred is literally filming, making a movie, of the experience, and we even get to see through his camera in certain scenes. That being said, 'Zombie Island' has nothing on the sheer level of self-reference present in 'Return to Zombie Island.'

The 2019 film starts with the gang winning tickets to an island paradise from a television horror movie marathon hosted by Elvira. As anyone familiar with her work could have guessed, and as the audience is reminded by basically everyone in the scene, Elvira specializes in ambitious failures. She shows horror movies that suck, and not just the ones about vampires. This is maybe our first clue to what the meta of this film is. When Elvira announces the next film as "Predator Jones," we are forced to think about derivative films which can not live up to the classics and the originals.

After landing on the island, a series of mysterious events cause the gang to reminisce about their time on Moonscar Island in the original movie. They note similarities between this island and that one, and Daphne, Velma, and Fred actually provide a summary of all the major events of the first film. While they are doing this, Shaggy and Scooby are commenting on how weird it is that they feel the need to recap what they all had been present for already. The metatext is obvious in this scene. It would be fruitless to retell the first film in this one because the audience has already seen it. However, because this is a sequel and necessarily brings us back to where the first one took place, they have no choice but to rehash it. Elvira was talking about a derivative film that failed because it was a rip-off. Here, 'Return to Zombie Island' is openly questioning how it could possibly avoid being just a derivative rip-off of 'Zombie Island.'

Throughout the first half of the film, more and more similarities crop up. Not only is the island named "Moonstar," a one letter difference from "Moonscar," but the staff at the hotel look identical to the inhabitants of the island from the first film. Eventually, zombies start popping up, but they are far fewer in number than in the original, look less realistic, and actually never come across as a real threat. Eventually, the zombies are all caught and unmasked, revealing them to

be the staff from the hotel. It turns out, the place was entirely occupied by paid actors and a film crew, and the security cameras around the building were all actually there to record the action. The hotel manager, Alan Smithee, is actually a director trying to reenact the events of Mystery Inc's first trip to Moonscar Island for an upcoming film. The first half of 'Return to Zombie Island,' then, is literally about an incompetent crew trying to remake the first movie. The director is even named "Alan Smithee," a pseudonym commonly used by directors who do not wish to have their actual name associated with a project. They effectively gave their fictional bad director the name "fictional bad director." The cherry on top of this buffet of meta is at the end of the reveal. Shaggy and Scooby are positioned as the audience, and Velma, Daphne, and Fred turn to them, almost to us, and declare, "We are in a movie!"

It doesn't end there though. In the second half of the film, the Scooby gang decide to help Alan finish his movie, taking on their roles actively. However, they soon discover that knowing they are being recorded causes them to act unnaturally, and it basically ruins every take they are involved with.[47] They may have done a great job the first go around, but that energy is just impossible for them to recreate consciously. Ultimately, the film shoot collapses when some costumed cat people show up and start wrecking things while looking for Captain Moonscar's lost treasure. In the end, Alan and the gang are incapable of finishing the project. However, Alan recovers the missing chest, gold and all, and Mystery Inc. celebrates solving another mystery.[48]

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[47] Like a scene right out of De Palma's *Greetings* (1968)

[48] Now that we have before us the basic structure of the film, it is also interesting to note a few things as regards inspiration. It is clear, to me, that the original 'Zombie Island' is an abstracted version of the Dracula story. A life-sucking humanoid with close ties to animals, gifted powers from beyond, lures people to its big house so they can be periodically sacrificed in a ritual which grants immortality to its performer. However, 'Return to Zombie Island' actually takes its basic structure from Hitchcock's 1958 masterpiece, *Vertigo*. In that film, without spoiling too much, a man is tricked into being part of another man's scheme and then reconstructs the scheme for himself in the second half of the film. While *Vertigo* is about the impossibility of constructing and sustaining a fantasy, 'Return' is about the impossibility of re-constructing and sustaining the fantasy world of a film. This isn't the first time someone has used the schema of

The movie has many more layers of meta commentary,[49] but these are the essential ones and give us the real thesis of the film. 'Goes Hollywood' was a TV special about how it was okay that Scooby was staying on episodic TV. "It's a Wonderful Scoob" was an episode about real monsters which was really about how it was okay that 'Scooby' was now doing episodes that involved real monsters. "Silver Scream" was a modern comedy reimagining of the classic franchise that was about how it was okay to do a modern comedy reimagining of a classic franchise. 'Return to Zombie Island' was a remake about how it is impossible to recapture the feeling and impact of the original but worth trying because you still get something out of it if it's done right. The people who hate the film for not being more like the original missed the point of the whole thing. The movie wasn't trying to be the original. Why? Because that's an impossible demand. Instead, they gave you a fun time and a decent mystery. And really, isn't that enough?

With all these examples laid out, we can see how the franchise exalts its central idea and turns it into a weapon it wields even against itself. 'Scooby-Doo' is not only about taking the strange world out there and making it into a home for ourselves. It is not only about working on ourselves and learning how to feel comfortable in our own bodies and minds. It takes the project of stripping away the bizarre to reveal the familiar so seriously that it puts itself through that process on a meta level. The franchise arches back as a Scooby-ouroboros and unmasks itself, strips itself of its own discomforts, bumps, and bruises.

Vertigo this way, just check out *Body Double* (1984) for an even more extreme example. It also isn't the first time that 'Scooby' has turned to Hitchcock for inspiration. Recently they've done it quite a bit. For just one example, the 'Be Cool' episode "Doo Not Disturb" is a direct *Psycho* (1960) homage.

[49] Some examples being the replacement of the Mystery Machine with a juiced up monster truck-esque van and the introduction of a stunt double for Fred. These are remakes more capable than the original and yet falling short as far as emotional and audience connection goes.

Chapter 7: Case Study: *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase*

At this point, we have excavated the 'Scooby' system so thoroughly that we could stop here. However, there is another, soft-spoken, purpose for this book that I feel is worth making explicit for anyone who has gotten this far. This book is not just my attempt at analyzing a beloved franchise and figuring out what makes it tick. It is my hope that what I have really provided is a selection of tools that others may use to crack open their favorite 'Scooby' stories and subject them to further investigation.

With this in mind, I will give one more example of how to analyze a single incarnation of 'Scooby' using what we have learned about the central theme of the Scooby-verse. For the sake of clarity, I will pick one which is a relatively easy fit for the schema of the previous chapters. I will also choose one which is not a fan favorite or one of the features that gets generally high reviews. Fitting that criteria, we have a childhood favorite of my own, *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* (2001).

The plot of this film is relatively simple. The gang is sucked into a video game and has to work their way through it in order to escape. However, with this easily digestible, and at this point cliched, premise, we can see all the work from earlier in this part shining through. We can simply go through the main points elaborated by each chapter to demonstrate what I mean.

In chapter four, we discussed how the world that Mystery Inc. inhabits is often hostile and alien, only for it to later be transformed through the gang's actions into one that is pleasant and familiar. Perhaps more than any other entry in the franchise, it should be immediately visible to us how this is incorporated in 'Cyber Chase.' At the start of the film, the crew is sucked into a video-game world. This realm is not only different from what they are used to, it is

fundamentally constructed in a way their world is not. To add to this, it is populated by dozens of villains and antagonists. The resolution of the movie comes with the gang beating the final computerized baddie and exiting the video game back into their world. They very literally enter a world that is 'other' and very literally exit that world into something comforting.

In chapter five, we talked about how the movement to get comfortable with the world around us is reflected within ourselves, how we learn to be familiar with what and who we are as we rob everything apart from us of its otherness. Again, 'Cyber Chase' might make this idea more explicit than any other film or show the series has yet to offer. On the final level of the video game, after run-ins with dinosaurs, gladiators, and practically every other enemy you could imagine, the gang find themselves face-to-face with a new group of digital characters: *themselves*. A video game version of Mystery Inc. is already inhabiting the computer-game and the real gang must team up with their NPC counterparts to defeat the threats that occupy the final level. When the game is complete, the gang waves goodbye to their doppelgangers and leaves them behind in the virtual world. Vanquishing the alien world also separates us from that view we have of ourselves as strange and 'other.'

In chapter six, we talked about the meta-narratives present in certain 'Scooby' titles, the way that the central idea of the franchise sometimes pokes its head all the way to the level of the franchise itself. Not only is 'Scooby-Doo' about how the strange becomes familiar, sometimes 'Scooby-Doo' itself becomes strange and fights to make itself familiar again. As usual, 'Cyber Chase' sends this point home crystal clear. The NPC Mystery Inc. on the final level is dressed in outfits resembling those worn by the crew in the old 'Scooby' shows and movies. The villains of the level are classic monsters from the series. From the perspective of the franchise as a whole,

'Cyber Chase' is part of the late-90s-early-2000s revival of the iconic team. With that in mind, it is obvious that the final scene in the video game, where the classic gang send the flesh and blood Mystery Inc. back to the world to live their lives, is really symbolic of where the series was at. The old was passing away, giving the baton to a new crew to carry on the sign of 'Scooby' for the next generation. The modern mystery solvers were different from the old, but they were familiar in their common mission and message.

I hope this has been illustrative of both how to use these tools and just how easy it is to apply them. 'Cyber Chase' is a straightforward example, but the rest of the series isn't too hard to see through this lens. After all, it is the lens that the franchise itself has provided us. We are simply watching the gang as the gang demands to be watched, treating them as they treat themselves.

Chapter 8: Scooby-Doo, We Love You!

We've reached the end. The mystery is solved. A series of pulleys and oil slicks, a flying washing machine, and an oddly ghost-shaped net have all snapped into place and caught our ghoul dead to rights. Let's take a moment to reflect before hopping in our van and heading for the sunset.

At the beginning of our investigation, we were immediately given two false leads. First, there were the skeptics. They claimed that the only message our talking dog wished to communicate was that there was no such thing as a talking dog. Anything that appeared to introduce a new element into our world was really just a trick or a scheme. We soon found out though, that many of our skeptics had never even seen the 'Scooby' that they wished to undersell so much, and that they were merely attempting to use a popular misconception about the series to serve their own criminally limited worldview.

Second, we tried to follow the teachings of the Doo-alists. In time, however, we had to question them on a few philosophical points. They said that 'Scooby' was sometimes magical and sometimes scientific. We objected on the grounds that, sometimes, magic is just the sign of an underdeveloped science. We also wondered if it would be fair to define electricity simply by saying "sometimes it's negative, sometimes it's positive." After all, that hardly seems to tell us a single thing about electricity!

These red herrings did, paradoxically, put us in the right direction, though. They showed us where we couldn't stop, and they showed us where we shouldn't look. After a bit of working things out on our own, we came to our conclusion. *The 'Scooby' franchise truly revolves around*

one core, one essential movement: the interplay of strangeness and familiarity, and the victory of the latter over the former.

And with that key in place, we opened some doors, cracked some windows, and stumbled our way head first over the finish line. We went places that our predecessors never dared to tread. The skeptics and Doo-alists couldn't hope to talk about something like *Scooby Goes Hollywood*. That work has neither a real monster or a man in a mask. It seems to exist in a separate world from the franchise as they imagine it. However, it makes complete sense when looked at through the right vantage point, an angle we find easy enough with the use of our key. The same goes for many of the other bizarre and underappreciated entries in the Scooby-verse. Ignored by others, they are resuscitated by us, seen as the embodiments of the central tenet of 'Scooby' and given room to thrive.

It is also my belief that we have provided the answer to a question commonly asked by Scooby-heads the world over. Why has the franchise stuck around so long? Why do people connect with it so much? Given what we now know about the series, it seems all too natural. The entire point of 'Scooby' is to show the comfort which can be found through hardships. Is it any wonder that it becomes a comfort itself to its audience? When I turn on the show, I am washed over by a feeling of reassurance, similar to the feeling I get from my mother's cooking. However, this isn't just the result of nostalgia. Even as a kid, it gave me this feeling. The message I have always gotten, the message 'Scooby' has always tried to tell, the message I have finally been able to put into words, is that this massive and incomprehensible world will make sense in time. It has reassured us that, while ghosts might not be real, there is always life after death, confidence after doubt, and water just over the desert horizon.

Yet, despite whatever we may have accomplished here, my work is not done. Our work is not done. This book is not the final word on the subject. I do not want to be the last to write about the series this way, and I do not want to be the only one to take up this project. It is my wish that we all could take our media a bit more seriously. It is my dream that we could all, as a society, really try to gain some understanding of what the stories we tell mean and why we tell them. Whether you agree with my arguments or not, I ultimately would just appreciate a discussion being sparked. Academics have written entire books analyzing the films of Hitchcock, the themes of *The Sopranos*, and the subtext of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.[50] But why should it only be official academia that indulges in cultural criticism? And why should it only be a select few areas of culture, an elite sub-set of fiction, that gets this treatment?

I will consider this book a success if the arguments in it are compelling and the picture it paints of 'Scooby' is accurate. But, ultimately, this book will only be a success if it is part of a larger movement towards widespread cultural criticism and analysis. Only a renaissance can produce renaissance men. What I wish to leave you all with, then, is a call to action. Take up the study of the world, actively engage with the culture and society around you, and push forward towards a new golden age in art, one where it is taken seriously and enjoyed freely by us all. Think through your views, make them heard, and listen to the voices of others. "Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend."[51]

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[50] I mention these three in particular because they have practically built followings and fields in academia but also because I do legitimately love all three of them.
[51] An old Chinese saying.