

**“That’s a Scooby-don’t”:
The Melancholy Nostalgia of “Scoobynatural”
for *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?***

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"I think this cartoon is haunted!"

— Dean Winchester

With its Gothic touches, humour, and ensemble of youthful investigative protagonists, *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?* (1966-1969) has been a touchstone for many contemporary genre series. The CW’s *iZombie* (2015-19), itself an ensemble generic hybrid of horror, comedy, and drama, references its similarities: “Look at us! Working together to solve mysteries. We should get a van and a dog” (“Zombie Knows Best” 3.2). *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), of course, referred to its own ensemble of, at various times, a slayer, a witch, a watcher, a vampire, a werewolf, and a civilian, as the “Scooby Gang,” often shortened to the “Scoobies.” While in both instances—and unlike *Scooby-Doo* itself—at least some of the “monsters” their protagonists fought were real, the aforementioned elements, along with their blend of ratiocination (mystery-solving) and horror, hint at these series’ mutuality.

Supernatural does not conform to the formula in quite the same way. While the long-running show boasts a large recurring cast, the primary focus on brothers Sam and Dean Winchester makes it difficult to classify *Supernatural* as

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an ensemble series in the same way as some of its influential predecessors and contemporaries. Nor are its protagonists as youthful or broadly caricatured as their animated counterparts (Sam and Dean are anything but ciphers). *Supernatural* does, however, frequently employ both Gothic elements (Wright 2008; Edmundson 2016) and humour (Abbott 2011) in a way similar to *Scooby-Doo*. Norville “Shaggy” Rogers and his pal Scooby serve as the gang’s hysterical embodiment, their bodies running, flailing, and laughing, and with a perpetual physical hunger that frequently dictates their choices. In *Supernatural*, Dean Winchester serves as a similar source and target of the series’ humour, right down to his own voracious appetite. The episode “Yellow Fever” (4.6, aired October 23, 2008) in which Dean contracts a virus that makes him afraid and paranoid, plays his fear for laughs in quite deliberate allusions to the histrionic excesses of Shaggy and Scooby.¹ In *Scooby-Doo*, fellow sleuths Fred Jones, Velma Dinkley, and Daphne Blake act as foils to Shaggy and Scooby’s more embodied fears and desires—with Fred and Velma functioning along the lines of strict logic, and Daphne taking on the role of questioner of the obvious (“Why would a ghost need a refrigerator full of food?”). In *Supernatural*, these three’s traits are most often blended into the character of Sam—the “smart one” of the pair—who, while displaying his brother’s penchant for fighting, additionally serves as primary researcher and repository of knowledge. Like *Scooby-Doo*, *Supernatural* draws from a number of cultural and religious traditions for its monsters, and (unlike its predecessor) strives for some degree of authenticity in how it engages with folklore.²

A nostalgia for *Scooby-Doo* informs the meta-textual “Scoobynatural” (13.16, aired March 29, 2018). Despite the humour that attends both the original series and “Scoobynatural,” their bleaker underpinnings are what will form this essay’s discussion of the two, revealing a surprising pessimism that undercuts the seeming naiveté of *Scooby-Doo*, and highlights the pervasive melancholia of *Supernatural*. “Scoobynatural” literally inserts Sam and Dean Winchester into the *Scooby-Doo* episode, “A Night of Fright is No Delight” (1.16, aired January 10, 1970); the very presence of these two “real” monster hunters within that story world thus changes—and darkens—the earlier series’ dynamic. “A Night of Fright” borrows heavily from the Agatha Christie school of mystery, particularly

¹ Thank you to Stacey Abbott for this observation. The echoes of *Scooby-Doo* in “Yellow Fever” become even stronger in the gag reel outtake from the episode, with Ackles literally jumping into Padalecki’s arms Scooby-style.

² For an analysis of *Supernatural*’s deployment of folklore, including it rather than decontextualizing it within multiple episodes, see Koven and Thorgeirsdottir (2010, 189-190).

her 1939 novel *And Then There Were None*, with a group of guests gathered by invitation at a remote island site and an event that promises (and in most cases delivers) their doom.³ In the *Scooby-Doo* version of the scenario, we learn that Colonel Sanders (ahem) has invited a group of family and friends (including Scooby-Doo, who saved him from drowning in a fish pond) to hear the reading of his will, which stipulates that the inheritance of a million dollars is the shared possession of anyone who can stay the night in his ostensibly haunted mansion. Administered by the legal firm of Cosgood Creeps and Cuthbert Crawls, the estate is already in jeopardy at the episode's beginning, telegraphing the obvious—that the lawyers are the culprits (the fact that the money turns out to be Confederate money and worthless notwithstanding). Cackling green ghosts and spectacular hijinks ensue, with the gang ultimately uncovering the crooks in Creeps and Crawls.

“Scoobyatural” is, in essence, an extended treatment of Dean’s nostalgia for a childhood he (and Sam) only partly experienced. While Dean has a small store of pre-hunting memories of home (“Dark Side of the Moon” 5.16) and Sam none, Dean nevertheless strove to shield his brother from the horror around them, despite Sam’s constant questioning. The impossibility of Dean’s ever succeeding at redirecting his little brother from a desire to know why they lived as they did features in another nostalgia-infused episode: “A Very Supernatural Christmas” (3.8). Something of a companion piece to “Scoobyatural,” this ‘very special’ holiday episode takes pains to evoke the ostensible innocence of both childhood and a past era of television. Its opening borrows the 70s/80s era CBS’s “Special Presentation” tag familiar to older (Gen X) viewers, gathered around the TV to watch (or ritually rewatch) Rankin and Bass’s stop-motion *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) or their traditionally animated *Frosty the Snowman* (1969), and there is the diegetic appearance of the long-running “Santa riding a razor” Norelco commercial on the hotel room television.⁴ Aside from the episode’s villains, who themselves suggest a malevolent Ozzie and Harriet (including a prohibition against swearing), the episode uses the built-in nostalgia of the holiday by cutting between the brothers’ past (where Dean lies to Sam about where their father is and what he

³ The novel is one of the best-selling mysteries (and books) of all time; it also serves as the title for an episode of *Supernatural*, in which a stranded group of hunters (including Sam and Dean) are killed off one by one (“... And Then There Were None” 6.16, aired March 4, 2011).

⁴ Each broadcast network had a particular “special presentation” logo. CBS’s graphic originally read “CBS Special Presentation,” hence its use here; CBS/Viacom is half owner of the CW Network on which *Supernatural* airs in the United States.

does to preserve Sam's innocence) and present, in which Sam (initially) refuses to honour Dean's wish to celebrate Christmas. Here, as in "Scoobynatural," Dean is the episode's fulcrum, attempting to preserve Sam's ignorance of the supernatural and maintaining a nostalgia for a less-fraught time in their lives. Neither goal is really possible, however; their past was never that great, and Sam would rebel against being kept in ignorance.

While not explicitly referenced in "Scoobynatural," Dean's earlier lack of success in shielding Sam is reflected in his actions toward the *Scooby-Doo* Gang. Although the episode is humorous from beginning to end, there is a melancholic, darkly despairing tone attached to Dean's attempts to keep the cartoon world free of the real supernatural violence and trauma he and his brother Sam have experienced since childhood. The episode begins with Sam and Dean in an electronics repair shop fighting a large, green, Barney-like stuffed dinosaur, possessed by a curse. We later learn that the curse, ironically, relates to a real-estate scam reminiscent of *Scooby-Doo's* typical uncovering of sinister plots. The two leave the shop with a gift of gratitude from the shop's owner—a flat-screen TV that Dean makes the centre of his "Deancave" ("... or, Fortress of Deanitude," he adds with childish glee.) Once turned on, the TV sucks Sam and Dean into the world of *Scooby-Doo*, and by extension Dean's desire to return to, if not a lost youth, at least a life where ghost hunting comes with dating, soda shops, and fun.

Dean's nostalgia here includes feelings of loss and Freudian lack, his continual attempts (and failures) to hook up with Daphne paralleling his struggle to maintain a now-inaccessible fantasy world of Saturday morning cartoons, and to isolate the original gang from the truths of Sam and Dean's "real" world. Upon re-emerging from the cartoon world near the episode's end, Dean tells Sam and Castiel that this was the coolest thing that has ever happened to him outside of a sexual encounter with "the Cartwright Twins"—the experience of (lost) childhood fantasy tied explicitly here to sexual gratification. Significant attention is paid to Dean's gendering of the TV ("Be careful! She's delicate," he says, as he and Sam carry it from the shop) in the same way he genders Baby, their 1967 Impala and de facto "home" for most of their childhoods. *Scooby-Doo* and the television medium become a figuration of a lost childhood that never was, but their coveted place in the adult Deancave suggest they are, like Baby, part of an oddly sexualized *and* womb-like space. This metaphorical mix of desired object as both parental and sexual is underscored in the implication by

a resurrected Mary Winchester that Dean himself may have been conceived in the Impala (“Keep Calm and Carry On” 12.1).⁵

In the Freudian psychoanalytical terms the episode encourages, the nostalgia here is tied up in object narcissism—the television set, the cartoon series, Daphne, the Deancave, and the moving image medium itself all become the equivalent of lost love objects that provide for Dean’s needs, feed his ego, and thus form the source of idealized infatuation. That this infatuation in Dean comes in the form of nostalgia attaches it to loss and the melancholic, for Freud the “loss of a more ideal [or idealized] kind” than the type of loss found in mourning ([1917] 1974, 245). As with dread, the melancholic has lost sight of the object causing the emotional state; the object, not dead, but lost, and therefore imminent—is somewhere, out there. In “Scoobynatural,” the television itself—the cursed “object” that so lures Dean—cannot itself fill in the space of lack. It stands in for the established degree to which Dean’s sense of loss is attached to nostalgia for both the televisual medium and to a genre that mirrors the horrors of his and Sam’s lives.

The postmodern referentiality of “Scoobynatural” derives from this sense of loss made manifest in a reverence for both youth horror television and the moving image as spaces of fantastical possibility. Since the advent of cinema and the work of Georges Méliès, the spectacle of cinematic subjects slipping from the film’s diegetic reality into a deeper fantasy-within-a-fantasy has been a key trope.⁶ The prototypical narrative film in which a character gets sucked into a film within the film is Buster Keaton’s 1924 silent romantic comedy, *Sherlock, Jr.* Keaton’s film also collapses the object of sexual desire and longing into the cinema itself. Its protagonist—a hopeless romantic, cinephile, and projectionist played by Keaton—gazes as longingly at the screen as he does at his would-be

⁵ Contemporaneous series *Doctor Who* (2005-present), particularly during showrunner Steven Moffat’s tenure (2010-2017), conceives of the TARDIS, the Doctor’s vehicle for traveling through time and space, in a similar fashion. It is both the Doctor’s home, and a gendered, quasi-living entity the Eleventh Doctor (Matt Smith) refers to by the nickname “Sexy.” Indeed, in the Neil Gaiman-penned episode “The Doctor’s Wife,” the TARDIS’s consciousness is literally embodied in a woman (6.4).

⁶ Of course in “Scoobynatural,” the so-called fantasy is the product of a curse—a motif in both cinema and television that occurs most iconically in Tobe Hooper’s 1982 film *Poltergeist*, and, as Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott note, across a large swath of television episodes that see the TV set as a kind of “conduit” to another reality (2013, 179-199, 184). Among these, Jowett and Abbott cite two other episodes of *Supernatural*, “Hell House” (1.17) and “Ghostfacers” (3.13), both of which bring the brothers into direct confrontation with the ethos of reality-TV horror pseudo-documentary (2013, 196-199).

love; in one scene, he even mimics what he sees onscreen in a scene that uncannily, humorously parallels his attempts to woo her. In Keaton’s film and “Scoobynatural” the uncanny elements linking desire (of all sorts) to the medium are played for laughs, but that they are tied to a sense of longing and lack also gives them unsettling power.

Even though in the narrative of “Scoobynatural” the opportunity comes as the result of a curse, Dean’s desire to insert himself into the sacrosanct world of *Scooby-Doo*—to defend it, and protect it—is dreamy to the point of desperation. This kind of nostalgia in “Scoobynatural” also manifests aesthetically, in the animation’s painstaking recreation of the *Scooby*-verse. The cartoon haunted house backgrounds are stunning recreations, and some of them look almost like visual grabs of the animation plates from the original *Scooby-Doo* episode (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 and 2: Loving recreation of the *Scooby-Doo* aesthetic in

Further aesthetic nostalgia comes in the allusive acknowledgments of the detective narrative that undergirds *Scooby-Doo*, *Supernatural*, and the series that bridges them: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The battle to keep knowledge that monsters are real from the *Scooby-Doo* Gang results in dialogue similar to *Buffy*, whose Slayer (like Sam and Dean) tends to fight supernatural forces under the radar of the general public:

- Sam:** “Look, I’m not supposed to tell you this, but ghosts are real. My brother and I, we hunt them, along with werewolves and vampires and demons, and ... We’ve saved the world, a lot.”
- Velma:** (condescendingly) “Monsters are nothing more than crooks in masks ... usually unscrupulous real estate developers.”

The literal reference to *Buffy* in Sam’s last comment is a nod to the pop-cultural legacy of that show and its titular character (whose tombstone at the end of the show’s fifth season reads “She saved the world. A lot” [“The Gift” 5.22]), and one of its key conceits—that the monsters Buffy fights are real (and figurative, in the show’s themes), showing *Supernatural*’s writers’ acute awareness of its origins in *Buffy* (Graves 2019) and its crime-detective spinoff *Angel* (Giannini 2019).

Dean’s interpretive stretch of the haunting of the *Scooby-Doo* episode to the cartoon itself (“I think this cartoon is haunted!”) is equally a loaded allusion to the ‘haunted’ medium of television, which brings disembodied sound and image through the ether into the comfortable, idealistically inviolable space of home.⁷ Among the other aspects of “Scoobynatural” that “haunt” the cartoon are the tropes and themes that come through meta-fictionally to acknowledge the ties between genre and nostalgia. When a paradigm shift threatens their experience that all monsters are merely crooks in masks, the original *Scooby-Doo* Gang experiences an existential crisis that can be read as childhood’s end. Velma says, “I thought I was blind without my glasses, but I was just blind,” and Fred and Daphne express a similarly despairing awareness of reality:

- Fred:** (banging his head into a tree) “We’ve been stopping real estate

⁷ See, e.g., Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Emily D. Edwards, *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005); and Murray Leeder, editor, *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

developers when we could have been hunting Dracula? Are you kidding me? My life is meaningless!”

Daphne: “If there are ghosts, that means there’s an afterlife. Heaven. Hell. Am I going to hell?”

Some of the most compelling scenes in the episode are those in which the original *Scooby-Doo* characters register shock and trauma (Figures 3 and 4) at various sites and sights of blood, pain, and bodily dismemberment (Figures 5 and 6). The usual gravity-defying rules of the cartoon world are slipping here, and there is a sense of flesh-and-bone weight to the kills and injuries that recall the world Dean, at least, wishes to escape from—and that the Scooby-Doo characters were never a part of.



Figures 3 and 4 (top): The *Scooby-Doo* gang registers “real” shock and trauma. Figures 5 and 6 (bottom): Blood, pain and bodily dismemberment in the no-longer ‘weightless’ cartoon world.

"Scooby natural" is acutely attuned to the more morbid and extreme embodiments of horror that have oft labelled it exploitative—a "lowbrow" genre, appealing to the basest of senses. *Scooby-Doo*, on the other hand, has tended to mock this aspect of horror with its extended music-driven slapstick sequences, where fear is to be laughed at, and in its rendering its monsters the product of criminal fakery and illusion by episode’s end. In the latter aspect,

Scooby-Doo follows in the tradition of the Radcliffean Gothic, which always strips away the curtain to reveal the machinery of phantasmagorical illusion.⁸ In *Scooby-Doo*, supernatural monstrosity is always a sham—a rather convincing manipulation—while in *Supernatural*, it is part of a very real productive pessimism. And yet both series come together where this pessimism relates to humanity’s failures. The *Scooby-Doo* gang and the Winchesters are suspicious seekers-out of human corruption, and it's always there, in both of their 'verses.

In a moment of poignancy that also ironically recalls the many unmaskings of flawed human evildoers in *Scooby-Doo*, the violent ghost in “Scoobynatural” turns out to be that of a dead child who seeks his father (a significant factor of Sam and Dean’s own quest). The boy’s soul is tied to a pocket knife, that iconic adventure “tool” of clichéd boyhood. (It will later be seared to char by a blow-torch.) Thus, the crossover of the mystery from the outside world of *Supernatural* to cartoon-world and back suggests a kind of shared loss as well. The scene of the child mourning the inability to cross into the spirit world to join his father is another in the episode’s compelling images of melancholic longing (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Childhood’s end: melancholic longing in “Scoobynatural”

⁸ Anne Radcliffe (1764-1823), author of popular Gothic novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), also penned the posthumously published “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826), an influential essay that helped to establish this high-low binaristic view of horror as a baser emotion (and aesthetic) that scrambles the intellectual faculties, and terror the more refined or intellectual state (and aesthetic) to achieve.

The episode's narrative goal is to save the child from enslavement by the outside world's real estate developer, who has inserted the cursed pocket knife into the TV to throw off Sam and Dean from discovering his plans. Parallel to this, the ultimate goal becomes, with the help of the ghost child, to undo the *Scooby-Doo* Gang's new knowledge of *Supernatural*'s more embodied, violent human reality, and to reaffirm the more weightless cartoon reality of *Scooby-Doo*. That is, to restore the cartoon's "fantasy" (and ironically, the viewer's reality) that monsters aren't real and that youthful perseverance will yield positive results. For both the Winchesters and the ghost-child, something important to them must be destroyed, suggesting that in the real world, those with the least are often asked to sacrifice the most. When the child finally vanishes in a cloud of smoke, reaffirming the supernatural reality of *Supernatural* and the weightless cartoon reality of *Scooby-Doo*, these various destructions bring us back to the creeping melancholia that underlies both series. "Scoobynatural" both critiques and celebrates *Scooby-Doo*'s essential whimsy and naïveté. In doing so, it suggests that the melancholic longing that drives Dean's desperate attempt to maintain a childhood fantasy is proof enough that the earlier series' "monsters" are real—*supernatural*, or not.

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