The Real Scares In Scooby-Doo 2

A Feminist Analysis

[Claire Pardus]

What's scarier than the looming patriarchy hindering minorities such as women, people of color, and queer individuals from making strides in the world and being adequately represented in modern media? If you said *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed* (2004)[1], you're on the right track. At least, on the right track for this discussion. Some might think of this film as a cult classic that rolls into everyone's Netflix recommendations in late October, but I would argue that it serves as a twenty-year-old time capsule of how visual media portrayed existing ideas of gender, women, feminism, and masculinity. *Scooby-Doo 2* is a film that relates to pop culture and feminism through the messages it relates to its audience through storyline and characters. By examining these aspects in terms of Laura Mulvey's male gaze, Deanna D. Sellnow's visual pleasure theory, Lindy West's argument on anger in women, and bell hooks' concept of white power feminism, we can unravel how the implications of these elements perpetuate the modern day patriarchy.

Like much of the media that we consume today, this movie was geared to consciously please their audience. There's the one aspect of beloved characters getting up to their silly antics, but on the other hand we have the film perpetrating the male gaze through our heroines. To understand this concept, one needs to take a step back into 1975 when academic Laura Mulvey puts a name to this concept in her work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". According to Mulvey, the male gaze places a woman as a visual object for the audience, particularly in film and movie production, as they are the subject of men objectifying them and are thus objectified by the audience.[2] This is undoubtedly the case in *Scooby-Doo 2* where Daphne and, at points,

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1   *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*, directed by Raja Gosnell (2004; Los Angeles, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006), DVD.

2   Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Glasgow, Scotland: Screen, 1975), 62-3.

Velma, cater to this objectification of women through their visual appearances. The former struts into frame either with her iconic gaga boots or bell bottom leggings, both of these being in variations of purple and pink. Meanwhile, Velma is the main focus of the film's subplot as she uncharacteristically adorns a skin-tight orange jumpsuit to appeal to her romantic interest. These characters have interactions with other masculine-presenting characters that illuminate their hyperfemininity while being objects of appeal for a masculine audience. With this in mind, it's clear that there is hardly any content in this film that presents women in a positive or powerful position without being degraded to their bodies and womanhood for the pleasure of others.

Deanna D. Sellnow furthers this idea in her own discussions of visual pleasure theory, arguing that "it focuses on messages of narcissism…, [and] fetishism" to illuminate how visual media such as movies perpetuate the appeasement of the male, heterosexual gaze[3]. Rewatching the movie with a keen eye and open ear, one might be surprised to find subtle undertones throughout the story and dialogue pushing women to be happy by 1.) looking "beautiful," and 2.) seeking companionship through a man. Daphne needs her Fred, Velma needs her Patrick, so on and so forth. Moreover, these characters are fetishized by the audience as they stand on polar opposites of the "womanly" spectrum that appeal to a larger heterosexual male audience: the Barbie doll klutz and the shy, reserved nerd. Consider that final fight scene with the monsters where Daphne and Velma each have a spontaneously brave moment, but beyond that their characters have no variation or depth. With all of this taken into consideration, it's clear that *Scooby-Doo 2* perpetuates unhealthy and unnecessary standards for women that they must be visually pleasing to look at by men in order to be accepted by men and, by extension, society as a whole.

In line with Mulvey's male gaze is Sellnow's further discussion on the variety of feminist perspectives throughout the decades, specifically the radical feminist perspective. The lack of queer characters is glaring when applying a radical feminist perspective, and is all the more glaring when one considers how the franchise emanates the all-loving hippie aesthetic or even the queer undertones from character portrayal and dialogue. In a brief yet heart-touching conversation between Velma, Shaggy, and Scooby-Doo where Shaggy tells her that he and Scooby have tried to be heroes but failed, she replies in surprise claiming that she had always thought of them as heroes. "I've always wanted to be like you guys. You guys are so free. You're never afraid to be who you really are."[4] As the goal of the radical feminist perspective is to "reveal how objectifying hegemonic beliefs and behaviors based on sex, gender, or sexual orientation are reinforced or challenged in some way," one can view this scene as a cultural reinforcement that everybody is heterosexual and that Velma would *never* be hinting at anything besides her quirky, nerdy personality when claiming she wishes to be "free."[5] The male gaze assumes that men and women can only be attracted to

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3   Deanna D. Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*, *Third Edition* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2018), 13.

4   *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed*.

5   Sellnow, 145.

each other, but by thinking about the film through the radical feminist perspective this assumption is made glaringly obvious and, unfortunately, one of the film's greatest downfalls despite its messages of "being true to yourself."

If I were to ask you to picture an angry feminist, you'd probably have someone with at least one of the following traits: brightly dyed hair, unconventional appearance, and their mouth wide open shouting or chanting. These are the characteristics that make up a feminist depicted in 2000s media, and *Scooby Doo 2* is no exception. At the start of the movie, most viewers can't help but to associate the pink-haired superfan of Velma's with the iconic video clip of Canadian feminist Chanty Binx, or "Big Red," who gained internet notoriety through aggressive feminist activism[6]. On a similar page, Daphne gets told by a news reporter named Heather that she's only good to the team for being a nice thing to look at. She tries to find reassurance from her partner Fred by asking if he thinks she's "just a pretty face,"[7] but fails to gain any resolution from this heated conflict. Of course this is brought into discussion right when a pivotal moment in the movie's plot occurs, so her anger is dismissed as nothing more than a joke that is never resolved by the end of the film. Women who work hard to break down the patriarchy by expression or questioning are reprimanded for their "out of hand" yet justified anger, so it shouldn't come to any surprise that women in this movie were unable to express themselves in a similar fashion. They're just *angry,* everyone, nothing to see or take note of here! Women and their emotions, am I right?

Perhaps there's some validity in their emotions, and perhaps that's something that is needed to really start a pushback against a male-dominated society. Lindy West suggests in a chapter her memoir *The Witches Are Coming* titled "Anger is a Weapon" that anger is a negative trait associated with feminism, yet urges her audience to weaponize anger as a means of being a feminist. She makes a remark that sounds awfully similar to the predicament Daphne finds herself in with Fred: "When a woman gets angry, the typical response is: She didn't understand what happened. She misunderstood." Yet by West's definition, "feminism is the collective manifestation of female anger."[8] To have Daphne be unable to express her frustration with Fred and explain her feelings towards the comments she received from the snarky news reporter is patriarchy putting her own feelings on the back burner and moving along with the story. To glorify this film for its cinematic beauty of CGI-animated great danes and nostalgia of its animated forefather is to uphold this sentiment that women cannot express "negative" emotions like frustration and fury. Beyond the media, there is a collective anger of all women from decades of mistreatment, and despite the lack of conclusion this movie provides to this subject, it brings forward an opportunity to present women as fully-fleshed, well-rounded individuals who can and *will* express a range of emotions.

Newer iterations of the *Scooby-Doo* franchise in visual media have included different races and sexualities in full display (like Mindy Kaling's television flop, but

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6   Don Caldwell, "Big Red," *Know Your Meme*, December 5, 2014, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/big-red.

7   *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed.*

8   Lindy West, *The Witches Are Coming* (Lebanon, IN: Hachette Books, 2019), 208.

that's not our focus here), which shines a light on this movie's lack of diversity. Unfortunately, feminism is not safe from whitewashing as bell hooks' explores "white power feminism" in her book *feminism is for everybody*. She argues that this specific type of feminism is generally more accepted by society and media as it focuses on reforming the patriarchy to allow white women into positions rather than enacting change to allow all minorities, women or otherwise, to obtain the same opportunities (hooks)[9]. It's worth noting that the majority of people in the movie, save for Rubben Studdard at the Faux Ghost bar and Ned the news cameraman, are white. Studdard and the musicians are background characters who contribute little to nothing to the storyline of the movie, and Ned is surprisingly thrusted into the spotlight at the end when the gang reveal that he and Heather were the true villains that are arrested. Ned had less screen time than the 80s jive band at the bar, and he's *somehow* one of the two masterminds behind the movie's entire plot? When the only prominent inclusion of people of ethnicities that are anything besides white or caucasian are in a negative light, it creates a desire for people to not be like Ned and to not associate with people like Ned. The message of equality and empowerment for all can only go so far when it's exclusive to the dominant group, leaving much to be desired from a movie that seemed to have such a vast influence on pop culture and media.

Let's take a second to take a collective breath and address something that's been echoed by critics and viewers alike about this theatrical iteration: this movie was progressive for its time. One can pull out the argument that the original *Scooby-Doo: Where Are You?* television series from the 1960s was created in response to political turmoil at the time, providing a silly child-friendly alternative to viewing Vietnam war news coverage, the Cuban Missile Crisis two days in, or the loss of life that came as a result of the civil rights movement. As the early 2000s was home to third wave feminism through pushing for social equality and expanding civil rights for all, one can draw the line between the past and the present in terms of the media's overall goal: provide relief to current issues[10]. One can also draw from the head writer of this 2004 movie, James Gunn, and the numerous comments he's made on social media sites in recent years clarifying the original storyline that never made it into the final cut. Gunn clarified in a series of tweets on Twitter that he had attempted to make Velma "explicitly gay" before the studio muddled down her character to being completely nothing in the 2002 movie and given a boyfriend in the next installment[11]. At the very least, this movie in retrospect was confirmed to have tried something different and unheard of for its time, so it's worth acknowledging this effort.

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9   bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody* (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 2015).
10   Kendall Trammel, "Scooby-Doo wasn't just another cartoon. It was a reaction to the political turmoil at the time," *CNN,* September 13, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/13/entertainment/scooby-doo-50th-anniversary-history-trnd/index.html.
11   "Filmmaker James Gunn wanted 'Scooby-Doo' character Velma to be 'explicitly gay'," *CNN*, July 15, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/15/entertainment/james-gunn-scooby-doo-velma-gay-trnd/index.html.

Astute observations are being made here, but my only comment is that this argument does not hold up… at all. Let's take this argument into the world of literature by contrasting the works of Mary Shelley and Charlotte Bronte. Shelley's most famous piece, *Frankenstein*, portrays women characters like Elizabeth, Frankenstein's fiance, as submissive creatures who are seen as possessions. As Frankenstein puts it, "[I] looked upon Elizabeth as mine – mine to protect, love, and cherish."[12] In contrast, Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* follows the named main character as she works to gain control of her life, her destiny, and overcome societal obstacles that stand in her way. Over the course of the novel Jane Eyre learns to balance her taught submissive nature with freedom and expression, and this is all brought together neatly through the balancing of her tray of candles and water to her beloved Rochester in the closing chapters of the novel.[13] Both of these authors are Romantic writers who wrote in the widely popular bildungsroman format and published their respective works in 1818 and 1847, but the misogyny that Shelley writes does not define the capability of growth in women characters that Bronte writes. One piece of media does not define another from the same time period, just as *Scooby-Doo 2* does not define other films made in the 2000s. Not only this, but the "product of its time" argument implies a continuous progression and betterment of society. By suggesting that media in the past was made by those who were less educated, less culturally or socially aware and overall less *than* compared to current day society, we are suggesting that history, that *feminism*, moves in a linear fashion where the future always equates to positive progress. If we, the people of modern day, are truly smarter than those who lived before, then nothing from the past really matters and we are currently the best versions of ourselves. All of this seems a bit backwards, right?

The hit 2000s film *Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed* engages in themes of pop culture and feminism through the lenses of the "male gaze," visual pleasure theory, anger in women, and white power feminism. By using these ideas to reflect on the movie, it is clear that several aspects of the film perpetuate negative and harmful ideas that align with the pre-existing patriarchy. The film ultimately fails to portray women and other minorities in a thoroughly positive light, from being eye candy to a lack of personal authority to white-washed casting. The problematic overt and subtle messaging tinge this cult classic and should not be replicated in future iterations in the theatrical space as it is not simply "a product of its time," but it's not just on the media to make these changes. Well-educated audiences need to separate the patriarchal ideas and arguments from the content and novelty of the beloved franchises like the Mystery Inc. gang to enjoy the timeless nature of unique, one-of-a-kind cinematic cult classics. Whether future iterations will fill the holes left behind in its 2004 predecessor is another mystery the gang will have to solve.

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12   Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 18.
13   Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (New York City, NY: Penguin Group, 2008), 440.