

Television Criticism

Scooby-Doo Chasing Postmodernism

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Introduction

Jim Senstrum's 2001 film *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* represents many examples of the postmodernism lens in this children's movie. This film calls under many postmodernism sub lenses' such as intertextuality, transmedia, and simulacra. This paper will be pulling from multiple scholarly sources and how it's important to note how many television shows and films can connect to each other over a timeline. Interconnectedness is more often used in media and in everyday life when the viewer truly thinks about it. The draw of intertextuality in a text is to draw attention and a larger audience that otherwise would not have been to start with.

Transmedia helps gain the attention of the audience towards more products that can be potentially produced by the franchise in order to maintain excitement about the original product. Most popular franchises tend to market multiples of said products such as television shows, movies, spin-offs, merchandise, and so on. *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* does just that. The ongoing elements of postmodernism presented in *Scooby-Doo* and specifically this film, there is a recurring theme of reinforcing the status quo that there will always be something to reference of a television show or film or even items that can be presented at any time given the correct space. Manapop frequently mentions the amount of referencing to previous films or forms of media that *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* does to in Disney's 1982 film *Tron* (Brooks, 2019). This review touches on the intertextuality qualities of the film and how well it was produced compared to other *Scooby-Doo* films, and how they related to other sections of the franchise or

outside of it. Topics such as the listed above items will be covered and explained throughout the paper and analyzed to show how it supports the status quo.

Program Information

In the film *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase*, the plot begins with the Mystery Inc. driving in the Mystery Van to visit their old friend, Eric, who went to high school with the Mystery Inc.. Eric made a video game in honor of his mystery-solving friends and their everlasting adventures. The characters that are important to note in this program are Freddy, Shaggy, Scooby-Doo, Velma, Daphne, the in-game Mystery Inc., the Phantom Virus, Eric, Bill, Professor Robert Kaufman, and the security guard because they all serve an important role to the plot or subplots.

The Mystery Inc. is eventually digitized into the game by laser to try and fight off the Phantom Virus that appeared. The Mystery crew finds out that, in order to defeat the Phantom Virus, these friends have the only weapon the Phantom Virus is reactive to. This weapon is a giant magnet, but they either forget that they are in possession of the magnet or they end up running away in fear from not only the Phantom Virus but from other monsters the mystery-solving friends have defeated in the past. Near the end of the video game plot, Shaggy reveals that he was in possession of the giant magnet the entire game without realizing. This then ends the last level of the game and is transported back to reality while simultaneously defeating the Phantom Virus. The Mystery Inc. finds out who created the Phantom Virus and falsely accused Professor Robert Kaufman of this accident, then quickly figures out it was Bill who planted the computer virus out of jealousy for not being chosen for the science fair. As mentioned in an article from Common Sense Media, there are potential questions to discuss to viewer's children about the film regarding "cross-promotion", "Families can talk about the

meaning of ‘cross-promotion.’ How does this *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* DVD help sell the brand's video games, and how do the games help sell this DVD?” (pp. 4). Which is a bigger topic to attempt to explain to some children about. For some children, it might only take several months or even years to realize that the film was trying to promote the franchise’s new video game that was being released soon. So when bringing this thought provoking question up at an earlier age, children that are consuming these types of texts, they can constantly think about this sort of question.

There were some major themes in the film regarding postmodernism and how most articles mentioned the intertextuality of the films. Most of these scholarly articles mentioned that when reinforcing the status quo of the usage of “cross-promotion” it is an effective way without it being completely noticeable at first sight. Most of *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* is an advertisement for the video game also named, *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* which plays into the sublenses of postmodernism such as intertextuality, transmedia, and simulacra.

In the book *New Narratives*, there are explanations on how Lego Star Wars uses the same tactics to build their franchising by expanding their presence in other film worlds to continue to encourage consumers to feed into the franchise. Some of the articles that will help further explain the claims that this film supports the status quo of postmodernism is, O’Donnell’s Television Criticism 3 because it explains true definitions of the lens and the themes within the lens. Another scholarly article is *New Narratives* which has a chapter on transmedia and the world of *Star Wars* because it explains very well the extensions of media *Scooby-Doo* takes on the same concept of building the franchise with merchandise and video games that derive from the original *Scooby-Doo* text. Moving on, there’s also more information on how postmodernism doesn’t just appear in children’s animated television, but in reality television like *Glee* and *American Idol* so

that article is included as well in order to further the abilities of explaining a postmodern lens. *The Simpsons* is a big example of postmodernism in the world of animated television, so that is in the paper along with online reviews for the *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase*. An important note to the citations of minutes of scenes, I was unable to purchase the movie on my laptop, so I was able to find a full YouTube playlist that has just simply cut the film into sections of five minutes. The entire film is still there, but it's just broken up to be free on YouTube.

Lens/Description of Approach

Here, I will be conducting the theoretical background to this film; *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* in the Postmodern lens. There is an exuberant amount of intertextuality, transmedia, and simulacra throughout the film. Postmodernism has many definitions and ways to refer to it, but in O'Donnell's *Television Criticism 3* (2017), postmodernism is defined to be, "A controversial term that is often used to describe the style and aesthetics of contemporary television as well as architecture, the arts, and fashion. ... Postmodernism breaks down the traditions of modernism, for it means that a body of work is nonlinear, playful, and assembled from various other forms" (p. 177-179). Postmodernism in the television perspective brings other forms of texts together creating spaces for the audience to decipher their own meanings to what's being viewed.

Postmodernism also refers to its sublenses of intertextuality, transmedia, and simulacra.

One of the sub lenses that will be discovered in this text is intertextuality, it drives the definition of postmodernism even further because it's taking references from previous texts and combining it into something new for the audience to think further about the placement importance. According to O'Donnell (2017) intertextuality also, "includes allusions to other television programs, films, from the past, actors, songs, and news events, is a regular feature in

many television programs” (p. 181). Many television shows use this technique and is more common when being aware of its usage. The enjoyment of viewing these shows increases for the audience because it brings in other texts that they could have enjoyed earlier leading into some nostalgia and appreciation for how those references are now used in that text or others. *The Simpsons* had done an amazing job with this element before *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* with using references from the news, to modern events, and sometimes making fun of the media. This is also used to keep viewer engagement higher since it’s something that the audience can almost immediately relate to since what is being referenced is commonly current events. In Knox’s scholarly article *The Simpsons* (2006) notes, “Since its inception in the late 1980s, this copyrighted brand has been firmly entrenched in consumer culture as a multibillion dollar global merchandising phenomenon” (p. 73). When using text in this way specifically, will catch the attention of an audience member that might be using the show as background noise, this show does it well so the audience wants to engage with the text on the screen. Intertextuality also calls to the viewer’s innerself and how they can personally relate to the text, and for the viewer to be constantly involved with how the text can evolve along with continuously referenced to others to grow a larger audience to that text.

After looking into intertextuality, another sub lens that can further explain how postmodernism is used in *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* is transmedia. It helps with this concept as well because there is not only the intertextuality, but the promotion to other texts that can be produced. Transmedia used in popular television shows are more focused on audience engagement creating a loyal viewership like in *The Bachelor* franchise and *American Idol*. According to scholarly source from Wood & Baughman (2012) *Glee Frandom and Twitter: Something New, or More of the Same Old Thing?* Stated that, “transmedia franchises like

American Idol have demonstrated the shift from television advertising and networks' focus on quantity of viewers to focusing on the quality of 'audience engagement' (Jenkins, 2006, p.63), thus, loyal and sustainable viewership" (p. 329). Transmedia continues the franchise further by creating other television shows that can have gender roles reversed like in *The Bachelor* and how the producers came up with *The Bachelorette* to continue to hold the audience's loyalty and attention. These companies can also create more films, sell merchandise, video games, PR events, and even brand deals with food companies that can further convince the audience to continue these franchises. *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* performs in these examples very well, considering that it is a film advertising the video game that's about to be released at that time. The game also includes features from previous *Scooby-Doo* cast members and villains with references to other television shows in the animation that can engulf the consumer further.

Another sub lens of postmodernism that is presented in *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* is the usage of simulacra. Simulacra refers to how convincing postmodernism is used in this film. To the characters in the animation, it feels real when they're digitized in the video game because they can physically interact with the computer generated clones of themselves and past and present villains. Simulacra is important in the lens of postmodernism since there is typically a line of what's real and what isn't but can be blurred very easily that there is almost no difference. This happens often in reality television shows, in this film the line of what's real and what isn't is what's in the game and what's truly reality. In this context, it is best displayed when the Mystery Inc. is digitized into the game, but in other texts like reality television, it's more so of what's scripted and what isn't like in *The Bachelor* or in the news. According to Morris' scholarly article *Simulacra in the Age of Social Media: Baudrillard as the Prophet of Fake News* (2021) there's a discussion how social media influences the news and how sometimes viewers can't tell

the difference between real news and “fake news”, “Baudrillard argued that these technologies of communication engendered a media world that exists in parallel to reality, breaking the traditional linguistic relationship of sign and meaning” (p. 321). This is important to consider when looking at the lens of postmodernism and how deep it actually can go. When not directly thinking about the lens, the line of reality and “fake news” blurs more than before and the difficulty of telling the difference rises.

Analysis/Interpretation

Intertextuality

There were many forms of intertextuality throughout the film. It started off by referencing SuperMan and his Kryptonite. Then in the Cybervverse it was Land of the Lost tv series, the franchise’s original characters from previous series of *Scooby-Doo*, *Spongebob SB-129* episode, original *Tron*. Intertextuality in postmodernism defined by O’Donnell (2017) means, “Includes allusions to other television programs, films from the past, actors, songs, and news events, is a regular feature in many television programs” (p. 181). Which is prominent in this film with the intertextuality within its own world of the franchise. O’Donnell mentions how television has the power to bring attention to itself in order to gain audience attention. In the first ten minutes of the film (Part 3, 1:12 - 1:20) there’s attention called to other well known figures to audience members referencing SuperMan and Kryptonite where Bill and Professor Kaufman explain the incident with the virus they had the night before:

Professor Kaufman: “Had an adverse effect on the virus”

Billy: “Yeah, and it seemed like the magnet weakened him, like Kryptonite and SuperMan!”

This draws the attention of the viewer immediately to pay attention to the film's intertextuality capabilities. This reference also fits in the context of the film because it's more of a physical item that can weaken the enemy rather than a weapon like in other action or horror films. Especially because both of these items are more of something natural from a planet and both of these characters in either film get extremely weak when around these objects.

There are nods to the way that the animation is set up that not just by looking at the scene would be picked up unless viewers consume heavy amounts of a variety of texts to point out. The transition scenes when the Mystery Inc. is going through different levels of Eric's video game does specifically do that. With the animation of these specific transitions, it looks very similar to Spongebob episode, SB-129, when Squidward is stuck in the void "alone".



Figure 1 shows the Mystery Inc. confused where they are while transitioning levels. Figure 2 shows how this similarly happened to Squidward in Spongebob SB-129 where he is stuck in the void alone.

Both of these scenes are seen as in this void of not knowing where they are in time, space, or anywhere of that matter. You can see in Figure 1 that the Mystery Inc. is registering confusion as to where they are until the video game is generated around them again (Part 8, 4:27 - 4:28). Then in Figure 2 Squidward is seen as content in the void until seconds later breaks into pure panic that he has no idea where he is until he is then brought back to the time machine. The plot of the movie is also very similar to Disney's 1982 film *Tron*, "Scooby-Doo and friends find themselves digitized and sucked into a computer game, and if that premise sounds a tad familiar to you, that would be because it was pretty much ripping off Disney's 1982 sci-fi movie **Tron**" (Brooks 1).

From this review of *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* there is a detail that isn't exactly sought out until it's realized by someone previous. The entire plot is almost similar to many other types of the mystery and crime detective work genre that now has the element of Sci-Fi.

Then lastly, in the film there are constant examples of intertextuality within the original cast, monsters, and villains. Their first encounters with each other present the main cast of the film into a shock along with the digitized cast members and villains.

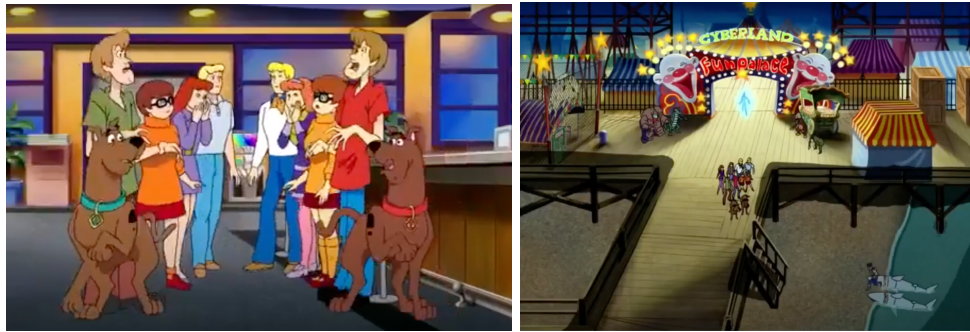


Figure 3 shows how the Mystery Inc. is confused and shocked as to why they're seeing themselves in the video game.

Figure 4 shows the shock that they're all running into past villains.

In minutes (Part 9, 1:04 - 2:00) shows in Figure 3 that the cast playing the game is shocked to see replicas of themselves in the past. In Figure 4 all of the digitized old monsters and villains are surrounding both versions of the Mystery Inc. along with the Phantom Virus (Part 10, 1:53 - 3:00). Here is intertextuality within the *Scooby-Doo* franchise because it's promoting to watch the other television series and films this film derived from and possibly entice the viewer to buy the video game and other merchandise from the franchise.

While also thinking about the smaller intertextuality in the film like, Disney's 1982 *Tron*, there's the reference from Brooke's Manapop article (2019), "This time out, Scooby-Doo and friends find themselves digitized and sucked into a computer game, and if that premise sounds a tad familiar to you, that would be because it was pretty much ripping off Disney's 1982 sci-fi movie **Tron**" (pp. 1). How the plot is very similar to that movie but chose to make it something

new in this film. There is also a small connection with Land of the Lost with the dinosaurs in one of the fighting levels (Part 8, 0:28 - 1:01). There could even be more than what's noted since there technically isn't anything new in television anymore, everything is referencing previous works to make a different story.

All of these examples of intertextuality connect to the theme of postmodernism almost like a puzzle because it encourages the audience to think about what they're watching while they're watching it. While going into detail on how original texts were met with previous classic texts, it also encourages other levels of postmodernism without realizing it initially which keeps the viewers engaged and loyal to the patterns of this style of production such as transmedia and simulacra.

Transmedia

Just as prominent intertextuality is, transmedia is as important to note in this *Scooby-Doo* film. The first transmedia theme to note in the film is how the Mystery Inc. is digitized into a video game about themselves. *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* is in of itself also is a form of transmedia of the *Scooby-Doo* franchise since it's a film based off of the original animated television series that has many reboots, live action films, clothing, toys, stuffed animals, and video games of *Scooby-Doo*. Transmedia is the extension of a text that was already made and the franchise wants to expand on the brand. When first introduced to this film, I did not realize that it was a drawn out version of an advertisement for the franchise's game *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase*. I thought it was just a different form of script for *Scooby-Doo* than all of the rest which made it more entertaining to watch. At the end of the film, there is an after credits scene where animation was brought out entirely differently than the rest of the film and was the more pushing

part of the advertisement of the video game about to be released at the time. This scene can be found at (Part 15, 0:51 - 4:47). It pushed a lot throughout the film on how viewers can eventually play these characters as if they were in CyberSpace with the Mystery Inc., but in the comfort of their own homes.

The Star Wars franchise is very similar in this advertising aspect and usage of postmodernism because they not only managed to make all seven of the Star Wars films, reboots of the films (add-ons), different versions of animated television series, clothing, stuffed animals, toys, various video games on different platforms, and even being able to fit in the world of Legos with a Lego Star Wars video game. Not to mention that they even have a “Star Wars Land” in Disney World where fans are able to meet these characters and act like they’re in Tatooine with each other. In the context of the *Star Wars* game, there is more of a freedom with how to navigate the world which makes the audience to this franchise even more excited to play the game and stay involved which is crucial to fan loyalty. According to Page and Thomas (2011), “By exploring the development processes of the *LEGO Star Wars* teams and their engagements with Lucasfilm, we gain a glimpse of the unexpected freedoms offered the games’ designers in working with the otherwise fiercely protected *Star Wars* canon (see Jenkins 1992)” (p. 240). Not only does it give the viewer some sort of control in the franchise at a small scale, but there’s transmedia that’s being presented without realizing. The world of *Star Wars* is being put into another universe making that video game also a form of transmedia and postmodernism. Very similar to what *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* are doing with promoting their video game and merchandise. Like mentioned before, advertising the video game while in the film about a video game.

Simulacra

Simulacra is an important piece of the postmodernist lens because it explains how things can become more realistic than reality when in these worlds. It can also be referred to as being under a spectacle in society and how easily society believes what's being told to them. The incident of when Mystery Inc. had been digitized by a laser into the video game created by Eric, honoring his mystery solving friends was a presentation of how society is a spectacle. They were able to be shot into the game to fight the Phantom Virus that was later revealed to be created by Bill, Eric's lab partner. When Mystery Inc. appeared in the video game for the first time, they were shocked that the game simulated reality so well while they were there. The frame then shot back to the lab where Eric, Bill, Professor Kaufman, and the security guard were explaining how Eric's friends were stuck in the game until they beat every level since there wasn't a way to just take them out of CyberSpace before that. In (Part 5, 0:30 - 0:35):

Bill: "Until they can get out by winning every level of the game, the danger in there will be very real."

This now expresses the true danger that the Mystery Inc. is in like they are in every episode or movie, but usually with people hiding under the masks, these monsters and villains are as real as they are outside of the video game. This relates back to the theme of how real a simulation can be because even though the Mystery Inc. isn't in true danger, the simulation is very real that they could be. This is the same as for when the Mystery Inc. meets the original cast of *Scooby-Doo* and the villains because they seem so real to the digitized Mystery Inc., they can't tell if they're truly a simulation or not until they get to know them more after the initial encounter and work together to defeat the Phantom Virus that's in their world.

Evaluation

Based on my analysis of the film *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase*, this text reinforces the status quo because there is a constant presence of each theme of postmodernism throughout the film. The program is well-made for an animated film in the 2000s, especially for the franchise to branch out from their usual storyline and genre which is mystery and crime fighting detective work to being featured as mystery and sci-fi in this film. The amount of emphasis on intertextuality in this film is fascinating to see after knowing all of the texts that it pulls from, and even if it wasn't intertextuality the film did an amazing job with connecting different texts I forgot about in my childhood without directly referencing the text specifically. For a children's animated film, it does a great job of promoting the video game that was coming out without specifically mentioning that the franchise was selling a video game that was similar to the movie. When watching it as a child I remembered that I didn't realize that there was a video game from the movie until years after and thinking that it was good marketing on their part. The film also reinstates the status quo with transmedia because there are extensions of advertising the brand repeatedly without directly advertising it, instead through creative liberty of the film. The viewers can't tell immediately that it's an advertisement either until maybe months or years after the film was released. Plus as a child watching the film, there's a greater chance of their influence to buy the video game after watching the film than not watching it at all. That's what's so unique about this film, is that it's not directly influencing the audience to purchase more of their media, instead it's showing them what fun they could have if they were stuck inside a computer to fight off monsters and villains.

Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase does a great job with incorporating all sub lenses of postmodernism and breaking it down for the younger audience members to understand at a

smaller scale, and for the older audience to explain what the film is doing with postmodernism in a simpler manner to learners. This film was very interesting with its style of animation included in the after credit scene as well as the thoughtfulness of the transitions to other levels of the game the Mystery Inc. had to play in order to exit the game. The expressions of each character's face is appreciated because facial expressions are often lost in animation. The attention to detail with each reference made on purpose or accidental was used correctly as well. Postmodernism reinforced the status quo and most of it was obvious to the naked eye, and some had to be investigated closer.

Conclusion

To conclude my findings, *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* is a good example of how postmodernism works and especially to children, but often goes over their heads when they watch this type of media and are stuck in the world of if the Mystery Inc. was stuck in a video game or not. There were constant themes of intertextuality in the film from other texts across platforms and broadcast companies, transmedia was an important extension to this franchise and how the film was articulated to not be immediately noticed as an advertisement for the video game that was actually being released is important to remember, and finally how simulacra was an important step as well to prove the status quo of postmodernism in *Scooby-Doo and the Cyber Chase* connected to how the ability of unawareness to what's real and what's fake in this animation is impressive. There could be further research on this film regarding hegemonic masculinity, but more specifically in other television episodes or films since it's more prominent in those.

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