"If It Hadn't Been for You Meddling Kids": The Explained Supernatural in an Irrational Age

Maria Purves

Abstract
This paper investigates some popular twentieth-century incarnations of the 'explained supernatural' narrative which came to prominence in the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century. Recent developments in the representation of well-known heroes of the debunking narrative – the kids in Scooby-Doo, Sherlock Holmes – have them battling the actual supernatural, and behaving like superheroes. Referencing accepted readings of the explained supernatural as reflecting the shift in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from credulity to belief in scientific rationality, this paper suggests that the 'explained supernatural' also represented a celebration of the power of the mind at a time when machinery was replacing the human body. Today (by contrast) computers are replacing the mind, and we are being reduced to an irrational state by technology. Moreover science and technology have convinced us that the body is becoming invulnerable to ageing, illness and death. Linking this to the new physicality of characters such as Sherlock Holmes, this essay argues that our complete faith in science and technology – and our infantilisation by the same – has made possible a new 'explained supernatural' narrative model in which characters who formerly used only brainwork now need superhuman physical strength to get things done, and the supernatural is no longer explained away, but privileged.
Keywords: *Scooby-Doo, Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle, explained supernatural, Ann Radcliffe*

Whatever has happened to *Scooby-Doo*? The twentieth century's most popular animated incarnation of what Nicholas Paige terms the debunking narrative (Paige 2009: 163) in which supernatural events are proven to have a rational explanation ("It wasn't a ghost after all! It was Mr Jones from the Toy Museum!"), has been dealing in the actual supernatural. In several of the straight-to-video films of the last thirteen years and both feature-length live-action films, a brief preliminary plot in which the gang uncover a haunting's very

ordinary origins is succeeded by a genuinely supernatural plot which constitutes the film's focus. The first four straight-to-video films changed the format of the original series by introducing a darker tone and pitting the kids of "Mystery Inc." against supernatural forces. In *Scooby-Doo and the Witch's Ghost* (1999) for example, the gang meet a Gothic writer – a Stephen King figure – who is returning to his New England hometown. The town's *Oktoberfest* is said to be haunted by the writer's great aunt who was a witch, and tourists gather to experience the haunting. Outraged, the author sets about attempting to prove that his aunt was in fact just a healer, and the gang reveal the haunting to be fake to pull in tourist trade: however in the process, they help the author locate his aunt's buried spell book, which he then uses to unleash her. It turns out that she *was* in fact an evil witch, and he wants to win her magic power for himself. The film's climax sees the gang trying to take back the book whilst fighting off the powers of darkness. In the end Velma enlists a local teenage goth who is descended from an actual white witch and thus has the power to counteract black magic, to say the spell which returns the witch to hell (taking the writer with her!). As usual, it is Velma's powers of deduction that save the situation: that, at least, has not changed. But Velma's detective work can only go so far in making the problem disappear in this particular case.

These new-style Scooby-Doo plots, in which the 'explained supernatural' gives way to the actual supernatural, are curiosities, for films are still being made to the original format (one, *Scooby-Doo! Legend of the Phantosaur*, was made in 2011). It is as if the two narratives are interchangeable, complementary even – supernatural and explained supernatural, enchanted and disenchanted. The makers of these films are requiring their audience to accept that the supernatural exists and that some days "Mystery Inc." has to fight it, whereas on other days they simply have to unmask a greedy ne'er-do-well in the locale. Somehow the appeal to rational thought that lies behind debunking narratives has become lost, or replaced by a more fluid invitation to accept all possible narratives. The following is an investigation of why twenty-first-century audiences might be receptive to such an invitation.

Stories of disenchantment first appeared right at the beginning of the Enlightenment, in seventeenth-century France, as Paige

shows in his essay "Permanent Re-Enchantments". One of the tales within the novel *La Fausse Clélie* written in 1670 by Adrien-Thomas Perdoux de Subligny, "gives", Paige says, "in a nutshell the formula that will power thousands of gothic narratives, detective stories, and Scooby-Doo episodes" (Paige 2009: 163). Succinctly demonstrating a clear link between the first explained supernatural narratives and detective narratives (which will be important for this paper), Paige goes on to make the point that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debunking narratives served two purposes: "satisfying cognitive closure and […] vicariously experienced fear" (Paige 2009: 164). Transferring this model to the new Scooby-Doo films, we are given satisfying cognitive closure (the haunting is proven to be a fake) which is then overturned by supernatural developments rational thought (exemplified by Velma's detective work) can only partially solve. The "cognitive pleasure produced by devising a rational explanation that fits the data just as well as the supernatural explanation which at first suggests itself" (Paige 2009: 164) is given only to be taken away: (cognitive) pleasure denied. And there is another major development in the *Scooby-Doo* format, specifically in the feature-length live-action films: the kids have exaggerated physical strength and fighting skills. The formerly wet Daphne kick-boxes; tedious, organised Fred jousts, in macho fashion, on a motorbike; all climb, swing, and pack a punch as they were never wont to do in their early-format incarnations. This is something of a trope in recent cinema with reference to female characters, of course. Our animated childhood heroines are all becoming more physical: any girl who remembers Disney's Snow White, so static, so tippy-toey, so delicate that she needed little birds to lift her skirts as she walked, should be (pleasantly) surprised by Disney's current Rapunzel who uses her hair as a rope to swing her in and out of dangerous situations, rescuing her prince-to-be en-route. The new characterisation of Daphne in *Scooby-Doo* is clearly part of this effort to redefine the feminine. However the overall result of these major changes to the old formula is that the cognitive has become marginalised and the physical exaggerated.

   This is a trope we can also find in the recent Hollywood blockbusters *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows* (2012). Holmes is of course the most popular of all of

the Victorian debunking-narrative heroes[1]. And the films directed by Guy Ritchie, the first two in a planned series, represent a reimagination of the character for the new millennium, as fantasy fiction writer Genevieve Valentine argues. "For better or worse", she says, "this is the shape of the new classic" (Valentine 2009). Doyle created a character who is tall, lean and cadaverous, a body shape which throws his large elongated head starkly into relief. Holmes seems all skull[2], his cranium and/or brow often being made points of reference. "I had hardly expected so dolichocephalic a skull or such well-marked supra-orbital development", says phrenologist Dr James Mortimer in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, "[a] cast of your skull, sir, until the original is available, would be an ornament to any anthropological museum. It is not my intention to be fulsome, but I confess that I covet your skull" (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle 2007: 181). Watson calls Holmes "a brain without a heart" (*The Greek Interpreter*, Doyle 2007: 785) and throughout the oeuvre Holmes's occupation is referred to as "brain-work". All of which makes the point that the brain is very much the point: not just of the characterisation of Holmes (and indeed Moriarty: Holmes refers to Moriarty's highly-domed forehead, and describes him as "the controlling brain of the underworld, a brain which might have made or marred the destiny of nations", [*The Valley of Fear*, Doyle 2007: 308]) but also of the stories. In his investigations, Doyle does not allow the character of Holmes to stray even for a moment from the realms of rational deduction. While the title of a few particular stories might be explicitly Gothic – *The Sussex Vampire*, *The Devil's Foot* – and the stories may open with Holmes's client putting before him a case described in purely supernatural terms, Holmes sets out his stall immediately, warning Watson and the other characters that he will not countenance any notion of the supernatural:

"Are we to give serious attention to such things? This Agency stands flatfooted upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No ghosts need apply." (*The Sussex Vampire*, Doyle 2007: 1298)

---

[1] There are several debunking narratives – stories in which the supernatural is explained – in the Holmes canon.
[2] This feature was repeated in the early twentieth century by Sax Rohmer in his character Moris Klaw.

This is a trope of the debunking narrative, as illustrated by Paige with reference to the seventeenth-century tales of Subligny: the reader is presented with a possibility which is immediately foreclosed. The trope puts us in mind of Goethe's description of rationality, which "wants to hold everything still, so that it can utilise it". Unlike reason which, Goethe says, "rejoices in whatever evolves"[3], rationality freezes the possibilities and works backwards and inwards from there. Holmes is operating in absolute accordance with the laws of rationality when he stops the narrative of supernatural possibility in its tracks. The reader, like Watson, is then beguiled by various gothic motifs (the misty moors in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the graves and black cliffs in *The Devil's Foot*, oral and physical evidence of diabolical and supernatural phenomena) until s/he fears that Holmes must surely be wrong! Of course, he never is. A Holmesian narrative is, as I have said, all about the brain: Holmes's strength of mind never gives out, never gives up the rational quest.

In the Guy Ritchie films we are offered another Holmes: small, punchy, and incredibly strong. This Holmes has been reimagined with new focus on the brief references in the books to Holmes's expertise in fist-fighting, stick fighting and martial arts. Reinventing him as, to quote Ritchie, a "more visceral" figure (in "Sherlock Holmes: Reinvented", an extra feature on the *Sherlock Holmes* DVD [2009]), the focus of the director and screenwriter is on a fantasy of Holmes's body rather than on his cranium. He is still a genius, but unlike the literary Holmes, he thinks fast and on-the-hoof, usually just before performing feats of impossible physical agility in action scenes worthy of *Die Hard*. His beaten, naked torso is often centre-shot, reinforcing Yvonne Tasker's well-known reading of action cinema as a genre "draw[ing] on […] those Christian traditions of representation which offer up the suffering white male body as spectacle" (Tasker 1993: 74). The spectacular body here is super-humanly strong and agile. In addition, in the first film Holmes channels black magic to help him solve the mystery. This is a Holmes who, trying to put himself into the mind of an evil opponent, draws a pentacle and casts a spell as though it were second-nature to him,

---

[3] Both quotes by Goethe, *Maximen und Reflektionen* (1888), in English translation come from McGilchrist (2009: 360).

sits in it, and opens himself up to possible supernatural forces. Nothing supernatural happens: Holmes uses black magic ritual as a consumer, gaining material rather than mystical knowledge from it. However a boundary has been crossed in our understanding of, and engagement with, the character of Holmes. This new Holmes is being implicitly presented as less rational, a consumer rather than a forecloser of possible narratives (which, I want to argue, is what we the audience are being asked to become). In addition, he has become a type of a superhero, possessing amazing physical skills. If we return to those *Scooby-Doo* films where it is assumed that audiences are agreeable to switching wantonly from a belief in the validity of the explained supernatural narrative (the rational) to its exact opposite – combined with a new emphasis on the physical abilities of the detective group – we have a case for arguing that a shift has taken place in the 'explained supernatural' form.

Much has been written about the explained supernatural in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a site of celebration, as it were, of the triumph of scientific rationality over credulity. As a continuation of this argument I would suggest that the 'explained supernatural' in popular detective fiction such as that of Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins and their followers might be read as a celebration of the powers of the brain at a time when machines were replacing the human body on a huge scale and with great rapidity. It was a celebration highlighting two concurrent, contiguous responses to mechanisation: self-congratulation that humans were clever enough to have created machines to do their work for them; and vague unease that our brains were the only useful part of us left. The drug-abusing Holmes embodies the unease of the latter response:

I cannot live without brain-work. What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? (*The Sign of Four*, Doyle 2007: 102)

I do not have space here to expand upon this reading other than to say that Dorothy L. Sayers touches upon something similar in her well-known essay "The Omnibus in Crime". She argues (in an

upbeat way because she is not siting detective fiction as I am within the Gothic, with its inherently dystopian worldview) that detective fiction became popular precisely because detectives were seen as a new type of protector for the industrial and post-industrial age:

In the nineteenth century the vast, unexplored limits of the world began to shrink at an amazing and unprecedented rate. The electric telegraph circled the globe; railways brought remote villages into touch with civilisation; photographs made known to the stay-at-homes the marvels of foreign landscapes, customs, and animals; science reduced seeming miracles to mechanical marvels; popular education and improved policing made town and country safer for the common man than they had ever been. In place of the adventurer and the knight errant popular imagination hailed the doctor, the scientist, and the policeman as saviours and protectors. If one could no longer hunt the manticora, one could still hunt the murderer; if the armed escort had grown less necessary, yet one still needed the analyst to frustrate the wiles of the poisoner; from this point of view, the detective steps into his right place as the protector of the weak – the latest of the popular heroes, the true successor of Roland and Lancelot. (Sayers 1980: 56)

The cerebralist plodder, the disenchanter, the forecloser of supernatural narrative, replaced the knight – the physical hero of romantic/supernatural fantasy – in the nineteenth-century popular imagination. What then is the significance of the 'classic' twenty-first-century recreation of Sherlock Holmes into a physical hero? Sayers's reading of doctors and scientists hailed as saviours and protectors is key here, for it is, I want to argue, that same worshipful trust which has led to the re-enchanted debunking narratives discussed in this paper in which supernatural possibility is restored, and thinkers/plodders become superheroes with supra-physical bodies. I want to read these chimeras formed from competing narratives as the natural outcome of this century's relationship with science and technology.

   The debunking narrative which symbolised a celebration of brainpower in an era in which mechanisation had usurped the usefulness of the human body does not have the same relevance in this highly technological age. In this age computers are analysing, calculating, researching, and processing: taking over the brain's territory. The position of the brain is not as secure as it was. This,

I suggest, would be the *core* explanation for the brain's demotion in the material discussed here. Had I the space I would investigate the nuances of this argument, demonstrating how steampunk imagery in both *Sherlock Holmes* the movie and *Scooby-Doo II* positions both films within the anachronistic Gothic: a genre which consistently questions the drive behind scientific and technological progress (see Rose 2009). We might then investigate whether or not these films symbolise anxiety about the brain's usurpation by technology, much as the literary Sherlock Holmes, who feels dead when he is not engaged in mental activity, could be said to be giving voice to a general discourse about industrialisation and the fear that brainwork was the only thing left to us. However my focus has to be the impulse behind the decision to privilege the supra-physical body over the brain and its implications within a wider cultural discourse; and for that Sayers's premise is useful.

From hailing doctors and scientists as saviours we have developed unassailable faith in science and technology. Our faith in them has enabled us to believe unwaveringly in their promises. Medical technology and biotechnology promise – assert – that they will make our bodies invulnerable to age and disease. As Richard Stivers argues in his book *Technology as Magic*, "[we expect] the creation of a new nature and a perfect human being" (Stivers 1999: 7). We are avid consumers of what Stivers terms "technological utopianism [which] suggest[s] that technology will permit us to solve all natural and social problems and to perfect the human body" (Stivers 1999: 61). In a very recent broadsheet newspaper there was an article which claimed, without obvious irony, that "medicine and technology are turning us all into superheroes" (Sandbrook 2011). This dream is behind the reshaping of narratives in which formerly the brain was eminent. They demonstrate a cultural desire to celebrate science's promise to make the human body invulnerable, perfectly strong and perfectly powerful.

The new physicality of the formerly cerebral hero also represents our faith in science and technology. Because as I mentioned earlier, the appeal to rational thought that lies behind the debunking narrative is being replaced by an assumption that we can and will accept all possible narratives. Thus the supernatural appears in disenchanting narratives, as though that were not a contradiction in terms. The rational and the irrational have become complementary;

and we, the audience, are required not to question that. What lies behind the assumption that we will not question is our credulity. Increasingly we have invested science and technology with the same faith that used to be reserved for religious mysteries and supernatural beliefs. And what are science and technology if not forms of magic, as both Stivers, and Andrew Murphie in *Technologies of Magic*, have argued? Says Murphie, "[m]agic has always been about power – over life and death and illness, over transformation, over appearance and disappearance. This is what technology is increasingly about as well" (Murphie 2006: 114). He goes on to argue, with reference to the arguments of Michael Taussig in *The Nervous System*, that our relationship with medical practice for example is "mystification and absolute knowledge on one side (for the medical system), psychological pain on the other (for the patient)" (Murphie 2006: 115), which, to me, sounds identical to the old relationship between believer and priest. "What is precisely lost in such a medical approach is the *singular cognitive process of the patient*" argues Murphie, resonating with my argument about the removal of the cognitive process from debunking narratives; "Magic", he concludes, "rather more than knowledge itself [is] the theme of our age" (Murphie 2006: 116).

Reason and its open-minded process of empirical discovery by which the Enlightenment gained dominance over religion is not relevant to this age because of its tendency towards unquestioning faith – in science and technology. It is a strangely circular journey which has returned us to an irrational state. As Stivers argues, "[w]e tacitly sense that the more powerful the technological system becomes, the less powerful we are" and the irrational, he claims, is our refuge; from the mystifying complexities of new technology; from our subconscious recognition of the fact that "the more rational the system is, the less meaning and hope it can provide" (Stivers 1999: 207). Stivers claims that we idealise childhood, and that we do so because children "perfectly embody the ultimate […] mythological symbol of technological utopianism – happiness"; indeed children are far from physical degradation and death: they also "turn to reason only as a last resort" (Stivers 1999: 206). From hero-worshipping *Scooby-Doo*'s Mystery Inc., we have in a sense become meddling kids of a different kind in a new spirit of irrationality: we have made possible the hybridisation of 'explained supernatural' and supernatural.

I want to make a final observation on the role of the supernatural in these films. I have argued (broadly) that its presence is an accommodation of our credulity as an audience which has, culturally, found refuge in the irrational. In the *Scooby-Doo* films the supernatural is also quite clearly shaping rationality as an outmoded, even irrelevant, discourse. Velma and the gang may solve the mystery early on; but that narrative is quickly surpassed by a much more colourful, exciting one involving supernatural forces. The new *Scooby-Doo* functions in much the same way as disenchantment tales which vicariously gave readers that warm glow of superiority at the "aha!" moment when the credulous are made to look foolish and the mystery is explained rationally. The thrilling physical fight against dark forces in these films renders pointless the earlier mystery, involving, for example, the owner of a failing toy factory trying to scare developers away with a flying clown costume on a string. The detective process – brainwork – is trivialised. The explained supernatural is outclassed by the supernatural (the rational by the irrational). A similar sense of the supernatural outperforming the explained supernatural is achieved by the Gothic/steampunk contextualisation of Sherlock Holmes in the Ritchie film (it almost has the feel of Tim Burton's camp-gothic *Sweeney Todd*), combined with Holmes's accommodation of the supernatural in the film (both of which, incidentally, link the film to Gothic literary examples in the gaslamp romance/gaslamp fantasy genre in which Holmes actually confronts the supernatural: Fred Saberhagen's *The Holmes-Dracula File*, for example)[4]. Framing Sherlock Holmes within a context resonant with Gothic values (the unexplained, the uncanny) forecloses or at the very least destabilises his natural habitat of the rational, making this Holmesian narrative almost the inverse of its forebears. The cinematic gothicisation of Sherlock Holmes is far from what Doyle had in mind: his occasional employment of a Gothic landscape served only to make the impact of the rational more fully felt when the entirely material nature of the mystery is revealed (the moment when, for example, the looming, dark figure regularly seen in relief on the moorland crag turns out

---

[4] For instance Loren Estleman's *The Tale of the Sanguinary Count* (1978), Stuart Davies' *The Tangled Skein* (1992), Watkin Jones's *The Case of the Scarlet Woman: Sherlock Holmes and the Occult* (1999).

to be Holmes pootling around happily in the moor's Iron Age ruins whilst keeping an eye on the action). The full gothicisation of Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* diminishes the force of the rational and can therefore plausibly be read as a critique of the Doylean/ Holmesian principle: that there is a material explanation for every mystery. It would seem that, currently, mystery is not something we are in any hurry to question.

Interestingly *Scooby-Doo II: Monsters Unleashed* is set in a museum which celebrates all of the gang's past cases. The costumes worn by the villains from all the old cartoons are displayed in glass cabinets. The villain is a mad scientist (steampunk imagery in this film is explicit, as are references to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) who steals the costumes and, with a strange substance he has concocted in his lab, makes them come alive. As clear a metaphor as any for the emptiness, redundancy, and outmodedness of rationality and her cerebral fictions (the old rationally-explained mysteries are literally museum pieces) which need new life breathed into them by the unexplained if they are to entertain a twenty-first-century audience.

References

DOYLE, ARTHUR CONAN, 2007, *Sherlock Holmes. The Complete Stories*, Wordsworth Editions Limited, Ware.

GOETHE, JOHANN WOLFANG VON, [1888] 1991, *Maximen und Reflektionen*, in K. Richter (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. XVII, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich.

MCGILCHRIST, IAIN, 2009, *The Master and His Emissary*, Yale U.P., New Haven-London.

MURPHIE, ANDREW, 2006, "Magic and Consciousness", in J. Potts and E. Scheer (eds), *Technologies of Magic. A Cultural Study of Ghost, Machines and the Uncanny*, Power Publications, Sydney, pp. 112-24.

PAIGE, NICHOLAS, 2009, "Permanent Re-enchantments: On Some Literary Uses of the Supernatural from Early Empiricism to Modern Aesthetics", in J. Landy and M. Saler (eds), *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, Stanford U.P., Stanford, pp. 159-81.

ROSE, MARGARET, 2009, "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 20 (3), pp. 319-33.

SANDBROOK, DOMINIC, 2011, Review of *Supergods* by Grant Morrison, *The Sunday Times*, July 3rd, http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/non_fiction/article659771.ece, last accessed October 14, 2012.

SAYERS, DOROTHY L., [1928] 1980, "The Omnibus of Crime", in Robin W.
      Winks (ed.), *Detective Fiction. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice
      Hall, Englewood Cliffs (NJ)-London, pp. 53-84.
STIVERS, RICHARD, 1999, *Technology as Magic. The Triumph of the Irrational*,
      Continuum, New York.
TASKER, YVONNE, 1993, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action
      Cinema*, Routledge, London and New York.
VALENTINE, GENEVIEVE, 2009, "*Sherlock Holmes:* It's Elementary", *Fantasy
      Magazine*, http://www.fantasy-magazine.com/reviews/sherlock-holmes-
      its-elementary/, last accessed October 10, 2012.

Video-animated films

Scooby-Doo and the Witch's Ghost. Dir. Jim Stenstrum. Warner Brothers
      Animation, 1999.
Scooby-Doo! Legend of the Phantosaur. Dir. Etan Spaulding. Warner
      Brothers Animation, 2011.

Films

Scooby-Doo II: Monsters Unleashed. Dir. Raja Gosnell. Warner Brothers,
      2004.
Sherlock Holmes. Dir. Guy Ritchie. Warner Brothers, 2009.
Sherlock Holmes: Game of Shadows. Dir. Guy Ritchie. Warner Brothers,
      2011.