

David Lavery
The X-Files

The X-Files is a long-running television series, created by Chris Carter, a former writer and editor (of the magazine *Surfing*), which premiered on the Fox Network in the US in September of 1993, starring David Duchovny as Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Special Agent Fox Mulder and Gillian Anderson as Dr. Dana Scully, his partner. Though it gained little acclaim early in its run, this moody visually stunning "quality TV" series went on to become first a cult hit and then a popular success, eventually making the top twenty in the Nielsen ratings. In a self-congratulatory but essentially accurate observation, Carter has acknowledged that "the show's original spirit has become kind of the spirit of the country—if not the world."

The X-Files generated a wide variety of paratexts—including novels, official and unofficial guides books, an official magazine, and, of course, academic examinations of the series—not to mention a wide variety of *X-Files* merchandise. Hundreds of fan websites on the Internet were devoted to the show, and its fans—who came to call themselves X-Philes—were among the most obsessed in all of popular culture. Now in its ninth season, its complex story lines, comprised of both stand-alone "monster of the week" episodes and segments that are part of a multi-season narrative arc known as the *X-Files* "mythology," have unfolded in over two hundred episodes and one feature film, *X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998). Over its run, the series has become increasingly self-referential and intertextual, offering hilarious spoofs of its own conventions and sending-up other media genres. With Duchovny's limited participation in the 2000-2001 season (his last on the show), the series experienced for the first time significant cast changes (Robert Patrick as Agent John Doggett became Scully's new partner). By general critical consensus the series began to decline. Many commentators even began to question the rationale (other than economic) for its continuance.

The degree to which *The X-Files* became in the last decade part of our cultural vocabulary can be demonstrated by an exchange from a first season episode of the WB series *Angel* in which Kendrick, an obviously sexist male detective, hassles female detective Kate Lockley (Elizabeth Rohm), who has come to believe in the reality of vampires. The following dialogue ensues:

Kendrick: "Come on, Kate. Everybody knows you've gone all Scully. Anytime one of these weird cases crosses anyone's desk you're always there. What's going on with you?"

Kate: "Scully is the skeptic."

Kendrick: "Huh?"

Kate: "Mulder is the believer. Scully is the skeptic."

Kendrick scratches his head: "Scully is the chick, right?"

Kate: "Yes. But she's not the one that wants to believe."

Although Kendrick does not seem to get the basic premise, the culture at large certainly did, and to "Scully" someone came to mean to doubt his or her questionable ideas—especially conspiracy theories. Mulder was open-minded about all sorts of paranormal possibilities, especially UFOs and alien abduction—had he not watched his own sister abducted when he was twelve years old? Scully, however, was the ever-questioning, scientifically objective medical doctor assigned to partner with (and reign in) Mulder in his investigation of the X-Files, those aberrant FBI cases that do not lend themselves to normal forensic investigation.

"The Kennedy assassination, MIA's, radiation experiments on terminal patients, Watergate, Iran-Contra, Roswell, the Tuskegee experiments—where will it end?" Mulder asks his informant Deep Throat in the first season of *The X-Files*. For

Graham, *The X-Files*, "television's *fin de siècle* compendium of conspiracy theories," is the apotheosis of American conspiratorial thinking stretching back to the 1960s. Likening Scully and Mulder to Woodward and Bernstein, she notes that Mulder's sister had been snatched by aliens while they were watching the Watergate Hearings on television. (Not surprisingly, Chris Carter has called Watergate "the most formative event of my youth" and spoken too of the strong influence of Harvard psychologist John Mack's controversial *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*.)

Driven by its "perpetual motion of suspicion" (Knight), *The X-Files* has contemplated much worse than mere political conspiracy. We learn in the mythology episodes that an international consortium ("The Syndicate") involving mysterious, powerful men meeting in drawing rooms in London and New York, working in cooperation with scientists from the Axis Powers supplied through "Operation Paper Clip," have known since the crash of a UFO at Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 of a coming alien invasion. Over the years conscientious viewers have very gradually come to realize that The Syndicate has been preparing for the end, bargaining for a delay so that they might, as a kind of peace overture to the invaders, offer them genetically engineered human-alien hybrids, purportedly as slaves for the powerful and ancient conquerors and (in secret) to prepare a cure, a serum, that would prevent their own colonization by the pathogenic Black Oil. They had long ago surrendered their own loved ones—wives, children (including Mulder's sister)—as hostages, in return for their own survival of the impending "viral holocaust." "Survival," the Well Manicured Man tells Mulder in the *X-Files* movie, "is the ultimate ideology."

The evil but compelling Cigarette Smoking Man (CSM)—Mulder calls him "Cancer Man"—one of the series' most interesting creations, serves, it seems, as The Syndicate's chief enforcer, one of them but working at their behest, though always putting his self-interest first. In the fourth season episode "Musings of a Cigarette-Smoking Man," we learn (or do we?) that his involvement in conspiracy is not limited to covering up the coming alien invasion. CSM assassinated both JFK and Martin Luther King, fixed the 1980 United States Olympic ice hockey upset of the Soviet Union, prevented the Buffalo Bills from ever winning the Super Bowl, and talks regularly on the phone with Saddam Hussein . . . But then again we are not certain of the validity of any of these "facts," which are buried two or three levels deep in the narrative, and CSM himself, it turns out, is a failed writer of bad Robert Ludlumish fiction. In "Jose Chung's *From Outer Space*" (third season), one of the series' most masterful episodes, Scully completes her narration of the events to an author who is completing the "non-fiction science fiction" book of the title and then admits that it "probably doesn't have the sense of closure you want, but it has more than our other cases"—a very self-conscious allusion to/defense of the often-complained-about-tendency of Mulder's and Scully's cases (and every *X-Files* episode) to end enigmatically and without full resolution.

It was probably inevitable in the climate of postmodernism that a television series so focused on conspiracy would itself generate paranoid criticism. Burns, drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno, suggests that this "very postmodern show" might be considered part of "a grand governmental conspiracy to 'keep the whole thing together,' meaning capitalism and its mass suppression." The sealing off of the eyes of the Alien Rebels in the series, she suggests, "pokes fun at the fantasy that television might, like the black oil, sneak in through our eyes and 'infect' us with alien cultural influences. While making "visible the buried social implications of centrist politics," the writers and producers of *The X-Files*, Burns proposes, have a more cynical secret agenda in mind: "step[ping] beyond the temptation simply to be noiresque and nihilistic; they realize their own roles as history bringers, via

television, through which they may—wittingly or not—participate in yet another conspiracy: that of draining the agency out of the American masses.” McLean, too, finds the series both cause and effect of contemporary conspiracy culture. “Scully and Mulder cannot be joined sexually or legally,” we are told, “because they are both literally and figuratively alienated, penetrated, and probed to the molecular level by omniscient and omnipotent forces who have infiltrated, like television and, now, computers, virtually everything in our lives.” We remain fans of the series, she thinks, despite the anxiety it induces, because “We *have* to believe in the reality of *something*, even if that something is the paranoia induced by television itself.”

From its inception *The X-Files* has given with one hand and taken away with the other, perpetually abandoning the viewer in a “hermeneutic limbo” (Knight). The series has not been content to merely “deny all knowledge”; it has, as Knight observes, taken as its subject “the *process* of repeatedly discovering everything you thought you knew is wrong.”

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See also Federal Bureau of Investigation, UFOs