

**Oblique Politics: The Conspiracy Theory at the Heart of *The X-Files***  
**Sara Martín, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona**

**Seminar “Popular Narratives and Contemporary Worlds”**  
**7th Conference European Society for the Study of English (ESSE)**

**Universidad de Zaragoza**  
**2004**

Along 9 seasons (1993-2002) *The X-Files* has charmed its audience with a convoluted narrative dealing with the efforts of plucky FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully to unmask a vast conspiracy. This will result in the invasion of planet Earth in the year 2012 by extraterrestrial aliens of unknown origin. This serial within the series, which spans about one third of *The X-Files* and was dubbed the ‘mythology’ by producer Chris Carter, reached thus a devastating end. The hero and his partner were left stranded outside the already infiltrated FBI, resigned to facing the future only with the dimmest hope that they might resist the aliens’ plans.

The ‘mythology’ is a classic conspiracy theory narrative and, as such, it unfolds imitating strip-tease dancers, slowly unveiling for the heroes’ and the audience’s benefit the ‘truth’ behind the gargantuan lies. As happens in all narratives of this subgenre, the hero begins a quest soon stumbling upon obstacles that make him doubt the steps taken so far and even the very reason for his quest –only to hit on a much larger, sinister truth. Thus, convinced that his little sister Samantha was abducted by extraterrestrials, Mulder discovers with Scully’s help that she’s part of a project begun in 1947 when contact was made with the aliens that crashed-landed in Roswell. In 1973, when it was seen that the global colonisation they were planning could not be stopped, an international secret group known as the Syndicate bargained for their own safety offering the aliens their collaboration to create a hybrid slave race, which, unlike humans, would survive the viral apocalypse the invaders would unleash on Earth. As a good-will token the Syndicate men, including Mulder’s father, handed over to the aliens members of their own families, which explains Samantha’s disappearance. The Syndicate tries for two decades to betray their allies by developing a vaccine but, unknown to them, a second alien faction rebels and wins a civil war against the colonisers which results in the collateral elimination of the Syndicate.

A second part of the conspiracy developed between seasons 6 and 9 suggesting that the US Government, including the FBI, and the military were already infiltrated by the rebels’ slaves, a breed of unstoppable super-soldiers resulting from the transformation of human bodies by means of a virus possibly developed in complicity with the military, behind the backs of the Syndicate and the colonisers. The invaders will presumably use this bio-engineered army of hybrids to defeat human beings when Armageddon comes. Only Mulder and Scully and their FBI replacements, John Doggett and Monica Reyes, know the truth.

Now that the series is over and despite the announcement of the release of the second feature film in 2006, it’s time to consider whether *The X-Files* is complicit with or critical of



the political inertia that conspiracy theory seems to foster both in real life and in fiction. John Edward Campbell argues that by using marginal discourses such as ufology and alien abduction *The X-Files* “embodies many of the characteristics identifying a politically subversive text ... focusing on the unaccountability of governmental authority and the impossibility of a democratic public sphere in an industrialised society” (2001: 330). This openness, though, is nothing but a ploy to, borrowing Roland Barthes’ terminology, inoculate viewers against taking real political action and cynically increase its appeal. Although *The X-Files* might be subversive, its potentially radical political message is thwarted by the fact that the series “reflects the ideological imperatives of the commercial media” (342) in which it thrives. Chris Carter has it thus both ways, being able “to openly attack the government and the military-industrial complex because the very extremity of its attacks defuses the possibility that they will instigate any significant political challenge to the status quo.” (342)

This is not a singular quality of Carter’s series nor of the medium that harboured it – television or the Fox Network– but rather a characteristic of conspiracy theory *per se*. *The X-Files*, though, seems to be specially frustrating for those that seek a regeneration of the American political body due to its sheer impact. Mark Fenster, for instance, values the expression in conspiracy theory of “a utopian desire to understand and confront the contradictions and conflicts of contemporary capitalism” (1999: 116) but criticises conspiracy theory communities for being unable “to construct an alternative, collective, working model of scholarship and resistance.” (117) He also complains that in influential conspiracy theory fiction like *The X-Files* the “detailed and grandiose description of an all-powerful conspiracy makes effective resistance seem improbable, if not impossible.” (130) Besides promoting conformity under the cover of the resistance preached by its famous slogans –‘Trust no one’, ‘I want to believe’, ‘The truth is out there’– *The X-Files* keeps an ambiguous stance towards conspiracy theory itself. As Fenster notes, the trio of conspiracy buffs that help Mulder, nicknamed The Lone Gunmen and originally thrown in for comic relief, are played “both ironically and affectionately” (133). Despite their hesitancy, Carter and company occasionally touch raw nerves whether by accident or conviction. The pilot episode of the short-lived spin-off devoted to The Lone Gunmen, aired in March 2001, narrated how the trio defused at the last minute a Government conspiracy to crash a Jumbo jet onto the World Trade Centre so as to increase decaying weapons exports. Either Bin Laden was watching Fox TV on that day or conspiracy theory, even when it’s just for fun, matters more than those who toy with it think.

“Like Mulder,” Lavery and company write “many X-philes want to believe, but Carter refuses to provide him or them any easy answers.” (1996: 13) But believe in what exactly? In the claims of conspiracy theorists? In the hope to resist the lie? In making a quick buck out of widespread paranoia? Is, in short, Carter’s attitude that of Scully, who thinks that Mulder and the Lone Gunmen “give too much credit to the Government” (E.B.E., 1.16)? Or, rather, that of populist Michael Moore who writes that “The powers that be [represented by *The New York Times*] are never going to tell us when the end is nigh, given the risk of mass pandemonium and subscription cancellations” (Moore 2003: 127) As Carter has often explained, Mulder and Scully sprang from his own split personality, with one side wanting to believe there’s more than boring everyday life out there and the other keeping sceptic tabs on this need. As Keith M. Booker notes this position is shared by most members of the series audience who’ve watched it, despite being cautious like Carter regarding conspiracy theory, “because it congratulates them on being sophisticated enough not even to try to resist the sinister forces that surround them.” (2002: 129) The series is bracketed historically by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the 11/9 terrorist outrage of 2001, years in which Americans, though



vaguely alert to menacing Third World forces envious of their privileged way of life, felt anxious that “no such threats were really serious, that there were no more glorious victories to be achieved, no more frontiers to conquer.” (127) Ironically, the same agency that employs the vigilant Mulder and the CIA failed to spot within US borders the very embodiment of those fears, the men that trained to do what *The Lone Gunmen* predicted. After the tragic collapse of the grandly named World Trade Center, Mulder’s planetary holocaust and the monster-of-the-week episodes suddenly seemed hollow threats. Audiences just stopped caring.

Carter, in short, had a strong intuition of the forces at work but by focusing on aliens rather than the politics of so-called reality he failed to, at least, create debate as for instance Oliver Stone’s *JFK* did. After watching Mulder take his crusade to its apocalyptic conclusion no one feels the need to found or join a political association of any kind to force the US Government to finally tell the truth about Roswell, if there is a truth to be told at all. *The X-Files* belongs to the moment when “the mainstream became tolerant and even accepting of reports of secret plans, cover-ups, and hidden agendas. Cynicism had replaced trusts in the authorities” (Goldberg 2001: 65) but this is cynicism that generates more fiction than action.

In *The X-Files* Roswell mixes uncritically with the Millennialism preached by Hal Lindsey, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson –Carter’s other main series was *Millennium* (1997-2000) – to renew the paranoid sci-fi films of the 1950s, finally reverting to the pioneering model offered by H.G. Wells with *The War of the Worlds* (1895). Taking Wells’s fantasy of invasion into account we may see that the failure of Carter’s series to stir Americans into political action is less relevant than its expression of latent fears related to the decadence of US civilisation. Wells expressed the Darwinian fears of British civilisation at a time when, though being at its peak, its decadence was already under way and, as Elspeth Kydd (2001/2) argues, *The X-Files* uses “a similar generic science fiction metaphor of alien colonisation to evoke the fear of difference” (web) which will put an end to the hegemony of the white race within and without US territory. This is why invasion in *The X-Files* works at two levels: as fear of the take-over of the planet by the extraterrestrial Other and of the human body by their viruses.

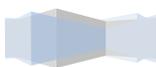
As Kydd claims, “the white body is the primary battleground where this war of colonisation is fought” (web) as all the major participants on both sides of the mythology are white, with few exceptions (DD Kersch and X). The subplots involving Scully’s two abductions and her subsequent mysterious pregnancy bring up “the fear of miscegenation and its subsequent reproduction of mixed-race offspring” that tabooed in the past the relationships between white women and non-white men. Katherine Kinney concurs, pointing out that “*The X-Files*’s climb to cult status and beyond took place during a period marked by a nationalist discourse obsessed with borders and immigration... [of] so-called illegal aliens” (2001/2: web). She notes that although New Mexico and Nevada play a major role in the mythology as sites of secret military facilities central to the conspiracy, Chicanos are absent from it, something she reads as “one sign of the show’s failure to fully see either the present or the past being invoked” (web). This lack is, besides, masked with a controversial use of Navajo culture as a background for the presentation of Mulder as a possible messianic saviour. Eleanor Hersey claims that “rather than explicitly alluding to the government’s oppression and destruction of the Navajo people, the Anasazi arc [of seasons 2 and 3] relies on holocaust-like images of alien bodies, implicating the government in a history of violence against the Navajo without relying on the clichéd portrait of the ‘doomed Indian’ or noble savage”(1998: web). This is doubtful since the implicitness of the imagery is a sign that Carter didn’t want the issue

raised; in addition, the main Navajo character, Albert Hosteen, an ex-windtalker during WWII and as such certainly victimised by the US Government, collaborates with the FBI as personified by Mulder and Scully. He is also typecast as the proverbial soft-spoken Indian sage in a kind of New Age recast of the noble savage stereotype.

Judith Grant's suggestion that *The X-Files* expresses the trauma America suffered because of WWII seems even more productive than the racial issue. Grant argues that "the structure of untruth and conspiracy" (1998: web) of totalitarian regimes such as Nazism and Communism was partly copied by agencies like the FBI and the CIA to combat them before, during and after WWII. This war, which she defines as "nearly apocalyptic in its sheer scope, and nearly pure evil in its genocidal intent and zeal" (web) was at the same time the hotbed for the development of the military technology that allowed for the take-off of corporate America at a world level from 1945 onwards. In this sense, although *The X-Files* tiptoes over the matter of the atomic bomb, Carter does not hesitate to stress that the US benefited from the science and technology developed by ex-Nazis on American soil after WWII. Although this may sound as a callous disregard of the American guilt over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when information about Japan's biological warfare and the infamous Unit 731 became widespread (see Williams & Wallace 1989, and Harris 1994) the series didn't hesitate to point out that the US were complicit in the cover-up. The doctor that Scully thinks manipulated her during her abduction is the former head of Unit 731 while a villainous Syndicate member, Conrad Strughold, is named after the Nazi scientist that helped establish the field of aeronautic medicine under US protection despite his Dachau credentials. This may be oblique politics but it is no doubt a way of raising historical issues most members of the audience would otherwise ignore.

*The X-Files* is the product of a decade of intense historical revisionism in which very ugly truths have surfaced. In this process America concluded not only that the trauma of WWII had not been properly dealt with –hence *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) – but also that the evil fought in it echoed back home. The monumental conspiracy that concealed the murder of 6 million Jews is too close to the holocaust of the Native Americans, the ill-treatment of the Afro-American slaves, the mass murder of the Japanese in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and indeed Vietnam to make Americans feel at ease with their role as world leaders. The need to shift the blame onto the imaginary aliens and their shadowy allies and the story of how the white hero Mulder discovers the many skeletons in his own middle-class family life can be read, thus, as an act of masochistic expiation, an attempt to consider what is like to be a victim. The point of the series, after all, is not to have the hero crush the invader, as happens in the optimistic *Independence Day* (1998), but to have him face for the first time the possibility of defeat. When in their last meeting Mulder accuses Cancer Man, his own father, of "feeling drunk with power. The power to do nothing," his enemy answers that "My power comes from telling you. Seeing your powerlessness hearing it. They wanted to kill you, Fox. I protected you all these years waiting for this moment to see you broken. Afraid. Now you can die."

Mulder, ultimately, represents this terminal white, patriarchal America that, wrapped in the loving but helpless arms of the heroine Scully, wonders in a run-down motel in Roswell, how to prevent the end that the corruption of the father's generation has allowed. "Maybe there's hope" is the most he can say but he knows, as we know, that as usual he 'wants to believe.'



## REFERENCES

- Booker, M. Keith. "It's the libidinal economy, stupid: *The X-files* and the politics of postmodern desire." 121 -149. *Strange TV: Innovative Television Series from The Twilight Zone to The X-files*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002.
- Campbell, John Edward. "Alien(ating) Ideology and the American Media: Apprehending the Alien Image in Television through *The X-Files*." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. September 2001. 4(3): 327-47.
- Fenster, Mark. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Goldberg, Robert Alan. *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Grant, Judith. "Trust no One: Paranoia, Conspiracy Theories and Alien Invasions". *Undercurrent*. Spring 1998. Issue 6. <http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~grantj1/trust.html>
- Harris, Sheldon. *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare 1932-45 and the American Cover-up*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Hersey, Eleanor. "Word-Healers and Code-Talkers: Native Americans in *The X-Files*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. 1998. 26:3. No pages (online version).
- Kinney, Katherine. "*The X-Files* and the Borders of the Post-Cold War World." *Journal of Film & Video*. Winter 2001/2002. 53:4. No pages (online version).
- Kydd, Elspeth. "Differences: *The X-Files*, Race and the White Norm." *Journal of Film & Video*. Winter 2001/2002. 53:4. No pages (online version).
- Lavery, David; Hague, Angela and Cartwright, Marla. "Introduction: Generation X, *The X-Files* and the Cultural Moment". 1-20. David Lavery, Angela Hague, and Marla Cartwright (eds.). *Deny all Knowledge: Reading the X-Files*. London: Faber & Faber, 1996.
- Moore, Michael. *Stupid White Men*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003.
- Williams, Peter; Wallace, David. *Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989.



**You are free:** to Share — to copy, distribute and transmit the work  
Under the following conditions:

**Attribution** — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

**Noncommercial** — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

**No Derivative Works** — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

**Notice** — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.

