The X Files: Entries on Meaning

AXEL KRUSE

'There's a starman waiting in the sky' (David Bowie, *Starman*)

The X Files

The success of *The X Files* (1993-) makes it one of the defining programs of a period of transition in which television moves towards a new range of commercial mega-media provided by global communication enterprises. As so many viewers are aware, the narrative basis for the series is that Special Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully work in the Violent Crimes section of the Federal Bureau of Investigation with the X Files, a set of fictional files about violent crimes which involve elements of the unknown and unexplainable. Strange mutations, madness, the paranormal, and aliens are linked under the general category of X, the unknown, with the effect that *The X Files* brings the unknown and the inhuman into the domestic site of prime time television. In addition, Mulder and Scully become increasingly involved with evidence that the world is threatened both by alien invasion and an international government conspiracy to keep people ignorant about what is happening. In that way *The X Files* defines itself in terms of news about millennial, end-of-the-world crisis at the same time as it contributes to a new stage of global authority for television as a medium for the definition and communication of meaning. Seeing the series in perspective involves questions about its appeal to millennial horror and its basis in American mainstream television and international corporate culture.

Prime Time Horror

Chris Carter's background and his development of the idea for *The X Files* are the starting point for the legend in the official

and unofficial guides to the series.[1] He completed a degree in journalism at California State University and worked first as an editor for *Surfing* magazine. He established his career as a television writer and producer at Disney Studios and NBC Entertainment where he wrote for *Rags to Riches* (1989-90), a musical comedy series, and *Brand New Life* (1989), an updated version of *The Brady Bunch* (1969-74), which was presented for *The Magical World of Disney*.[2] He created *The X Files* for Fox Broadcasting in 1992 when Fox Broadcasting wanted to position itself more strongly as a competitor to the major television networks. *The X Files* was the result of his sense that there was a lack of horror entertainment in the offerings from the American television networks in 1992. He seems to have decided that the niche could be filled by devising an imitation of earlier series such as *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* and *The Twilight Zone*, and part of the strategy seems to have been to develop a series which would cater to the interest in cult television defined by *Star Trek* (1966-9) and *Twin Peaks* (1990-1). The development of the project involved close imitation of films and television series from the areas of horror, science fiction and detective fiction.[3] Carter has said that he was interested in what he could learn from *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), and there is evidence that the development of the project was influenced by *All The President's Men*, *Twin*

1 For the basic reading see Brian Lowry, *The Official Guide to the X Files* (London: Harper Collins, 1995) which covers the first two series; Brian Lowry, *The Official Third Season Guide to The X Files* (London: Harper Collins, 1996); Ted Edwards, *X-Files Confidential: The Unauthorized X-Philes Compendium* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1996); N.E. Genge, *The Unofficial X-Files Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Frank Lovece, *The X-Files Declassified* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996).

2 Brian Lowry, *The Official Guide to the X Files*, pp. 8-9; Frank Lovece, *The X-Files Declassified*, pp. 2-3.

3 For discussion see Jimmie L. Reeves, Mark C. Rodgers, and Michael Epstein, 'Rewriting Popularity: The Cult Files', *"Deny All Knowledge": Reading The X Files* , ed. David Lavery, Angela Hague, and Marla Cartwright (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp. 22-35.

Peaks, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Thin Blue Line*, and even *The Avengers*.[4] Carter chose to focus on alien abduction, interest in the paranormal, and American concern about government conspiracy. He emphasises his interest in research which revealed that three percent of the American population believe they have been victims of alien abduction, and the fact that the FBI had investigated satanic cults. His development of the theme of government conspiracy reflects his sense that recent American history has been defined by questions about the activities of the FBI and the Central Intelligence Agency, and events such as the assassination of President Kennedy and Watergate. But the main emphasis in the accounts of the development of *The X Files* is that Carter and his collaborators were interested in devising something they understood as being in the horror genre.[5]

The basic point of departure for *The X Files* seems to have been the earlier television series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-5), which Chris Carter has described as a horror show in which 'a reporter investigated a monster of the week'.[6] The *Kolchak* series was created by Jeff Rice and began as a television movie, *The Night Stalker* (1972), in which Darren McGavin plays Kolchak, a crime reporter investigating a vampire who preys on the night people of Las Vegas. A second television movie, *The Night Strangler* (1973), was followed in 1974 by the television series which continued the idea of pitting the low-life crime reporter Kolchack against classic horror fiction monsters.[7] The series includes connections between

4 For background about Chris Carter and the series see Brian Lowry, *The Official Guide to the X Files*, pp. 7-13; David Lipsky, 'Interview [with Chris Carter]', *Rolling Stone*, March 1997, pp. 49-50, 111; Ted Edwards, *X-Files Confidential,* pp. 10-15, 36.

5 Brian Lowry, *The Official Guide to the X Files,* p.10; David Lipsky, 'Interview [with Chris Carter]', p.49.

6 David Lipsky, 'Interview [with Chris Carter]', pp. 49-50, 111.

7 Gene Wright, *Horrorshows: The A-To-Z of Horror in Film, TV, Radio and Theater* (New York: Facts on File, 1986), pp. 255-6.

Kolchak's freakish, early seventies sense of humour and the fact that the hip weirdness of the stories is presented with the emphasis that the episodes are formulaic, commercial television. Cool weirdness supports formulaic commercial television. Carter's imitation of *Kolchak* is a later, more extreme transformation of the classic Gothic tradition into contemporary American terms, with Kolchak transformed into Mulder and his laconic, middle-class, end of the century paranoia. The classic Gothic tradition continues in the first series of *The X Files* in *Shapes* (1.18), an episode which was a response to the fact that the network wanted a conventional 'monster show' in the manner of 'the vampire and werewolf thing'.[8] But for the most part *The X Files* continues the direction established in the first series that its monsters tend to be aliens, paranormal figures, and mad mutants. The monstrous and alien mutant is one of the distinctive monsters of *The X Files*, and the mutants of *The X Files* combine the traditional Gothic, the idea of the alien, and science. The theme is stated explicitly in *Humbug* (2.20) in the comment, 'Nature abhors normality, it can't go very long without creating a mutant'.

Squeeze (1.02) and *Tooms* (1.20) are two of the defining episodes and involve a considerable debt to *The Night Strangler*. Eugene Tooms is an ageless cannibal mutant who kills five victims every thirty years. Human livers are his natural food, and he hibernates in a nest and changes his shape in order to crawl through small spaces to his victims. While Tooms's derivation from *The Night Strangler* underlines his line of descent from the classic vampire tradition, as a mutant serial killer he is a version of the monstrous in which the supernatural is overwritten by science fiction and a later stage in the horror tradition. His inhuman cannibalism is evidence of the influence of *The Silence of the Lambs*, and his story establishes a direction for *The X Files* towards a combination of bizarre, graphic violence and psychological horror which includes close relations between monster, victims and

8 Ted Edwards, *X-Files Confidential: The Unauthorized X-Philes Compendium*, pp. 69-70.

investigators. At the same time, *The X Files* balances extremes of horror and prime time television censorship. Tooms retains human form even at his most monstrous, and the horror in the first series is a mix of implication, suspense, censored murders, music, strange noises, screams, and occasional images such as dripping blood and a corpse's bloody hand. The direction has been towards more bizarre violence and more graphic images. In the third series, in *The Walk* (3.07), the monster is a quadruple amputee who attacks his victims with his astral body. At the beginning of *The Walk* one of the victims attempts to commit suicide by climbing into a bath of boiling water. The horror which follows includes a special effects sequence about a woman drowned in a swimming pool by an unseen assailant; a child smothered in a sandpit; views of the naked torso and stumps of the amputee; and a climax in which the amputee is smothered by the other monster, the shambling and disfigured Lt. Colonel Stand who attempted to boil himself alive. The fourth series deals in especially bizarre monsters and a heavy load of gore and mutilation. In *Leonard Betts* (4.14) the monster whose name provides the title is a mutant in line of descent from Tooms. Leonard Betts is a serial killer cancer mutant who feeds on human cancer and has the ability to regenerate himself. At the beginning of the episode he is decapitated in an accident and becomes a classic living dead monster without a head. The episode provides graphic views of bizarre horror: Scully and Mulder search through a hospital disposal bin full of surgical remains which look like pieces of meat in a supermarket; they find Leonard Betts's decapitated head which opens its eyes as Scully is about to perform an autopsy; and in a later scene Betts tears off his thumb. The other complications include Betts's mother's invitation to him to feed on her own cancer; and the end of the episode provides views of Leonard Betts in the process of regeneration, with the consequence that a special effects mutant cancer monster becomes one of the defining figures of the fourth series.

The X Files belongs to a period in which horror has become one of the dominant genres of the media. The new wave of horror in the cinema since the sixties has seen a general

direction to translation of the classic Gothic tradition into American realism and post-sixties transgressive cleverness and nonsense, and increasing licence for graphic violence. The rise of horror films in the period has led to horror subgenres which include graveyard zombie movies, contemporary American Gothic movies, paranoia movies about things such as disasters and aliens, psycho movies, teenage comedy horror, and so on. Seen in this context *The X Files* is a point in the assimilation of the wider tradition of film and popular fiction horror to prime time television. One consideration is that the narrative motifs and themes of *The X Files* were already well established in the mass of previous horror and science fiction. The end of the world, invasion by aliens, and government conspiracy have been standard themes in the horror tradition since the sixties.[9]

Chris Carter has stressed the connections of *The X Files* with the dark side of the horror tradition. He rejects the idea that the success of the series means that it might have become 'a mainstream show' and says that it has remained 'the same dark show — in fact, a darker show ... It just gained a mainstream audience'.[10] On the other hand, while *The X Files* is certainly a 'dark show' in the sense that it is a millennial horror show, and while it is a further development of the cult television tradition, and even at times recalls the avant garde horror of *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1978), when it is seen against the full range of the horror tradition it begins to seem even more clearly a development within prime time television. *Kolchak* constructs a commercial version of seventies pop culture somewhere between the extremes of the liberated, subversive gore of *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), the visionary science fiction of *2001* (Kubrick, 1968), and the rock culture faith in cool weirdness and aliens of *Ziggy Stardust*. *The X Files* is more inclusive, and it takes the possibilities for popular television horror much further. It is more violent, more like

9 For comment see Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), pp. 79-82.

10 Brian Lowry, *The Official Third Season Guide to The X Files*, p. xvi.

2001, and it is a hybrid (mutant) mix of horror, science fiction and postmodern millennialism similar in some ways to recent films such as Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) and Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1996). On the other hand, like *Kolchak*, *The X Files* maintains an essential emphasis on its formulaic structure as a one hour television drama series. There is a sense in which the monsters and the millennial horror are essentially commercial, narrative entertainment which supports the advertisements and defines itself in terms of mainstream television codes and conventions, and an essential tabloid restriction of fictional range and meaning. In order to understand that element of tabloid limitation we need more information about the history of the production of *The X Files* within corporate media culture. At the same time it is crucial that Chris Carter has commented that *The X Files* is about 'extreme possibility', a formulation which echoes an earlier statement by Mulder in *Little Green Men* (2.01) about 'realms of extreme possibilities'.[11] Chris Carter and Mulder tie the formulation to interest in the unknown, but it is also true that *The X Files* is an exploration of extreme possibilities for commercial television fiction.

Media Culture and Millennial Cool

In addition to its concern with horror and monsters *The X Files* involves a convergence of mainstream television with cult fiction and fashionable postmodernism. *Twin Peaks* made the point that postmodern games with the American dream and media culture could be reconciled with mainstream television consumerism. It demonstrated that hyperawareness about the media matched well with a stylishly hyper mode of narrative and a point of view which suggested that a sense of weirdness might be the proper reaction to contemporary America. *The X Files* adjusts the *Twin Peaks* exploration of fashionable postmodernism and cult television to a more mainstream mode. *The X Files* combines mainstream television production methods with media culture games, cult emphasis on a religious

[11] David Lipsky, 'Interview [with Chris Carter]', p. 50.

dimension, and an appeal to cool millennial cleverness. From one point of view it is an extreme case of strategic industrial imitation and the current fashion for media games. The extent of the background of similar film and television at times makes it difficult to distinguish between imitation and coincidence, as with the similarities between *The X Files* and *Hangar 18* (James L. Conway, 1980), a Darren McGavin film in which a NASA flying shuttle shoots down a flying saucer and the American government and the armed forces keep the events secret. At another level *The X Files* plays elaborate games with allusions to the horror and science fiction tradition, as with the similarities to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg, 1977) in *Duane Barry* (2.5), and the reference to *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) in *The Erlenmeyer Flask* (1.23). And at another level *The X Files* combines postmodern media culture cleverness with variations on more conventional fan interests, as with the elaborate games with details such as that the observatory in *D.P.O* (3.03) is named after Chris Carter's executive assistant.[12] Fan interests and in-house production games contribute to cult fiction which is an extreme appeal to consumerism and commodity fetishism, a mix which has contributed to the success of *The X Files* on the World Wide Web.

It also seems relevant that *The X Files* was developed at the time that *Melrose Place* (1992-) and *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-) were among the greatest successes for Twentieth Century Fox. *The X Files* makes sense as fashionable contrast to the glossy west coast vulgarism of *Melrose Place*, and Chris Carter has said that he is interested in the world of fashion and fashion magazines.[13] As in *Twin Peaks*, stylish and exaggerated visual images and sound contribute to a general direction towards hyped-up media culture and awareness of media fashion. The emphasis in *The X Files* is on an agreement

12 Brian Lowry, *The Official Third Season Guide to The X Files*, pp. 88,165.

13 David Lipsky, 'Interview [with Chris Carter]', p. 50.

between postmodern media fashion and the idea of aliens and fashionable alienation. Gillian Anderson's dyed red hair, and her unreal blue eyes and mask-like, heavily cosmeticised and alien-like face complement Duchovny's post-*Twin Peaks*, Hugo Boss-dressed strangeness. The fact that the characters are hyperreal, alien, and spectral media images supports a hyper mode of television and stylish alienation. Prime time horror which is fashionable and hip intersects with the idea of the X factor and contributes to a general view in terms of millennial cool and paranoia about the unknown. At one extreme Mulder and Scully merge with the aliens and the monsters and their victims as figures who seem to be part of the world of fashion magazines such *The Face*, and representations of alienated domestic normality.

Paranoia Makes You Think

An essential feature of the success of *The X Files* is that it involves an appeal to popular intellectualism. Perhaps more than any previous prime time drama series *The X Files* makes intelligence and strange speculation fashionable television commodities. Mulder is a psychologist whose achievements include study at Oxford and an academic book about serial killers and the occult. Scully is a brilliant medical doctor with an interest in Einstein and forensic pathology.[14] The wider legend includes that David Duchovny completed an M.A. in English Literature at Yale, and began studies at Yale for a Ph.D. with a dissertation on 'Magic and Technology in Contemporary Poetry and Prose'.[15] The development of the series has combined a heightened condition of weirdness and paranoia with topics of intellectual cult interest: alien abduction, the paranormal, the government, the esoteric world of

14 Brian Lowry, *The Official Guide to the X Files,* pp. 261-5.

15 N.E. Genge, *The Unofficial X-Files Companion*, p. 77.

contemporary science.[16] Chris Carter has stressed the political dimension of the mix of cult fiction, cult intellectualism, and paranoia. He says that he sees the series as reflecting his own distrust of authority and his 'basic mistrust of government' and a sense that the American government (under President Clinton at the time of the interview) 'doesn't care about the individual'. He links that political view with the claim that in the circumstances, 'Paranoia is a good thing', and that paranoia makes people smart and makes them think. He also says that he works out of a sense of paranoia for the reason that his family background has made him 'acutely aware of fear and betrayal'; and there is a similar correspondence between personal history and the millennial politics of alien invasion in *The X Files*.[17]

In the circumstances, one of the initial critical challenges for the viewer is to see the intellectual range of *The X Files* in perspective. And one immediate consideration is that, whatever else the series might include, the stories and the dialogue are an ultimate kind of television formula based in stylish television cliché. The episodes develop much of their intellectual interest through the ongoing conflict between Mulder and Scully and 'intellectual' debate in which meaning is stated in set pieces of jargon which are at once authoritative, absurd and confirmation that intellectualism itself is weird as well as cool. In fact, throughout the series the speech is stylish cliché which is limited as intellectual rhetoric and which includes an essential qualification of ambivalent and absurd irony. Mulder's moments of greatest eloquence involve statements such as, 'Look, you have my files, and you have my gun, don't ask me for my trust' (in *Paper Clip* (3.02)). One of the crucial complications is that media slogans become intellectual formulations. The slogans which introduce the *The X Files*

16 For the concern with weirdness see N.E. Genge, *The Unofficial X-Files Companion*, p. 168. And compare the praise of Nick Chinlund as an actor who was able 'to underline the weirdness and strangeness of the character', Ted Edwards, *X-Files Confidential: The Unauthorized X-Philes Compendium*, pp. 111-12.

17 David Lipsky, 'Interview [with Chris Carter]', pp. 49-50, 111.

combine the rhetoric of advertisements with speculation about life and the universe, and with the effect that the meaning of *The X Files* is summed up in the two main statements: 'Trust No One', and 'The Truth Is Out There'. In addition to the mix of millennial cool and rhetorical limitation of those slogans one implication is that the wisdom of *The X Files* is a summation of the most general kind of meaning of the horror tradition and science fiction. Weirdness and paranoia are essential themes of the horror tradition. Where the world is peopled by vampires, flesh eating living dead, alien predators, and where even the weather can turn predatory, paranoia is a normal state of mind; and extreme paranoia has been one of the dominant themes of recent horror films.[18] The idea that the aliens and the truth are 'out there' somewhere in the universe is a truism of science fiction. Fox Mulder begs comparison with Vince Vega, and there are many ways to do the intellectual thing against *The X Files*. In the circumstances, *The X Files* might not be more than the dark side of *Surfing* magazine and *The Magical World of Disney* in disguise as millennial wisdom. Even so, even if there is worse than that possible (and there is), *The X Files* provides significant formulations about crucial contemporary issues. The mix of advertising slogan and media-speak is eloquent as well as limited. The emphasis on cultist intellectual interest and millennial paranoia answers to a widespread sense of the world. And *The X Files* is tabloid television which echoes some of the main themes of the twentieth-century intellectual tradition.

18 Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88*, includes a chapter on 'Paranoia Paradise: Or: Five Things to Worry About', pp. 65-87.

The X Files and the Other

Chris Carter has said that his interest in aliens is related to his sense that people are vulnerable at the point of their fear of the unknown and the other, 'Fear of the outsiders, fear of the other ... We're all afraid of the unknown ... I'm exposing people to what they don't know'.[19] That comment points to a convergence between *The X Files* and some of the most widely influential twentieth-century assumptions about identity and meaning. In particular, *The X Files* corresponds to a preoccupation in recent psychoanalytic theory with the Other and with a related tropology which is spectral and Gothic. Lacan's version of Freud is one of the main points of reference, and one of the main sources for the recent intellectual preoccupation with the Other.[20] Two stories underline the convergence of *The X Files* and the psychoanalytic tradition.

The first story. A man picks up a prostitute, she sees that his bed is dressed like a funeral parlour after which he murders her, cuts off her hair, cuts out her fingernails, and cuts off some of her fingers. At the autopsy it is said that, 'This is one of the most dehumanising murders imaginable' and that, 'It's not enough that they are dead, it's almost as if he has to defile them'. The murderer attends a lecture on comparative religion at which the lecturer comments, 'the subtextual themes are what Freud would describe as a death wish'.

The second story. The electricity fails. Two women servants find that their ironing is interrupted and turn on their mistress and her daughter and batter them to death. They tear out the eyes of their mistress, tear out the eye of the daughter while she is still alive, hack the bodies to pieces, strip the daughter's

19 David Lipsky, 'Interview [with Chris Carter]', p. 48.

20 The account of the intellectual background which follows parallels the accounts of the background of popular belief and science in companions to *The X Files* such as Jane Goldman, *The X-Files Book of the Unexplained* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

body, and splatter its genital area with blood and brain. Later they claim that they had no other motive than that their ironing was interrupted.

The first story is a summary of *Irresistible* (2.13) written by Chris Carter. The second story is a summary of a crime which was committed in 1933 in France and provided one of the main points of departure for Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis. Elisabeth Roudinesco comments that Lacan's interpretation of it demonstrates that one of the essential shifts in his theory was to a view of madness as 'the alienated reality of man and not the reverse side of an illusory reason'.[21] The similarities point to a continuing twentieth century interest in connections between meaning, madness and experience which is beyond reason. Lacan's account of subjectivity and the Other includes a theory of desire and the limit which stresses awareness of the Other as alien. For Lacan the unconscious and the ego are a distant, unknown inner world, like a set of alien presences within, 'The unconscious is that part of the concrete discourse, in so far as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse'.[22] In a way which parallels *The X Files* Lacan constructs the unconscious in terms of a traditional preoccupation with lack, violence, danger, and a view of nature which assumes the trope of the fall and similar tropes of a birth which is lack and violence. The unconscious and the ego are the Other as a distant and unspeakable series of alien presences understood in terms of a fundamental process of *Verneinung*, a process of denial, contradiction and negation. The drama of these Lacanian alien inner presences is in a mode of Gothic

21 Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co.: A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 124-7.

22 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* , translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 49. Unless noted otherwise the quotations from Lacan are from *Ecrits*.

horror.[23] For Lacan in 1948 the modern subject is 'the 'emancipated' man of modern society' in whom the deformation of the death instinct constructs 'down to the depths of his being, a neurosis of self-punishment ... functional inhibitions .... derealizations of others and of the world, with its social consequences in failure and crime', conditions which make the representative modern subject 'this escaped, irresponsible outlaw' (pp. 28-9). Psychoanalysis becomes a reading of a political unconscious which constructs a world drama of monstrous alienation.

Reading *The X Files* in the light of a return to Lacan makes 'The Truth Is Out There' a puzzle about a theory of the Other which finds the alien and the aliens within, as conditions of the modern subject. In that sense what is out there is within, what is within is remote and alien and essential to identity. That 'The Truth Is Out There' echoes Lacan's repetitive, oracular translations of Freud's, '*Wo es war, soll Ich werden*' (where it was I must become), which in one of Lacan's later translations becomes, 'Here, in the field of dream, you are at home'.[24]

The convergence of the Lacanian Other and *The X Files* underlines the essential ambiguity in *The X Files* about the relation between the investigators and the weird madmen, mutants and aliens they investigate. Duchovny/Mulder is a weird presence who is like the monsters he investigates. He is a variation on the mad scientist bonded with the monster he creates. The complicitous and potentially alien and monstrous aspect of Mulder and Scully is established at the beginning of the series. The Tooms episodes establish an obscure

[23] For Lacan psychoanalysis involves questions about whether 'to disguise the black God in the sheep's clothing of the Good Shepherd Eros' (*Ecrits*, p. 245), desire is an 'embodied aporia' described in a trope of 'the lost phallus of the embalmed Osiris' (p. 265), and in one of the definitive statements in *Ecrits*, Freud becomes the seer of the truth that life 'has only one meaning, that in which desire is borne by death' (p. 277).

[24] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London, 1977), p. 44.

correspondence between Tooms and Mulder. Tooms is a baby faced mutant, who looks vulnerable, sensitive and even intelligent. In that way he is a dark Other to Mulder, and their confrontation involves dream-like intimacy, even to the extent that Tooms enters Mulder's apartment when he is asleep and sets him up with a charge of assault. Throughout the series the monsters make sense as a sensational visual mythology of the dark Other and as twins to Mulder and Scully. Leonard Betts is an extreme case. When Leonard Betts regenerates he is reborn live and fully formed from his own mouth as he screams, and when he is seen with his mother he is a childlike adult monster covered in cancerous slime. In that way he is a literal representation of a dark Other which is within, and also a sexualised, naked presence and an image of slime-like, raw and bloody cancer.

Mulder's insistence that the truth is out there, and his belief that he was involved in the abduction of his sister, make him someone who seems to be part of the alien truth. The similar complications with Scully include that her abduction by aliens in the second season. Alien abduction becomes another figure for the monstrous nature of the contemporary world and contemporary identity. In *Duane Barry* (2.5) and *Ascension* (2.6) Duane Barry believes that he was abducted by aliens. He takes a number of hostages in a building in the centre of the city and attempts to negotiate with the authorities. Mulder believes his story, and much of the episode supports Duane Barry's claims. The viewer sees the abduction at the beginning of the episode, and when Duane Barry tells his story the events are an absurd, dark version of *Close Encounters* and religious ascension. We see the house lit up from within and Duane Barry's bed ascends into the sky, drawn up to a flying saucer in a beam of light, surrounded by six attendant aliens, and to the accompaniment of the victim's terrified screams. As Barry tells Mulder his story their conversation becomes a ritualistic exchange of hidden truth, an absurd version of initiation into the mysteries of a cult. Mulder prompts Duane Barry, 'They take you on board the ship to perform the test'. Duane Barry replies, 'They drill holes in my teeth'. When we see the tests

they are a version of conventional abduction stories presented in terms of special effects which seem horrific, absurdly cool, and like something out of one of the adventures of Flash Gordon or a recent science fiction graphic magazine (and the episode of *The Simpsons* about *The X Files* included a joke about the abduction of Duane Barry). We see Duane Barry's mouth held open, and a surreal version of oral invasion in which a giant machine probe sends a laser into his mouth as he lies on an operating table and screams. The images present him as a suffering Frankenstein's monster surrounded by monstrous aliens. Mulder's preoccupation with his sister's abduction adds to the impression of a ritualistic exchange of a shared truth. Duane Barry agrees that the victims include children, that the aliens are 'Doing tests, testing them', and that they are hurting them, 'Oh yeah. Sometimes it hurts real bad and you just want to die, you know. You know what it is like, sir? It's like living with a gun to your head and you never know when it's going to go off'. The implication is that abduction is a revelation of a dark truth which corresponds to the general conditions of identity and contemporary existence. Alien abduction becomes a figure for the fact that we are all insanely suffering, powerless victims who survive in a sadomasochistic situation where the alien is part of identity and 'Sometimes it hurts real bad'.

The agreement between *The X Files* and the Lacanian account of the Other has been one of the main themes threaded through the initial critical comment on *The X Files*, and that emphasis has been accompanied by a related thread of comment identifying the twin aspect of Mulder and Scully as hyper normal and abnormal, and as alien and monstrous investigators of monsters and aliens.[25] Where the initial comment has gone beyond rhetorical conflation of *The X*

[25] See, for example, Michele Malach, 'I Want to Believe ... in the FBI: the Special Agent and *The X Files*' and Leslie Jones, 'Last Week We Had An Omen: The Mythological X-Files', "*Deny All Knowledge": Reading The X Files*, pp. 63-76 and 77-98.

Files and the Other the tendency has been towards elaborately detailed application of Lacan to *The X Files*, an approach with the limitation that it does not allow either for a wider perspective, or for the fact that *The X Files* draws on the discourse of the Other within its characteristic mode of prime time media fiction.[26]

Reading *The X Files* in terms of Lacan fits a widespread fashion for Lacanian interpretation of popular culture and a widespread contemporary intellectual involvement with Gothic tropes about dark, alien mysteries and spectres. Slavoj Zizek claims that the Freudian tradition posits a 'fundamental dimension of radical negativity' and his application of Lacan to popular culture becomes an assimilation of popular culture to the idea that democracy must include a certain fetishistic split and a sense of 'pathological' imbalance and impossibility.[27] There is an even closer parallel between *The X Files* and Baudrillard's account of television theory in terms of spectral presences and viral religiousness like an alien invasion. For Baudrillard television is a subtle assimilation and incorporation into the alien, 'Such a blending, such a viral, endemic, chronic alarming presence of the medium ... we are ... doomed not to invasion ... by the media and their models, but to their

26 See, for example, Elizabeth Kubek, 'You Only Expose Your Father: The Imaginary, Voyeurism And The Symbolic Order In *The X Files*', *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X Files*, pp. 168-204.

27 See Slovoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 5, 170. Also, 'I know very well (that the democratic form is just a form spoiled by stains of 'pathological' imbalance), but just the same (I act as if democracy were possible)': Slovoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), p. 168. As Zizek acknowledges in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (p. 163) the argument is a variation on the theory of antagonism and radical democracy developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985).

induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence'.[28] In cultural theory Jameson's grand endeavour in *The Political Unconscious* borrows from Lacan in order to support a conservative leftist attempt to read the meaning of art and culture in terms of political allegory which invokes dealings with political spectres and hidden mysteries.[29] Jameson has been followed by the millennial politics of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, perhaps the most extreme case of an end of the century direction to a nostalgic intellectual tropology of Gothic mysteries and spectres. Derrida presents himself as a voice for political dissent and claims that deconstruction derives from Marx, although with the qualification that what he argues for is a revision which 'transforms the very thing it interprets'.[30] For Derrida the irreducible element of the revolutionary tradition is 'a certain experience of emancipatory promise' (p. 59), with the essential Derridean articulation that this is seen in terms of a post-Lacanian, dark view of 'the alterity of the other' within which the messianic must be asserted (p. 28). Derrida's political statement becomes incantatory definition of a sense of emancipatory promise which remains other, alien, strange, dark and like a millennial haunting, 'an experience that is so impossible ... a quasi-"messianism" so anxious, fragile, and impoverished ... a despairing "messianism"' (pp. 168-9). The correspondences with *The X Files* include Mulder's identity as a paranoid and fragile millennial hero who says in *Ascension* that his quest for the truth is pursued in a situation of 'Constant denial of everything. Questions answered with a question'. In

28 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (1981; 1994), p. 30.

29 For Jameson's direct comment on Lacan see, for example, Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As A Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 65-7, 82, 124-5, 152-3, 174-6. For comment on Jameson's appropriation of the Lacanian model, see Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian Unconscious: The Aesthetics of Marxist Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 183-4.

30 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* , translated Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 51.

the same episode the Cigarette Smoking Man challenges him with the possibility that revelation of the truth about the aliens and their meaning for the world would be disastrous, 'If people were to know of the things that I know, they would all fall apart'. At that point the politics of alien invasion is a close parallel to Derrida's millennial politics. The Cigarette Smoking Man and Mulder share a condition of isolated survival in an end of the world situation where the old order continues as a spectral presence accompanying a new alien order. In the circumstances, paranoid fear of difference begins to seem essential where normality has become a facade and the world is a place of sudden madness, murders, mutations, and alien abductions, and where the hero cannot trust himself.

Talitha Cumi and *Masterplan*

Chris Carter refers to *Talitha Cumi* (3.24) and *Herrenvolk* (4.1) as episodes which add to the 'mythology' of *The X Files*. While his emphasis is that episodes such as these add to the life histories of the main characters, *Talitha Cumi* and *Herrenvolk* also make the characters epic figures in a series which imitates the appeal of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* as media entertainment with a range from pulp fiction to media mythology about contemporary belief.[31] And *The X Files* is media mythology with connections with major works of traditional literature and a wide range of traditional philosophy as well as with other media fiction. In *The Official Third Season Guide* Brian Lowry explains that the planning of *Talitha Cumi* included the idea of a confrontation between the Cigarette Smoking Man and an alien who would be like Christ, an idea derived from the Grand Inquisitor chapter in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Lowry adds that Duchovny collaborated with Carter on the script and suggested the Dostoyevsky model, and that Duchovny has said that in this episode the Cigarette Smoking Man echoes Nietzsche as well as Dostoevsky, 'It made sense for him to become the Grand

31 Brian Lowry, *The Official Third Season Guide to The X Files*, pp. xix, 8, 222-3.

Inquisitor — this kind of cynically heroic character. He's like Nietzsche's Socrates — he's the rational man, saving the masses from their own imagination'.[32] In *The Brothers Karamazov* Christ returns to earth at the time of the Inquisition in Spain and the Grand Inquisitor tells him that freedom is too difficult and too terrible for humanity, and that the Roman Catholic church has chosen to follow Satan and rules with miracle, mystery and authority. In *Talitha Cumi* the Dostoevsky model is rewritten in terms of a confrontation between the Cigarette Smoking Man and a Christ-like alien who has god-like powers and rebels against the masterplan for alien invasion. Duchovny's reference to Nietzsche's Socrates and mass culture underlines the presence of a characteristic level of ambiguities and contradictions. Duchovny's reference is to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in which history is described in terms of the conflict between tragedy and the rise of science defined by Socrates, a view Nietzsche linked with the opposition to Christianity he developed in his mature works such as *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ*. *Talitha Cumi* includes crucial ambiguities about Christianity and the inhuman and politics.

In the first scene of *Talitha Cumi* a man goes berserk in a diner. He is a loser, a member of the American underclass. He shoots a number of people, he is eventually shot by riot police, and he and his victims are healed by the rebel alien. We are in an X Files world of ordinary violence and postmodern miracles similar to *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994). The events seem both miraculous and a narrative puzzle which recalls the absurd miracles and media games of *Pulp Fiction*, and Sandy's epiphany of the robins in *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986). In contrast to the echoes of Christian miracle, even at the most obvious level this is an X Files event about an alien who is not Christ and potentially satanic, like an Anti-Christ, or an alien god. Later it is revealed that the rebel alien passes in society as a minor administrator in the Department of Social Security, where he is known as Jeremiah Smith, a name which seems to

[32] Brian Lowry, *The Official Third Season Guide to The X Files*, p. 4.

include an absurd game about the eccentric Dr Zachary Smith of *Lost in Space*.

When Jeremiah Smith is taken captive by the Cigarette Smoking Man and held in a government prison, their confrontation is an imitation of Dostoevsky in which the alien becomes a Promethean, Christ-like rebel and the Cigarette Smoking Man is a variation on the Grand Inquisitor. The interview repeats the established pattern of prime time religiousness and absurd media puzzle, and it is clearer that traditional religiousness is being presented as a matter for speculation in the established mode of millennial weirdness of *The X Files*. Jeremiah Smith speaks in classic terms about loss of faith, with the irony that what he is talking about is a masterplan about alien invasion which has become part of the traditional order of things in the world. He says, 'I no longer believe in the greater purpose', and in contrast to *The Brothers Karamazov* his rebellion sounds in part like a rejection of the grand narrative of the old order of Christianity and post-Enlightenment values he seems to represent. The Cigarette Smoking Man's defence of the masterplan makes it seem a continuation of the old order and traditional religiousness, with the irony that both seem to be identified as a slave order. The conversation combines Dostoevsky's religious dimension with political debate, and Jeremiah Smith's speeches stress criticism of the established political order.

> CIGARETTE SMOKING MAN: We give them happiness and they give us authority.
>
> SMITH: The authority to take away their freedom in the guise of democracy.
>
> CIGARETTE SMOKING MAN: Men can never be free, because they are weak, corrupt, worthless and restless. The people believe in authority. They've grown tired of waiting for miracle and mystery. Science is their religion. No greater explanation exists for them. They must never believe any differently if the project is to go forward.'
>
> SMITH: At what cost to them?

The writing is a close reworking of *The Brothers Karamazov* and the claim that, 'Men can never be free, because they are weak, corrupt, worthless and restless', echoes standard English translations of Dostoevsky in which the Grand Inquisitor claims that men 'can never be free, for they are weak, vicious, worthless and rebellious'.[33] The Cigarette Smoking Man says that the end is inevitable, the date is set. But at that point the alien provides another dramatic demonstration of transformation and power. He transforms himself into the image of Deep Throat, and as his opponent reacts with controlled horror the alien repeats with mysterious strength, 'At what cost to them for your own selfish benefit? How many must die at your hands to preserve your place in the project?' The obvious meaning might seem to be that Jeremiah Smith is a Christ figure who is a voice for a return to true religion and democracy. On the other hand the debate is an extreme statement of the theme that the government and authority are not to be trusted, and it includes the characteristic complication that while Jeremiah Smith is Christ-like he is also a Promethean monster who is confined in a way which makes him seem like Hannibal Lecter.

Duchovny's allusion to Nietzsche underlines that Jeremiah Smith can be understood as a mythological figure who is a puzzle about the need for a new vision of an alien and inhuman universe. What might seem to be a jeremiad about millennial pessimism can be read as radical optimism. The images and the dialogue involve close parallels to Nietzsche's themes about transformation and rejection of traditional authority and belief. The setting is the world of the death of God Nietzsche proclaimed, and seeing the Cigarette Smoking Man in relation to Nietzsche's Socrates underlines that Jeremiah Smith is similar to Nietzsche's versions of Dionysian man and the Anti-Christ. Jeremiah Smith talks in terms of a revaluation of values and power, 'My justice is not for you to mete out. You may have reason. You have no right. You have no means either.' For Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Anti-Christ* the vision

[33] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1912), p. 260.

of the end of a slave mentality is tied to his insistence that if one rejects Christianity and the fundamental idea, the belief in God, 'one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands'.[34] According to the Nietzschean world view the kind of breakdown of the old order the Cigarette Smoking Man warns against is a condition for progress. For Nietzsche apocalyptic ending is a beginning in which the emancipatory promise of individual freedom depends on self interest, strength, affirmation, confidence in difference, and transformation, 'the facility of the metamorphosis'.[35] Difference and transformation become two of the main issues for an optimistic revaluation of values, and, as Nietzsche announces in *The Gay Science*, change depends on awareness of the alien and the inhuman, 'We know it well, the world in which we live is ungodly, immoral, "inhuman"; we have interpreted it far too long in a false and mendacious way, in accordance with the wishes of our reverence'.[36] As every fan of *The X Files* should be aware, 'Trust No One' and Chris Carter's gloss in the *Rolling Stone* interview, 'Paranoia is a good thing', can be understood in relation to Nietzsche's basic formulation, 'The more mistrust, the more philosophy'.[37] When Jeremiah Smith is a figure of monstrous Dionysian promise it can seem even more interesting to see Mulder as a millennial superman whose hidden identity involves similarities with the mutants and aliens he investigates. In the rest of the story Mulder and Jeremiah Smith work together until Jeremiah Smith is hunted down by the alien terminator who eventually saves Mulder's mother. In addition to his relation to the father figure, Jeremiah Smith, Mulder is seem in twin relation to the terminator, a character who recalls the Schwarzenegger figure of the

34 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 69-70.

35 *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, p. 73.

36 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 286.

37 *The Gay Science*, p. 286.

Terminator films (Cameron, 1984, 1991) and the *Herrenvolk* cyborg figure of *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), and with the implication that Mulder is a twin to the alien and monstrous neo-brutalism of the terminator figure.

Tabloid Meaning

The X Files is an exploration of 'extreme possibility' in the sense that it is an extreme or hyper mode of prime time television which explores possibilities for popular intellectualism, millennial mythology and commercial media fiction. As prime time commercial entertainment it has proved to be an extremely successful context for commercials, to the extent that the third and fourth series have been accompanied by commercials in an X Files style. What is more problematic is that the basis of *The X Files* in corporate commercialism is accompanied by development of the idea of weirdness and mystery in terms of narrative lack of closure and a similar, unresolved proliferation of extreme possibilities for meaning. That Tooms is shredded in the elevator and leaves Mulder and Scully without evidence sets a narrative pattern which is continued in the rest of the series. In a similar way the ambiguities and contradictions of *Talitha Cumi* provide extreme meanings without closure. Throughout *The X Files* the trick of narrative closure is accompanied by inconclusive ambiguity and a return from ideas and mythology to the emphasis on formulaic horror fiction and monsters. The strategy makes for good commercial practice to the extent that it suggests that there is room for endless debate, that everyone is right, you can make what you like of it, and the story is all there is. Even in *Talitha Cumi* it is not clear how much the imitation of Dostoevsky and the echoes of Nietzsche are more purposeful than the strategic reworking of *Kolchak*. Popular intellectualism tends to become at once weird, esoteric and noninvasive, a condition linked with the view of the aliens and the inhuman as at once monstrously real and unreal. More to the point, meaning is free in the sense that it remains altogether democratically open and strategically ambivalent. The politics of millennial paranoia can be read as

being either right wing or left wing, that the government is not to be trusted for the reason that it fails to provide support for survival, and that the government interferes too much. That everything is unknown involves an essential deflection of meaning. 'I can tell you what I saw but I don't think there's a man here who can tell you what happened', as the detective says in *Talitha Cumi*. Reading the Dostoevsky and Nietzsche level of reference in *Talitha Cumi* becomes a matter of preference, a choice between Nietzsche's liberal progressivism and conservative fear of the alien.[38] Popular intellectualism becomes an even-handed, endless balancing of extreme possibilities like an exploitation version of commercial media 'academicism'. In the circumstances Duchovny's description of the Cigarette Smoking Man in *Talitha Cumi* as a comment about repression of the imagination of the masses corresponds to the fact that *The X Files* is a new version of some old questions about the limits of mass culture. The problem is compounded by the fact that the translation of millennial meaning into media slogans and cool, oracular cliché has its limits, even with the addition of games with media culture. There is a point where the viewer wants something more than a translation of the psychoanalytic tradition into an intellectual statement in line of descent from the illumination that strikes Commander Adams in *Forbidden Planet* (Wilcox, 1956), 'those mindless beasts of the unconscious ... The secret devil of every soul on the planet, all set free at once to loot and maim. And take revenge, Morbius, and kill ... Monsters from the id, monsters from the subconscious'.

There are further questions from within the horror tradition. From that point of view it seems reasonable to ask whether mainstream television entertainment imposes restrictive

38 In the circumstances, reading accounts of the meaning of *The X Files* tends to involve high awareness of whether you agree or disagree with what the writer wants to find. At present the account of the series I find most rewarding at that level is Linda Badley, 'The Rebirth of the Clinic: The Body as Alien in *The X Files*', "*Deny All Knowledge": Reading The X Files*, pp. 148-67.

censorship on sex and violence. And there is a related question whether *The X Files* represents an assimilation of horror fiction into mainstream television in a way which involves a dilution of a distinctively intellectual subculture. After all, allusions to Lacan and Nietzsche are not necessary for intellectual interest. The base line is intellectual coherence and purpose. With Cronenberg and Lynch horror fiction theorises dissidence, moral conservatism, and commercial exploitation of horror and violence. In Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) a group of right wing do-gooders make a viral sex and violence video series called *Videodrome* designed to exterminate the kind of people who make and watch that kind of television, 'Why would anyone watch a scum show like *Videodrome*? ... Why deny you get your kicks out of watching torture and murder? ... you people who wallow around in it, and your viewers who watch you do it, you're rotting us away from the inside. We intend to stop that rot.' While Chris Carter is clearly aware of that tradition of dark intellectualism *The X Files* turns away from development of the questions about commerce in 'torture and murder'.

And yet, on its own terms *The X Files* is entertainment which is a dull instrument of torture, an exercise in degraded tabloid meaning, and an exploration of extreme possibilities which extend the range of television fiction. And it seems interesting most of all at the point where it approaches a condition of cool, interminable and absurdly degraded, media cult mythology, and where Mulder merges with Jeremiah Smith and the figures of Krycek, the alien terminators, and monsters such as Tooms and Leonard Betts. At that level the mythology of *The X Files* involves an increasingly precise focus on the theme of cancer. In *Talitha Cumi* Jeremiah Smith reveals that the Cigarette Smoking Man is dying of cancer and cures him in return for his freedom. In the fourth series the history of the Cigarette Smoking Man and the episode about Leonard Betts are followed by the revelation that Scully has contracted terminal cancer as a result of her abduction by aliens. The vision of the millennium in terms of the image of cancer and an unexplored, inconclusive merging of the image of the aliens, Jeremiah

Smith, the millennial hero Mulder and the cancer monster Leonard Betts is a prime example of the mix of radical possibility and degraded, imaginative schlock which is an essential condition of *The X Files*. At that level one of the most memorable images *The X Files* provides at the centre of its mythology for the millennium is the figure of Leonard Betts like a naked Frankenstein monster, or mutant Adam, screaming as he regenerates as living cancer. Interesting as that is as an icon for the millennium, it seems to be a reduction of contemporary preoccupation with the alien and inhuman to fear of disease and death. The question there is whether *The X Files* is cult television which makes an extreme appeal to conservative fear of difference and the unknown.