

***The X-Files* (USA: Fox, 1993-2002)**

Production Details:

Writers: Chris Carter, Darrin Morgan, Howard Gordon,
David Duchovny, Alex Gansa, Vince Gillian,
William Gibson, Stephen King, Frank Spotnitz,
Glen Morgan

Directors: Rob Bowman, Chris Carter, Kim Manners,
David Nutter, Duchovny

Producers: Carter, Manners, Spotnitz, John Shiban

Cast:

Agent Fox Mulder (David Duchovny)

Agent Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson)

Agent Monica Reyes (Annabeth Gish)

Agent John Doggett (Robert Patrick)

Associate Director Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi)

Deep Throat (Jerry Hardin)

Agent Diane Fowley (Mimi Rogers)

Alex Krychek (Nicholas Lea)

The Lone Gunmen (Dean Haglund, Bruce Harwood, Tom Braidwood)

X (Steven Williams)

C. G. B. Spender/The Cigarette-Smoking Man (William B. Davis)

The Well-Manicured Man (John Neville)



Like so much end-of-the-20th century television, *The X-Files*, which premiered on the still-new Fox Television Network in September of 1993, nine months into the presidency of William Jefferson Clinton, five months after the fiery end of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, was the result of recombinant programming. Under the admitted strong influence of the Watergate hearings, television programs like *The Night Stalker* (1972), and books like John Mack's *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (1994), series creator Chris Carter fashioned *The X-Files* out of conventions and formulae originating in police procedural, suspense, action, science fiction, and horror genres.

Beautifully shot (for its first five years it was filmed in and around Vancouver, British Columbia but then moved to Los Angeles) and edited, with intriguing electronic music, and first-rate special effects, it was in its time the best-looking show on television, and its key players, the little-known Duchovny as the wanting-to-believe-in the miraculous seeker Fox Mulder and the completely unknown Gillian Anderson as the skeptical medical scientist Scully (Mulder's "perfect other," as she refers to herself in Season Nine's "Trust No. 1"), were likewise superb. Beginning with Season Seven, Duchovny, anxious to pursue a film career, appeared in only half of the episodes and was replaced by Robert Patrick as the straight-arrow John Doggett. The supporting cast, especially Mitch Pileggi as the compromised company man Assistant Director (of the FBI) Walter Skinner, and William B. Davis as the sinister Cigarette-Smoking Man, was also memorable.

The X-Files was a narratologically unique series as well. In the closure-obsessed medium of television, virutally every episode lacked closure. Whatever "out there" truth Mulder and Skully discovered in the hour, whatever evidence they accumulated, by means of his intuitions or her careful science, of the existence of the paranormal or the supernatural or of vast conspiracies dissipated or evaporated before the closing credits. With the series' perpetual absence of resolution in mind, critic Charles Taylor observed that "What makes the show truly frightening is that it doesn't explain away any of its horror. . . . Watching each episode is like watching a photo that comes up in a chemical bath and suddenly goes bad; what seemed crystal clear clouds over, leaving us to grasp at what we thought we saw." By the end of the series' run in 2002, however, the complete lack of answers, perpetually promised by the show's creators but never delivered, had become extremely annoying.

Twin Peaks, one of *The X-Files*' key ancestor texts (Duchovny had even appeared in a quirky role in its second season), had failed to add viewers during its brief run in part because its serial narrative made it quite difficult for new viewers to come on board. Though it too had an ongoing, developing storyline, *The X-Files*, which began as a cult program (Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein) on the television graveyard of Friday night, was able to build its audience from year to year, eventually ranking as a Nielsen top twenty show (with as many as sixteen million viewers) that "owned" (pre-*Sopranos*) Sunday evening, because it combined serial, so-called "Mythology," episodes with stand-alone, monster-of-the-week stories. In the stand-alones, Mulder and Scully confronted vampires, fluke men, cockroaches, Frankenstein-like Cher fans, serial killers, shapeshifters, murderous shadows, an

alien Negro-league baseball star, manipulative tattoos, a reborn Golem, a computer-game character with a mind of her own, supersoldiers. In the Mythology episodes, sometimes two and even three-parts (“to be continued”) in length, Mulder and Scully sought to uncover a vast conspiracy involving a future invasion of Earth by an ancient alien species supported by The Syndicate, an ultra-secret, sinister NGO, whose members once included Mulder’s own father. It had been the abduction of Mulder’s sister Samantha (while, as children, they watched Watergate coverage on television) which had originally inspired his interest in UFOS and led to his assignment by the FBI to take charge of “the X-files,” those confined-to-the-basement, occult cases deemed outside the Bureau’s definition of normal.

At least since the actual Roswell incident in 1947, The Syndicate, it seems, has had prior knowledge about a coming alien invasion of the planet, a future conquest—it is scheduled for 2012—with which they seem to have been cooperating. They have bargained for time, however, by offering to first perfect (with the help of medical scientists recruited from the Axis powers after World War II) a slave-race of alien-human hybrids to be used by the invaders (Syndicate members’ wives and children, including Samantha Mulder, were offered up as guinea pigs for this research), while secretly developing an antidote to the Black Oil, a pathogenic substance, present on earth since prehistory, instrumental to the coming “viral holocaust.” “Survival,” the Well Manicured Man, a key conspirator, tells Mulder in *Fight the Future* (a 1998 feature film which extended and explored the series’ Mythology), “is the ultimate ideology,” and The Syndicate are ideologues. The malevolent Cigarette-Smoking Man (who appears to be Mulder’s real father and may, as we learn in the Season Four episode “Musings of a Cigarette-Smoking Man,” have assassinated both JFK and Martin Luther King) is their chief enforcer, though his motives are never entirely clear. If this all-too-brief summary of *X-Files* mythology appears confusing, part of the blame must be placed on the narrative itself. By the end of the series, at least one admirer had begun to wonder “whether the mythos storyline had become so complicated and so muddled that even Carter couldn’t untangle it” (Kelsey).

Devoted fans, known as X-Philes, turned their obsession with the series into inspired websites that helped newcomers to the series to get caught up and acclimate themselves to the *X-Files* universe. One ambitious, meticulous *X-Files* Timeline, to site but one example, provides a chronology of the series’ Mythology that runs to over seventy pages in length (Marek). Some prominent fans even came

to write for the show: cyberpunk founder William Gibson wrote two episodes and horror master Stephen King one. Websites like The David Duchovny Estrogen (DDEB) and Gillian Anderson Testosterone Brigade (GATB) promoted the show's stars as sex symbols. Slash fan-fiction coupled Mulder and Skully (in the show's actual nine year run, the partners never did more than kiss, and the series' UST—Unresolved Sexual Tension—was never relieved) and even Mulder and Skinner. Fans did more than write and talk about the series, of course; thanks to Fox's skillful vertical integration of their franchise show, they would have the opportunity to spend millions of dollars a year on official books, novels, trading cards, coffee mugs, t-shirts, DVDs, and action figures.

By its third season, *The X-Files* had already begun to regularly spoof itself. In the "narrative abduction" (Lavery, Hague, Cartwright, "Generation X") of "Jose Chung's *From Outer Space*," for example, one of several brilliant episodes penned by Darrin Morgan, a novelist writes a "non-fiction science fiction" book about a Mulder/Scully investigation of an alien abduction and, after a labyrinthine story which spoofs the Fox's exploitative airing of an "Alien Autopsy," burlesques *Twin Peaks*, and includes appearances by future governor of Minnesota Jesse Ventura and *Jeopardy* host Alex Trebek as Men in Black, and comes to the conclusion that Mulder is a "ticking time bomb of insanity." In Season Seven's "X-Cops" Mulder and Scully find themselves in the middle of an episode of the Fox reality show *Cops* in what becomes a kind of *X-Files* mockumentary. In the same season's "Hollywood A.D." the partners become consultants on a movie version of an X-File, in which comic Garry Shandling plays Mulder and Tea Leoni (Duchovny's wife) does Scully. Such send-ups, however, and tour-de-force episodes like "Triangle" (Season Six), inspired by Hitchcock's experiment in shooting without cuts in *Rope* (1948), helped to give the series new creative energy. As Kinney notes "every time you pronounce it creatively dead, it comes back to life like the ghouls that Mulder and Scully have been investigating these eight odd years. Every time you think the show has fallen into irreparable self-parody, Chris Carter has a marijuana-induced epiphany, rolls off his chaise on some remote Hawaiian beach, and videophones in an idea that shake new life into it."

In 2001, *The X-Files* produced its one and only spinoff, the short-lived *The Lone Gunmen*, which featured the three conspiracy-nerds, Langly, Frohike, and Byers, who had often aided Skully and Mulder in their investigations. (After the demise of their show, Carter would have the Gunmen heroically killed off in the “Jumping the Shark” episode of *X-Files*’ final season.) Many series, however, attempted to mine the vein *X-Files* had opened up. *Millennium* (1996-1999) and *Harsh Realm* (1999)—both created by Chris Carter, *Dark Skies* (1996), *Roswell* (1999-2002), *Dark Angel* (2000-2002)—all owed a substantial debt to *The X-Files*, though none matched its success.

The series has inspired a good deal of critical attention. Both Graham and Knight, for example, find it a revealing example of late twentieth century “conspiracy culture.” Delasara has exhaustively catalogued how the series is indebted to/imbedded in popular culture. Wilcox and Williams and Parks see it as an important feminist text, with Skully, both a scientist and a courageous FBI agent, serving as an important new role model. Badley examines it as a Foucauldian revelation about contemporary attitudes about the body. Clerc has examined its fandom. Kubek offers a Lacanian, psychoanalytic reading of the series. Both Burns and McLean engage in “paranoid criticism” (Lavery) that mirrors the series’ own paranoia. Burns, for example, believes that “the show pokes fun at the fantasy that television might, like the black oil, sneak in through our eyes and ‘infect’ us with alien cultural influences. And so the rebel aliens protect themselves by burning their eyes shut. Allowing nothing visual to seep in means allowing no seduction and no oppression of cultural difference by the normative culture controlling the visual field.”

The philosopher Nietzsche once observed, through his mouthpiece Zarathustra, that the great secret of life is to “die at the right time.” Though its nine year run as a television series was governed by the faith that “the truth is out there,” *The X-Files* could not claim to have understood Zarathustra’s truth; it lived on for two or three seasons too long, its ratings halved from their peak, and it may not be dead yet. Having already spun-off one feature film, additional movies are possible, and it will likely continue to be one of the most popular shows in syndication.

For a time, however, it was an international cultural phenomenon, an entertainment that both shaped and reflected, and finally confirmed, American sensibility in the pre-millennium, pre-9/11 decade. It was not *Law and Order*, recycling cases from contemporary headlines; it borrowed from the zeitgeist, not the

front page. Though it remained a series that never really took itself that seriously, *The X-Files* made sublime paranoia the stuff of network television and “drastically raised the bar on this particular genre,” as contributor William Gibson would observe in a dialogue with Chris Carter. “It’s a genre without a name,” Gibson insisted, “but there’s a lineage. The next time somebody approaches this genre, the bar is *The X-Files*” (McIntyre).

Questions to Consider:

- How did *The X-Files* develop from a cult show into a mainstream hit?
- *X-Files* creator Carter has observed that “the show’s original spirit has become kind of the spirit of the country—if not the world” (quoted in Knight). Is this remark justified?
- *The X-Files* was clearly subversive television. But what exactly did it subvert? How did it subvert itself as well?
- How did the series UST contribute to the ongoing narrative of *The X-Files*?
- What genre formulae are identifiable in the series?
- Can you identify some ways in which *The X-Files* was televisually innovative?
- After inspecting some fan sites, as well as the official *X-Files* website (<http://www.x-files.com/>), how would you characterize the contributions of the Internet to our understanding and appreciation of the series?

Recommended Reading

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