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## *The X-Files* and the Demon-Haunted World

*Ari N. Schulman*

**T**he *X-Files* shared with Carl Sagan a kind of cosmic loneliness—an ache for beings from elsewhere to materialize from the sky, to reveal their secret knowledge, so long obscured from us, of how to snatch meaning back from the void. In one episode, our hero, FBI agent Fox Mulder, watches footage of Sagan stating at a NASA symposium that “by finding out whether there are civilizations on planets of other stars, we reestablish a meaningful context for ourselves.” Mulder and the protagonist of Sagan’s novel *Contact* both turn the search for little green men into a personal and professional obsession, to the jeering of their colleagues and the derailing of their careers.

But whatever affection for Sagan was built into *The X-Files* went unrequited. In 1996, when the show was near the apex of its cultural influence, Sagan griped in his book *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*:

A series called *The X Files*, which pays lip service to skeptical examination of the paranormal, is skewed heavily towards the reality of alien abductions, strange

powers and government complicity in covering up just about everything interesting. Almost never does the paranormal claim turn out to be a hoax or a psychological aberration or a misunderstanding of the natural world.

Sagan goes on to complain about the implausibility of the interspecies breeding depicted in *Star Trek*, missing how powerfully it symbolized his own cosmopolitan politics, or willing to ignore it for the sake of pedantry. For the science evangelist, like certain other flavors of moralist, there must be no art in art, only lessons. Even the most passing inaccuracies are direct threats to science, and so to civilization itself. As if in heartsick reply, the *X-Files* episode with the Sagan footage aired a few months after his death, with a teary-eyed Mulder watching it to nurse his despair over the revelation that an apparent alien body he’d recovered was an elaborate hoax.

So maybe Sagan didn’t quite grasp the fictional part of fiction—but just the same, he might have had a point about *The X-Files*. The show depicted the investigations of Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny)

and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), two FBI agents who investigate “unexplained phenomena” under the bureau’s X-Files unit, whose staff consists solely of Mulder until Scully is assigned in the pilot episode to join him. Created by Chris Carter, a television writer and producer looking for his first big break, it debuted on Fox in 1993, and was an immediate hit, popular enough that a film was made while the show was still on the air—almost unheard of in those days. It was canceled in 2002, and although its reincarnation in a second movie in 2008 went almost unnoticed, it is returning again as a six-episode miniseries in early 2016.

Unlike outright fantasies set in worlds of dragons and unicorns, distant sci-fi futures or galaxies far, far

away, episodes of *The X-Files* generally take place in suburban or small-town America, familiar settings that give the show’s phantasmagoria an ambiguous relationship with reality. And where other horror-sci-fi shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Outer Limits* present themselves as parallel realities, with at most an allegorical relation to our own, *The X-Files* is premised on exploring the kinds of weird phenomena that some people claim are actually going on in our own world today: UFOs and alien abductions, cloak-and-dagger government conspiracies, mutants, demonic possession, strange creatures living in the sewers, poltergeists, telepathy, past-life experiences, cannibal cults, and satanic ritual abuse. In other words,



*Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) in Mulder's office in the basement of FBI headquarters.*

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exactly the kind of tabloid fodder, black-helicopter paranoia, and New Age mysticism that irritated Sagan enough to devote significant time and energy to debunking it.

One of the show's central themes involves powerful forces aligning to frustrate the investigation of The Truth—which, as the tagline from the opening credits reminds us, Is Out There. In many of the show's so-called “monster-of-the-week” episodes, we see town elders suppressing evidence and concealing the dark secrets that haunt their seemingly sleepy burgs. Other episodes explore an ongoing “mytharc” storyline, slowly revealing the existence of a shadowy syndicate of men in black dedicated to suppressing public knowledge of the existence of extraterrestrials.

The other major theme is not about the conspiratorial concealment of the truth but about those who refuse to accept it for themselves, even when they see it with their own eyes. Thus the dynamic between Mulder and Scully, the pitting of Mulder's openness to aliens and goblins against Scully's hard-nosed empiricism. Between believing in science and believing in spooks, the show says, one stands for open-minded intellectual bravery, the other a cowering behind exhausted dogma—just not in the way you've been told.

**A**s the series opens we are introduced to Fox Mulder. Once a rising star at the FBI Academy

and then a genius as an agent, he has become the laughingstock of the bureau. Driven by his quest to find his younger sister, whom he witnessed being abducted when they were children—by aliens, he believes—Mulder's colleagues take him to be squandering his talents on investigating aliens, government conspiracies, and other tinfoil-hat concerns. Mulder is dubbed “Spooky” by his colleagues and dumped in a dusty basement office.

But he remains an ace sleuth: In bureau meetings on high-profile unsolved cases, Mulder silently lurks in the back of the room until his colleagues' swagger gives way to head-scratching, at which point he pipes up with an “out-there” theory. All heads turn, and as Mulder goes on he is met with guffaws and eye rolls, until he points to some key details in the physical evidence that everyone else had missed and that defy conventional explanation. A grudging silence falls on the room as Mulder strides out to pursue the lead. In one early episode, smear marks on air vents in a crime scene with no discernible forced entry point turn out to be elongated human fingerprints, as if some humanoid creature had stretched itself to squeeze through the narrow ducts. The marks match a suspect when his fingerprints on file are digitally stretched.

The weight of the skeptical work falls to Dana Scully, a novice agent, forensic pathologist, and M.D.

assigned at the behest of shadowy bureau figures to become the second agent on the X-Files beat. Scully understands that her tacit purpose is to debunk Mulder's work, and resents the assignment, as does Mulder. But Scully, strait-laced and science-minded, can't help but fill the role.

The show unfolds as a paranormal procedural, a sort of *Law & Order: Monster Victims Unit*. The basic template of an episode varies little: Mulder and Scully are sent to investigate a crime that's stumped the local police and now the FBI. A higher-up in the bureau, or a fellow agent, grudgingly admits that he can't provide a conventional explanation, and has heard that Mulder and Scully specialize in "uh...*unusual*" cases.

As the intrepid duo investigates and the bodies pile higher, Mulder soon alights upon a theory, often sauntering over to a dusty filing cabinet to pull out an old X-file in which an FBI predecessor recounted facing just the same mysterious phenomenon decades before. As Mulder advances a theory drawn from folklore, ancient mythology, real but over-baked science, and investigative intuition, Scully flounders for increasingly desperate-sounding conventional explanations, even as she adopts Mulder's idea as a working hypothesis in order to stop the monster. The beast is caught, killed, or driven away, ending the crisis in

whatever backwater it has chosen to do its ghoulish business. As Mulder and Scully drive off into the night, the episode closes with glowing eyes peeking from beneath a sewer. Something has survived.

In good science-fiction tradition, many of the monsters are based on actual scientific ideas, and even serve to elaborately illustrate them: a man who eats cancerous tumors and can regrow amputated appendages is explained through punctuated equilibrium, the theory that evolution happens in rare but momentous shifts; an episode that ventures into *Matrix*-style reality-bending territory invokes hallucinogenic mushrooms and fungi that span entire forests.

But the role of real science in the show is slippery. As one exasperated scientist moans to Mulder, "you are taking my legitimate research and basic biological principle, and stretching them both way out of proportion, in an effort to give some kind of validity to an entirely ludicrous theory." Mulder's goal, moreover, isn't only to demonstrate new phenomena or theories, or even, like Copernicus and Einstein, to induce a scientific revolution. His project is to draw on science's legitimacy in order to explode it.

Scully's dutiful pushback to Mulder reflects their tacit agreement that if proof of the paranormal could ever be secured, science would be unable

to accommodate it. Even when Scully finally, absurdly belatedly, comes around to acknowledging what she has seen, she still must bracket it, setting it aside as part of the observable world that is somehow beyond the realm of science. Lecturing to her academy students, she warns, “only after we have exhausted these methods should we leave science behind to consider more”—here she takes one of her patented apologetic pauses—“extreme possibilities.”

And the supposed world-historical importance of finding evidence for the paranormal was always deeply equivocal. Mulder rails on about it season after season—*This could finally be the proof, Scully!, the proof I've been looking for my whole life of The Truth about the secret alien invasion, or astral projection, or whatever.* It's quite a problem, then, that the men in black or the meddling local authorities almost always abscond at episode's end with any hard evidence of the monsters, sending Mulder and Scully away without so much as a drop of ectoplasm.

But for all Mulder's raving about the powers who suppress The Truth, the agents have a remarkably short-lived interest in what they do turn up, which is still quite substantial: the occasional ghoulish residue, but also especially the agents' own documentation, Scully's countless autopsies, and the testimony of their own eyes in case after case. There's enough accumulated for it to be peculiar that

the agents don't treat it as a body of work in an emerging science, to be discussed and studied and publicized long after any one case is over.

Some of this can be chalked up to the demands of storytelling: episodic TV shows need a world that more or less resets with every episode. But, aside from the ongoing government-alien-conspiracy plot, the show never even offers a passing gesture at the need for enduring principles or coherent forces behind these extreme possibilities. There is only a grab bag of weird stuff, no one of which obviously validates any other, much less some entire alternative picture. The paranormal in *The X-Files* is defined by its evasiveness. And despite its pretense, the show was not really interested in what a science of the paranormal, to the extent such a thing can be imagined, would actually look like.

As the show's seasons roll by, the woo-woo stuff mounts and Agent Scully is left with precious little to salvage her materialist commitments—“Help me find some science that I can hang this on,” she pleads in a sixth-season episode. An increasing amount of the skeptical work must be borne by Gillian Anderson: Whenever Scully is called upon to rebut one of Mulder's just-so-crazy-it-must-be-true theories, an intricate play of condescension, annoyance, frustration, humoring, disbelief, bargaining, denial, and grudging acceptance moves



Courtesy Fox

across Anderson's face in the span of a short moment.

The imbalance between Mulder and Scully comes to a head in this exchange from late in the sixth season:

Scully: Mulder, can't you just for once, just for the novelty of it, come up with the simplest explanation, the most logical one, instead of automatically jumping to UFOs or Bigfoot or—

Mulder: Scully, in six years, how often have I been wrong? No, seriously, I mean, every time I bring you a new case, we go through this perfunctory dance. You tell me I'm not being scientifically rigorous and that I'm off my nut, and then in the end, who turns out to be right, like, ninety-eight-point-nine percent of the time? I just think I've earned the benefit of the doubt here.

Based on their respective types—Mulder the believer and Scully the skeptic—one might expect Mulder to be a hysteric, and Scully a cool-headed pragmatist. But the roles are played somewhat opposite to their types. This is particularly true for Mulder, who despite his endless sanctimony is rarely hotheaded, almost never hysterical. In a wink at Duchovny's deadpan delivery, one frightened character describes Mulder as "so blank and expressionless he didn't even seem human. I think he was a mandroid." Mulder's interest in the paranormal is played on a day-to-day level as geekiness, his certitude laconic. He gets away with being so nuts because he's more in on the joke than anyone else: he knows just how crazy he sounds, but, what do you know, it just so happens that he's always right.

If Mulder isn't quite what we would expect of a true believer, Scully comes a bit closer to what we would expect of a skeptic. Usually unflappable and, apart from some occasional sarcasm, relatively humorless, Agent Scully performs her duties as a scientist and an FBI agent conscientiously and by the book. But her seriousness covers an emotional well that, if not deeper than Mulder's, is more churning, more volatile, demanding something stronger to keep it concealed. Like Clarice Starling from *The Silence of the Lambs*—one of Chris Carter's models for the character—Scully is all clinical affect and boxy pantsuits, a hardboiled veneer concealing a certain vulnerability, her devotion to science driven in part by a need for order.

Chris Carter said in an interview that he aimed to “flip” the two main characters' traditional gender roles, making the man more intuitive and the woman more skeptical. But one feminist critic, blogging pseudonymously at Fannie's Room, argues that the series actually preserves the essence of these types by tossing Scully into a universe where her skepticism actually still means, as Mulder finally has to break it to her, that she is pretty much always wrong. This interpretation could be extended by noting how often Scully is a damsel in distress. In practically every third episode, especially in the early seasons, Scully is abducted and Mulder dashes in to save her at the

last moment. Perhaps this is meant to invert the inversion—to return some traditional femininity to the woman who otherwise seems tough enough to play in the rough man's world.

But the gender-political interpretation seems inadequate. For one thing, Scully is not physically or constitutionally weak, in need of Mulder's masculine show of force. It's her physical willpower, mental resilience, and psychological cunning that allow her to endure the abductions and outsmart her captors long enough to be rescued. Mulder's role is really just to always be right enough to know where to look.

Scully's abductions, moreover, only gain their full force in the context of her skepticism. She isn't placed into just any kind of peril, but subjected to bizarre, traumatic stuff: she nearly gets eaten by the cancer-eating man (whose choice of her as a victim itself contains a traumatic revelation); nearly made a victim of a necrophiliac serial killer (twice!); abducted by aliens, or maybe men in black posing as aliens, who implant a tracking device in her and harvest all of her ova; later taken again by aliens and nearly mutated into one of them; kidnapped by a town of cannibals and nearly beheaded by a masked executioner; and so on. She is, in short, subjected to traumas by precisely the paranormal oddities she so strenuously denies—and generally continues to deny even after

several seasons of this treatment. It's not enough to have her worldview proven wrong over and over; it has to be beaten out of her by monster after monster she claims not to believe in.

What Agent Scully endures is a kind of rationalist deconditioning program. It is a trial by ordeal for Scully's science and her insistent belief in it. And it is a vindication of the saving power of the one who is open to the real Truth. To be sure, Agent Mulder faces his own travails. But these are far rarer, and when they do occur, they are steps on the path to him becoming who he is destined to be. Most notable is his near-death experience, interpreted for him by a wise old Navajo man, which points to the spiritual nature of his entire life's journey. This notion comes to fruition with a later abduction in which Mulder is portrayed as an overtly Christlike figure—suffering, disappeared, resurrected. Even the alien hoax, described above, can in retrospect be considered a test of faith, a trial on the path to full belief. Scully's ordeals are part of a process of self-abnegation; Mulder's, of self-realization.

**T**he *X-Files* toys with the way modern science understands itself. Science is not only a method but a worldview, with its own traditions and myths, heroes and villains. Consider the story of Galileo standing up to the Church, the classic tale of the champion of discovery perse-

cuted by the powers that be for busting cherished beliefs. Like Mulder's appeals to science, the faithfulness of this story to the actual historical record is less important than the lesson it is meant to convey. What *The X-Files* offers is a series of cunning inversions of these mythologies science has developed about itself.

Chief among these is the myth of the Galilean skeptic clashing with the orthodox believer. And as far as that goes, it's really Mulder who's the skeptic, and Scully the believer. However much we're told that Mulder is driven by his traumatic origin story and his love of the spooky, we mostly only see Mulder's passions trumping his reason in the episodes where he is investigating his sister's disappearance or the vast all-wing conspiracy. And although these things are at the core of the show's mythology, they're also a departure from its normal depiction of Mulder as an investigator: Typically cool, wry, and curious, Mulder has the demeanor and style of a skeptic. And he and Scully are quite evenly matched, both critical, insightful, and attentive to the demands of evidence.

More to the point, it is of course Mulder, not Scully, who is willing to reckon with the reality of the observable phenomena of their world, which after all is the point of the scientific method. For all her forensic and investigatory chops, Scully the scientist is, as one of Mulder's few allies in the bureau puts it, "not what



I'd call an open mind." She defends science—"my science," she calls it, suggesting there might be others—as if it were defined by some particular list of things that are not allowed to exist. And when she winds up seeing just about everything on this list and yet refuses to acknowledge it, her invocations of science begin to sound less like skepticism than clinging to blind faith.

Along with the clash of skeptic and believer is an inversion of science's relationship to authority. The agents illustrate this again: scientific Scully is actually deferential to authorities of all kinds, Mulder suspicious and confrontational. The scientific imperative to question arguments from authority is meant to counter our inherent complacency and deference. But in the noir world of *The X-Files*, authority must be fought because anyone and everyone could be out to deceive. Though Carl Sagan dismissed the paranoid style of the show, it shared more with his science and his politics than he would have cared to admit. "One of the great commandments of science is, 'Mistrust arguments from authority,'" he writes in *The Demon-Haunted World*. Or, as *The X-Files* puts it: TRUST NO ONE. Both seemed to agree that the authorities do not just happen to be wrong; it is in their interest to defend orthodoxy.

Here is where the broader scientific mythology, going beyond the strict dictates of method, is at its strongest

play in the show: in the story of the brave loners, the few who seek and discover and sustain the Truth, no matter how they challenge the powerful or society's cherished beliefs, no matter how they are persecuted. But where Sagan saw science as the ultimate weapon in the struggle against power structures of all kinds, in the universe of *The X-Files*, the scientific establishment is both an orthodoxy and an instrument of the powers that be.

The ironic upshot is that *The X-Files* invokes the mythology of modern science in order to arrive at the very set of beliefs that modern science defines itself against. It tells a story of how, in a world riven by demons and spooks and witches, science would fall into the same kind of dogmatism it claims to vanquish.

**A**mong the many interesting things about this literarily brilliant, philosophically perverse conceit of the show—making the scientific enterprise eat its own tail—is the way that it shows up in real-world debates about science. Many of these debates are over subjects with higher stakes than the powers of the corner-shop psychic: most obviously, things like genetically modified foods, alternative medicine, the purported link between childhood vaccines and autism, and so on. These are fights in which "concerned citizens" portray themselves as brave seekers of the truth battling a sneering scientific

establishment and the society that blindly supports it, backed by distended corporate interests and shadowy government powers. They see themselves in much the same way Fox Mulder sees himself.

For Mulder, the problem with science is that it is a form of bias, not only a deference to received ideas but a brute preference for certain kinds of worlds over others—simple over complex, spiritless over haunted. He mocks Occam's Razor, the principle that the simplest explanation for something is usually the right one, as "Occam's Principle of Limited Imagination." But this rather tellingly misses the point. Given any list of events that might but are unlikely to occur, over any span of time it's likelier that fewer rather than more of them will occur. The same principle applies to accounting for the origins of events, even if demons and little green men are admitted onto the list of possible causes. Occam's Razor, in this way of applying it, is a statistical principle, and applies to haunted worlds as much as any other. Even if Scully was blind to the big picture, she still should have been right more often than Mulder, if only the screenwriters had not stacked the deck against her.

Statistics is dry material for television, of course, but what's striking is that Mulder actually agrees with his scientific adversaries that Occam's Razor is in practice a psychological principle, aimed at the

human imagination. But of course the scientific concern is that the imagination is already too eager. And while there are certainly fake-outs in *The X-Files*, particularly in the satiric episodes—a hovering noise and bright light, shot in filmic language lifted from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, will resolve into an ordinary helicopter—only seldom did the show do more than tease the possibility that what we fear might just be in our heads.

It is a point worth observing not because the show had any obligation to get things right about science, but because the insightful part of its critique gets lost when science is cast as just another form of metaphysical dogma. It is not so outlandish, after all, to imagine that if spooky stuff actually were to start happening in our world, even in a readily observable way, scientists would be rather reluctant to admit it. But if that hesitance follows from the philosophical roots of the scientific project, it has to do not only with premises about what kind of world we live in but also what kind of minds we have.

When you were little, did you ever lie in bed, in the twilight between waking and sleep where reason slackens its grip on imagination, and, gazing out at the black expanse, think you saw... You cry out. Your mother comes in, flips on the light, and lifts the bedcover to reveal the floor beneath: clean hardwood. You

see? It's just your imagination. Go back to sleep, dear. She turns out the light and shuts the door. The bedcover has fallen back into place—except for one ruffle, a gap that opens now onto darkness, pure but for two glowing, yellow eyes. Cue the opening credits.

The ancients once knew what today only a few true believers do: Every fevered vision, every thing that goes bump in the night, is really there. As silly as this conceit of subverting science is when taken at face value, *The X-Files* should not work so well as it does. Then again, it is a curiosity that the thing whose defects modern science was designed to work around—the mind—is also the one lingering part of our everyday world that it has, as yet, most failed to account for. But if the beasties that populate the demon-haunted world are really projections welling from deep within the mind, then the show's pretense of depicting an empirical science of them takes on a rather new meaning.

There is a popular account of the appeal of horror films that says the genre allows us to examine our real-world fears in a safe way, and thereby to purge ourselves of them—fiction as therapy, a notion that can be traced back to Aristotle's understanding of catharsis. In this view, witches and vampires and spooks are metaphors, personifications of other repressed terrors, and horror films, in turn, enact these fears.

There is much to support this kind of interpretation of *The X-Files*, as a working out of some of its era's deep-seated anxieties. The show's conspiracy mythology coincided with the height of American black-helicopter paranoia. Its various monsters, ugly though they appear, were imbued with pathos and often treated with surprising sympathy. And then there were the towns the monsters haunted—sometimes poverty-stricken spots in Middle America, sometimes well-tended suburbs and gated communities, but almost always sites of dysfunction, loneliness, alienation, and the grinding oppression of conformity. The spooks and demons of *The X-Files* give us a glimpse into the dark interior of the late-twentieth-century American soul.

But for Sagan, *The X-Files* and its ilk represent a near-existential threat to civilization, not only by muddling the science that vanquished the Dark Ages but by stoking the fears that fed it. "I have a foreboding of an America in my children's or grandchildren's time," Sagan wrote, "when, clutching our crystals and nervously consulting our horoscopes, our critical faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness." The appeal of a show like *The X-Files* is a holdover from our benighted evolutionary and cultural past, and not only can we jettison it, but modernity will not be secured

until we do—until the candle of science, as the subtitle of Sagan’s book puts it, shines fully through the dark.

The horror-film explanation, relishing symbols where Sagan permits only literalism, can see the dark forces explored on the show as inevitable if occasional intruders on the human landscape, and can see the genre as a healthy tool for coping with them. But there is a deeper convergence between this explanation and Sagan’s handwringing: to resolve the fears is to fulfill the purpose of the stories, in a way that also defuses them. Since horror’s purpose is cathartic, its appeal peaks at the time of greatest therapeutic need.

Sagan clearly saw the 1990s as a moment of such crisis. And yet the conditions for a pro-science society as Sagan understood them were perhaps never stronger than around the time he wrote his book. Security fears appeared to be waning during that brief lull between the Cold War and 9/11. The hopes for something like post-national governance of the world were probably never higher. Scientific and intellectual collaboration ignored international boundaries like never before—the International Space Station! The Internet! And the figure of the scientist had already achieved the present status of public intellectual *par excellence*; Sagan himself was king of them all.

And yet in the midst of this shiny era, this decade about nothing, a

nation turned demonic. There was Marilyn Manson and Disturbed and Rob Zombie; the neo-pagan and mystical music of Enigma and their imitators; the vampire fare of *Buffy* and *Blade* and *Interview with the Vampire*; the further spread of the goth scene; the rise of Wicca and “magick”; *The Blair Witch Project*, and many others. And creeping in the center of this vast cultural nightscape, two flashlights in the dark.

The most enduring curiosity of the show is how little it wound up caring about the actual contents of The Truth it was supposed to be after, how the show wanted it to remain forever Out There. The widely mocked resolution of the show’s “mytharc” storyline was bound to disappoint, not only because the writers obviously had no overarching plan for it, but because the animating spirit of *The X-Files* was a perpetual dissatisfaction with reassuring answers, including its own. It was instead a show that sought to inhabit strangeness for its own sake. Its fascination with freakishness, its paranoid and mysterian streaks, can be traced back only so far to literal beliefs or present anxieties in the viewership.

The basic thrill of watching *The X-Files* is not one of exorcism but possession. We are, in our way, like Fox Mulder, who rages against vast conspiracies and hidden forces in the sky, and yet would hardly know why to get out of bed in the morning

without them, would rather the stars  
be aligning against him than care  
nothing for him at all. In an age in  
which we have trained ourselves to  
admit only what we see in the light of  
day, it may be possible to experience

the ecstatic only through horror, the  
dark apparition of what we do not  
want to believe.

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