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**Deceive, Inveigle, Obfuscate:**

**Post-Structuralism and the Staggered Retirement of Fox Mulder**

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Fox Mulder pissed away a brilliant career, lost the respect of supervisors and friends and now lives his life shaking his fist at the sky and muttering about conspiracies to anyone who will listen.

Morris Fletcher. “Dreamland.” *The X-Files*.

It doesn’t make sense. It’s incomprehensible in any real world way.

Fox Mulder. “Sein und Weit.” *The X-Files.*

“Once upon a time, there was a guy with the improbable name of Fox Mulder” (Dreamland). With these words, Morris Fletcher opens the second installment of a two-part story told as part of the sixth season of *The X-Files* (1993-2002). This “improbably named character” is one of the show’s two central protagonists: Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Special Agents Fox William Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson). Together, Mulder and Scully investigate the X-Files: unsolvable or minimal-priority status cases that exist outside the Bureau mainstream, typically associated with unexplained phenomena, fringe pseudo-scientific theories or non-verifiable evidence of paranormal investigation. Over the course of the nine years originally documented by the show Mulder drifts further away from the bureau. When the franchise is revived in the 2007 movie *X-Files: I Want to Believe*, Mulder is hiding from the FBI. Later, the 2016 “Event Series” finds him living as a hermit, fully disassociated from his former career until he is invited back to investigate the X-Files once more. Upon resuming his former occupation, Mulder catalyzes a disintegration of procedures, both within the bureau and within the genre of the show itself. This chapter with chart Mulder’s gradual disassociation from the FBI and, exploring this disassociation in relation to post-structuralism, argue that Mulder’s career-path functions metonymically for the disintegration of the show’s own genre; a procedural drama which ultimately (and recurrently) foregrounds the actual impossibility of professional procedures to secure unproblematic resolution.

In 1996, *The X-Files* was said to be “as complex and as controversial a phenomenon as the medium of television has ever produced” (1996, 3). The first collection of scholarly essays dedicated to its analysis noted that it was incendiary, “not least because it dared to suggest (with great seriousness) that the government of the United States is involved in a vast conspiracy with former Nazi and Japanese scientists to assist alien beings in performing experiments – including, perhaps, generic hybridization! – on American citizens, [but because] it also experimented, narratologically, semiotically – with the medium [of television] in innovative ways” (1996, 3). One such innovation was its self-conscious manipulation of the procedural drama. *The X-Files* proved so informative to procedural drama that in 2008 Chandler Harriss used it alongside only three other archetypal examples - *Law and Order* (1990-2010), *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-2002) and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) – to offer what he presented as a definitive textualist definition of the genre. Working with this corpus, Harriss generated the following definition:

The procedural is a variant of the detective story, which is itself a variant of the mystery, globally speaking. Procedurals filter the ratiocinative action through characters who actively investigate the mystery for the viewer, following procedures that are prescribed by their profession (e.g. police detectives, forensic scientists, etc.) (43).

In the case of *The X-Files* that “profession” is Mulder and Scully’s work as special agents for the FBI, the ultimate signifier of institutional power in America. Michele Malach has noted that within the “pantheon of pop-culture agents”, prior to *The X-Files* (and its immediate predecessor, *Twin Peaks*, 1990-91), it was typically the case that agents enforced not only the law, but also cultural standards of order and normalcy. Malach writes that “like other representations of law enforcement officials, the agent character also embodies the normal. This means that he or she represents cultural categories of correctness, acting out what it means to be normal, mainstream, not-marginalized” (64). The fundamental allure of procedural drama is the promise that order will be restored. In terms of procedural drama dealing with criminal injustice, this restoration comes when the perpetrator is caught and punished. Given that the genre deals with professional procedures, this resolution also comes with the official endorsement of the state. Here, there is also the opportunity for a second order to be restored: the restoration of state sanctioned attitudes and social behaviors. Martha Nochimson identifies the figure of the law enforcement official as the most essential ingredient in procedural drama for this reason, observing that “television government agents are the sine qua non of television’s endless obsession with the restoration of limits, barriers that authorize only the most domesticated form of desire” (147).

Given that the premise of *The X-Files* sees Mulder and Scully working through a backlog of unsolved, non-normative cases, the potential for satisfactory resolution through professional procedure is high. At the same time, the show regularly foregrounds Mulder and Scully’s hyper-normality. As Malach notes, “their appearance as ordinary FBI agents in line with traditional expectations of what agents look like reminds the viewers of a time when FBI agents were trustworthy protectors of the American way of life. Because Mulder and Scully look this way, we can trust them to tell us the truth.” However, this resolution is never achieved, and rather than restoring order, *The X-Files* deconstructs the parameters by which any sense of order can be attained.

This resistance to generic expectations is deliberate, resulting from a self-conscious juxtaposition of form and content. First, the unsolved cases that Mulder and Scully investigate are unsolved because they do not obey the logic of FBI procedure. Therefore, the very procedure that the viewer relies upon to bring order and resolution is functionally useless. Second, though Mulder and Scully may present as “normal” and thus serve as arbiters of state-sanctioned behaviors, neither is capable of acting as a dispassionate vessel for bureau attitudes and objectives. For instance, Mulder repeatedly takes psychic evidence as seriously as physical evidence, often ignoring that which is usually prized the most by law enforcement officials: proof. Even Scully, who is usually presented as the more “normal” of the two, is seen to act on visions (such as in “Beyond the Sea”, an episode in the first season) or on what she perceives to be divine inspiration (such as in the ninth season episode “Improbable”). Not only are the procedures at the heart of the show in which they exist utterly redundant, but neither can Mulder and Scully adequately police the boundaries of normalcy because neither adhere to such standards themselves. What happens instead, this chapter argues, is that *The X-Files* navigates the irreconcilable contradictions built into its format by maintaining an ironic self-reflexivity from which it offers a critique of both the procedural drama and the society that lusts for its artificial conjuring of order and resolution.

Morris Fletcher, the character introduced at the outset of this chapter, offers us an intriguing perspective on Mulder’s career during the sixth season episode “Dreamland”. A luckless Man in Black, when we first encounter Fletcher he is counting down the days to retirement. In the previous episode, he apprehended Mulder and Scully at the gates of Area 51. As he sarcastically assures Mulder that “there’s no such thing as flying saucers,” a UFO rumbles overhead. The saucer’s unnaturally bright lights fade to reveal that Fletcher and Mulder have swapped bodies. Told largely from Fletcher’s perspective (witnessing events through Mulder’s eyes), these two episodes provide a rare opportunity for the audience to encounter a new vision of Agent Mulder. Fletcher, an outsider uninitiated in the show’s story and continuity, generates an alternate telling of Mulder’s narrative. Famously, “Spooky Mulder” is the outsider inside the FBI, driven to find his lost sister (who he believes to have been abducted by aliens in 1973) and prove that her disappearance was part of an all-encompassing conspiracy orchestrated by a shadow organization working at the highest level of government. As our point-of-view character for much of the show, Mulder brings the audience (and our proxy, Scully) along on this quest, ever deeper into the conspiracy. However, Fletcher has not experienced our six-year initiation. From Fletcher’s perspective, he has found himself in the body of a delusional man who uses his faith in an unprovable experience to justify a lack of development across both his personal and professional lives. Viewed objectively, Mulder, who left the FBI academy a rising star with an Oxford PhD, squandered his career. For his obsession, he is condemned to the basement of the bureau, whilst his regular insubordination gets him sacked and demoted on multiple occasions. Mulder’s inability to evolve his relationship with Scully, despite their mutual insistence that they love each other, is also read by Fletcher as a sign of personal underdevelopment. Once again, Mulder’s excuse for this is the alien conspiracy.

Coming six years into the show’s original run, in what would later prove to be Duchovny’s penultimate season, the episode mines a rich vein of comedy, bathetically juxtaposing the show’s own canonical portrayal of Fox Mulder with Fletcher’s far more plausible reading. At the same time, this story also allows Mulder a glimpse of the road less traveled; a life not plagued by his insatiable desire to decode, deconstruct and decipher the narratives underpinning social reality. The appearance of this story in the show’s sixth season is no mistake. Mulder’s philosophy has only one logical conclusion: that there can be no totality of explanation. This revelation recalls the assertions of Post-structuralism, which emerged from the discipline of linguistics in the late 1960s. Post-structuralism promotes a linguistic skepticism of anything presented as ordered or whole. Looking at language, texts, narratives, concepts and ideologies, Post-structuralism argues that any coherence (most often figured as “the center”) is in fact projected by the observer. The post-structuralist universe is therefore commonly referred to as being “decentered.” Mulder finds himself operating in such a universe, the conspiracy he perceives bearing no center.

The success of Chris Carter’s *The X-Files* was stratospheric. In the US, *The X-Files* rapidly made the unlikely transition from small cult show to cultural phenomenon watched by billions. Observing the show’s triumphant arrival on British shores, esteemed periodical *The New Statesman* published an article titled “We all love X, but why?” (Justice). The author, Emma Justice, figures the show’s popularity in terms of pandemic and addiction as it quickly became a global hit, winning awards and critical acclaim both sides of the Atlantic and “spawning merchandising, internet sites and conventions” (Justice). It became the highest-rated program on UK television at the time (Brown, 2010). In Japan, 120,000 videos were sold before a single episode was broadcast on television (Justice). Writing six years after the show premiered, Joyce Millman observed that it was “so much a part of the popular consciousness that the phrase ‘like something from *The X-Files*’regularly creeps into news stories to describe things that are scientifically ambiguous, or inexplicable, or just plain weird” (Millman, “*X-*Files” 1). Eighteen years later, this phrase persists as linguistic cultural residue of the show’s phenomenal status. As early as 2002, Keith Booker was already making the claim that *The X-Files* had been the most representative show of the 1990s. More recently, Enrica Picarelli and M. Carmen Gomez-Gallisteo have asserted that *The X-Files* “occupies a special pace in the SF imaginary of the late twentieth century” (71). Indeed, so common is the claim that the *X-Files* is the definitive show of the 1990s that it is now seems almost cliché to state it. A second common-place observation is that *The X-Files* crashed and burned, hemorrhaging viewers as it collapsed beneath the growing weight of its own internal continuity.

Simon Brown summarizes perceptions of the show’s decline when he writes that “despite being arguably *the* defining SF series of the 1990s, by the time the last episode of *The X-Files* aired in the US in 2002 (2003 in the UK), few people cared” (7). As Brown records, there are frequently two accounts given for the show’s “slow death.” The most obvious explanation arises from practical issues surrounding the show’s production. Famously, during the final seasons, Duchovny sued Fox Television for allegedly underpaying him millions of dollars of profit (Schilling). After drastically reducing his number of appearances per season (attributed in the narrative to Mulder’s convenient abduction), Duchovny left the show entirely at the end of the six season, only returning for the finale a year later after the case against Fox had been settled out of court. Naturally, viewers, critics and commentators aware of this high-profile disagreement between Duchovny and Fox sought to find evidence from the show’s production to explain developments in its ongoing narrative and characterization. In a piece published in *Salon* during the dispute, Joyce Millman wrote of “the incredible shrinking Mulder”, deducing that “[Duchovny] is bored of the *X-Files* and, frankly, so are we” (“Shrinking Mulder”). Millman’s coverage argues that the actor’s bid for further payment was “good news for Duchovny [but] bad news for *X-Files* fans.” The conclusion that the fundamental shift in the show’s format that Duchovny’s reduced involvement precipitated would send the show hurtling towards a creative and commercial oblivion quickly became commonly held. Brown has collated a survey of responses to these final seasons, looking at publications such as *The Hollywood Reporter* and the UK’s *Guardian* as well as online commentary. He concludes that “fans argue that the machinations of Duchovny robbed the series of its principal protagonist and therefore its driving force, as well as breaking up the core relationship between the two central characters” (8).

An often cited second explanation is that the show’s central conspiracy became too complex, the writers deferring resolution for too long. In 1996, Charles Taylor statedthat *The X-Files* reveals a world in which “the curtain of what we except as reality seems to have torn, allowing Mulder and Scully to search for meanings usually obscured” (2). Viewed two decades on, we see that our intrepid agents were never successful in firmly establishing those meanings. It is a staggering achievement that after 201 episodes, two feature films, and a mini-series, so much remains unexplained. Just as the shadowy groups they imagined inside the corridors of institutional power, the show’s writers too managed to “deny all knowledge.” Like Mulder and Scully, we are left wanting to believe, no assurance that our conspiracy theories will ever be confirmed or denied. As Peter Knight eloquently observed in 2000 (whilst the original series was still on screens):

[*The X-Files*] teases its audience with the promise that eventually everything will be revealed to be part of a huge, interconnecting plot. But in the same way that the ultimate source of power is never revealed, so too is the final truth of the murky past and eerie present never fully exposed (18).

Following the broadcast of the 2016 revival, which ended on a cliff-hanger inviting further questions rather than presenting definitive answers, we see that the trend Knight identified still persists. For most commentators watching those final seasons of the original series at the time of broadcast the perpetual deferral of resolution throughout almost a decade of continuous story-telling was seen not as an achievement but a sign of increasing weakness in the show’s writing. Brown’s survey of contemporary reactions leads him to observe that the most vocal critics felt that “the writers lost track of the complicated narrative arcs and started either making mistakes or cheating by reinventing history” (8). Or, as “dig-duggler” exclaimed on one online forum: “Chris Carter was just making this shit up as he went along” (8).

There is, however, an alternate reading of *The X-Files* that prevailing views of later seasonsrefuse to entertain. The first aspect of this reading centers on the structural and thematic function of conspiracy within *The X-Files*. As Knight has noted, “the more *The X-Files* promises to reveal a traditional humanist conspiracy of top-down control, the more it seems to paint a Foucauldian portrait of decentered power which is everywhere in the system but in no particular location” (17). Rather than the writers finding themselves unable to construct a suitable explanation for how the show’s various mysteries can be connected and thus resolved, this re-reading asserts that the writers deliberately resist providing such an explanation to radically foreground the extent to which narrative cohesion is always imagined, both inside and outside of the fictional text. Mulder, like the show’s frustrated viewers, realizes the limitations of narrative to provide an explanation for the totality of the show’s mysteries. Indeed, as seen at the outset of this chapter, the story of “Dreamland” begins to entertain the notion that Mulder is the only one to bring narrative cohesion to the disparate events depicted on the show. Over the two seasons that follow, Mulder is, time and again confronted with the limits of his own investigative project and prompted to reflect explicitly upon his personal raison d'être. These moments come as his core beliefs are debunked and revealed as wholly unrelated. Mulder’s quest for ultimate coherent meaning becomes the ultimate challenge to the coherence of meaning, prompting generic disintegration of the procedural world he inhabits. Considering narrative events that have taken place since the original series ended in 2002, across the subsequent feature film *X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008) and the recent six-part “Event series” (2016), there can be seen a direct correlation between Mulder’s gradual disassociation from the FBI and his character’s increasing inability to function within the generic confines of the procedural drama. As he approaches enlightenment Mulder is rendered redundant, transcending a format designed to regularly resolve with the revelation of truth. As such, in the seventh season, he vanishes. Putting aside issues of production, Mulder’s disappearance is in fact consistent with the trajectory set for both his character and the show’s narrative.

For all that *The X-Files* was celebrated as a ground-breaking and innovative concept during its early years, its central fusion of the procedural and the supernatural was far from new. One need only look at the works of Edgar Allan Poe, celebrated as both an early originator of crime and detective fiction and a prolific purveyor of Gothic horror, to see that the order promised by the former and the disorder threatened by the later make for a heady cocktail.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, in most cases the eighteenth-century gothic novel features all the traits identified by Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales and Robert Vilain as the core characteristics of the detective genre:

The detective story is the very paradigm of the ‘rattling good story’; the reader cannot put the book down (as the saying goes) because of the sheer compulsion to find the explanation of ‘whodunit.’ […] The detective story enshrines that perennial hermeneutic of the narrative mode which works with deep structures of change and stasis, of onward-moving events and retrospective reflection, of mystery and its resolution (xii).

Like detective fiction, eighteenth-century gothic authors such as Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Dacre structure their novels around the deferred revelation of what has truly be terrorising their protagonists and for what reason. Radcliffe mastered the trope of the “explained supernatural”, in which the protagonist (most often a young heroine) is seemingly tortured by other worldly entities only to discover in the final pages that there was a rational explanation all along (2014). For instance, when Radcliffe’s readers reach the final pages of *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) they discover that her heroine, Emily St. Aubert, has not in fact been terrorised by the supernatural (as implied by the preceding four-hundred or so pages) but that she has drawn misleading conclusions from coincidence, happenstance, and various unrelated conspiracies of men. The explanation comes as a relief, as Radcliffe draws the many dangling plot threads together into a satisfying and coherent whole. All the mysteries of Udolpho are resolved. This satisfaction is directly analogous to that experienced by the reader of typical detective fiction, which also culminates in the revelation of truth: “the reader-response elicited by a detective story is very specific… A detective-story plot stimulates its audience to expect unequivocal narrative closure” (Donlan, 37).

Crucially though, eighteenth-century Gothic does not always necessarily resolve with a rational or earthly explanation. Like Radcliffe’s *Udolpho*,Charlotte Dacre’s *Zafloya* (1806) similarly defers to the closing pages the revelation of how the events that have befallen her protagonist, Victoria de Loredani, are all seemingly connected. However, Victoria has not simply stumbled upon a series of random events and misread a conspiracy into them, like Radcliffe’s Emily. Instead, she finds herself confronted with the devil himself, who has carefully orchestrated her terror and has now come to claim her soul. Structurally, such novels still share a common template with crime fiction, and the euphoria of their climax is derived from the same pleasure: resolution and closure. However, the logic is not that of empirical procedure and the officious martialling of order, but instead that of the Gothic, the supernatural and the terrified imagination.

Given the close proximity of the Gothic novel and detective fiction, in terms of both their genesis and evolution, the importation of procedural crime drama into a world of supernatural terror is not a surprising development. Indeed, the use of a “professional procedure” to bring order to the dangerous and transgressive logics of the Gothic imagination is perhaps more a conservative fantasy than a radical act of generic supervision. Take, for example, *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, an American television series that aired on ABC in 1974-1975. Often cited as direct inspiration for *The X-Files*, *Kolchak* follows the investigations of a fictional Chicago newspaper reporter - the titular Carl Kolchak (Darren McGavin) – who pursues mysterious cases with unlikely causes. These are most often those cases that the law enforcement authorities ignore, due to their connection to the supernatural or paranormal. Applying a fairly typical detective procedure - only extending the parameters of his investigation to include the occult and mythological - Kolchak closed cases involving werewolves, mummies, zombies, doppelgangers, witches and even Satan himself. Though there are clearly some very obvious parallels between the business of *Kolchak* and *The X-Files*, the two diverge in one central aspect. *The X-Files* poses as “explained supernatural”, providing a procedure to police the paranormal, irrational and transgressive. In fact, it appears even more conservative than *Kolchak*, swapping the amateur sleuth for the FBI; the ultimate signifier of American institutional power. It promises that the government will bring order to Gothic chaos. However, *The X-Files* is not what it appears to be. It does not deliver on the apparent promise of its premise. Instead, it simply proves time and again that institutional procedures, whether endorsed by the government or not, are incapable of explaining the inexplicable.

Initially, this lurch away from closure is most obvious in the characteristic twist ending of most “monster-of-the-week” episodes. This irresolution manifests itself in two ways. Oftentimes, the agents believe that the case has been closed only for the viewer to be privileged to a final shot revealing that the phenomena they have been investigating in fact persists. A typical example of this is seen in the second season episode “Die Hand die Verletzt”, in which Mulder and Scully identify high-school teacher Mrs Paddock as the witch who has been terrorizing the town of Milford Haven. However, though the case appears closed, the final shot of the episode pans across Mrs Paddock’s classroom to reveal a message inscribed upon her chalk board: “Goodbye. It’s been nice working with you.” She has escaped. More commonly, irresolution presents itself practically when Mulder and Scully are unable to file their case-report because either the evidence they have gathered does not adhere to FBI standards or the procedural infrastructure they operate within cannot accommodate the logic they have used to solve their case. For instance, at the close of the first season episode “Tooms”, Scully presents FBI assistant director Walter Skinner with a report accounting for the conditions in which Mulder defensively killed escaped prisoner Eugene Victor Tooms. The repot explains that Tooms, who the agents believe to have been an adult since at least the 1930s, has an abnormal skeleton structure which allows him to elongate his limbs and an unusual metabolism which allows him to spit acidic bile. Their investigation has apparently revealed that Tooms regularly goes into hibernation after consuming a set number of human livers. Mulder disturbed Tooms as he prepared to attack his final victim. Tooms attacked Mulder instead, who then killed him in self-defence. As will be the case many more times over subsequent years, Skinner refuses to believe this outlandish account and Mulder and Scully have no acceptable evidence to support it. The *X-Files* peripeteia, which resists rather than delivers resolution in a last-minute sting before the credits roll, became one of the tropes for which the show was best known. Writ large, this evasion of narrative closure can be seen in Mulder’s personal quest to uncover the machinations of the Syndicate (a secret shadow government with nefarious global interests) and prove his sister’s abduction by aliens.

For much of the show’s first six seasons, Mulder’s core beliefs function as what Derrida terms “transcendental signifiers”, fixed intellectual anchors from which all other knowledge and understanding can be mapped. Derrida figures these fixed points as the center and the knowledge, understandings and systems that surrounding them as the whole: “by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represent the unthinkable itself” (2001, 352). Continuing the logic of Structuralism, as embodied in the work of figures such as Roland Barthes, Derrida argued that if we can accept that language informs our understanding of the world, then that language must also be responsible for the creation of those transcendental signifiers constituting the “centers” of human society and culture. These centers, he suggested, do not originate or exist in the center at all, but are instead projected to the center by the human observer. The act of observation is what enforces linguistic coherence on that which is actually incoherent, by extension forming the illusion of a “linked chain of determinations” (352). Famously, Derrida observed that “the center is not at the center of totality” (352). Derrida talked of this revelation as a rupture within philosophy, which has subsequently been seen to seek out and deconstruct the centers around which Western intellectual thinking had previously been founded. Peter Barry highlights one such center as being the assumption that man is the measure of all things in the universe: “white Western norms of dress, behavior, architecture, intellectual outlook and so on, provided a firm center against which deviations, aberrations, variations could be detected and identified as ‘Other’ and marginal” (67). To an extent, this accounts for the traditional role of the pop-culture agent, as discussed by Malach. The agent provides a center, a marker of normalization, and in contrast to the agent we can see those pursued and punished as deviant and Other. Mulder, though, as already discussed, is not a typical pop-culture agent. He often implores his colleagues to have an open mind, sharing with Derrida a radical uncertainty of cultural attitudes, social mores and even, at times, reason itself. Barry’s overview of Post-structuralism is surprisingly reminiscent of Mulder’s world-view and, to an extent, the character and content of *The X-Files* as a whole:

Post-structuralism inherits [from philosophy] the habit of skepticism, and intensifies it. It regards any confidence in the scientific method as naïve, and even derives a certain masochistic intellectual pleasure from knowing for certain that we can’t know anything for certain, fully conscious of the irony and paradox which doing this entails (63).

Crucially, though, whilst Mulder puts little stock in the transcendental signifiers policed and installed by both the institution in which he works and his cultural episteme more broadly, he does harbor some intellectual anchors of his own. Mulder’s life is structured around proving two of his personal beliefs: that his sister was abducted by aliens, and that this abduction was part of an all-encompassing global conspiracy orchestrated by a secret shadow government later identified as “the Syndicate.” As the episode “Dreamland” playfully implies, much of the show’s narrative cohesion comes from Mulder’s own efforts to orient the cases he and Scully encounter in relation to these two beliefs. Samantha Mulder and the Syndicate become the center of Mulder’s life and as a result often appear to provide the center for the show; an anchor for its dense and sprawling continuity. However, as the show enters its seventh season, each of Mulder’s beliefs have been debunked.

Much of Mulder’s beliefs are validated, but the grand narrative he assembles – built as it is on ideas of structure and totality – falls wide of the mark. In the sixth season episode “One son”, Mulder finally confronts The Smoking Man (William B. Davis), a dissembling agent of the Syndicate who has long since come to personify the conspiracy Mulder seeks to unravel. Held at gun-point with nothing to lose, The Smoking Man finally tells Mulder about the Syndicate’s involvement with aliens. Rather than revealing a single, coherent conspiracy that has been playing out since the 1960s, he talks of a series of largely reactionary events and decisions involving multiple players, including the US government and two groups of aliens; one intent on colonizing earth, one intent on protecting it. Furthermore, though it seems that the Syndicate have been assisting in alien plans for the colonization of Earth, the Smoking Man tells the tale in such a way that this can be read as a pose, their true intention being to halt the alien invaders at the eleventh hour. Much of what Mulder has pieced together has been the result of happenstance or, in some cases, is wholly unrelated to the Syndicate’s project. There is no coherent narrative, only further evidence of undersigned chaos.

Mulder is correct in his assumption that his sister was involved in the plans of the Syndicate. In the 1960s, the Syndicate had allied themselves with the colonizing aliens so that their families might be spared during the invasion. Mulder’s father, Bill, was a member of the Syndicate, and he had no choice but to offer his daughter, Samantha, over to the aliens as collateral. However, in the Season Seven episode “Closure”, Mulder discovers that even this may not fully account for Samantha’s fate. Rather than being abducted by aliens, Mulder learns that she lived in secret with the Smoking Man, where she was regularly subjected to painful tests. Mulder discovers that in 1979 a girl matching Samantha’s description was checked into hospital. Further investigation reveals that the girl disappeared that night, and, with the assistance of psychic Harold Piller, Mulder concludes that Samantha was taken by entities composed of starlight known as “walk-ins” who save children destined to suffer terrible fates. Though Mulder choses to believe that this is what happened to Samantha, similarities between her disappearance and the case that Mulder and Scully are investigating invite a far more pessimistic reading of events in which she may have fallen victim to a murderous pedophile. Though this situation remains open to interpretation, the show does at least confirm that Samantha was not abducted by aliens after all.

“Closure” also makes explicit a reading of Mulder’s behavior that is usually only ever implied: that he is delusional. Concerned that Mulder’s interactions with psychic Harold Piller might result in lasting psychological damage, Scully meets with a psychiatrist to discuss a video tape depicting Mulder undergoing hypnotic regression therapy a decade earlier. The tape shows Mulder vividly recounting the abduction of his sister by aliens. The psychiatrist concludes that the memory is a fantasy, conjured by Mulder’s subconscious desire to never remember what really happened that night, suggesting that “his delusion is playing into his unconscious hope that his sister is still alive. And if you think about it, his delusion has the effect of giving his reason to pursue her.”

Mulder’s beliefs give him a reason to live. They are transcendental signifiers which allow him to orient his personal and professional lives, as well as his other beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. When he discovers that they are as artificial as any other cultural norm scrutinized by Post-structuralism, both his rationale and his role within the show begin to come unstuck. In the episode “Redux”, Mulder expresses this revelation himself:

I've held a torch in the darkness to glance upon a truth unknown. An act of faith begun with an ineloquent certainty that my journey promised the chance, not just of understanding, but of recovery. That the disappearance of my sister, twenty-three years ago, would come to be explained. And that the pursuit of these greater truths about the existence of extraterrestrial life might even reunite us. A belief which I now know to be false and uninformed in the extreme. My folly revealed by facts which illuminate both my arrogance and self-deception.

Mulder learns that there is no totality of explanation. The revelation relieves him of his goal, but as a character born of and at the heart of a procedural drama, it also relieves him of his place in the narrative. In “Requiem”, Mulder’s final episode as a reoccurring character, the case for his redundancy - both professionally and narratively - is presented to him in unambiguous terms by an FBI Auditor:

Auditor. By FBI standards these numbers are out of control… You’re under evaluation. There has to be a point where we say no.

Mulder. Well you can’t really compare what we do to other departments in the bureau.

Auditor. Right. This business with aliens?

Mulder. There’s more to it than that.

Auditor. But at the end of the day you’d say that aliens are your real focus.

Mulder. That’s the reason I got started, yeah.

Auditor. Investigating your sister’s abduction and the government conspiracy around it. Both of which have been resolved, correct?

Mulder. Nothing has been resolved, exactly.

Auditor. In this report here, it is concluded that your sister is dead, as well as the men who took her. This is your hand-writing, here on the report, Agent Mulder?

Mulder. Yeah.

Auditor. So, what exactly is left to investigate?

As Mulder himself observes here, “nothing has been resolved exactly”, but as Mulder has learnt, nothing can be resolved. In a way, Mulder has uncovered the ultimate human conspiracy: the conspiracy of meaning. Structuralism is largely informed by Nietzschean philosophy which, in so many ways, begins by foregrounding the extent to which language informs (and distorts) human perception and understanding:

The arrogance inherent in cognition and feeling casts a blinding fog over the eyes and sense of human beings, and because it contains within itself the most flattering evaluation of cognition it deceives them about the value of existence. Its most general effect is deception. Is there a perfect match between things and their designations? Is language the full and adequate expression of all realities? Only through forgetfulness could human beings ever entertain the illusion that they possess truth to the degree described above. If they will not content themselves with truth in the form of a tautology, i.e. with empty husks they will forever exchange illusions for truth (51).

Mulder, like Nietzsche and Derrida, discovers that there is naught but the empty signifiers of language and the artificial projection of narrative coherence. There is no center and there is no outside. This new perspective is incompatible with the procedural drama, and as such, Mulder is not present for much of the show’s eighth and ninth seasons. There is no place in the FBI for a man who has lost his faith in transcendental signifiers and by extension the promise of resolution or the discovery of truth. There is also no place for such a man in a procedural crime drama: a detective who no longer believes a case can ever be closed.

We encounter Mulder again in the 2007 film *I Want to Believe*. Mulder is in exile, now hiding from the FBI that he once worked for. As viewers, we are led to him by Scully (now a full-time medical doctor) and find him in his home-office, his walls plastered with newspaper cuttings pertaining to strange and unusual happenings. When he is inevitably coaxed back to the FBI (who promise to drop charges against him if he assists in one final case) he is comically incompatible with the bureau, both as an institution and as an environment. Now bearded and dressed in jeans and a sweater, Mulder is a visibly irregular character as he traverses the corridors and offices of the FBI, densely populated by smartly dressed men and women in suits and ties. As agents step around him, casting side-long glances, our once perceivably hyper-normal protagonist has become abnormal, transgressive and Other. The FBI is more than just a setting, it doubles as a metaphor for the show’s generic confines, into which Mulder no longer fits.

Special agent Dakota Whitney has sought Mulder out for assistance with a case that, like the X-files, does not conform to the parameters of the FBI’s typical investigatory procedures. An agent has been kidnapped and a pedophilic psychic Catholic Priest claims to be having visions pertaining to the case. Intriguingly, Whitney looks to Mulder for expert council, asking him to comment on existing precedents and offer alternative procedural guidance, indicating, for instance, the speed and order in which such phenomena usually progress. With access to a privileged, rarefied body of knowledge, Mulder becomes once more professionalized, but as a free-lance specialist rather than an FBI agent. He can bring his own procedures to the drama, and once again inhabit the procedural genre. The film resists confirming whether Mulder’s procedures work, since it is ambiguous to what extent Father Joe’s vague claims actually assist in the investigation. And then, Mulder’s resistance to FBI protocol during the film’s finale almost results in his death. As the film closes, Mulder has been convinced that he cannot return to the FBI. Neither can he continue to exist within the confines of procedural drama. As the credits roll, Mulder and Scully are seen rowing away in a small boat, out to sea and then into darkness, leaving both the franchise and the genre and finally transcending *The X-Files*.

They would of course return, nine years later, in the six-part “Event Season”, which initially appears to undo the logic of *I Want to Believe* by brining Mulder back into both the FBI and the procedural drama. Mulder suffers something of a relapse in the opening episode, “My Struggle”, falling back into the convictions he held in the show’s fifth and sixth seasons as he becomes once again convinced of a grand narrative that draws together all his suspicions and findings. However, “My Struggle” does not simply forget a decade of character development. Instead, it takes Mulder on a microcosmic reenactment of the character’s preceding story-arch in just forty-four minutes, reminding him that there can be no such explanation. That this then results in him returning to his former office at the FBI where he is coupled again with his former partner to work once more on the X-Files does perhaps stretch credulity to the limits, and it is telling that his reinstatement happens off-screen, via voice over, in the closing seconds of the episode. However, after Mulder’s return it is far from business as usual. His world-view is now absolutely antithetical to both the profession and genre in which he is operating, triggering a volatile reaction between the show’s form and content which, by the end of this short season, brings about the utter disintegration of its procedural format.

The point of no return comes in the fifth episode, “Babylon”, which proves explicitly Post-structuralist in its central interest in the relationship between language and reality. The episode opens with an uncomfortably realist sequence, depicted two men walking into an art gallery and detonating a bomb. As the dust settles, burning civilians stumble out onto the street. In total contrast to this, the title sequence is followed by a light-hearted and meta-theatrical scene in Mulder’s office. There’s a knock at the door, and Scully responds by directly quoting Mulder’s first ever line of dialogue on the show before joking that she’s “waited twenty-three years” to say that. Their visitors are two junior agents, Kyd Miller and Liz Einstein. It clear to the viewer that the open-minded Miller and the skeptical Einstein are young doubles of Mulder and Scully, a point hammered home by the revelation that Scully wrote her dissertation on Albert Einstein’s *twin* paradox. Mulder and Scully are also aware that they have come face to face with their own doubles, delivering a string of knowing punchlines to this effect. In contrast to the preceding scene, Mulder’s office is a surreal space where anything is possible.

As in *I Want to Believe*, Mulder has been sought out for his ability to offer non-normative procedural guidance on a case that does not conform to the FBI’s own procedures and regulations. Miller and Einstein hope to communicate with one of the surviving suicide bombers, who now languishes in a coma. When Einstein later reluctantly accepts Mulder’s offer of assistance, he lays out his Post-structuralist philosophy, asking Einstein if she is willing to “talk about the nature of reality.” He goes on:

Do you believe that thoughts have mass? That ideas such as faith and forgiveness have weight much the same way this desk has weight? Or any material, really. I'm sure you believe that words have weight. The weight to move people to go kill other people… Neo-Darwinists believe that every word spoken, every thought, every perception, lest I misperceive, is a step in the evolution of mankind. Agent Einstein, you have a terrorist lying in a state of existence somewhere between life and death. If he holds valuable intel on other terrorists, maybe in order to reach him, you need to expand your mind on the so-called material world.

In an exchange that emphasizes how far *The X-Files* has drifted from the typical procedural crime drama, Mulder proposes that Einstein administer him hallucinogenic drugs so that he might transcend the material word and communicate with the comatose terrorist. Citing existing precedents, Mulder explains that “test subjects report experiences that transcended space and time, confrontations with the dead, touching the very face of God… Test subjects have also reported that once the impediment of the physical body is removed, deep and lasting truths are revealed that the conscious mind won’t allow.” At last, Mulder has found the means to transcend the realm of words.

Mulder’s proposed procedure is remarkably simple, he sits next to the patient and takes the drug. What follows is, again, profoundly surreal, as to a diegetic dance beat Mulder is seen leaving the hospital, before participating in a montage of increasingly unlikely scenarios. He is seen jay-walking, then arriving at a line-dance, then doing a solo show-dance ending in a back-flip before being mobbed by women and sitting down with a group of deceased characters from the show’s history. Next, the bar dissolves to reveal him strapped topless to a table whilst being whipped by Einstein, now in the character of a dominatrix. Then he finds himself on a longboat, where, to the sound of Tom Waits “Misery is the rhythm of the world”, he encounters the comatose terrorist who whispers to him in Arabic.

It remains unclear which aspects of the sequence actually occurred, though it is confirmed that Mulder did briefly go missing from the hospital. Einstein later reveals that the drugs she gave Mulder were a placebo, indicating the extent to which he can now self-consciously restructure his own reality. Mulder can recall the phrase that he heard during his vision, which Miller translates as the name of a hotel where more terrorists are preparing to mobilize. Mulder’s procedure, such as it is, has resolved Einstein and Miller’s case. Rather than there being no explanation as to why the case cannot be resolved, as was often so during earlier seasons of *The X-Files*, in “Babylon” we are instead left with no explanation for how it is solved. Mulder has become the unknowable component in the show, precipitating a radical alteration in the show’s procedural format. No longer is the procedure insufficient for the task, the procedure works but it is unintelligible. Following Mulder’s return, the viewer can experience the resolution of the case being closed, but is left to wonder how it is resolved.

It is normal to seek truth from external sources and it is normal to desire closure, particularly within the procedural crime drama, which by its very nature promises resolution and the restoration and propagation of normalcy. However, *The X-Files* has always overlooked the normal in favor of the paranormal. Mr. Blockhead, a body manipulator who self-identifies as a “freak” in the episode “Humbug” hints that this is the moral behind the *The X-Files* as early as the second season, telling Scully that “nature abhors normality, it can’t go very long without creating a mutant. You know why? It’s a mystery. Maybe some mysteries aren’t supposed to be solved.” In so many ways *The X-Files* is that mutant. A procedural that foregrounds the artificiality and ineffectiveness of procedure. A crime drama that knows the mystery can never be solved. Tracing Mulder’s staggered retirement spotlights what it is that *The X-Files* has achieved over the past quarter of a century, and the scale of that achievement is unprecedented. It disrupts, it deconstructs, and ultimately it demonstrates time and again the creative potential of irresolution. Agent Einstein quotes her namesake to make this very observation during the closing scenes of “Babylon”, responding to Miller’s lamentation that some mysteries cannot be solved: “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious, the source of all true art and science.”

Replacing empirical procedure with the invitation to imagine, *The X-Files* recommends an alternative way of reading the world which addresses the radical uncertainties of post-structuralism. Mulder’s journey in *The X-Files* endorses the philosophical claims of post-structuralism: there is no totality of explanation and there are no transcendental signifiers, there is but the forlorn impulse of the human mind to imprint seeming order onto actual chaos. Finally acknowledging that narrative coherence, order and the “center” are all projected by the observer is a liberating revelation for Mulder. As “Babel” demonstrates, once he has learned this lesson he is able to unlock new understanding and abilities, even briefly transcending the boundaries of human life to convene with the dead. The secret, he finds, comes in acknowledging that he was projecting the narrative all along, so transcendence comes simply with identifying and informing that narrative. Order does not come from the external, but the internal. Where, then, can we find truth? Uncharacteristically, *The X-Files* does momentarily offer an answer to this, the oldest of questions, three episodes prior to “Babel”. It comes as a throwaway line during “Founder’s Mutation”, setting the pace for much of what follows:

Gupta: You guys are all alike, you know? You say you want to walk on the wild side, but when it comes down to it... you're repressed. I finally let go of all that, that self-loathing and that judgment and I'm free. Stop tormenting yourself. The truth is in here [points to Mulder’s heart].

Mulder: Yeah, I've heard something like that.

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1. Edgar Allan Poe’s character, C. August Dupin, is generally regarded the first detective in fiction. He first appeared in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841), which is also widely considered the first example of detective fiction as we would recognise it today. Kenneth Silverman offers a comprehensive overview of Poe’s role in establishing the detective fiction genre and his subsequent influence (1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)