"For the First Time in My Life, I Don't Know What to Believe": Conspiracy and Gender in *The X-Files*

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The X-Files, from its representation of monsters, aliens, and the government, to its engagement with gender roles, has been thoroughly analysed by scholars and fans alike in the past thirty years. This study aims to tie two elements of the show together: conspiracy theories and gender. Examining the early mythopoeia of the series, I argue that creating conspiracy theories might be read as a primarily masculine prerogative on the show, and that Dana Scully is not fully empowered to join her partner in conspiracy theorising due to her position as a woman at the FBI.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, crime drama, television series, gender studies, media studies

1 Introduction

With its initial run between 1993 and 2002, two feature-length films, and another two seasons in the 2010s, Chris Carter's *The X-Files* is noteworthy both due to the complexity and size of its canon and its longstanding impact on pop-culture. In the past thirty years or so, the show has become both a classic for fandom and the site of a large body of scholarly research. This study seeks to add to this robust scholarship by tying the show's conspiracy narrative to its construction of the femininity and masculinity of its protagonists. I examine the first season of *The X-Files*, exploring how the early mythopoeia of the show might be read, paying particular attention to five key mythology episodes (E1 "Pilot," E2 "Deep Throat," E10 "Fallen Angel," E17 "E.B.E." and E24 "The Erlenmeyer Flask"), as well as an additional, equally important villain-of-the-week instalment (E13 "Beyond the Sea"). There are two reasons for the limitation of the range of episodes covered. First, by the end of the 24-episode run of season one, the initial setup of the government conspiracy was already complete, and audiences were introduced to most of the important players; yet, the conspiracy was still hidden at this point, with viewers only aware of the fact

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that something was going on behind the scenes. This partial reveal of the conspiracy left room for theorising both on the part of the characters and the audience. Second, in season one, Mulder and Scully's dynamic was present at its most unaltered. Later, Scully's role started to transform, and her role as the 'sceptic' became unstable to a degree. Similarly, Mulder would time and again be challenged on his thinking. The selection of these particular mythology episodes is collected in *The X-Files Mythology* (2009) DVD series and the book *The Complete X-Files: Behind the Series, the Myths and the Movies* (Knowles et al. 2008). As opposed to the self-contained episodes that follow the monster-of-the-week format, these contribute to the overarching narrative of the show, with their storyline spanning the whole season (or multiple seasons in some cases), building the lore of the universe of *The X-Files*.

A significant portion of the existing scholarship on the show's two main characters calls attention to the atypicality of Fox Mulder's masculinity and Dana Scully's femininity. Reflecting on these interpretations, I argue that besides the non-traditionality of the characters' genderings, paradoxically, the show also reinforced Mulder's masculinity by validating his paranoid fantasies. I aim to highlight the difference between the narrative-making power of the two protagonists, exploring the intersection of gender and conspiracy theories in the series. I will demonstrate that in the first season of *The X-Files*, conspiracy theory creation might be read as a male privilege; in this gendered context, I aim to analyse the different ways we may read Scully's role as a sceptic, when and how conspiratorial thinking is validated on screen, who can (and who cannot) create conspiracy theories, and finally, how the existence of a real government conspiracy may inform our reading of the series. After reflecting on the critical potential of conspiratorial narratives in fiction and considering the general analysis on the gendered aspects of *The X-Files*, I offer an avenue to connect the two frameworks. I examine Scully's role as an FBI agent on the one hand, and as a (potential) narrator on the other, to demonstrate how her being a woman influences and constrains her behaviour within the show. I argue that although, as previous research highlights, Scully is not a dispossessed character and both protagonists display an ambiguity in terms of their relationship to traditional gender roles, Scully's narrative voice is nonetheless not fully empowered as she cannot join her partner in conspiracy theorising due to her gender. To further illustrate how the embrace of conspiracy theories is not a wholly accessible course of action for her, I explore the ways in which Scully's role might be contrasted with Mulder's and the eccentric Lone Gunmen's. In both cases I argue that the gendered dimension of the series cannot be fully explored without examining the extent to which conspiratorial discourse is available to the characters.

2 Conspiracy, Social Reflection, and *The X-Files*

A conspiracy theory (CT) is a narrative that explains an event as a product of the secret scheming of a group of sinister actors (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 32). This group is consciously trying to further its own goals, which harm the interests of other parts of society. To put another way, a conspiracy theory is best conceptualised as "a hegemonic and systemic political worldview [, or a] theory of power, of its practices and representations in which plots, pacts, secrecy and concealment play a decisive and central part" (Giry and Tika 2020, 114). While there are many different designs to CTs, those that are "deemed both false and dangerous" (Barkun 2003, 83) – as opposed to the ones that are strange but largely harmless (for example the belief that Paul McCartney died in 1966 and was replaced with a body double) – are relegated to the sidelines of or are entirely absent from mainstream discourse (83), as they are not reinforced by "properly constituted epistemic authorities" (Levy 2007, 187). Therefore, we may think of conspiratorial argumentation as a "stigmatized form of knowledge" (Bezalel 2021, 675). That is, generally speaking, conspiracy theories have negative connotations attached to them; the term itself is used by many in a pejorative sense. In *The X-Files*, conspiracy theories are time and again repressed by the authorities, with important consequences for the main characters. At the same time, the plot of the show validates a form of reasoning considered by many to be of the political fringes, as a way to find out the truth that is "out there" is through conspiratorial thinking.

When it comes to conspiracy theories in fiction, the analytical or critical functions of the fictitious representation of conspiracies (and theories about them) are important to highlight. For example, John S. Nelson describes how conspiracies in films are ways to analyse social systems, writing that "conspiracies in movies can be devices for resisting the totalizing politics of systems. Movies use mythic figures of conspiracy to specify systems that otherwise elude popular attention precisely because their politics are structural and pervasive" (2003, 502). As Nelson explains, the on-screen representation of a conspiracy can make tangible "the organizations and operations of distinct systems. The implication is that people can attend more and understand better when complicated structures appear as engaging characters and subtle interactions surface as dramatic deeds" (501).

As far as *The X-Files* is concerned, it captures the post-Watergate mistrust of American people towards their own political institutions. Pew Research Center highlights how the 1960s saw – partly because of the Vietnam War – a steady decline in people's trust in the US government, which would fall even further in the 1970s due to the Watergate scandal and economic struggles ("Public Trust" 2024). By 1974, according to Pew, only 36 percent of Americans said that they "trust the

government to do what is right just about always/most of the time," down from the 77 percent of 1964. The 1980s brought a slight recovery with over 40 percent of Americans trusting their government, but this number fell quickly again between 1991 and 1995. Public trust then steadily climbed and crossed the 50 percent mark for the first time since the 1970s in 2001, but then would drop again sharply in the early 2000s. Overall, Americans have had low trust in their government ever since the late 1960s (2024). In such an environment, it is unsurprising that a TV series whose fundamental premise is that the government is lying to its people would resonate with viewers. "If there is a ghost animating the machinery of *The X-Files*," writes Allison Graham in her reflection on the conspiracy theories on the show, "it is most likely Richard Nixon, the icon of paranoia whose career virtually defined the golden age of American conspiracy theory" (1996, 58). Graham's point is perhaps best illustrated if we turn to a summary of season one's mytharc.

In the first season of *The X-Files*, FBI Agent Dana Scully is assigned to work alongside Agent Fox Mulder and write reports on his investigations into what he believes to be cases connected to extraterrestrials. As the pair set out to solve these so-called X-Files, Mulder makes contact with a mysterious man known as Deep Throat. Deep Throat is closely familiar with the conspiring forces in the show, and in a way initiates Mulder into the conspiracy, too, feeding him pieces of information of the government plot as he seems fit. (Scully, too, comes face to face with Deep Throat eventually, though much later than her partner.) One consequential fact that is revealed in the first season is that the government has been experimenting on humans. Deep Throat is killed in a confrontation (by, viewers later learn, a mysterious group named the Syndicate), and at the end of the season the X-Files unit is shut down. As for later seasons, the main storyline details how the United States government is working to cover up both the existence of alien life and an approaching extraterrestrial invasion of Earth. (The revival of the show would revamp this mythology somewhat, yet a shadowy plot is undoubtedly in existence throughout the canon of *The X-Files*.) The series is set in the 1990s, which situates its characters in the post-Nixon era that Graham highlights. They, like the show's audience, feel the legacy of Watergate. The younger agents grew up in its shadow, while the senior FBI members were adults during the scandal.

At the same time, in a 2002 article for *The New York Times*, Joyce Millman highlighted the peculiarity of the show's success in the United States in an era of relative "security and prosperity". "Alien-invasion fiction usually flourishes in times of national anxiety," Millman wrote, mentioning *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as a classic example of a Cold War-inspired science fiction horror story that deals with an alien invasion similar to what the Syndicate is preparing for in *The X-Files*. Wondering what could have contributed to the popularity of the

paranoid tone of the series in a post-Cold War environment, Millman concluded that it was "[a]n event that comes once every thousand years": the millennium. "As the '90s unfolded," Millman continued, "superstition about the approaching millennium renewed interest in all things spiritual, from doomsday prophecies to fundamentalism, from the cabala to angels. And *The X-Files* mirrored this hunger to believe." In her understanding, then, the show not only reflected but also supplied Americans with anxious visions – visions that according to Millman they were increasingly keen for before the turn of the century (2002). Indeed, the show is not only a result of the post-Watergate atmosphere of mistrust but also a reflection of broader, more general anxieties regarding contemporary social issues. Katherine Kinney explores how in a globalised world, immigration and consequent nationalist focus on the issue of border security, fears about 'aliens' are bound to resonate with viewers (2001, 54). Broadening the scope of criticism, Kevin Howley argues that the show "addresses fundamental concerns over social, psychological, and political control and is an expression of deep-seated cultural anxieties toward various forms of control technologies" (2001, 258). These arguments, in their highlighting of concrete social phenomena that fictional conspiracy theories reflect on, raise the question of how these fictional narratives utilize alternative discursive practices to not only render but criticise the socio-political context in which they are created.

In this context, the question of mainstreaming must be briefly addressed here. Does conspiracy fiction have a tangible role in neutralising conspiratorial, paranoid thinking for its audiences? As Michael Barkun argues, "the appearance of conspiracy themes in popular culture at least partially destigmatizes those ideas, by associating them with admired stars and propagating them through the most important forms of mass entertainment. […] Popular culture can also reduce the potency of conspiratorial themes by depriving them of some of their allure" (2003, 35). The relationship between *The X-Files* and the issue of stigmatisation/destigmatisation may be read through similar bifocal lenses. Michele Malach, reflecting on Dale Cooper in *Twin Peaks* alongside Mulder and Scully, emphasises that in popular media, "FBI agents typically function to police character and narrative boundaries, thereby reining in desire" (1996, 64). Moreover, in stark contrast to the earlier assertions of this study, Malach highlights that generally speaking, these agents tend to embody normalcy, representing "cultural categories of correctness, acting out what it means to be normal, mainstream, not-marginalized" (64). Although Mulder and Scully "behave in ways that may not always seem rational, as pop-culture FBI agents they still symbolize what our culture considers conventional" (64). In this sense, not only is Mulder allowed conspiratorial thinking due to him being an FBI agent, but conspiracy theorising is rendered acceptable *through* his character.

Joe Bellon argues that *The X-Files* criticises "not science itself, but rather the way authority has invested certain scientists and certain theories with the exclusive right to determine truth" (1999, 144). According to Bellon, the show does not claim that truth itself is unreachable; instead, "Mulder (the believer) and Scully (the sceptic) carry on a debate about the legitimacy of accepted science while simultaneously transforming themselves so that the dichotomy that first characterized them is increasingly questionable" (144). The series is not anti-science, Bellon highlights, but nor is it traditionally pro-authority, as it questions government narratives (146). In the same vein, it is not necessarily pro-CT, but it does critically reflect on the scope of acceptable discourse in society. In an era of, as Pew data revealed, public mistrust toward the government, the question of monopoly over truth is one that is highly relevant. Similarly, Stephanie Kelley-Romano highlights that conspiracy rhetoric "questions everything, particularly the nature of reality and possibility of truth" (2008, 106), and thus "works to question epistemological assumptions through the legitimization of alternative reasoning processes" (115). "The sort of authority that has been invested in science has also been conferred upon government and gender" (1999, 151), writes Bellon, emphasising that the unshakable certainty of all three ("that science is invariably correct, that government must be trusted, that differences in gender are definite and controlling" [151]) are simultaneously deconstructed in the show. This deconstruction, in turn, allows for new formulations of scientific reasoning, power, and gender, and inevitably makes space for conspiratorial thinking, as well. Overall, then, conspiracy fiction can be both an avenue for social reflection and criticism *because* it utilises an alternative (and stigmatised) mode of reasoning that may reveal previously repressed knowledge. In the next section, I examine the gendered associations that arise when considering reason as a concept, and in the context of *The X-Files,* Scully's access to the conspiratorial discursive space.

3 Scully, Mulder, and Gender Roles

As for the show's engagement with femininity and masculinity, generally studies highlight that the two protagonists are not archetypally gendered. Multiple chapters of the influential *"Deny All Knowledge": Reading the X-Files* (1996), edited by David Lavery et al., focus on the gender formulations in the series (for example Wilcox and Williams; Parks; Kubek), as do other researchers (e.g. Silbergleid 2003; Bury 1998; 2003; Braun 2000) who have analysed both the show and its surrounding fandom through a gender studies lens. Overall, most scholars agree that Scully, as

the sceptic party in the pair, stands for science and reason – both metaphorically and as a medical doctor – while Mulder is the believer, who often goes on faith and intuition when investigating cases. The association of reason, and thus science with masculinity and on the 'opposing' end, nature, with femininity lies deep within the Western philosophical tradition (Lloyd 1984, ix; 1). In a patriarchal society, this dichotomy brings with itself the discounting of emotionality (as inferior to reason). As Catherine Lutz summarises, "emotions are fundamentally devalued themselves – as irrational, physical, unintentional, weak, biased, and female" (1986, 301-2). The reversal of this presupposition in Mulder and Scully's dynamic is perhaps best illustrated by the following two exchanges, the first in an early episode titled "Deep Throat," the next nearing the end of the season in "Born Again."

> SCULLY: Mulder, c'mon. You've got two blurry photos, one of them taken almost fifty years ago, and another one you purchased today in a roadside diner. You're going out on a pretty big limb. […] Tell me one good reason why either of these photos is authentic.
> MULDER: You saw exactly what I saw in the sky tonight. What do you think they were?
> SCULLY: Just because I can't explain it, doesn't mean I'm gonna believe they were UFOs.
> MULDER: Unidentified Flying Objects, I think that fits the description pretty well. Tell me I'm crazy.
> SCULLY: Mulder, you're crazy. (S01E02 00:22:01–39)

> MULDER: Why is it still so hard for you to believe, even when all the evidence suggests extraordinary phenomena?
> SCULLY: Because sometimes […] looking for extreme possibilities makes you blind to the probable explanation right in front of you. (S01E22 00:14:13–28)

Scully, the rational scientists, wants concrete evidence to believe in Mulder's theories – two blurry pictures are not sufficient to convince her. Resembling these scenes, throughout the series her commitment to 'hard facts' places her as the level-headed balance to Mulder's steadfast belief. While he is ready to "go out on a limb," Scully is cautious when it comes to "extreme possibilities." Scully begins by being uncompromising in her position, often pushing back against Mulder's theories, but also standing up to her superiors when she feels it necessary. Indeed, as Bellon highlights, "Scully does not signify a passive, intuitive, incompetent woman. She is an aggressive, eager, objective, scientific professional; she is actually the representative of ultimate authority in the partnership, having been asked by her superiors at the FBI to oversee Fox Mulder's investigations" (1999, 149). By contrast, as mentioned above, Mulder, the criminal profiler in the pair, is the 'believer,' who is motivated throughout the series by the need to find his sister, who disappeared when they were children. The personal trauma that his character is caught up in is something that is both manipulated and exploited by Deep Throat. Mulder's main struggle, concurrently, is often to remain objective when faced with dubious evidence.

However, the protagonists' role reversal does not lean into essentialising, either. Mulder is not a blind fanatic when it comes to conspiracy theories. Multiple times the audience sees that his belief in alien life is one that rests on his own mode of scientific reasoning. Already in episode one, he tells Scully: "I am not crazy, Scully, I have the same doubts you do" (S01E01 00:15:50–54). In the previously quoted scene from episode two, he turns Scully's argument against her: they did indeed witness UFOs, despite Scully's scepticism, as a UFO is nothing more than an unidentified flying object – he did not come to his conclusion impulsively, but rationally. Further exploring the complexity of the characters, Bellon points out that Scully "displays flashes of a deep religious faith, and experiences powerful emotions following her father's death" (1999, 150–51). Indeed, Scully does not wholly reject faith as such, and out of the pair, she is the one who is shown to be religious; she does believe, just not in aliens, the first season of the show tells its audience. Moreover, in episode thirteen, titled "Beyond the Sea," it becomes clear that her rejection of the paranormal is not absolute. In a curious role reversal, for an episode Scully becomes the believer and Mulder the sceptic, when a death row inmate claims that he can communicate with Scully's recently passed father. Throughout the episode, Scully is visibly shaken during her encounters with the inmate, Boggs, who at one point recalls a teenage memory from Scully's past. After Boggs tips Scully off on the kidnapping case the agents are working on, she and Mulder argue about her following Boggs's suggestion:

> MULDER: That doesn't matter! That's exactly what Boggs wanted! He could have been setting you up! You could be dead right now! Why did you feel you had to lie in your police report?
> SCULLY: I thought it would be a better explanation under the circumstances.
> MULDER: What you're really saying is that you didn't want to go on record admitting that you believed in Boggs! The Bureau would expect something like that from 'Spooky' Mulder, but not Dana Scully.
> SCULLY: I thought that you'd be pleased that I'd opened myself to extreme possibilities.
> MULDER: Why now? After all we've seen, why Boggs? […] Dana... open yourself up to extreme possibilities only when they're the truth. That goes for Luther Boggs, and your father. As for Luther Boggs, he's the greatest of lies. I know he's working with someone on the outside and they planted that evidence. (S01E13 00:19:23–21:02)

This exchange in particular, and the episode in general, are important to consider for multiple reasons. First, Mulder directly calls upon their differing positions within the FBI, almost admonishing Scully for her actions. 'Spooky' Mulder, as others call him behind his back, is aware that he and Scully are perceived differently – and in this moment, when he tries to protect his partner from harm, he embraces this difference, saying that Scully should stick to her sceptic role. Indeed, his comment

about lying is less about Scully falsifying her report, and more about her searching for "extreme possibilities" alone, in a way that put her in a dangerous position. Second, despite the fact that "Beyond the Sea" is not considered a mytharc episode, it establishes key characteristics of the protagonists that serve as jumping points for their later development. It is shown, much more explicitly than before, that Mulder is not a monomaniac and that Scully is just as capable of having faith as her partner is. The faith/science dichotomy, then, is not absolute: while both characters embody archetypes to a degree, their positions are not set, and they are capable of crossing borders when the occasion calls for it: Scully, in her grief, coloured by the deep love she felt for her father, Mulder in his attempt to protect Scully from disappointment, as he knows Boggs to be someone they cannot trust. Later in the episode, in total opposition to the usual conversations the protagonists have on cases, they discuss:

> MULDER: No matter what, don't believe him. Boggs created this whole charade to get back at me for putting him on death row. You'd be the next best thing.
> SCULLY: Mulder, I never thought I'd say this... but what if there's another explanation?
> MULDER: Don't deal with him. He could be trying to claim you as his last victim. (S01E13 00:35:25–59)

Scully is overcome, her rational system of reasoning seemingly crumbling. Importantly, it is not an alien encounter or a meeting with Deep Throat that sends her on this course – instead, it is a closely personal matter, the passing of her father earlier in the episode. She and Mulder, then, are not so different, despite their opposing approaches to investigations: both are deeply moved by their own personal family trauma, which sets them on a (tentative, in Scully's case) path of belief in something supernatural. Scully has not fully joined the 'other side' yet, though. Near the end of the episode, she seeks to explain how Boggs could have known so much about her, telling Mulder: "I was considering Boggs. If he knew that I was your partner, he could have found out everything he knew about me. About my father...". Mulder stops her and asks: "After all you've seen, after all the evidence, why can't you believe?" Scully, in a final show of vulnerability replies, "I'm afraid. I'm afraid to believe." (S01E13 00:44:04–48)

Mulder and Scully, then, are atypically gendered, the reason/emotion distinction reversed through their primarily characteristics without succumbing to rigidity in these roles. Both have composite relationships with science and faith, which are challenged in various episodes of the first season. This complexity in character building reveals, in part, why the show has gone on to be one of the cult classics of the 1990s and the 2000s, with devoted fans pouring over episodes to unravel both the alien conspiracy and the psyches of the main characters. The ambiguous readings that the show opens up for are evidenced, in part, by the vast amount of

scholarship that focuses on the series. My aim is to add a new perspective to this already existing multiplicity by bridging the gap between the literature on conspiracy theories and scholarship on the representation of women in crime television series, analysing the act of conspiracy narrative creation from a gender studies perspective.

4 Dana Scully, FBI Agent

In order to analyse Scully's role as a federal agent, it is important to examine the media representation of female agents, as popular media have a crucial role in reiterating acceptable forms of gender performance. Tammy S. Garland et al., for example, examined the depiction of female federal law enforcement on screen through the content analysis of prime-time dramas. They found that white males were more frequently depicted as both agents and perpetrators of crimes on the twelve examined series (2018, 617) and that women were often portrayed as less competent or self-confident, having to "become 'one of the boys' to be accepted and perceived as qualified" (618). In an earlier study, Kimberly A. DeTardo-Bora concluded that fictional women in the criminal justice profession were repeatedly represented as young, sexually appealing, in possession of 'feminine' qualities such as nurturance and "subordinat[ion] to authority" (2009, 165). At the same time, they were "were shown to be intelligent, competitive, self-confident, and assertive" (165). Janet T. Davidson similarly highlighted how the "female crime fighters" she examined were routinely depicted as young and were also more likely to be sexualized than their male counterparts, often taking on an assistive role on screen (2015, 1022). Moreover, these women were often unmarried and without children, or their family lives were not harmonious (1022), implying that while the female agent can be successful in her professional life, she cannot "have it all" (Garland et al. 2018, 620).

Scully, as the previous section also highlighted, is a novel female character, not only because she is a scientist but because as an equal partner to Mulder in the agency, she routinely saves him from trouble, as well as standing up to both him and their higher ups. Her competence and self-confidence are repeatedly asserted in the series, and she is not overtly sexualised, although her femininity is often contrasted with that of her superiors. There are multiple scenes where Scully is the only woman at a meeting or involved in an investigation, exposing that within the Bureau, she is an Other. DeTardo-Bora's words, that "[t]here is hope yet that women will continue to be portrayed in a positive light, one that will inspire young women [as] crime dramas are partially breaking away from some of the stereotypical images of women that have traditionally been displayed" (2009, 165), are undoubtedly

applicable to *The X-Files,* as well. Overall, Scully is an active figure in the narrative who has considerable agency, a capable and professional scientist whose voice shapes events in the show. However, her femininity colours the scope of actions accessible to her as an agent. Namely, Scully has to perform a double role in the show, and her scepticism (that is often read as a subversion of restrictive gender roles) might also be taken a sign of her marginality as a female FBI agent. She is not 'entitled' to express conspiratorial opinions the same way Mulder is, as if, were she to take on the conspiracist language, she would be shunned by her superiors.

Scully's role within the FBI and as Mulder's partner is interesting to consider for multiple reasons. Assigned to the X-Files unit to keep an eye on (and discredit) Mulder's theories, she occupies a meta-investigator role. Not only does she deal with the cases but also has to observe the investigative process itself as a disciplinary figure. Importantly, both Mulder and Scully are aware of her twofold position as evidenced in the pilot episode of the series, when the two have this conversation because evidence suggests that a coma patient might inexplicably have been involved in the crime they are investigating:

> MULDER: All right, but I just want you to understand what it is you're saying.
> SCULLY: You said it yourself.
> MULDER: Yeah, but you have to write it down in your report. (S01E01 00:38:24–34)

Scully and Mulder *are* different. While he can posit theories that might contradict official Bureau ideas, 'Spooky' Mulder's theories are ultimately not scrutinised too heavily – he does, after all, have a job at the agency despite his unorthodox claims. Scully, in contrast, has to always keep in mind that her reports go back to their higher-ups, and she will be questioned on their content. And here lies another important point for her character: while she is a partner to Mulder (as of the first season only as a colleague and friend), the requirement to submit the field reports hinders her ability to fully take on the 'believer' (or in other words, conspiracy theorist) role. She could only endorse Mulder's ideas to the detriment of her own position in the FBI, going against the goals of her higher ups. Illustrating the limitations imposed on her, in the same episode, the two agents have the following heated exchange:

> MULDER: There's classified government information I've being trying to access, but someone has been blocking my attempts to get at it. […] Someone at a higher level of power. The only reason I've been allowed to continue with my work is because I've made connections in Congress.
> SCULLY: And they're afraid of what? That, that you'll leak this information?
> MULDER: You're a part of that agenda, you know that.
> SCULLY: I'm not a part of any agenda. You've got to trust me. I'm here just like you, to solve this. (S01E01 00:28:47–29:17)

Mulder, in the heat of the argument, accuses Scully of following FBI goals blindly – something that she rejects outright. But to what extent is this rejection reality, and how much of it is simply a wish on Scully's part? In other words, can she truly declare not to be "part of any agenda" when she is still writing reports on their work? As later scenes would show throughout the series, she is not afraid to oppose their superiors, often coming to her own or Mulder's protection when they try to discredit what the agents saw or experienced during their investigations. Nonetheless, she must linger within certain bounds to keep her job, and to be able to fulfil her role as a 'warden' next to Mulder.

So, while it is true that the logic/emotion dichotomy is reversed in the show through alternative constructions of gender, it is important to acknowledge that Scully must remain a sceptic for her to perform the part of the FBI agent well. She joins the 'boys' club' of the FBI – as mentioned, there are multiple scenes throughout the show where audiences see that there are very few women in positions like hers, and that virtually all of her higher ups are men – and must adhere to its roles to be respected. While hers might be read as a 'hegemonic femininity' that gets ahead through the subversion of some masculinities (for example Mulder's – her initial job, after all, is to keep him in check), I argue that there still is a gendered 'invisible ceiling,' specifically when it comes to narrative-making, which limits her ability to create theory as freely as Mulder does. Importantly, Scully is given a voice in the series. The question to consider for the rest of this study is what exactly shapes how she can use the voice that she has.

5 Dana Scully, Narrator

By the end of the first season of *The X-Files*, there is clear indication that Scully's trust in her FBI superiors is not absolute – her arc over the twenty-four episodes is from cynic to a tentative believer. On a parallel trajectory, she goes from trust to mistrust when it comes to the Bureau. Illustrating this change, in the second episode, she pushes back against Mulder's conspiratorial thinking (although it must be acknowledged that she does often entertain Mulder's ideas throughout the season, even if she personally does not believe them):

> MULDER: […] I think there's a huge conspiracy here Scully. They've got a UFO here, I'm sure of it. And they'll do anything to keep it a secret, including sacrificing lives and minds of those pilots, because what if that secret got out.
> SCULLY: If, if that were true, it would be a national scandal.
> MULDER: No, no, you're not thinking big enough. If it were true, it would be confirmation of the existence of extraterrestrial life.

> SCULLY: Did you ever stop to think that what we saw was simply an experimental plane. Like the stealth bomber or, this Aurora Project. Doesn't the government have a right and a responsibility to protect its secrets?
> MULDER: Yes, but at what cost, when does the human cost become too high for the building of a better machine?
> SCULLY: Look, these are questions we have no business asking. (S01E02 00:29:40–00:30:30)

In contrast, by the last episode ("The Erlenmeyer Flask") she seems to be much closer to his standpoint:

> SCULLY: Mulder? I, I just want to say that I was wrong.
> MULDER: It's all right, don't worry about it.
> SCULLY: No, um... if you had listened to me, we wouldn't be here right now. I should know by now to trust your instincts.
> MULDER: Why? Nobody else does.
> SCULLY: You know, I've always held science as sacred. I've, I've always put my trust in the accepted facts. And what I saw last night... for the first time in my life, I don't know what to believe. (S01E24 00:27:00–33)

There is a stark dissimilitude between the two scenes. Whereas in the first Scully shuts down Mulder's line of reasoning wholly, in a way disempowering them both (they have no business wandering about the dealings of the government, despite the fact that they are, as FBI agents, part of the power apparatus), by the time the latter half of the season comes around, she is not only receptive of Mulder's intuition-based methods, but is questioning her own scientific reasoning, as well.

Overall, these scenes exemplify the tension of Scully's position: although she performs well in her role as the sceptic, ultimately she is proven wrong. It seems that the narrative itself rejects her performance, urging her to change her stances, while Mulder's paranoid fantasies are validated. The idea that science and reason can offer explanations for the world is negated, or at least partially questioned, through Scully's character: she cannot arrive at the truth on her own, but must adopt a new framework to do so. She thus must go outside the discursive mainstream and be Othered for *that* to arrive at the truth that the show seeks. The show's endorsement of Mulder's position is evidenced in its slogan, as well. As Malach also points out, "the program's worldview (captured in the slogan "The Truth Is Out There") is obviously Mulder's. As a believer in paranormal phenomena, he has the advantage over his partner in most episodes" (1996, 74). "Scully, however," Malach continues, "becomes the more flexible character over time, as her experiences seem to change her worldview more than Mulder's do him" (74). So paradoxically, Scully is greatly limited in her ability to enter the conspiracy narrative-making space as a woman, and yet she must do so to arrive at the truth. What is puzzling about this situation is that at first, she is the 'narrator' of the story through her reports, which would

imply her ability to create adequate theories regarding the investigation. Moreover, as Wilcox and Williams point out, "[t]he Mulveyan gaze, too, is sublimated: throughout the series, Mulder and Scully look into each other's eyes in their quest for the truth […]. 'What do you think?' are the words they perhaps most often address to each other, and it seems they really want to know" (1996, 105–6). Scully shares "equal looks" (116) with Mulder, and through her reporting on the cases, she has the discursive power to actively take part in truth-seeking. And yet, despite the looks and the voice, she cannot, through her own means, arrive at the answers that she and Mulder are looking for.

Indeed, an important factor that limits Scully's 'voice' in conspiracy-making is her inability to see much of the proof that Mulder faces in episodes. Despite seeing signs that the government is doing something in secret (though the extraterrestrial part of the plot is at that point largely obscured) by the second episode already, it is only in the very last episode of the season that she encounters concrete evidence of the government plot. Moreover, initially only Mulder makes contact with the informant Deep Throat, keeping their meetings secret from Scully for a significant span of time. It is once again only in the last episode that Scully meaningfully interacts with Deep Throat. In episode ten, Deep Throat explicitly asks Mulder if he is certain that she has not followed them, revealing that Scully is deliberately kept out of the loop. Scully is actively shut out of the theorising space by Deep Throat, as well. As Wilcox and Williams contend, "ironically, their frequent sex role reversals result in Scully's investigative gaze being disempowered. Time and again, Mulder sees evidence of the supernatural that Scully, by the structure of the episode, is disallowed from seeing" (1996, 99). Scully and Mulder, they continue, "are presented as equal. In one area, however, that equality fails: while Scully and Mulder in various senses look at each other as equals, Scully's gaze is disempowered by the text" (117). Therefore, while Scully is "seemingly more aligned with traditional masculine power" (117), she is ultimately marginalised from a space her male colleagues easily enter.

6 "I Want to Believe:" Reflecting on the Figure of the Conspiracy Theorist

Thus far, my analysis focused on Scully and her constrained position in the narrative with regard to conspiratorial thinking. However, Mulder's relationship with power and authorities is also worthwhile to consider. Wilcox and Williams write that Mulder's "insistence on the reality of beings and experiences not acknowledged by patriarchy marks him as Other to many of patriarchy's representatives, thus aligning him with woman" (1996, 118). As Lisa Parks similarly argues,

> [Mulder's] fascination with the paranormal is both feminized (especially as it is articulated through his relationship to his sister) and at the same time turned into a masculine investigatory adventure. Scully, on the other hand, is masculinized through her connection to science yet feminized by her subordination in the FBI's chain of command and by her placement "out of the Bureau mainstream." (1996, 123)

According to Wilcox and Williams, Mulder occupies the position and thus takes on the characteristics of the woman in popular fiction who "sees the monster with a special horror because she recognizes their shared difference from the males of the established power structures. […] 'Spooky' Mulder is identified with the monster in his difference, as even his nickname indicates" (1996, 118). Thus far, my analysis has closely mirrored Wilcox and Williams's, utilising different frameworks to highlight similar points regarding the gendered discourse of the show. However, at this point our arguments seem to diverge. They go on to write that "[b]y the last episode of the second season, Scully is again across the table from the representatives of patriarchy, telling them that her reports validate Mulder's work. She, like Mulder, is threatened with dismissal from a position sponsored by that patriarchy, a position that has enabled the two agents to pursue their investigations more effectively" (119). Conversely, I argue that Scully's position had been threatened from the beginning. While Wilcox and Williams also address her precarious position as a woman in the FBI (119), their focus rests chiefly on Mulder and Scully's interpersonal relationship (and how it is often perceived by other characters as sexual [113]), whereas my interest is in how the outside treats each character differently. In my interpretation, Mulder may symbolically align with the Other (the woman), but he is nonetheless perceived to be a man by society. Moreover, Mulder and Scully may be equal in the eyes of each other, but both the Bureau and the narrative itself, as I explained, seem to (explicitly or implicitly) reject (or at least heavily question) this. It is true that Mulder is relegated to the sidelines of the FBI, with his office located in the basement of the agency's facility symbolically setting him apart from – and below – his colleagues, prompting him to call himself the "FBI's most unwanted" (S01E01 00:05:00–05). At the same time, as creating conspiracy theories is a necessity to finding the truth in the series not only is this alternative discursive strategy foregrounded, but Mulder's embracing of it is validated, too. In other words, his outsider status is ultimately rewarded as it is what allows his investigations to succeed.

However, being a conspiracy theorist is not unequivocally endorsed on the show. In episode 17, titled "E.B.E.," Mulder and Scully meet the Lone Gunmen, a group of conspiracy theorists who run a magazine of unexplained phenomena. While they seem to be in the same business as Mulder, he is sympathetic to the viewers, whereas the Gunmen are presented as aloof and obviously overzealous with their ideas. Describing them to Scully, Mulder says "these guys are like an extreme government

watchdog group. […] Some of their information is first-rate; covert actions, classified weapons. Some of their ideas are downright spooky" (S01E17 00:09:38–49). As mentioned already, "spooky" is an adjective that is most often associated with Mulder, from the very first episode of the show – others called him so behind his back in the Academy, and seemingly the practice stuck in the FBI, as well. The initial similarity and descriptive connection between the Gunmen and Mulder, however, is not bolstered further, and gets reframed during the scene after the agents visit the group in their offices. After their meeting, once again alone, Scully somewhat teasingly says, "[d]id you see the way they answered the telephone? They probably think that every call that they get is monitored and they're followed wherever they go. It's a form of self-delusion. It makes them think that what they're doing is important enough that somebody would" (S01E17 00:12:18–32), only to be cut off as she finds a listening device in her pen.

There are, then, two chief differences between the Gunmen and Mulder and Scully: first, their (or at least Mulder's) theorising is painted in a much less comic light. Second, the Gunmen, the audience understands, are unjustified in their paranoia, while the protagonists ought to be suspicious of their surroundings. Both these points connect to the positions the characters occupy within the narrative, but the difference is not simply a matter of proximity to truth. After all, Mulder tells Scully that some information that the Gunmen have is "first-rate" (S01E17 00:09:38–49). Instead, Mulder's work at the Bureau both makes his claims serious and at the same time troubling and thus warranting control. Mulder, coming from inside the FBI, is legitimised in creating his conspiracy theories – he is, after all, in the business of sleuthing. Ironically, for a show that focuses on governmental power abuses and their coverups, truth-seeking remains largely in the hands of authorities. One can make alternative theories, the show seems to imply, but will be taken seriously – by the narrative and other characters – only if they are part of the institution. At the same time, because Mulder is a figure who is part of law enforcement, his going against accepted political narratives must be carefully controlled and kept under surveillance; this is why Deep Throat feeds only morsels of information to him throughout the season – Mulder may learn enough to satiate some of his curiosity, but never so much that he would pose a real threat to the FBI. In the episode titled "Fallen Angel," Deep Throat explains as much to a colleague:

> I appreciate your frustration, but you and I both know that Mulder's work is a singular passion – poses a most unique dilemma. But his occasional insubordination is in the end, far less dangerous […] [t]han having him exposed to the wrong people. What he knows. What he thinks he knows. Always keep your friends close, Mr. McGrath. But keep your enemies closer." (S01E10 00:44:21–45:02)

Paradoxically, then, Mulder is both more sanctioned to embrace conspiratorial thinking due to his work – when he comes up with outrageous theories, he is to be taken more seriously than the Gunmen when they do –, as well as more constrained, since he is under constant watch of Deep Throat and the conspiring higher-ups.

7 Conclusion

Overall, this study aimed to highlight the tensions within the narrative of the first season of *The X-Files*. My goal was to show that reading Dana Scully as a fully disempowered woman or as wholly flipping gender scripts would both be simplifications of the complexity of her character. Utilising conspiracy theory creation (which I took to be a central driving force of the narrative) as a framework through which to analyse the gender roles of the series, I argued that access to the theorising space was the entitlement of the men of season one of *The X-Files*. While Scully is an active figure in the series and her character is on the one hand subversive, on the other, her voice is greatly limited in its narrative capacity. The performance that is required of her as an FBI agent limits her ability to fully access the truth by stepping into the believer (and conspiracy theorist) role. At the same time, Mulder's position at the FBI is what differentiates him from other conspiracy theorists: him and Scully being part of an institution that functions as an epistemic authority complicates their relationship with the truth and issues of legitimate critical potential considerably. As I argued for the social reflective capabilities of fictional conspiracy narratives, Scully's binary characterisation in the show and her lack of access to a needed conspiracist reasoning highlights the pervasiveness of the patriarchal favouring of "masculine" discourse, even when it is considered to be transgressive. A fruitful endeavour in the future would be to examine how later seasons revise this contention, and to chart Scully's evolution throughout the entirety of the series, seeing how her role within the narrative changes as she takes on more of a believer role.

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