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Introduction:

a critical reflection on thirty years of *The X-Files*

James Fenwick and Diane A. Rodgers

Where does one begin with the legacy of *The X-Files*? It is a television series that has been deemed a cultural phenomenon and, particularly during the peak of its popularity and success in the late 1990s, is amongst several programmes—including *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-03)—attributed with changing the face of television in this period (Jowett and Abbott 2013:9). Its lexicon of catchphrases—trust no one, the truth is out there, I want to believe —appeared to resonate with a mood of distrust, scandal, desperation and paranoia in the USA and the West more generally. FBI Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, the main characters of the series, became icons of sex, conspiracy, and science fiction whose frequent guest appearances and name-checks throughout popular media of the day (such as in the 1997 episode of *The Simpsons* [1989-] 'The Springfield Files' and the 1998 UK chart-topping song 'Mulder and Scully' by Catatonia) indicated the reach, acceptance, and familiarity of the characters and the series far beyond its core audience. No longer merely a 'cult' television series as it was initially considered to be (Appelo 1994), *The X-Files* had become, by the end of the 1990s: a powerful brand; a merchandising commodity; an end-of-century cultural zeitgeist; Hollywood global entertainment, and most of all a resounding television success.

Into the 2020s, popular film and television continues to acknowledge the importance of *The X-Files* in terms of its dissection and mythologization of American history and politics, as well as a significant forerunner and inspiration for contemporary media texts. In sci-fi horror film *Something in the Dirt* (2022), characters discuss the legacy of political

paranoia and conspiracy theories that seem to have invaded everyday life, noting that ‘now, *everything* is *The X-Files*’. The New Zealand mockumentary series *Wellington Paranormal* (2018-22) is explicit about it indebtedness to *The X-Files* as police chief Maaka (Maaka Pohatu) sports ‘The Truth is in Here’ underpants, displays an ‘I want to believe’ poster in his office, and his subordinates compare themselves to ‘Scully because she’s logical’ and ‘Mulder because I’m a man with dark hair’. *Stan Against Evil* (2016-18), a comedy horror series taking its cue in part from *The Evil Dead* film series (1981-), owes much of its investigative DNA to *The X-Files*, dedicating an entire episode ‘The Hex Files’ (S3: E02) to the arrival of Agents who look uncannily like Mulder and Scully and state knowing dialogue like ‘But I don’t want to believe’. Thirty years after its initial broadcast, *The X-Files* can still to be found prominently in examples of popular culture across all forms of media, whether central to the narrative, referenced in the mise-en-scène (such as in the 2021 Netflix series *Midnight Mass*) or discussed explicitly in both documentary and fiction podcasts (like *No Place Like Home* [2021] and *Video Palace* [2018-]).

But to understand the legacy of *The X-Files*, and to contextualize the chapters in this collection, we have to return to the beginning, before any of the above triumphs, accolades or fan worship came about (and, as some have suggested, problems, more on which is discussed below). The television series was the idea and creation of former journalist turned screenwriter Chris Carter. Born in Bellflower, California in 1956, Carter began working for *Surfing Magazine* in the 1970s, before progressing into a career as a screenwriter at Disney Studios (Hyman 1993: 15D). His career as a screenwriter came about through fortuitous connections and encounters, allowing him to move from one contract to another. Employed by Disney via a mutual contact of his future wife, Carter was later hired by NBC through a meeting with its executive at a baseball game. Finally, Carter moved to work for Fox after a new production executive at the company had been impressed with an unproduced script of

his – most of Carter's screenwriting had largely been unproduced (Lowry 1995: 4). The limited screenwriting work that had been produced at the point that Fox hired Carter in 1992 had been youth-orientated comedy: two television films for the anthology series *The Disney Sunday Movie* (1986-88) ('The B.R.A.T. Patrol' [1986] and 'Meet the Munceys' [1988]) and two episodes of NBC's musical comedy *Rags to Riches* (1987-88). As such, Carter's turn to writing *The X-Files* was, in the context of his career at that stage, unusual. He later revealed in interviews that his intention had been to create a 'scary' television show that drew upon his formative childhood and teenage television experiences, specifically the original series of *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64) and *Kolchak: The Night Stalker* (1974-75). In an interview with the *Las Vegas Review* in 1993 Carter said, 'I didn't have any agenda […] I just wanted to create a wildly entertaining show that would scare the pants off you' (Hyman 1993: 15D).

Kolchak: The Night Stalker was a particularly significant influence upon Carter and *The X-Files*. Featuring an investigative journalist as the title character, *Kolchak* explored different supernatural phenomena within a continuous serialized format, but in self-contained weekly episodes with their own resolved narratives. Often cited as exemplary of 'monster-of-the week' television, *Kolchak* 'repackaged' the formula of investigating and defeating a different supernatural creature by the episode's end each week: 'the narrative formula is fixed and weekly variation is provided by the monster and the methods Kolchak uses to stop it' (Jowett and Abbott 2013: 44). Adopting conventions from both horror and crime drama, the narrative of *Kolchak* is grounded in the real world despite uncovering crimes committed by 'a revivified Jack the Ripper', aliens, werewolves, zombies or even the devil, presenting such stories using realist location shooting and grainy, hand-held cinematography (Jowett and Abbott 2013: 45). It is easy to draw direct lines of comparison between this and *The X-Files*, particularly as Kolchak even frequently tried to expose institutional corruption, finding himself up against political cover-ups, 'Men in Black' and government officials in denial.

Though two decades on in the 1990s, the decision by Fox to hire Carter to write a new television series in a similar vein (given that *Kolchak* was cancelled after one year due to mediocre ratings) was potentially a risky venture, particularly given the unusual combination of science fiction, horror and dramatic thriller genres. There had been precedents for such material at that time with *Twin Peaks*, but that series too ultimately suffered from low audience ratings: despite an initial success with audiences and being one of the most watched programmes of 1990, it was cancelled after just two seasons and thirty episodes. The wider television landscape of the time favoured crime dramas and sitcoms. Film, English, and horror scholar Jan Delasara has argued that *The X-Files* was unusual at the time, even in the context of the initial success of *Twin Peaks*:

> It appeared in the midst of the usual cop shows and situation comedies just as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was preparing to abandon regular production and move into a series of films. At that point, dramatic shows with a speculative flavor seemed to be disappearing from the screen, leaving only television's peculiar notion of Real Life ("Real TV") and hyperbolic fictional humor or violence. (Delasara 2000: 7)

The decision to allow the development of a programme like *The X-Files* can be seen in the wider context of the evolution of the Fox network. Fox was still a fledgling broadcast network when *The X-Files* was commissioned in 1992. The Fox Broadcasting Company, as it was originally known, commenced broadcasting in 1986, with a primetime launch several months later in early 1987. The network was owned by Rupert Murdoch and was part of a wider global expansion by his media conglomerate, News Corporation, into television in the mid-to-late 1980s (Holt 2011: 86-89). Fox aimed to challenge the 'Big Three' US television networks at the time: ABC, CBS, and NBC. And it targeted a young demographic audience

(Carter 1991: D1), particularly with edgier programming like *The Late Show* (1986-88), sitcoms such as *Married…with Children* (1987-97), adult cartoons like *The Simpsons*, police dramas like *21 Jump Street* (1987-91), and crime reality television and documentary such as *Cops* (1989-) and *America's Most Wanted* (1988-21). But despite some initial programming success, by the 1991-1992 season Fox's ratings had dropped and it was still significantly outcompeted by the 'Big Three' networks. In 1992, the chairman of Fox, Barry Diller, resigned and his day-to-day activities were temporarily taken over by Murdoch directly. Murdoch's strategy going forward was to significantly increase the network's programme budget by 40 percent to 'accomplish its goal of a full 7-nights-a-week schedule' by 1993, and he initiated a national television news service that would become Fox News (Mermigas 1992: 26).

There were other significant changes too at Fox's television production unit Twentieth Television, where Peter Roth had become President of Production in June 1992 (Anon. 1992: 59). As a profile of Roth at the time noted, he became 'an integral part in the expansion of that division's network programming' (Anon. 1992: 59). Roth's previous role had been at Stephen J. Cannell Productions, where he had been involved in the production of crime and police dramas such as *21 Jump Street*, *The Commish* (1991-96) and *Wiseguys* (1987-90): all these programmes had been filmed in Vancouver, Canada, rather than Los Angeles, at the urging of Roth to reduce production costs. Roth would have a significant influence on the aesthetic of *The X-Files* when he pushed for that too to be filmed in Vancouver for its first five seasons. Roth reflected on the use of Vancouver in his television productions in an interview in 1997:

> 'I'm a real Vancouverphile,' Roth says. 'When I was first exposed to the city, it struck me as such a refreshing and beautiful, perfect Hollywood North. It had all of the

> value, I thought, of what we could do in Hollywood, with magnificent weather, incredible scenery, never-before-seen locations and, frankly, a willingness on the part of the crews unlike anything we saw in Hollywood.' (Strachan 1997: C2)

Roth was the creative gatekeeper responsible for commissioning *The X-Files*. He had been the executive that had read an unmade pilot script by Chris Carter and impressed, hired him to develop a script for Fox. Over lunch, Roth and Carter had discovered they had a shared enthusiasm for *Kolchak* and together they developed the initial idea for the series (Strachan 1997: C2): two FBI agents working in a marginalized investigation unit, the X-Files, that examined paranormal or unexplained events, crimes, and mysteries. The idea was initially rejected by Fox, but Roth and Carter persisted, pitching the idea to the highest executives at Fox, including to Murdoch himself (Rhodes 1993: 8). Carter was insistent that the series was not science fiction, but rather a fast-moving, suspense and thriller series (Hyman 1993: 15D). Murdoch and Fox relented, and the series was allowed to go ahead.

Upon its debut in autumn 1993, *The X-Files* had low audience ratings overall, though they were high compared to the average for Fox on the Friday night slot to which it had been scheduled (Rhodes 1993: 8). Carter immediately ascribed this large-Friday night audience to what he termed the 'thousands of X-Filophiles' in the USA: individuals that he said were believers in UFOs and, more importantly, believed they had seen or encountered extra-terrestrials (Rhodes 1993: 8). In December 1993, halfway into the first season, Carter outlined to the *Los Angeles Times* how this audience of believers was leading to a cult audience from the get-go for *The X-Files*:

> 'They wholeheartedly believe they have had these experiences,' says Carter, who has gotten word of a growing 'X-File' cult not only from letters and phone calls but also

> from a flurry of activity on computer-modem bulletin boards. ‘And who am I to say they haven't?’ And, what's more, they're not alone. According to a 1992 Roper poll, more than 2% of all Americans believe they may have been abducted by aliens and at least 16% believe they've had some kind of contact with beings from another realm. ‘That's an amazing amount of people,’ says Carter, who knows a hot demographic when he sees one. ‘That's millions of people who believe.’ (Rhodes 1993: 8)

From the very beginning, the series producers were engaging with their audience and with fledgling Internet forums to gain feedback. As Carter said in one 1993 interview, ‘We get the most amazing mail […] We get letters from at least two electronic bulletin boards, so we get immediate feedback. It's valuable stuff. I'll say that 95 percent of it is wildly positive’ (Hyman 1993: 15D). Carter also recognized the potential cynicism of a broader, more general television audience in the USA. As he noted,

> ‘The comment I get a lot is, “This isn't something I would normally be interested in, but I love your show.” […] ‘That was the thing that was really surprising in my research and in the tests of the pilot (episode), was how pervasive the belief is that the government acts in secretive ways.’ (Hyman 1993: 15D)

Whatever the secret to the series’ success, it was proving popular, at first with a ‘cult’ audience, what were quickly termed ‘X-Philes’ (Littlefield 1994: E11). By its second season in 1994/95, the audience share had grown to seventeen percent of the total Friday night network audience (Shrieves 1994: 31). In the UK, *The X-Files*—initially broadcast on the BBC—was drawing an audience of six million viewers. Its success was contributing to what Mark Simpson in *The Independent* called a growing belief in the ‘weird’ (Simpson 1994).

Simpson singled out the ‘Weird Night’ of programming on BBC2, which featured as its centrepiece an episode of *The X-Files*. As Simpson described it:

> ‘It's a whole evening devoted to the uncanny, the bizarre, the peculiar - and the downright freaky,’ enthuses Michael Jackson, Controller of BBC2. […] one of the featured programmes in ‘Weird Night’ is an episode of *The X-Files* […] *The X-Files*’ phenomenal popularity marks a watershed not just in how people watch TV but how they see the world. (Simpson 1994)

‘Weird’, spooky fare was not unknown to the BBC, whose commissioners had traditionally made space for ambitious, intellectually challenging fare such as the *Play for Today* (BBC1, 1970-84) series, which included many experimental offerings, including the folk horror ‘Robin Redbreast’ (1970), time-travelling science fiction ‘The Flipside of Dominick Hyde’ (1980) and post-apocalyptic ‘Z for Zachariah’ (1984). The 1970s were an especially rich period for wyrd British television, an era in which folklore and contemporary legend were treated with some gravity in mainstream media (Rodgers 2019). Series like the BBC’s *Ghost Story for Christmas* (1971-78) captured the popular imagination (and paved the way for later controversially spooky ‘cult’ fare like 1992’s *Ghostwatch*) but particularly of note here is lesser-known production *The Omega Factor* (1979). The short-lived series centred on journalist Tom Crane who, possessing psychic powers, joins a secret government department which investigates supernatural phenomena including telekinesis, brainwashing and poltergeist activity. Combining science fiction, horror and thriller elements with narrative focus on shadowy government activity and conspiracies, *The Omega Factor* has obvious links with its US counterpart *Kolchak*, both of which are echoed in *The X-Files*. It is interesting that *Doctor Who* (1963-), perhaps the most famous science fiction series stalwart of British television screens (combining science fiction and horror themes throughout its

tenure) since 1963, faced its only major lull in the 1990s when, according to script editor Andrew Cartmel, the series was 'held universally in contempt by the powers-that-be' who cancelled it in 1989 (Jeffery 2019). Though it was cancelled due to several complex factors, including the BBC's fluctuating distaste for 'cult' science fiction (Johnston 2009), perhaps the timely space left by *Doctor Who* was in part what helped encourage 1990s audiences to find programmes like *The X-Files*.

As *The X-Files*' television audience grew, both in the USA and UK, so too did its internet audience. By season two, 800 messages a day were being posted to the alt.tv.x-files newsgroup from users across the world, suggesting a growing global audience (Littlefield 1994: E11). Newspaper reports indicated that a fan base had begun circulating VHS tapes of *The X-Files* at science fiction and UFO conventions, while some had been attracted by the series' crossover appeal with *Twin Peaks* (Shrieves 1994: E1). But it was the growing success with a broader demographic, specifically 18- to 49-year-olds, and a core audience of men aged 18 to 34 that indicated the series had migrated rapidly from cult phenomenon to mainstream television success (Shrieves 1994: E1). In 1994, it won the Golden Globe for Best Drama Series and in 1995 it received Emmy Award nominations for Outstanding Drama Series, the first such nominations in the top award categories for any Fox series (Hopkins 1995: 2). But there was a tension between the cult origins of the series and its growing mainstream popularity, which had led to an increasing merchandising operation, including a tie-in comic book series published by Topp Comics between 1995 and 1998 and tie-in novels (including *Goblins* [1994], *Whirlwind* [1995], and *Ground Zero* [1995]). Chris Carter, interviewed about the growing popularity of the series in 1995, said he was cautious about the marketing and merchandising operation that had now grown around *The X-Files*:

> 'I said no to *The X-Files* boxer shorts last week,'" he said with a laugh. 'I think this show has a subversive, anti-establishment quality that over-marketing can work

> against. The message should be that this show has its feet firmly planted in the cult world of television.' (Hopkins 1995: 2)

By the time of the series' third season premiere in September 1995, talk of a feature film was already circulating in the trade press. No longer confined to cult status, the desire to move into feature film territory suggested how, far from Carter and the series' producers wanting to keep *The X-Files* in the 'cult world of television', there was an ambition for Hollywood franchise success. The first *X-Files*' film—titled *The X-Files* though also known as *The X-Files: Fight the Future*—was released in 1998, between the fifth and sixth seasons. The film was a box office success, grossing over $80 million in the USA and nearly $190 million total worldwide (Scott 1998: 31).

Yet, the transition to blockbuster feature film seemed to impact on the overall popularity and momentum of *The X-Files*. Season six, which had transferred production from Vancouver to Los Angeles at the urging of David Duchovny, suffered from a drop in audience ratings. Television critic Bill Carter, writing in the *New York Times* at the time of season six's broadcast, argued that the series was inevitably going to suffer from its transition to the cinema screen:

> "The X-Files" has reached an age at which many highly regarded television shows have been known to start losing their way. Plus it finds itself in a position no television show has ever been in before: following up a big-budget Hollywood movie packed with action scenes and the spectacular take-off of a giant spaceship in Antarctica, part of an elaborately constructed plot that was an extension of the story line of the television series. If the burden of serving as a 22-episode sequel to a movie were not enough of a challenge, "The X-Files" is coming out of a summer in which ratings for its repeat episodes have drastically fallen off, most likely as a result of

multiple exposure of the early episodes on cable and broadcast channels. (Carter 1998: B7)

A sense of exhaustion and a feeling that the series had reached the end of a particular phase in its life was reflected by the move from Vancouver to Los Angeles and, perhaps more significantly, to bring about the end to a major component of *The X-Files*: it's series-long myth-arc. *The X-Files* feature film had revealed many key answers to the government conspiracy – the 'truth' Mulder and Scully had doggedly been searching for since the pilot episode. The decision was taken to destroy the central cabal at the heart of the conspiracy, the so-called 'Syndicate', in the episodes 'Two Fathers' (S6: E11) and 'One Son' (S6: E12). As such, the series had entered a period of renewal, of a new beginning. But it never truly recovered the height of popularity it had achieved during the 1990s. There were attempts to engage audiences with spin-off series, such as *The Lone Gunmen* (2001) or with new Chris Carter-branded series like *Millennium* (1996-99), but neither of these ever achieved the ratings or cultural impact of *The X-Files* at its peak. Carter had talked of *The X-Files* going through regular reboots, with new main characters taking over from Mulder and Scully. This idea partially came to realisation in season eight and nine, following the semi-departure of David Duchovny from the series and the introduction of two new main characters in place of Mulder and Scully: FBI Agents John Doggett and Monica Reyes. But such attempts at renewal overlooked how the success of *The X-Files* owed much to the central pairing of Mulder and Scully, and the casting of Duchovny and Anderson in the roles. Mulder and Scully personified *The X-Files* and had become cultural icons as a result. To forever continue the series without them would mean a television series that was just not the same.

The decline in audience ratings led to Fox cancelling any further seasons of *The X-Files*, with the ninth season to be its last. Following the conclusion of the original run of the

series in 2002, there was repeated speculation in the media of a franchise film series that would focus on the alien myth-arc, supported by online fan communities (Marcus 2014; Williams 2015: 166). However, to date there has only been one further *The X-Files* film: *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* released in 2008, a stand-alone film that had nothing to do with extra-terrestrials but instead centred on a plot about organ harvesting, with wider themes of spirituality, family, and faith. Merchandise such as comics and novels continued the series in a paratextual form; this included a comic series by IDW Publishing that was branded as 'season eleven' of the series. Then, in 2015, it was confirmed that both Duchovny and Anderson would return in a six-episode 'revival' series, to be overseen by Chris Carter. What became known as season ten also revived the myth-arc of the original series and included the return of the sinister Cigarette Smoking Man, only this time setting the conspiracy in the post 9/11 and 'post-truth' era.

Whilst the first episode of the new series, 'My Struggle' (S10: E01) attracted a sizeable audience, viewing figures sharply declined from episode two onwards. Despite this, a second revival series, season eleven, was commissioned by Fox, but the viewing figures were even lower. As of the writing of this introduction, there has been no confirmation of a twelfth series. And whilst Carter indicated he would like to develop another series, Gillian Anderson firmly ruled it out in an interview in 2022, stating that it, 'just feels like such an old idea […] there would need to be a whole new set of writers and the baton would need to be handed on for it to feel like it was new and progressive' (Boyle 2022). *The X-Files* had lost its popular appeal and its revival series, and the various paratexts, merchandise, and other spin-off series, were targeted and consumed by the cult audience that had originally driven the series to mainstream success. *The X-Files* had become, as Anderson argued, a television series of the past (Boyle 2022).

The point of this introduction is not to recount the production history of *The X-Files*: others have done that in the many books, articles, and chapters written about the programme. Rather, it is to indicate the early contexts of the programme's origins and initial broadcast and reception to begin to understand its legacy thirty years later. The seeds of the programme's legacy were planted from the very beginning and arguably led to it being part of, and even contributing to, a television revolution: the globalisation of television and the expansion of new conglomerates into television ownership and production; the intersection and collision of the programme's creation with the rise of the Internet and new fan forums; and the fusion of genre with wider public cynicism in politics (perhaps the latter is the programme's most consequential and inadvertently dangerous legacy). But given that the series' peak of popularity was over twenty-five years ago and was incredibly brief, lasting only a few years up to the release of the first feature film in 1998, the question of *The X-Files*' legacy and its place within broader television history is ripe for discussion. Does *The X-Files* have a legacy? And does it even matter?

Television Legacies

Television historian Helen Wheatley, in the introduction to her edited collection *Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography* (2007), argues that a key problem in the field of television history is a tendency towards nostalgia (Wheatley 2007: 10). The television programmes scholars choose to focus on, memorialize, and ascribe cultural value to are incredibly subjective. After all, a series like *The X-Files* may well have been popular and influential, but without a detailed, measurable, even quantifiable study of that influence, then why should it be taken more seriously and ascribed greater cultural value than any other television programme from the time? This is not to de-value the importance of a series like *The X-Files* nor to suggest scholars should not undertake research into the series,

but rather to question *why* we do so. Television historian John Ellis, in his discussion of the possibility (or impossibility) of constructing a television 'canon', argues the following:

> Any canon, or 'list of greats', discriminates. That is its purpose. A canon tells us what is important, what we need to know, and what it regards as having enduring value. Any good canon will also expose its biases and its underlying rationales. Now that television has become an object of study, it too is subjected to the activity of canon building, if only because lecturers and students choose to study and write about one programme, series or genre rather than another. A canon is implicit in every such choice. (Ellis 2007: 15)

Ellis's argument focuses on the tension in the field of television history between what he terms textual historicism and immanent readings: the former places television programmes within their historical context, 'tying meaning to the period' (Ellis 2007: 15); the latter involves textually analysing and 'reinterpreting them through a modern optic' (Ellis 2007: 15-16). Television is a time-limited medium, which references its historical period, and this in turn leads to the nostalgia that Wheatley warns can impact on scholarly analysis.

But can a television programme break its temporal restrictions to become a media object that defies historical limitations and that resonates across time, cultures, and generations? Granted, even a programme like *The X-Files* is confined to time-specific references (images of a particular US president adorning the walls of the FBI, for example, or the references to media technology now defunct such as fax machines); yet, *The X-Files* also was designed, as Carter admitted, to appeal to a broad audience through its use of genre (suspense, horror, thriller, science fiction) and stardom (the sex-appeal of its main stars being used to appeal to a young audience), and, more importantly, its appeal to a wider national and

international belief in the paranormal and government conspiracies, something that defies a particular time period, even if there may be time specific cultural, political, and social contexts for such beliefs. The aesthetic and narrative of *The X-Files* was constructed to have a universal appeal and so the legacy of the programme could be, and probably should be studied from both textual-historical and immanent perspectives in order to understand the time-specific and inter-generational nature of this universalism. Whilst *The X-Files* had greatest impact and popularity in the 1990s, its appeal does endure through the fact that it continues to re-appear, recirculate, and resonate in the 2010s, some three decades later. Of course, one must be careful in the claims made about its continuing popularity. The programme has not had anywhere near its success of the 1990s in the succeeding years. But it has been repeated on television, had new television and film releases, new merchandise, and receives continuing critical and scholarly interest.

Scholarly output relating to *The X-Files* is also indicative that the programme has some kind of television legacy. Academics are typically attracted to studies of objects of the moment, as was very much the case with *The X-Files*. But even since the media hype surrounding the series has diminished, television and cultural historians have remained interested in *The X-Files*, with a revived awareness coinciding with the 'post-truth' era and the rise of populist politics, most obviously the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016. *The X-Files*' focus on 'the truth', cynical and revisionist interpretations of history, and a belief that those in power are lying, resonated with culture and society in the late 2010s and the post-2008 global financial crisis. The first scholarly outputs on *The X-Files* centred on themes of paranoia, distrust, and conspiracy that pervade current political discourse in the West. In the edited collection *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X-Files* (1996), English scholars David Lavery, Angela Hague, and Maria Cartwright argue that the series was a production of its 'cultural moment' and reflected the scandal-ridden presidency of Bill

Clinton (1996: 2). Similarly, television critic Charles Taylor, in an early review of the series in *Millennium Pop*, calls *The X-Files* ‘subversive TV’ and argued that it was imbued with a sense of overriding cynicism at contemporary politics (Taylor 1994: 9).

Public perception of political culture in the USA has been, at least since Watergate, cynical, and by the 1990s this cynicism had tainted the very way in which political discourse was conducted. It was a theme further picked up by English professor Robert Markley:

> At the beginning of every episode, viewers of *The X-Files* are confronted by the paradoxical mantras of post-Watergate consciousness: white capital letters appear against menacing backgrounds warning us to “Trust No One” and declaring that “The Truth Is Out There.” The episodes that follows these injunctions fascinate us not because we necessarily believe in government conspiracies, alien assassins, and bizarre invasions of the body politic by unearthly genetic material, but because we respond viscerally as well as intellectually to weekly suggestions that we are trapped in a history that we have not made and no longer trust. (Markley 1997: 77)

Whereas Lavery, Hague and Cartwright, and Taylor suggest that *The X-Files* was of the moment and reflective of a very particular set of political circumstances—the come-down from the Reagan/Bush era and the intensity of the Clinton-era that was building towards the Monica Lewinsky scandal via the ever-more convoluted White Water scandal—Markley argues that the series represents a much deeper cultural phenomenon that goes beyond the moment, one that connects to the fears, paranoia, and cynicism that people have that the world is not everything we see and that there are forces beyond comprehension that seek to subvert truth. *The X-Files* was, in Markley’s assessment, tapping into a much darker force of conspiratorial belief and unleashing that on both a mainstream network television and global

audience. In other words, the series was a precursor to the post-truth age. Joe Bellon, in an assessment of the series' appeal, argues that *The X-Files* allowed audiences to recognize and challenge those in authority: 'Against the monolith of authority, *The X-Files* presents a subversive, liberating vision. Its narrative does more than teach us to distrust authority; it teaches us to trust ourselves' (Bellon 1999: 152). Bellon's argument suggests that *The X-Files* was responsible for releasing a repression of mistrust and bringing to 'waking consciousness' public doubts, fears, paranoia, and cynicism of government, politicians, the media, and reality (Bellon 1999: 152).

The original run of the series ended just after the 9/11 attacks in 2002. The attacks were carried out by the terrorist group al-Qaeda and overseen by Osama Bin Laden. But conspiracies about the attacks soon began to proliferate, blaming a range of other nefarious, hidden, secret governmental forces. 9/11 conspiracies began conflating alternative theories of US history with the terrorist atrocities, blurring the lines between fact and the 'paranoid structure of history' (Markley 1997). Yet, despite the proliferation of conspiracy theories about 9/11, some of which gained mainstream attention through social media channels and new sharing platforms like YouTube, belief in conspiracies had largely been stable since the 1960s and had even begun to decline by the 2010s (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 110-11). Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent, in their empirical study of conspiracy theories, conclude that 'we do not live in an age of conspiracy theories and have not for some time' (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 110-11). There have been peaks of conspiracy belief in the West, but generally belief has been a lot less pronounced than media and at times academic perception. Indeed, the scholarly output on *The X-Files* has typically assumed that the series has had an impact on conspiracy belief and led to its increase, but with no empirical evidence to indicate this has actually been the case. Enrica Picarelli and M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo (2013) claim that in the wake of 9/11, *The X-Files* in fact became less relevant to television audiences. In

depicting the government as the enemy, the series did not engage with a collective societal need for security in the face of ever-growing global disasters. The enemy was now an unseen enemy overseas, not from within a shadow government at home. As they argue, ‘In the aftermath of 9/11, the ‘Trust No One’ of *The X-Files* became too subversive and out of touch with the public need to trust the government to keep them safe from future attacks’ (2013: 83).

The argument that *The X-Files* fell out of touch with audiences is extended by American Studies scholar Felix Brinker to the 2016 ‘revival’ series. Brinker describes the revival series as being ‘out of step with today’s “Quality TV”’ as a result of its short run (six episodes) and its focus on stand alone, self-contained ‘monster of the week’ episodes. As Brinker suggests,

> Compared with contemporary shows that eschew episodically contained plots to tell sprawling stories about ever-shifting political alliances and lines of conflict among large casts of central and recurring characters—like HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011–) and Netflix’s *House of Cards* (2013–), for instance—or series that exploit their serial form to construct elaborate narrative puzzles—like HBO’s *Westworld* (2016–) —the latest iteration of *The X-Files* offers a television experience that is far more conducive to casual or even distracted viewing. (Brinker 2018: 341)

In Brinker’s assessment, *The X-Files* has not evolved or adapted to meet the aesthetic and narrative properties of contemporary television, but rather remained firmly grounded in the spirit and even nostalgia of its original run. But Brinker does not deem this a failure; it is instead an antidote to the hyper-intense, binge-watching culture of ‘Quality TV’ (Brinker 2018: 341).

The revival series was arguably more of a nostalgic return for pre-established fans of the series. And so, if *The X-Files* is now out of time, out of place, and out of influence, and if contemporary, 'Quality TV' has rapidly moved on, just what is the legacy of the series, if it even has one? In their assessment of the series' twentieth anniversary in 2013, television scholars Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown argued that *The X-Files* impacted on the seriousness of science fiction on television, bringing it—quite literally—back down to Earth (2013: 1). *The X-Files* influenced the swathe of science fiction television that emerged in its wake in the 1990s. And while television narrative structures may have changed since its original broadcast, the genre legacy of *The X-Files* can still be detected in recent popular science fiction series such as *Stranger Things* (2016-) or the revived *The Twilight Zone* (2019-20) series developed by Jordan Peele's Monkeypaw Productions (for which Glen Morgan, a writer on *The X-Files*, was executive producer).

The X-Files' relationship to fan culture has also been significant. The early cultivation, and recognition, of internet fan forums influenced the series and, as film and American studies scholar Adrienne McLean argue, '[X-Philes] were among the first to use cyberspace to create their own virtual fan culture and specialized interest groups (there are now nearly 500 websites devoted to "The X-Files")' (1998: 3). Fan forums on the internet allowed for a global community to interact and share fan fiction in fan-grown forums, as well as to participate in official forums established by Fox. Bertha Chin summarizes the extensive fan activity as follows: 'X-Philes built their communities around newsgroups, mailing lists and forums, developing an active fandom and a celebrated centralized system whereby fan fiction can be posted and archived on one website, called The Gossamer Project, which is still active' (Chin 2013: 92). There is even evidence that the FBI was a fan of the show. The conclusion of a lengthy real-life investigation into a complex heist involving a valuable pair of ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) ended with a team of FBI

agents delivering the shoes to Ryan Lintelman, entertainment curator at the Smithsonian (the world's largest museum complex, in the USA) in 2018. Lintelman offered to show the FBI agents some film memorabilia during their visit including 'Batman's cowl and Rocky's robe and boxing gloves' amongst other things. However, it was when Lintelman recalled that '"we've got Mulder and Scully's FBI badges from The X-Files" that the agents' eyes "lit up" and was the only thing "they really wanted to take photos with, take back and show the guys at the FBI!"' (*No Place Like Home*, 20 Jul 2021).

Measuring *The X-Files*' legacy, or legacies, is not an exact science, at least not in terms of quantifying it over the past three decades. Its immense popularity in the 1990s undoubtedly led to other television series that were directly or indirectly inspired by *The X-Files* such as those mentioned earlier as well as porn film parodies, such as *The Sex Files: A Dark XXX Parody* (2009), which television and fan studies scholar Bethan Jones (2013) argues can be interpreted as an adaptation of the series and fan fiction. Its impact on conspiracy belief is less certain, even if it did bring into the mainstream certain conspiratorial or paranormal ideas. *The X-Files* was a series of its time, but also a series that explored themes that resonate across time (faith, religion, spirituality, family). And the series turned its two main actors into television stars.

The aim of this collection is to revisit the series on its thirtieth anniversary to reconsider the series' legacy/ies and to contemplate its ongoing relevance to television, television history, and television studies. It is not the intention for the collection to serve as a hagiography, but rather for it to scrutinize the series' themes and impact, to consider how it can be used and interpreted through current scholarly interests and perspectives, and to re-evaluate its underpinning representations and ideologies. The essays in the collection touch upon the key thematic legacies, or potential legacies, of the series: race, gender, politics, genre, technology, history, fandom, and sexuality. It is hoped that these chapters, and the

collection as a whole, will serve not only as a guide to understanding, reflecting, and scrutinizing the place of *The X-Files* within television history, but also as a way to address broader thematic, philosophical, historical, methodological, and political topics within television and cultural studies.

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