

# Trust No One: The Conspiracy Genre on American Television

Stephanie Kelley-Romano

*Conspiracy on television is a distinct genre with heuristic value that fulfills important social-psychological functions for viewers. As such, this essay suggests that generic criticism can be productively expanded to focus on function rather than to be defined by recurring situation. This essay illustrates how conspiracy discourse works to articulate ideas about identity and reality in contemporary society. In addition to identifying the relationship between recurring situation and generic elements, this essay centers on the functions of the conspiracy genre that make it especially desirable for society right now. With the completion of the series, the conspiracy myth-arc of “The X-Files” is used as a paradigmatic illustration of the productivity of a functional approach to genre.*

Remarkably, on September 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks, the New York Lottery number was 9-1-1. This fact caught the attention of not just the “lunatic fringe” but also mainstream media that widely reported the coincidence as if it had deeper significance. Though most outlets did not go so far as to associate the drawing of 9-1-1 with a particular conspiracy, the enthymematic extrapolation implied conspiracy. Knight (2000) made the larger observation that conspiracy is “an integral part of the infotainment culture at the turn of the millennium” (p. 45). With increasing regularity, conspiracy texts have moved into mainstream culture through the big screen and prime-time television. Movies such as *JFK*, *The Game*, *The Fugitive*, *Conspiracy Theory*, *Chain Reaction*, *Total Recall*, and *The X-Files: Fight the Future* all revolve around the notion that a sinister force is at work against the “good people.” Prime-time fare drawing on conspiracy themes include “The X-Files,” “Push,” “Nevada,” “The Agency,” “Millennium,” “The Visitor,” “The Pretender,” “Dark Skies,” “Roswell,” “John Doe,” “Alias,” “24,” and the recent hit “The 4400.”

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Stephanie Kelley-Romano, Bates College. Correspondence to: Stephanie Kelley-Romano, Bates College, 308 Pettigrew Hall, Lewiston, ME 04240. E-mail: skelley@bates.edu

The ubiquitousness of conspiracy rhetoric indicates this discourse is more than entertainment (Creps, 1980; Darsey, 2002; Dorsey, 2002; Soukup, 2002; Stewart, 2002). In addition to entertainment, the conspiracy rhetoric of “The X-Files” raises significant issues about the nature of truth and the place of the individual. Conspiracy programs simultaneously attract and maintain audiences to the degree that they both entertain and engage viewers. What is particularly interesting, however, is that conspiracy shows have moved from being short-lasting fringe shows with tiny viewerships to being pervasive, prime-time, Emmy-nominated programs with huge followings.<sup>1</sup> This essay reveals the rhetorical explanations for why the cult has become the mainstream.

In this essay, I argue that the popularity of conspiracy rhetoric is due to the psychological functions these texts satisfy for viewers in the current cultural milieu. Recognizing that conspiracy discourse is more complex than simply a one-dimensional, situationally generated text, I utilize a generic approach privileging function over situation as a way of illuminating the genre. Traditionally, genre studies have examined the recurring, predictable situation that calls the rhetoric into being. Conspiracy discourse, however, is a functionally driven genre that satisfies crucial psychological needs. A functionally centered approach to conspiracy is particularly beneficial because of the fluid nature of the elements of conspiracy. Despite stylistic or thematic changes or ambiguity, what remains constant within the conspiracy genre is the psychological satisfaction experienced by viewers.

A generic approach to conspiracy rhetoric reveals that contemporary fictive conspiracies function in significant ways for viewers. Conspiracy discourse works to articulate and to critique contemporary ideas about identity and reality. In terms of identity, conspiracy texts often question the role of the individual in society and raise metaphysical issues of what it means to *be*. Conspiracy rhetoric defines what it means to be good or evil and simultaneously questions the process of identity formation itself. This removal of agency undercuts the efficacy of the public sphere. Epistemologically, conspiracy rhetoric questions everything, particularly the nature of reality and possibility of truth. As an enactment of logical forms, conspiracy rhetoric exemplifies—and in so doing reinforces—assumptions about knowledge.

In this essay, I demonstrate the utility of approaching conspiracy rhetoric from a functional generic perspective. To illustrate the correspondence between function and specific narrative elements, I identify and explore the significance of the issues of agency and epistemology that are raised in “The X-Files” as one manifestation of conspiracy discourse. Finally, I draw some conclusions as to the usefulness of a revised generic approach and summarize the psychological insights discovered by applying this approach to “The X-Files.”

### **History of Paranoia**

Most theory and criticism of conspiracy discourse begins with the ground-breaking work of Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1965). Hofstadter identified the unease and mistrust within the political sphere as

“the paranoid style” and commenced to address the challenge of trying to identify the elements of that style. Since then, scholars have continued to build on Hofstadter’s insights to better understand conspiracy. Several interdisciplinary scholars have addressed the significance and consequence of conspiracy rhetoric. Daniel Pipes (1997), working from Hofstadter’s thesis, surveyed the historical presence of conspiracy theories to demonstrate that they come from “two broad groups of people: the politically disaffected and the culturally suspicious” (p. 2). Dean (1998) recognized the fundamental importance of narratives that “structure popular understandings of truth and agency” (p. 19) and interpreted UFO discourse as one of those narratives. She articulated the position that conspiracy and the “alien icon” are indicators of the dissolution of “Common” sense and the inauguration of the individualization of reality (p. 24). Showalter (1997), while not concentrating explicitly on conspiracy theory, examined several experiences including alien abduction, recovered memory, and satanic ritual abuse to argue psychological causes can lead individuals to scapegoat and to blame external sources. For her, all of the epidemics were “cultural symptom[s] of anxiety and stress” (p. 9). For each of these authors, the consequence of conspiracy is the blurring of the boundaries between rational and irrational, reality and fantasy.

Rhetorical scholarship has focused primarily on conspiracy in politics. For example, Goodnight and Poulakos (1981) recognized the “paranoid style” had moved from “ideological extremes to the mainstream of political life” (p. 299). Extremist rhetoric showed how the “unpopular or presumably lunatic point of view may be participating in the restructuring of social consensus” (p. 300). Similarly, Zarefsky (1984) examined the rhetorical situations in which conspiracy becomes plausible. Delving further still, Young, Launer, and Austin (1990) presented an excellent typology of arguments used within conspiracy discourse to understand how arguments are legitimized within public dialogue. Griffin (1988) focused on the use of conspiracy as a specific strategy, examining how the jeremiad serves as a vehicle for the articulation of “interpretation of the Illuminati conspiracy” (p. 301). Overall, these studies continue to spotlight the traditional concerns of identifying similar situations and forms that unite texts. Each of these studies profitably extended Hofstadter’s work within public and political discourses.

More germane are those critics who examine conspiracy with an eye to issues relevant to genre studies. Assuming the traditional generic approach based on situation, Creps (1980) positioned conspiracy as a genre “conceived as a response to the problem of evil” (p. 12). In a special issue of *The Western Journal of Communication* dedicated to conspiracy, Dorsey (2002), writing on “The X-Files,” called the program a “contemporary conspiracy myth.” In his conceptualization of “The X-Files” as myth, he recognized that the program does not fit “traditional genres” nor is it best understood through the lens of “classic conspiracy” (p. 449). Similarly, Soukup (2002) implicitly categorized conspiracy texts as a genre when looking at the “conspiracy narrative structure” of “The X-Files” (p. 14). Goldzwig (2002) presented several potential questions for critics of conspiracy discourse to consider. Specifically appropriate to this particular study is Goldzwig’s eighth set of questions: “How are the formal and substantive aspects of conspiracy discourse defined? How do they

function?” (p. 505). Darsey (2002) similarly kept the focus on the formal, substantial, and functional elements of conspiracy as a genre: “It is not the content of arguments predicated on conspiracy that makes them so unsettling,” but that it is solely their “form” that is disturbing (p. 469). Taking an approach more similar to my own, Stewart (2002) examined the function of a master conspiracy narrative within a social movement, identifying the four rhetorical characteristics necessary to sustain the conspiracy within the movement. Each of these studies acknowledged implicitly that there is more to conspiracy rhetoric than meets the eye. It is my contention that recognizing function as the generating principle for the genre of conspiracy can bring into focus relationships and significances that float at the periphery in situationally based analyses.

### **A Functional Focus on Genre**

Like Aristotle with his distinction among epideictic, forensic, and deliberative genres of oratory, critics have long assembled groups of texts into larger categories. Generic categorization, or the “urge to find the appropriate class or category in which to place a given communication object” is, according to Rowland (1991), “surely fundamental” (p. 129). Television texts have often been the focus of genre studies (see Butler, 1993; Martindale, 1991; Newcomb, 1978; Rose, 1985; & Rowe, 1995). Specific types of programs—science-fiction, detective stories, mysteries, soap operas, westerns, and situational comedies—have all become identifiable by even the most casual television viewer. Shows that rely on generic conventions appeal to the conditioned knowledge of viewers—the audience knows what to expect because they are familiar with the genre. Viewers know the criminal does not get caught until half-way into the program on “Law and Order”; “Columbo” always peppers the guilty party with his questions and “one more thing,” and “Days of Our Lives” fans recognize everything juicy happens on Friday.

When generic criticism is at its best, it furthers understanding of both category and instance. A genre should be “broad enough to be flexible in its application” while also “narrow enough to provide conceptual rigor and heuristic value” (Crepes, 1980, p. 14). Rather than simply understanding that a particular text fits within a genre, we should learn something about the genre as a whole, or something about the particular text examined. Ideally, as suggested by Campbell (1974), the critic will make observations about both the theoretical significance and the cultural situatedness of texts. A rhetorically informed generic categorization suggests similarities in both form and function (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978; Rowland, 1991).

Much contemporary generic criticism recognizes genres as situationally based recurring forms containing specific *topos*. Historically, as recognized by Butler (1993), genres have been defined by either “presumed audience response,” style or substance (p. 339). We use genre to identify the formal aspects of recurring discourses. Apologias, inaugurals, eulogies, crisis rhetoric, and many other identified genres have as their defining characteristic situation. Similarly, Jamieson and Campbell (1982) focused on situation when exploring the role of rhetorical hybrids.

Rather than examine generic discourses as reactions to situations, I suggest we should privilege function as the significant generative source of generic texts. When forms are well known, this same generic approach can be used to identify social functions. In this way, generic criticism can capture the significance of conspiracy discourse on multiple levels. Additionally, specific functions are evoked through certain formal motifs and narrative conventions that prompt viewers to read particular texts as part of a larger genre.

### **“The X-Files”: Paranoid Product of the Cultural Milieu**

*I Want to Believe. Question Everything. Trust No One. The Truth is Out There.* The major metatext of “The X-Files” has been, since its inception in 1993, conspiracy. Kravitz (1999) remarked the program may be “America’s most potent version” of conspiracy (p. 125). Though episodes are self-contained and can be viewed independently, there is a continuity of detail and information that contributes to the larger plot of the series—the myth-arc episodes. Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein (1996) labeled “The X-Files” a “cumulative narrative” in its walking of an “intermediate path between the episodic series and the open-ended serial” (p. 33). In television drama, issues of resolution and closure are more complex than they would be in a two-hour film—nowhere is this more evident than in the nine-season-long run of “The X-Files.” The show was remarkably popular with approximately 15 million households tuning in to watch Mulder and Scully each week (Reeves, Rodgers, & Epstein, 1996, p. 27).

Malach (1996) observed “The X-Files” was the most popular show “since ‘The FBI’ (1965–1974) to feature FBI agent protagonists” (p. 64). Lavery, Hague, and Cartwright (1996) noted the program “is a product of its time not because it holds a mirror to reality but because it reflects the mindset of its era” (2). It exhibits a dramatic style that “wavers between the spoof and the deadly serious” (Knight, 2000, p. 48). Further confirming the show’s popularity is the spin-off feature film, comic books, hundreds of fan Internet sites, action figures, clothing, watches, and conferences.

Scholarly attention to the show has also recognized the multiplicity of meanings that can be attached to these texts. Wildermuth (1999) for example, classified the program as “science fiction horror” (p. 148). Recognizing the importance of function within conspiracy rhetoric, Howley (2001) viewed the program as “an expression of deep-seated cultural anxieties toward various forms of control technologies” (p. 258). Much academic inquiry has focused on the way the program challenges dominant epistemological paradigms.<sup>2</sup> Bellon (1999) viewed the program as “an act of rebellion against the power of authority” (p. 151). Similarly, Soukup (2002) argued the program serves as a type of “vicarious resistance” in that it “contains a resistive conspiracy narrative structure that maintains dominant ideology” (p. 14). Lavery, Hague, and Cartwright (1996) claimed “for many viewers, their weekly encounter with the show is an unsettling, sometimes frightening experience that powerfully interrogates a consensus reality that excludes the paranormal” (p. 12). Although these readings are certainly interesting, and potentially informative, now that the series has

ended, a more complete reading of the motives and significance of the program can be offered. For example, Graham's (1996) mid-series interpretation that the program serves as a reflection of the government as the villain can be refocused after viewing the completed myth-arc to see that in fact this is not the case—the villain, as it turns out, is still the ever-elusive and “out-there” force; in the case of “The X-Files,” the villain is the extraterrestrials.

The program revolves around the hero, an amalgamation of Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, who work in the FBI's Violent Crime section. Mulder, a genius whose paranormal beliefs have earned him much ridicule along with the nickname “Spooky,” is convinced a conspiracy of great proportion is in place. He is closely tied to the conspiracy through the alleged abduction of his sister Samantha and the murder of his father. Scully, a rational forensic scientist, posits simpler and less sinister solutions to the weekly mysteries. Although coming to “The X-Files” as an uninterested party, her abduction, the murder of her sister, and the cancer she contracted all provide reasons for her to fight to expose those responsible and to suspend her disbelief at least long enough to entertain conspiratorial explanations. Many of the weekly investigations Mulder and Scully undertake lead back to suspicious government activity. Suppression of UFO activity, experimentation on humans with extraterrestrial DNA, covering up of genetic testing memories with “screen memories” of alien abduction, or causing genetic mutations through testing—anything is possible on “The X-Files.”

### **Gen(re) X: Fun, Fun, Functional**

Like all genres, the conspiracy genre functions for viewers in key psychological ways. Conspiracy rhetoric is a complex form, popular at this particular moment because it functions on multiple levels for different viewers. As noted by Burke (1953), form is the “creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (p. 31). Viewers come to the program with basic expectations that must be met. “The X-Files” is able to meet those expectations and satisfy viewers because of the thematically substantial issues it feeds viewers. As a genre, conspiracy rhetoric is unique in that it deals primarily, and in very significant ways, with issues of agency and epistemology.

#### *Issues of Agency: Who are you? Who am I?*

Conspiracy rhetoric is particularly well positioned to grapple with issues of agency through several formal elements—the heroes, the villains, the relationships between heroes and villains, and the dominant narrative theme of infiltration. The development of a complex hero allows “The X-Files” to raise a number of relevant issues regarding human agency. Arguably, the program intentionally promotes the hero as a combination of Mulder/Scully representing the blending of Magic/Science, Masculine/Feminine, and Faith/Reason. As Irvine and Beattie (1998) noted, the

partnership “creates a position outside the paradigms and hence capable of exposing the conspiracy” (p. 4). Through this conceptualization viewers are encouraged to nurture or even to discover hidden parts of themselves. Although there is a constant struggle between the two characters and their perspectives, the symbiotic nature of the two-part hero suggests a balance that, although often not reached, presented the possibility of harmony/success.

One of the common formal characteristics present in conspiracy rhetoric is a complex relationship between the protagonists and antagonist. On a basic level, “The X-Files” reinforces the rugged individual ideal through the construction of the relationship between the hero and the government. Worrying about the government has become a “grim national obsession” (Handy, 1997). Knight (2000) noted that conspiracy has “come to express doubt about the legitimacy of authority in an age when less than a quarter of Americans trust the government” (p. 3). Chris Carter, creator and writer on “The X-Files” called Watergate “the most formative event of my youth” (Graham, 1996, p. 56). Mulder’s computer password (TrustNo1) and Deep Throat’s dying words to Mulder (also “Trust No One”) serve as cues to question everything. Furthermore, the opening “tag line” of the program—“The Truth is Out There”—has been changed to say things such as “Deny Everything” (Carter, 1994), “Deceive, Inveigle, Obfuscate” (Gordon, 1996), “Believe the Lie” (Carter, 1997a), and “All Lies Lead to the Truth” (Carter, 1997b). While promoting a pervasive sense of mistrust toward the government, “The X-Files” does eschew more radical paranoia by allowing the protagonists to trust one another. Despite a general air of disillusionment, the program sends the message that although the government is not to be trusted individuals can be trusted—even if they work for the government. The individual does not have to go it entirely alone but should beware of Big Brother. This is a particularly comforting theme for individuals who find themselves in an increasingly isolated and anonymous era.

Through character development, conspiracy rhetoric also works to define good and evil. Creps (1980) noted that conspiracy rhetoric works to resolve the rhetorical problem of evil (p. 7). Fenster (1999) described the evil as controlling “virtually all aspects of social life, politics, and economics” (p. xiv). In these programs good is clearly defined and distinguished from evil. Unfortunately, this can make for overly formulaic and predictable television. Conspiracy texts typically have pristine heroes who as a result are less interesting than their evil counterparts—the character of Sydney Bristow on “Alias” is a prime example. She is pure in heart, good in deed, and hot in fishnets, but not particularly interesting as a character—viewers know she will choose the moral high ground and play by the rules. “The X-Files” is able to overcome the pitfalls of oversimplification by creating a singular hero in two parts. The multiplicity of readings this provides—concerning gender, science, and mysticism—allows fans to play with the text on new levels. The message “The X-Files” sends is that it is only the blending of genders/perspectives that can move the hero forward in the search for truth. When Mulder and Scully are physically separated, bad besets them. For example, in the episode “WetWired,” Mulder leaves Scully to go gumshoeing on his own. In his absence, she becomes infected and convinced she

cannot trust Mulder. Only when the two are reunited, albeit after a violent confrontation, are things returned to normal. Construction of a complex hero allows "The X-Files" to play with the notion of balance on a variety of levels, while maintaining clear boundaries between good and evil.

As recognized by Dorsey (2002), the narrative is held together in very important ways by the "unconventional nature of its protagonists" (p. 450). The fact that Mulder and Scully combined form the "perfect" hero, and that they are both personally and intimately involved with the conspiracy helps make the conspiracy narrative cohesive. The "evil forces" are personified in "the Cigarette Smoking Man" (CSM), the equally perfect villain. Exactly to the degree that Mulder/Scully believe they must uncover the truth, CSM believes he must cover it up for the greater good.

The battle between good and evil critiques issues of identity in so far as situations are presented where alleged villains (CSM) can be viewed sympathetically (Morgan & Wong, 1996). The show also presents several characters as morally ambiguous, playing them up "in a fashion that plays out the ambiguity of their function," (Irvine & Beattie, 1998, p. 4) and allowing viewers to decide on which side of the moral battle the characters line up. Furthermore, the program reinforces the romantic ideal of the self-determining individual. Even though Mulder's father was most likely morally corrupt, Mulder is not tainted by the sins of his father. Despite the possibility that CSM may be Mulder's father, Mulder's righteousness remains unchallenged.

Week to week viewers tune in to see the hero make progress toward the defeat of evil. Week to week, however, viewers must also see the hero come up short. Progress, then—surely a God term in contemporary society—is held up as evidence of the inevitable triumph of goodness. Viewers can rest assured that evil will eventually be thwarted and so do not need to worry about the current state of affairs. The combination of Mulder/Scully, masculine/feminine, intuition/magic, and faith/reason carries with it the promise of eventual victory.

Issues of identity and agency are also worked out through the specific recurring theme of infiltration. The rhetoric of conspiracy "expresses concern about whether we are in control of our own actions, and even whether we are in control of our own minds and bodies" (Knight, 2000, p. 4). Shows revolving around mind control, alien abduction, and government corruption all question human agency. Hofstadter (1965) noted that one of the major subtexts of political conspiracy is that the highest levels of government have been infiltrated (p. 23). Distrust of technology—specifically reproductive technology—works to articulate commonly held fears. The major premise of "The X-Files" is based on the alien agenda of hybridization and world dominance through reproductive experimentation and procedures (Kelley-Romano, 2006). At the most basic level, the individual is informed of the vulnerability of the one thing over which he/she may have total control—his/her body.

Subthemes on "The X-Files" revolve around infiltration not only of the individuals' body but also into institutions. "They" are everywhere—in the White House, local law enforcement, delivering pizza, and repairing VCRs. Themes of infiltration of the individual body and infiltration of the societal body are often played out simultaneously. In the episode "WetWired," subliminal transmitting devices are placed in



the cable boxes of unsuspecting Americans (Beck, 1996). In this episode, not only were conspirators necessary to place the devices but also medical conspirators were necessary to intentionally misdiagnose the affected individuals. By having so many people involved, the pernicious forces were able to keep Mulder and Scully running around long enough to wrap up their testing, to destroy all evidence, and to disappear. The ability of these conspirators to effectively remain silent in the shadows of American life is a testament to their dedication, professionalism, and resources. Not only are viewers confronted with the notion that they could fall prey to technological takeover but they also must face the fact that others may want them to succumb.<sup>3</sup> By promoting distrust of both technology and institutions, “The X-Files” makes a nod toward interpersonal interactions. What is real, what can be trusted, and what matters is the relationship between individuals.

With the completion of the series, we see that “The X-Files” makes a bleak statement about agency. When examining the completed myth-arc, viewers realize that the collective actions of our protagonists do not matter. Mulder and Scully, despite their doggedness, do very little to expose or to eradicate the evil forces. Instead, viewers learn that only evil can destroy itself. Conspiracy rhetoric, and “The X-Files” in particular, simplifies the world and places blame on an untouchable, almost unimaginable other.

#### *Issues of Epistemology: What is It?*

The second significant function of conspiracy rhetoric is to question epistemological and ontological assumptions. Several formal characteristics work to raise issues regarding what and how we know, including intertextuality, the use of open texts, and particular argumentative forms.

Intertextual references are central to “The X-Files” and to the conspiracy genre on television. Intertextual references link individual episodes to the overarching myth-arc and make the larger narrative more complex and connected (Cauldwell, 1995; Kristeva, 1980). Kristeva (1980) noted intertextuality allows texts to connect to other texts and also allows the rhetor to connect to the audience (p. 69). On one level, intertextual references function to provide needed information in the viewer’s “quest for truth” or desire to make meaning. Seasoned conspiracy viewers are taught to dismiss nothing and to scan the visual scene for clues and cues to solve the mystery. Mulder may walk by a sewer grate in which viewers can spot the eyes of a genetically mutated monster or Scully may walk by a car where viewers can identify the license plate as that of the vehicle used earlier to commit a crime. Because of basic visual clues, fans learn to look closely at texts. On one level then, these references condition viewers to process information differently.

In addition to providing information, intertextual cues work to make the show more pleasurable for the audience. These references to other episodes, programs, real-life events, movies, books, and virtually any pop-culture artifact can lurk anywhere and reward viewers who access them. Deep intertextual references allow loyal viewers to feel smart. For example, in the episode “Blood,” a nurse ringing a doorbell

is buzzing “kill” in Morse code. According to Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein (1996), “serial elements are important in a cult show because they reward regular viewers” (p. 33). In the episode “Irresistible,” Mulder and Scully walk by a tombstone with the name Soames on it—loyal fans know Soames was the body exhumed in the “Pilot.” Likewise, in the episode “Jose Chung’s ‘From Outer Space’” Lavery, Hague, and Cartwright (1996) noted 10 examples of intertextuality and self-reference including this Easter egg:<sup>4</sup>

The appearance of Alex Trebek, the host of the popular television quiz show Jeopardy, constitutes an inside joke: David Duchovny (Fox Mulder) had actually appeared in a segment of “Celebrity Jeopardy,” losing to novelist Stephen King because of his inability to supply the question “What is Breakfast at Tiffany’s?” to a final jeopardy answer. Earlier in the episode, Scully is, of course, seen reading Capote’s novel. (p. 17)

Intertextual references are a fundamental component of conspiracy programming because of both the pleasure, and information, they can provide for viewers. Evidence of this can be seen on any of the many Internet fan pages dedicated to listing all Easter eggs, blunders, and other trivia.

Intertextual allusions reinforce the conspiratorial tone as well as blur the boundaries of reality. A central reference on “The X-Files” is Watergate. Graham (1996) identified the multiplicity of connections between the reality of Watergate and the drama of “The X-Files.” For example, “Deep Throat” is Mulder and Scully’s informant; Mulder’s sister Samantha disappears as the country learns of the Nixon tape erasure, and the boss who initially assigns Scully to Mulder is played by Charles Cioffi, “the Nixon-clone murderer in *Klute*” (Graham, p. 59). These references connect the show with “real” events and blur the line between the true, the false, and the possible.

In addition to using intertextuality to blur boundaries, “The X-Files” promotes alternative and conspiratorial explanations by employing open texts. Conspiracy texts are open texts that ensure viewers can negotiate an “appropriate variety of meanings” (Fiske, 1987, p. 84). Openness, according to Cauldwell (1995), “invite[s] viewer conjecture” (p. 261). Nelson (1997) acknowledged one application of open texts is to blur the boundaries between the imaginary and the real (p. 125). “The X-Files” carefully constructs a narrative world where the margins of fact and fiction overlap enabling different viewers to interpret texts differently. Each episode happens in a historically real and familiar world. Each episode “types out” specific dates, places, and times several times during the episode to further cement the viewer and the program into the real. In addition, the program incorporates historically real intertextual visual representations. For example, in the episode “Space,” shots of the outside of a space shuttle, known to viewers from news broadcasts, are shown (Carter, 1993c). Nelson (1997) labeled this type of text “factive fiction” (p. 125). By placing historical news footage within the boundaries of a fictitious program, viewers are encouraged to combine what they know to be real with what may only have the possibility of being real. This juxtaposition of “known real” versus “known unreal” encourages viewers to consider the mechanisms of belief and truth.

These open texts also employ the inclusion of pseudo-scientific discourse to promote conspiratorial readings as legitimate and simultaneously to increase the amount of information available to the viewer. Jargon is introduced into the program both through voiceovers and through consultations with experts (who are often Mulder/Scully themselves). Although usually a “tired device,” voiceovers are vital to “detail authentic paranormal case histories which . . . give the show its much-needed grounding in reality” (Pirie, 1996, p. 23). On “The X-Files” voiceovers often are articulated by Scully as she types her reports and field notes into her computer. In these reports she lists the evidence found and the possible explanations. By including the paranormal hypothesis in her formal, legitimized report, Scully raises the pseudo-scientific/paranormal explanation to the level of the scientific.

Although much of the exposition of scientific principles is purely fiction, the amount of time dedicated to discussing and unpacking it, as well as the jargon thrown about, contributes to the sense of realism and works to question the ways we assume we know. For example, in the first episode, Scully claims that “time can’t just disappear. It’s a universal invariant.” As Emery (1995) pointed out, this is just flat out false. In an episode dealing with spontaneous human combustion, fifth and sixth degree burns are mentioned, when in “reality” no such medical conditions exist. By perverting the truth, “The X-Files” is able to provoke viewers to question the reality of scientific proof.

Conspiracy rhetoric works to question epistemological assumptions through the legitimization of alternative reasoning processes. Arguably, it is the types and quality of arguments that set the tone of conspiracy rhetoric. Through the form, the genre simultaneously enacts and articulates a rhetoric of conspiracy. There are three main argumentative strategies employed by conspiracy texts. First, conspiracies must be what Zarefsky (1984) labeled “self-sealing” or self-confirming. Irvine and Beattie (1998) noted that “the belief in conspiracy leads the theorist to (re)encode all signs as substantiating his/her own belief in that conspiracy” (p. 32). Second, dichotomies are presented to the viewer, only to be later exposed as false; and third, “association” or the simultaneous contemplation of all evidence is encouraged (Young, Launer, & Austin, 1990, p. 95). Conspiracy arguments are deductively presented and promote the simultaneous contemplation of seemingly unrelated pieces of “evidence.” The process of reasoning involved in conspiracy, while not always correct, is consistent.

“The X-Files” evidence each of the argumentative strategies employed by the conspiracy genre. Most obviously, and often, the show promotes association of disparate pieces of evidence that encourages viewers to view arguments as “self-sealing.” Simultaneous contemplation of seemingly unrelated events and evidence often leads to the correct answer. To illustrate, in the episode “Talitha Cumi” a faith healer possesses the ability to heal people with the touch of his hand (Carter, 1996c). As he is healing, one hundred miles away, Mulder’s mother collapses due to a small stroke. At the hospital, unable to speak, she writes the word “palm” on a note to her son. Mulder, personifying the logical progression of self-sealing arguments recognizes immediately that the two—his mother and the alien healer—are somehow connected. Eventually, as Mulder searches his mother’s summer home for the weapon that

can kill aliens posing as humans (which he needs if he is to beat the evil forces to the alien healer so as to get the healer to save his mother), he realizes “palm” may have been an attempt by his mother to write “lamp.” Smashing the nearest lamp, Mulder finds the device for which he had been searching. This example illustrates the implausibility and illogic of conspiratorial narrative progression on “The X-Files.” Not only is it unlikely that Mrs. Mulder’s anagram was intentional, the likelihood that Mulder would be standing next to the correct lamp as he solves the logical puzzle is inconceivably improbable. Wildermuth (1999) noted both Mulder and Scully “make intuitive leaps requiring suprarational thinking” (p. 152). But, despite this convoluted mess of mismatched evidence, logical impenetrability is exactly the point. The show often undermines the most logical explanation with a paranormal/conspiratorial reality (Knight, 2000, p. 48). Followers of the show delight in the multitude of narrative strands that can be followed almost to the end. The promise of resolution entices viewers to play with the layers of interpretation.

Furthermore, the viewer is comforted in that the truth *is* out there, and this truth is accessible to humans by traditional, rational means. Conspiracy rhetoric is concerned with the “emancipation of knowledge” (Irvine & Beattie, 1998) that is contrary to postmodernism’s “doctrine of disbelief” (Reeves, Rodgers, & Epstein, 1996, p. 35). Dean (1998) noted the belief that the truth, even if it is unknown, is available and is a feature of many cyber discourses. Even if the explanation is a paranormal one, the viewer still goes through a process of logical reasoning that confirms at least the correctness of how he/she thinks if not what he/she thinks. Although the means by which that truth may be accessed may be questioned (conscious thought, hypnosis, out-of-body experiences), and the nature of the truth may be as of yet unknown (existence of parallel universes, paranormal abilities), the fact remains there is a truth to be accessed. The “hermeneutics of faith practiced by Mulder and the hermeneutics of suspicion practiced by Scully provide a bifocal outlook” that serves to counter post-modern attitudes of dismissal and mockery (Reeves, Rodgers, & Epstein, 1996, p. 35).

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Overall, a generic analysis focusing on function reveals issues surrounding human agency and knowledge that face contemporary individuals in the text of “The X-Files.” It also illustrates that generic criticism is useful despite the recurrent charges of it being tautological and that there are genres that are not always best defined by situation. Although the identification of generic characteristics necessitates the use of already existing examples of the genre, the resulting understanding of why those stylistic choices are made by producers, or why those thematic narrative strands resonate with viewers, is no less valuable. Burke (1966) would glibly observe that cultural texts reflect, select, and deflect reality (p. 45). Generic analysis can allow the critic to examine the way form, function, audience, and style intersect to foreshadow or to reinforce societal changes.

This analysis further suggests that generic criticism can be productively expanded to include a focus on function rather than to exclusively focus on a recurring

situation. Especially concerning mass-mediated communication, function more than situation calls the genre into being. Although there are narrow situations that define rhetorical types (eulogies, apologia, declarations of war) there are also any number of mass-mediated types brought into being by their rhetorical function. Most recently, the countless military/civil servant hero shows that have gained increasing popularity have done so, no doubt, because of key psychological functions they fulfill post 9–11. Even the conspiracy genre, post 9–11, functions very differently, as is evidenced by the “new” conspiracy hero—Jack Bauer of the hit television show “24.” Taken even further, it can be argued that absent a particular rhetorical function, any attempt to describe the characteristics of a mass-mediated genre is likely to be arbitrary.

A potentially troublesome consequence of discourse that simplifies and dichotomizes is scapegoating (Pipes, 1997; Showalter, 1997). Through the diametrical opposition of protagonist and antagonist, conspiracy rhetoric encourages oversimplification. Burke (1969) noted the consubstantiality of the hero and the scapegoat: “the debunker is much closer to the debunked than any others are” (p. 407). It is through the assignment of iniquities to the other that scapegoating “performs the role of vicarious atonement” (Burke, 1969, p. 406). In this way then, scapegoating functions in cathartic ways for viewers who identify with the hero. By identifying and defining the other, conspiracy rhetoric is able to reassign general feelings of unease to specific institutions, people, or species. “The X-Files” is able to encompass both the traditional othering of horror (the evil other is out there in the woods) and the othering of sci-fi (the evil other is another species). The audience is encouraged to fear the horrors that live within, and those that reside “out there.”

Knight (2000) noted that one of the two traditional functions of conspiracy has been to “justify the scapegoating of often blameless victims” (p. 3). In a time when international, intercultural, and interfaith conflicts confront and overwhelm the individual, a simple solution is a respite. Conspiracy rhetoric allows viewers to reduce the complexity of problems and allows viewers to resolve cognitive dissonance (Groh, 1987, p. 5). For example, in an economically depressed time, it is easier, and more comforting, for people to blame a governmental conspiracy for low wages than it is to contemplate complex theories concerning economic restructuring.

A related function of conspiracy rhetoric is that, like other systems of beliefs, it provides a community with which the individual can identify. Examination of this function reveals the dynamic between audience, text, and function well. Those who subscribe to conspiracy beliefs are included in an often very tight community. This community fulfills psychological functions in that it compliments believers by affirming they have knowledge of which most other Americans are oblivious. It also satisfies sociological/pedagogical functions in that it teaches adherents how to think and to reason about consequences in terms of conspiracy.

An additional potential consequence of conspiracy television is the potential to warp critical thinking skills.<sup>5</sup> Although much of “The X-Files” is engaged in intellectual play, and most of television requires the suspension of belief, the show does privilege textual readings that are illogical. Because of the types of arguments made within conspiracy rhetoric, viewers learn different expectations concerning evidence

and rules of reasoning. The fact that programs like “The X-Files” present the simultaneous contemplation of seemingly arbitrary pieces of information as a way to reach the eventual correct conclusion reduces the value the viewer may place on a more critical evaluation of evidence and rational progression from evidence to conclusion. Within this genre, all evidence supports the conspiracy, everything is considered evidence, and all types of knowing are valued equally.

But, despite the fictive storylines, the underlying attitudes these programs espouse and the critical thinking processes these programs encourage directly undercut the public sphere. Oversimplification, apathy, and inevitability all discourage viewers—potential true political agents—from action. Instead of participation in the public sphere, conspiracy believers can “participate” by trying to uncover the evil cabal, essentially alienating themselves from mainstream politics. Similarly, scapegoating can be seen as an act, albeit a counterproductive one. Coincidence is correctly read as conspiracy, and everything is evidence in these texts. Although television is fertile ground for exploring the limits of what we fear and how far we can stretch our faith, it is not the ideal place for resolution. Resolution results in cancellation. For conspiracy, then, it is best to keep the truth “out there.”

### Notes

- [1] A prime example is Stephen Spielberg’s 10-part miniseries “Taken,” which ran in 2002. In 2003, the program was nominated for multiple awards including six Emmys. The show won the Emmy for Outstanding Mini Series. Similarly, “The 4400” was nominated for three Emmys following its first season.
- [2] Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein (1996) characterized the show as both “anti-postmodern” and “post-postmodern.” Irvine and Beattie (1998) also read the show as “anti-postmodern.” In addition to this focus, other literature has examined connections to traditional mythology and folklore (Jones, 1996); fandom (Clerc, 1996); and gender (Wilcox & Williams, 1996; Parks, 1996) among other things.
- [3] Tuskegee, Agent Orange, and more recent rumors of Gulf War Syndrome make the complicity of medical personnel a viable possibility for viewers.
- [4] I would like to thank Pierre Hecker for pointing out the term “Easter egg.” An Easter Egg is an intertextual reference made within a text designed to compliment the informed viewer.
- [5] While I point out the argumentative troubles with conspiracy, I also agree with Knight (2000) that, although conspiracy can be “dangerous and deluded, it can also be a necessary and sometimes even a creative response to the rapidly changing condition of America” (p. 8).

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