Since its premiere in 1993, the Fox network television series “The X-Files” has gone from being what USA Today called a “weekly creep show” with a small cult following to a lauded, respectable, and profitable prime-time drama complete with Emmys, Golden Globes, and a top-twenty audience share in the United States and some 60 foreign countries. In addition to a forthcoming movie and
assorted novelizations, guidebooks, and official and unofficial tie-in merchandise, the series—which one fan writer describes as “part police procedural, part suspense thriller, part action adventure, part medical drama, part science fiction and part horror”—has also already generated its own book-length collection of scholarly essays.1 “The X-Files” stars previously unknown actors Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny as Dana Scully and Fox Mulder, FBI agents who have an extremely close and interesting relationship with each other—interesting (and unusual, for television) because it is strictly platonic. Each week the two labor, together and separately, to disentangle and understand what appears to be, at this writing, a giant government conspiracy involving alien/human hybridization, in which they themselves are somehow implicated.

Both the relationship and the conspiracy are the subjects of intense speculation by what Entertainment Weekly calls the show’s “extreme, obsessed, hyper-scrutinizing fan base”—or “X-Philes,” as they refer to themselves on the Internet.2 And, in turn, the fact that the 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”) has itself resulted in considerable journalistic and scholarly attention.3 In short, “The X-Files” is a popular culture phenomenon because of its bizarre subject matter and genre-bending, its cult status and obsessive fans; because the relationship of its main characters departs from television’s usual gender stereotypes; and because it may represent, in the words of Michele Malach, “part of a continuing cultural dialogue about law and order, freedom and safety, right and wrong, truth and falsity” during a period of PMT, or “premillennial tension.”4

I began to ponder another side to the “The X-Files” and its popularity while teaching a course on visual culture and reading some of the recently reissued works of media critic Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980).5 Certainly the rise and fall and rise of McLuhan’s reputation might easily be written into one of the show’s “the truth is out there” plot lines. Upon the publication of his second book, Understanding Media, in 1964, the New York Herald Tribune hailed McLuhan as “the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov,” and McLuhan’s name and many of his aphorisms—“the medium is the message,” “global village,” “the age of information”—became part of our permanent lexicon. But what Andrew Ross refers to as McLuhan’s “unremittingly formalist scheme,” or his apparent refusal to treat any mass medium as a specific practice imbricated in existing and interested economic and political power structures, kept the “High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media,” as Playboy called him in 1969, from being taken seriously by many academic scholars after the mid-1970s.6 In 1974 Hans Magnus Enzensberger harshly dismissed McLuhan as an apolitical “charlatan” who was “incapable of any theoretical construction” and who wrote with “provocative idiocy,” and Enzensberger was hardly alone in his opinion.7 After McLuhan’s death in 1980, his name and reputation, as Lewis Lapham writes, were “sent to the attic with the rest of the sensibility . . . that embodied the failed hopes of a discredited decade.”8

The current resurgence of interest in McLuhan does seem to be driven less by an interest in his theorizing than by his apparent ability to predict the electronic future. The emergence of the Internet and its role in the formation of a new global village, and the rise of home computers, video recorders, cable and satellite networks, cellular phones, and other technologies of electronic communication and, by implication, surveillance, have given McLuhan validity as a prophet of the condition that cultural critics variously describe as postmodernism or postmodernity. What was once dismissed as typical McLuhan jeremiad is now accepted as the common denominator of our collective lives—that, as he wrote in 1967, the electronic media are “so pervasive in their personal, political,
economically, aesthetically, psychologically, morally, ethically, and socially consequential that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered."10

McLuhan did not only predict the future, however. He helped to chart its discursive course. In fact, his work is now being acknowledged as visionary for what scholars had hitherto dismissed with contempt as formal and theoretical faults. The aphoristic and fragmentary nature of McLuhan’s discourse, its “weird and hybrid dabbling” in “scientific mysticism,” as Lapham puts it, have all become familiar as a postmodern style of writing and, equally important, historical investigation.10 In a climate in which historians desire to “free themselves,” Robert Rosenstone claims, “from the constraining bonds of metanarratives and the Historical discipline (the way history is taught in schools),”11 the fragmentary theorizing of McLuhan no longer seems so idiotic. Although in 1975 it made sense for Raymond Williams to declare that “as descriptions of any observable social state or tendency” McLuhan’s images of society were “ludicrous,” clearly this is no longer the case.12

My own appropriation of McLuhan to illuminate the workings of a particular television text is itself a postmodern stance, and marks me as what Anne Friedberg and others call a cultural flâneuse.13 The connection that I make between McLuhan and “The X-Files” is at once arbitrary (they have nothing historically to do with one another, yet I choose to connect them) and theoretically sound (I believe that McLuhan’s work on media effects does help us to understand “The X-Files” and, by implication, other popular television shows, both as representations in a precise cultural moment and as links to past television practice). This postmodern posture, however, is one which McLuhan himself regularly employed in his search to understand the effects of a media form like television on the culture which had called it into being. The aphorisms which have come down to us as McLuhan’s theories were in fact actually his “probes,” the “tentative statements” or “keywords” that McLuhan repeated, recast, revised, and “stretched” in order to investigate meaning. Probes are thus “drills,” in the words of McLuhan biographer W. Terrence Gordon, that helped McLuhan to “blast” through what Arthur Kroker calls the “deep, invisible assumptions,” the “silent structural rules” of the technology within which we are situated and which has taken us over.14

The point of the probes and their humor, jest, paradox, and irony is not, as Gordon points out, to “finish” the hole that the drill makes. Rather, it is what the drill “churns up” that matters.15 Here, I use several of McLuhan’s aphorisms about television culture and the effects of electronic media on our collective “sensorium”—our minds, our bodies, our nervous systems, our experience of time and space—as a set of probes with which to “pierce the crust” of “The X-Files.”16 Before drilling, however, I want to explore the general landscape of which “The X-Files” is a feature, to examine not only the show’s obvious surface but the programming context into which it fits. Only then can I turn to the McLuhanesque aspects of the show, its literalization of some of his most famous speculations: that television is a cool medium which thrives on cool characters and involves the casual participation of all of the senses; that it substitutes a vague insight for a real point of view; and that it produces a collective anxiety which is dominated by a free-floating terror in which “everybody is so profoundly involved with everybody else [that] nobody can really imagine what private guilt can be anymore.” In conclusion, I will address, if not completely answer, the question that people repeatedly put to me when they learn of my interest in “The X-Files”: namely, whether I am for it, or against it.

From its pilot forward, “The X-Files” has regularly featured and referred to mythology, ritual, and history ancient and modern. “The mythology” is also the official name for what series creator Chris Carter calls the “conspiracy” episodes that form the “scaffolding on which the series hangs.”17 The Lévi-Straussian dimensions of this phrase are hard to miss, as are the show’s obvious pairs of binary opposites (good/evil, male/female, alien/human, belief/skepticism, spooky/normal, truth/lies, etc.). In addition, its hermeneutics of lack, loss, and need and its intermittently appearing and disappearing helpers and villains and sought-for persons make it always already folkloric in the Popian sense as well. The question is what this self-conscious mythology, this spectacle or deployment of myth and folktale structure, obscures or plays with.

Like all television shows, “The X-Files” is polysemic and readable from what John Fiske calls “relations of subordination or opposition to the dominant meanings proposed by the text.”18 It may be that a concern with the fantastic and mythical is simply a dominant meaning of “The X-Files.” But this concern marks other recent television shows as well. John Taylor Caldwell has identified a trend, a counterstrategy in American broadcast programming since the 1980s which he calls “televisuality” that not only foregrounds a “visually based mythology, framework, and aesthetic based on an extreme self-consciousness of
style” but often utilizes “self-contained and volatile narrative and fantasy worlds.” Televisuality is “both a pretext for economic intervention and a programming tool used to flaunt and throw around ontological distinctions: history/text, news/film, reality/fiction.” Televisuality employs style to attract to faltering networks the discriminating viewers who belong to the 18-to-49 demographic that is so important to advertisers. In other words, relations of subordination or opposition might easily be structured into the plot of “The X-Files” both as authorial expression and as a marketing strategy. And this would not be remarkable.

I want to suggest that Caldwell’s description of televisuality bears a startling resemblance to McLuhan’s claims about the hybrid nature of television and its effects on our minds and bodies. To McLuhan, television was obviously an “integral medium, forcing an interaction among components of experience which have long been separate and scattered.” Through its ability to link, instantaneously, simultaneously, and nonlinearly, “anything with anything else,” television restructures us into beings whose sense of the world is based on a discarnate involvement with process, with style, with visual mythology, with fantasy worlds. The only difference between television and televisuality is the increase in self-reflexivity that the new term implies. Television now “knows” just what we know, so that it often serves as a substitute for lived experience, or translates reality for us. Television’s own hidden ground has become the content of the medium itself.

Here we are obviously arching towards McLuhan’s most famous aphorism and foundational probe, namely that “the medium is the message.” What McLuhan discovered through repeated applications of this probe is that the major effect of any medium is never its content but, instead, the “revolutionary environmental transformations” that the medium subliminally induces. That television is cool rather than hot refers to the different environmental transformations and sensory effects McLuhan associates with media of higher or lower definition. Hot media, in which he situates radio, photography, and cinema, contain relatively complete visual or aural information (they tend to “extend” one sense over others) and thus require less involvement of the user in making meaning from them. Cool media, on the other hand—the telephone, cartoons, television—supply less visual or aural information and thus require much greater sensory participation by the user.
To agree that television is a cool medium does not mean that we have to accept all of McLuhan’s speculations about its neurological effects (television’s sequential electronic scanning process may or may not create a “mosaic-like” tactile image that becomes “imprinted on our skins”). What matters here is McLuhan’s insistence on the meaning of television’s ubiquity, its usurpation of our psychic processes, and its potential to leave us in an “exhausted slump” of sensory overload. Television is at once a medium that requires audience participation and one which creates numbness and dulls our perceptions as well. This is what McLuhan describes as the “paradoxical feature of the ‘cool’ TV medium. It involves us in moving depth, but it does not excite, agitate or arouse.”

In light of television’s increasing televisuality, however, does the appellation “cool” remain useful? Does content really not matter in an age of cult shows, cult stars, audiences who schedule their lives around talk shows, soap operas, or “The X-Files”? Certainly television is becoming more and more like movies, fulfilling another McLuhan aphorism that all media tend to heat up over time. But this is because television, McLuhan would undoubtedly point out, has been superseded by a new “environmental” medium—the computer-linked Internet. Like print, the telegraph, the photograph, and cinema before it, television is now being reprocessed into a “harmless consumer commodity.” It is no longer regarded as “corrupt or degrading” because that designation is “always reserved,” McLuhan believes, for “whatever is actively environmental.” At present, with television the acknowledged subliminal ground of middle-class life, the computer and the Internet are becoming the new cool media, provoking in us that psychic and social disturbance that was once created by the TV image.

It is therefore hardly surprising to find “The X-Files,” like many other televisually oriented programs, often described as movie-like, or to realize that many movies scarcely signify as theatrical releases but as the television shows which, through video, they eventually become. What I am claiming, then, is also paradoxical: that even though “The X-Files” is movie-like formally and stylistically, it has chosen to remain cool in the McLuhanesque sense.21 “The X-Files” literalizes coolness, making what Arthur Kroker calls the “inner, structural code of the technological experience” an element of its content as well as its electronic form.22 When we drill into “The X-Files,” it is our lives under television that get churned to the surface.

One of the best-known features of “The X-Files” is the degree of audience involvement and participation that the show’s elliptical yet serial narrative structure fosters. The first McLuhan probe I employed, therefore, is that the “cool TV medium promotes depth structures in art and entertainment alike, and creates audience involvement in depth as well.” By withholding plot and character information from audiences for weeks or even months at a time, slowly doling out pieces to a puzzle that grows larger with each episode, “The X-Files” forces depth participation to the surface. The murky visual design of the show, its strange colors and expressionist lighting, also force us to participate in creating sense from what we often cannot actually see.

Nor is understanding made easy by the language of “The X-Files,” which is frequently itself aphoristic—e.g., “The truth is out there,” “Believe the lies,” “I want to believe,” “All lies lead to the truth.” One of the reasons McLuhan chose aphorism as his favored means of expression is that aphorism—like television—is by nature incomplete. Aphorism requires “participation on the part of the person regarding it or thinking about it,” and is therefore the language, he believes, of teaching. What does “The X-Files” teach? The show obviously aims to “deeply involve [us] in the process of learning, illustrating graphically the complex interplay of people and events, the development of forms, the multileveled interrelationships between and among such arbitrarily segregated subjects as biology, geography, mathematics, anthropology, history, literature and languages.” Yet this last quotation refers to McLuhan’s vision for the role of television in the classroom. What does it mean that we can have this vision fulfilled by a prime-time creep show?

When I first encountered “The X-Files,” I was greatly upset by its violence. People and animals were killed all the time, and they tended to be graphically scarified in the process. But I quickly became acclimated to the violence because “The X-Files” does consistently involve us, through its themes of investigation, in making “multileveled” connections between “arbitrarily segregated subjects.” On “The X-Files” one learns what standing inside an eviscerated elephant is like, what the Coriolis force is, how a succubus or a wraith is supposed to behave, how long it would take a python to digest a human, what escalating serial fetishism is, how cows look when they’ve been struck by lightning. One learns what happens to human flesh when you boil it, crush it, embalm it alive, freeze it, irradiate it, slice it with a razor blade, burn it, mutate it. Yet the visual depiction of these things seldom stirs up more than a faint, brief, queasi-
ness, because it is the appeal of knowledge and process that involves us more than the imagined effects of violence on actual human or inhuman organisms. "The X-Files" literalizes McLuhan's suggestion that not only "deeper, but further, into all knowledge has become the normal popular demand since TV."

Like television itself, "The X-Files" "compells commitment and participation, quite regardless of any point of view."

The McLuhan probe which best explains how "The X-Files" can at once create knowledge in depth and fail to produce a coherent point of view comprises two remarks. The first is that the cool medium of television rewards "spontaneous casualness" and "compatible coolness and indifference" in its actors (which also allow the viewer to "fill in the gaps with his [or her] own personal identification"); the second that the "cooling system" of television often "brings on a lifelong state of psychic rigor mortis, or of somnambulism, particularly observable in periods of new technology." The manner in which the two protagonists of "The X-Files," Scully/Anderson and Mulder/Duchovny, embody each of these aphorisms has been the subject of a striking amount of fan and audience discourse. Because Anderson and Duchovny became stars by being Scully and Mulder, they also literalize McLuhan's statement that fans of television prefer to think about and relate to TV stars as their roles, rather than as "real people."

Clearly the boundaries between forms of fan discourse are much more fluid now than they were when McLuhan was writing, but it is hard to imagine Scully and Mulder played by well-known actors with pre-existing or well-defined and filled-in extratextual identities. In fact, "The X-Files" encourages role/performer confusion by using what *Entertainment Weekly* calls a "Who-is-that-guy" casting strategy. But even though the show openly foregrounds its own coolness (as when Mulder wonders whether he can get something disgusting off his fingers "without betraying [his] cool exterior"). does this mean that Mulder and Scully are cool in the McLuhanesque sense? Absolutely, indeed programmatically.

The comments of reviewers are useful in this regard. *The Village Voice* remarked early on Duchovny's "wonderful deadpan poise," and *Gentlemen's Quarterly* the fact that he is "as murky as swamp water." *Entertainment Weekly* admires Anderson's "open, blank stare" and Duchovny's "pin-eyed zombie cool," *The New Yorker* the show's "deadpan aplomb in the face of man-size flukes and alien fetuses." Although at this point we might claim any number of other antecedents for an intense but low-key or unemotional acting style—film noir, Method acting, particular star images—the obvious influence would seem to be television itself, which changed adolescence from what McLuhan called a "time of fresh, eager, and expressive countenances" to one in which the "child of the TV age" sports a "dead and sculptural pan." In short, one of the ways that we adjust to the violence of "The X-Files" is by acquiring what Scully and Mulder have, the "casual and cool nonchalance of the playful and superior being," and incorporating their viewing strategy, their attitude of grave indifference toward virtually all that they encounter, as our own. Whether confronted with horrific and graphically presented brutality, paranormal threats, family crises, or good news, Scully and Mulder exhibit the somnambulism and numbness that television invokes in all of us. When I watch them, I too become numb. As does reviewer James Wolcott, in whom "The X-Files" induces "a lush, becalmed spirit of voyeurism so pure and intent that it borders on a trance state."

The third probe, which speaks to television's paradoxical alliance of numbness and participation, is McLuhan's characterization of the technological present as a new Age of Anxiety. Unlike modernist anxiety, in which the individual and his or her own interior are alienated from society, McLuhan's "anxiety of indifference" is generated by what Glenn Willmott calls the "denial (or penetration by the media, and so by everyone else) of any margins of solitude or alienation." This loss of margins leads inevitably, McLuhan believes, to a perpetual—and perpetually doomed, in a media-driven environment—"questing for lost identity." Do "the hermeneutics of faith practiced by Mulder and the hermeneutics of suspicion practiced by Scully" provide, therefore, what Jimmie L. Reeves, Mark C. Rodgers, and Michael Epstein call a "bifocal outlook on unexplained phenomenon that is characterized by a sincerity that stands in stark contrast to the mockeries" of "Twin Peaks," "Beavis and Butthead," and others? Or is the "quest for anything," as McLuhan puts it, including knowledge-seeking itself, undertaken because it is the only pure thrill left?

The quests that engage Scully and Mulder on "The X-Files" are intensely focused on foundational identity issues: the meaning of family socially and individually; of where and how one belongs in the world in an existential sense. A number of episodes, for example, center on Scully's search for who or what killed her sister, for the approval of her father, the identity of whoever abducted her for a month and
stole her ability to bear children, whoever gave her (and then cured) her terminal cancer. Mulder seeks his abducted sister and the rogue FBI agent who may have killed his father (even as questions are raised about who his father actually is). So ritualized and Freudian is this focus on family relationships that it seems linked to the extreme potency with which these issues are charged in melodrama. The omnipresence of music on “The X-Files,” the way it is used to create mood and mark climaxes, also suggests an affinity with melodrama.

Yet on “The X-Files,” families scarcely matter except as plot devices. Although Scully’s family is said to be important to her, there is little emotional affect in her relationship to its members. Her family obviously bores her, and she them. While Mulder is supposed to be searching for his sister, finding her (which he has done now several times) does not alter his cool demeanor, nor does it deter him from doggedly pursuing the truth. The most important relationship on “The X-Files,” the only one which does carry emotional weight, is the relationship between Mulder and Scully themselves.

Under its surface mythology of conspiracies and shadow governments, aliens and monstrosity, or even what Rhonda Wilcox and J. P. Williams call “liminality and gender pleasure,” “The X-Files” and its popularity can be read as literalizing the ways in which our lives and relationships have been changed by television. What is often perceived as the “lack” in the relationship of Scully and Mulder—its sexual and legal component—makes sense, then, in McLuhanesque terms. Scully and Mulder cannot be joined sexually or legally because they are both literally and figuratively alienated, penetrated, and probed to the molecular level by omniscient and omnipotent forces who have infiltrated, like television and, now, computers, virtually everything in our lives. In other words, were they to become lovers, they would cease to signify this and would instead become conventional representatives of what Kroker characterizes as the “imposed assumptions” of an outmoded set of social relations.

Scully and Mulder trust each other, and they trust what they do. Yet virtually everything they think they know is wrong. Television has taught them the arts of insight, but not how to formulate a point of view. It has sent them on a quest for identity, but taught them also never to trust what they find as a result of it. The media-driven milieu of “The X-Files” suggests that the whole world is now the same place, all of it accessible, all of it at once safe, dangerous, restricting, liberating. The North Pole is no more or less threatening than the New Jersey woods or a cheap motel room. A shopping mall, home, office building, or computer may harbor a mutant or alien; a kindly doctor or schoolteacher may inject you with a lethal virus; someone who looks like your sister or like your partner may turn out to be a shape-shifter or a clone. The psychic and physical collide in flashbacks that lie, in point-of-view shots that turn out to be “wrong,” in montage sequences that link events “incorrectly.” We cannot believe what we see on television, what we download from computers, what we hear on our cell phones. And yet just as Scully and Mulder believe in their relationship to each other and that there is truth somewhere, we do believe, all the time. We have to believe in the reality of something, even if that something is the paranoia induced by television itself.
In “The X-Files,” the extent to which we see, feel, and experience everything through technology, through literal “mediation,” is what McLuhan’s probes churn into a vortex of simultaneous paranoia, humor, and comfort. Paranoia is the only emotional tone that makes sense in a world in which we have let television and computers become substitutes for our nervous systems and our bodies. Yet because the paranoia is free-floating, as McLuhan points out, originating in media which are “both inside and outside,” it is also soothing. If, as “The X-Files” suggests, aliens and mutants are everywhere, one need not worry about them. Since an invisible shadow government controls everything from baseball to the media to our national destiny, real paranoia (much less political action) would be beside the point. Even terminal illness and death are rarely more than temporary plot divagations. Does this represent what Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein call a “reinvigoration of consensus culture and a renunciation of the excesses and exclusions of postmodernism”? Does “The X-Files” really acknowledge and affirm what its mythology overtly declares should matter to us—the ineffable, the spiritual, the other—or is it a televisual display of ideological virtuosity, the shape-shifting of its mutants and aliens no less and no more difficult than the easy mutability it posits among the markers of gender, race, nationality, or mortality?

The reason I am still for “The X-Files” is that it elicits so many passionate yet wildly variable reactions, that it has no strong consensus response. The most beneficent interpretation of the show would be that, through its foregrounding of coolness and style, it helps us achieve what McLuhan calls a consciousness of the “revolutionary transformations caused by new media,” thus giving us the means by which to “anticipate and control them” rather than being their slaves. Its Internet communities, though relatively exclusive in terms of educational, financial, and leisure resources, also bespeak a need for real connection, a connection which often extends beyond membership in the Gillian Anderson Testosterone Brigade or the Smart Young X-Philes. McLuhan would undoubtedly approve of the fact that one elementary school teacher uses the popularity of “The X-Files” among her students to get them interested in real science, but he would also agree with the scientist who fulminates against the show for being “pernicious because week after week it promotes the idea that a supernatural explanation should be favored over a rational one.”

What I am against in the show, however, is also its coolness, its blankness, its humor in the face of any and all killing, its increasing “flaunting of ontological distinctions” involving politics, power, and mortality. What “The X-Files” and its popularity suggest is that we would all like to be like Mulder and like Scully, that we all want not to be excited, agitated, or aroused by everything we see and experience, and certainly not by everything that we see and experience on television. We, too, would like to be able to “cool off” what McLuhan calls the “hot situations of actual life” by “miming” them with humor and play. Yet, as Kroker writes, for McLuhan television was a new technological sensorium, an “artificial amplification, and transfferal, of human consciousness and sensory organs to the technical apparatus, which now, having achieved the electronic phase of ‘simultaneity’ and ‘instantaneous scope,’ returns to take its due on the human body.” A show that repeatedly foregrounds this process, whether consciously or inadvertently, might easily appear, as “The X-Files” does to so many, to be a whole new form of television.

The literal conjunctions of “The X-Files” and McLuhan’s probes into the environmental effects of television form what I have argued to be the show’s own invisible assumptions. “The X-Files” and its worldwide following represent, indeed embody, a McLuhanesque view of the changing nature of meaning itself in a media-driven universe. Created by a California surfer out of the bits and pieces of his own mass-mediated past, “The X-Files” is meant, Chris Carter claims, to scare us. The truly frightening thing may be that we have already reached the state of psychic rigor mortis that McLuhan predicted television would eventually induce. Yet McLuhan also observed that television seemed to prompt in its audience “a strong drive toward religious experience with rich liturgical overtones,” and this “The X-Files” supports as well. In the end, both Marshall McLuhan and “The X-Files” are concerned with the decay of meaning in our lives, and both urge us to create for ourselves what we may no longer be able to find.

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Notes

1. The quotation is on p. 2 of the anthology (David Lavery, Angela Hague, and Marla Cartwright, eds., Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X Files [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996]).


16. Ibid.


21. For more on the forthcoming movie version of "The X-Files," whose plot, stars, writers, and production personnel are virtually all connected with the television show but "much bigger," see James Sterngold, "‘X-Files’ Looks for the Room to Stretch Out," *New York Times* (21 September, 1997), pp. 9, 14.


26. Wolcott, op. cit., p. 76.


28. Reeves, Rodgers, and Epstein, op. cit., p. 35.


30. To paraphrase James Wolcott, nobody really dies on "The X-Files"; they may at any time be hybridized, reincarnated, regenerated, cloned, and so on (in Badley, "Rebirth..."
of the Clinic,” p. 164). During the 1996-97 season, Scully was given a terminal metastasizing brain tumor that was later cured by a computer chip that Mulder found in a government file drawer, and Mulder himself appeared to commit suicide during the season finale. The ideological implications of making these issues so mutable remain to be addressed.


33. As Wolcott puts it, “the nadir was reached” during the 1996-97 season “in an episode where a trio of backwoods mutations savagely beat a black couple to death to the ironic strains of a Johnny Mathis tune” (“Too Much Pulp,” p. 76). The show has also begun to incorporate more and more archival documentary footage into its fictional storylines, and to culminate from topical news and events.

34. The relative lack of popularity of another Chris Carter series, “Millennium,” which began to run on Fox in 1996, is interesting by comparison to “The X-Files.” “Millennium” tends to lecture to its audiences rather than creating a sense of what McLuhan calls “do-it-yourself-ness and depth involvement”; its single star, Lance Henriksen, not only has an appearance which “strongly declares his role and status in life” (and hence is “wrong” for television) but possesses very little “spontaneous casualness”; and it desperately needs “humor and play.” Or, it could be that “Millennium” is, like “Twin Peaks” did, simply “drown[ing] in the puddle of its own drippy artiness” (Jonathan Ross, “Talking with Aliens,” Sight and Sound [June 1995], p. 61).
