



ARTICLE BY DAVID BISCHOFF

OPENING THE

X-FILES: BEHIND THE SCENES OF TV'S HOTTEST SHOW

At the UFO conference, the alien presence lurks . . . At the Hyatt Regency Airport Hotel, it walks among people with almond-eyed extra-terrestrials emblazoned on their TV shirts . . . Among UFO sculptures, passing a painting of a UFO hovering by a Brontosaurus . . . Among L.A. casual New-Agers wearing exotic jewelry and hard-nosed investigators scribbling in steno books . . .

As it hears Budd Hopkins speak of abduction trauma, it absorbs. As it observes a panel on covert U.S. government activities, it takes notes. As it listens to Richard Hoagland talk of alien structures on Mars, it calculates. As it passes the display

table for *UFO* magazine, it decides to decline a subscription and continue picking up the occasional issue from the newsstand.

Los Angeles. Early June. UFO Expo West. No sightings. No contact.

Anecdotal evidence. "Yeah. I was there," confesses Chris Carter, creator and executive producer of Fox's *X-Files*. His voice is relaxed and friendly on the phone. Carter is 37 years old and success has apparently not spoiled or hardened him. I've seen his picture in *TV Guide*. Blond. Slender. Handsome. "I attended incognito. I had a great time. I spent a whole day there in the gallery area."

"He was? I didn't know that!" says *UFO* magazine's editor and publisher, Vicki Cooper, her no-nonsense reporter's voice softening. "I would have loved to have met him."

I'm calling around, trying to get a fix on this aerial phenomenon called *X-Files*, and its paranormal show satellites. One of its two featured characters, FBI Agent Fox Mulder, claims to write articles for *Omni* under pen names. *Omni* wants to know about him, and his show.

Vicki Cooper is only too happy to give her opinion.

"The *X-Files* is very entertaining. The concept that Chris Carter came up with is intriguing not just to people who have greater info on and involvement in the UFO field, but also to audiences in general. Most episodes are good mysteries, and the mysteries are paranormal. I think there's a greater interest in that sort of thing these days."

The Fox network seems to think so. It has renewed *X-Files* for another full season of 24 episodes. Its other shows, *Sightings* and *Encounters*, put a documentary spin on the subject matter of the outré, from flying saucers to crop circles to ghosts. UFO books from the serious (Dr. John Mack's *Abductions*) through the ethereal (*Embraced by the Light*) to the ridiculous (*The Celestine Prophecy*) are levitating off bookstore shelves.

Not since the advent of spiritualism and H. P. Balzsky in the nineteenth century have so many Americans been so interested in the possibility that the bizarre is real.

These vibrations seem to emanate mostly from Friday nights at 9:00, as synthesizer music shambles from TVs and the bastard child of the *Twilight Zone* and the *F.B.I.* grabs millions of viewers by their lapels and gives them a good, creepy shake.

The *X-Files*, for the uninitiated and the frightened, deals with a brilliant psychologist named Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) whose excellent criminal work with the FBI has given him license to take on the unusual cases the agency receives. Mulder is a driven man. His sister disappeared when they were both children. Regressive hypnotherapy makes him believe she was abducted by aliens, an event he watched helplessly while she called for help.

The button-down Efram Zimbalist, Jr.—types are getting irked by "spooky" Mulder's activities. They assign Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), a medical doctor with a specialty in forensics and

a strong faith in the rational, to tag along, help, and report back. However, Mulder is a loose cannon. The Truth is out there, and Mulder means to get it, by hook or by crook.

The duo butt heads, bicker, wisecrack, argue, and debate. Mulder has seen Scully in her underwear, but there's never been more than a whisper of sexual interest or romance. Ultimately, after a season of firestarters, alien threats to mankind, UFOs, genetically warped serial killers who eat human livers, evil clone children, and—of course—alien abduction galore, they trust only each other.

Each episode is dead serious, often ending in ambiguity.

In "Ice," an excellent variation on John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There" (filmed twice as *The Thing*), they thwart an alien menace in the Arctic Circle. In "Ghost in the Machine," they must deal with an evil AI computer. In "Deep Throat," they discover an Air Force base where the government is secretly

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testing captured alien technology.

The direction is atmospheric, the scripts are tight, the dialogue is crisp, the tone uneasy and grim.

How can anyone not love this show? Chris Carter used to be a journalist. He wrote pieces on sports, mostly surfing. In 1985, one of his screenplays caught the notice of Jeffrey Katzenburg, boy genius of Disney's film division. Carter found himself developing for Disney. A detour into sitcoms led to a relationship with Twentieth Television, brainstorming TV projects.

Or so the Carter and the Fox press releases claim. Difficult to believe that something so dark and moody as the *X-Files* bubbled out of such a whitebread background.

Perhaps Carter stumbled across that cryogenically frozen body of Walt beside chained skeletons of animators in the Mouseswitz dungeons. Or he heard whispers of ancient voodoo cabals in the halls of the Writer's Guild? Or one night, surfing, he was picked up by a UFO!

Alas, all of the above are emphatically false.

"I've never had a personal experience with the paranormal," Carter asserts. "I've never seen a UFO. I've never been contacted by anything or anyone. My personal opinion? Well, I should preface this by saying that I'm a natural skeptic. My tendency is to discount most of the stuff because my personal experience doesn't include it."

So just where did Scully and Mulder come from?

"Right out of my head. A dichotomy. They are the equal parts of my desire to believe in something and my inability to believe in something. My skepticism and my faith. And the writing of the characters and the voices came very easily to me. I want, like a lot of people do, to have the experience of witnessing a paranormal phenomenon. At the same time I want not to accept it, but to question it. I think those characters and those voices came out of that duality."

Are the names significantly metaphorical?

"No, not at all. Just coincidence. I liked the sounds. They trip off the tongue. And I grew up in L.A. where Vince Scully was the voice of God."

Do the stories have any roots in science fiction?

"I was never an SF fan, oddly enough. I resisted the SF label for the show because of that, but I found that by having it called SF, it brought people

to the show that might not have bothered. Now I think it's not a bad label."

Still, wild as it may get, it's a here-and-now show—so much so that a recent tour of the FBI offices by actors and staff brought lectures by FBI agents on errors in weaponry and procedures.

Eerie things happen as well.

"Just last weekend I had a person whom I've seen on a social basis come up to me and say, 'You don't know how right you've got it.' And then he continued to tell me for the next two hours about his experiences as well as his reaction to them. A very strong personal reaction. Seeing those kinds of reactions makes one believe that there are things that are affecting people out there, whether they are real or imagined. There's too much evidence to dismiss it out of hand."

Evidence is what the UFO field seeks. It has quite a bit on its subject.

Vicki Cooper is a journalist who's also been observing the media lately.

"TV programming—movies and documentaries like *Sightings*, for instance,

with ghosts alongside UFOs—dilutes the information base just a tad. There is a database that can be based strictly on observed phenomena—stories that talk about craft, stories and reports that are based on landing traces and physical scarring and people who've had encounters with alleged UFO occupants. There is additional reported information that does have a distinct paranormal aspect, but most UFOlogists resist this."

How is *X-Files* viewed among the UFO experts?

"Although the material is greatly fictionalized, the basic premises of many episodes seem to be based on stories that have gotten a lot of attention in the UFO field. Mulder's government source—Deep Throat. Some of what he says mirrors the suspicions UFO researchers have had for years. But because this has been cloaked in secrecy, there's no real way of telling what is real and what isn't. There is seemingly a cover-up. What is being covered up and for what reason hasn't been defined to everyone's satisfaction.

"I've been greatly amused and gratified to see how Chris Carter apparently has really studied the UFO database. The show makes passing references to cases that everyone in the UFO field recognizes, such as the Gulf

Breeze case and Area 51. He and other writers obviously very cleverly filtered into the scripts real UFO info that we look at here in the UFO research field."

"We generally don't use consultants," says Carter. "There is no real Deep Throat. Now that the character is dead, he has no counterpart working on our staff. All of our research is done from diverse materials, wherever we can find it. But I have to say that we take the information, but don't use it in any kind of literal or verbatim way. We use it as a jumping-off point."

I pointed out that even the scientific research was well done, the dialogue ringing with authentic phrasings.

"I did consult with a virologist to make sure that the genetic science in the last show of the first season was correct. Beyond that we do it all ourselves," Carter explains.

It took a little digging to discover some of the related books that Carter has read. He never finished Whitley Strieber's *Communion*. He's read Howard Blum's *Out There*. He was familiar with the work of John Keel, but only after I mentioned some titles.

I admitted that Warner published my UFO fiction trilogy called *The UFO Conspiracy*, and that I had done extensive research on the subject. What

struck me the most about *X-Files* was how dead-on the show had captured the flavor and tone of UFO and paranormal literature.

Carter chuckled mischievously.

While reading for my Warner UFO books, I found the focal part of my studies in a *Whole Earth Catalog* book published by Harmony Press in 1989 titled *The Fringes of Reason*.

I can't help but suspect that it sits on Carter's office shelves, well-thumbed. Whether or not it is, anyone interested in the paranormal or UFOs or areas of thought and theory and experience that tilt amazingly and amusingly off the plane of the quotidian should know about this book.

Among the entries in a list of the nature of its contents on the back cover: "Channeling, Psychic Powers, Crystals, Bigfoot, Shamanism, UFOs, Perpetual Motion, Conspiracies, Flat Earth, Reincarnation, Spontaneous Human Combustion, Weird Phenomena, Atlantis, Alien Abductions."

If it's not the Bible of the *X-Files*, then it makes a very fine substitute.

Fringes editor and contributing writer Ted Schultz is now a graduate student in evolutionary biology at Cornell University, studying entomology—

specifically, species of ants that grow elaborate fungus gardens. He worked with the Whole Earth people for years and, because his interest in the outré was known, was invited to edit a special issue on the subject. It was one of the most popular issues that Whole Earth ever did. An expanded version became the book.

What a reader gets from *The Fringes of Reason* is the same thing that a viewer gets from *X-Files*: This subject matter is bizarre, it's creepy, it's fascinating, it's wacky, and yet it is also very human.

It also expands the mind.

"In my childhood," says Schultz, "I was told that everything had been figured out. My job as a grade-school student was just to learn it. Then in fifth grade I discovered an underground genre of literature. The Strange but True books, like Frank Edwards' *Stranger Than Science*. This was a comic-book frontier universe where things weren't known, where the rule was 'we don't know what's going on, and it's not what the authorities tell us it is.' Ghost books and flying-saucer

books were big. Ivan Sander-son's Abominable Snowman books blew my

mind. I discovered *Fate* magazine and started reading that.

"Along the way I believed in almost all these things. As an adult I got into Eastern religion and psychic phenomena. Net effect: With the sheer vastness and internal inconsistencies of the material, all of it can't be true. The occult systems were mutually contradictory. There had to be some standard by which they were judged. Ultimately this led me to a more rational standard. My enthusiasm for the material has not diminished, but I now have an anthropological or sociological outlook. I'm not sure what these belief systems are telling me about the real world, but I think that psychology and neurobiology are the fields best equipped to delve into this."

Could this be explosions of shamanistic needs from a culture cut off from a rich aboriginal psychospiritual tradition that we still see, say, in American Indians and other older groups?

"I think so. I don't believe in the paranormal, but I think there's an entirely different dimension of the mind that we're only beginning to understand."

Jay Kinney is publisher and editor-in-chief of *Gnosis* magazine, known as the "Journal

of the Western Inner Traditions." He helped put *The Fringes of Reason* together and wrote articles for it. He voices a view from another side.

"In our materialist, scientifically based society where people are only willing to believe something they are able to prove with hard scientific fact, UFOs are something like a tantalizing reminder that the universe is bigger than our day-to-day philosophies allow for. In that sense, UFOs give an opening for people's spiritual urges. Whether its an ultimately useful direction to take those urges, I'm a little skeptical. More traditional religious and spiritual paths can serve just fine. I'm not sure that aliens add all that much.

"Carl Jung viewed UFOs as a sort of eruption of archetypes out of the collective unconscious. There's a new book out from Viking called *Daimonic Reality*, by Patrick Harpur. He's positing that all this paranormal phenomena—be it Bigfoot, UFOs, or Fairies—are outcroppings of the same category of life which is basically in between the physical and some high spiritual other reality. An in-between zone. A zone of tricksters like Pan. The Little People the Celts talk about. Visions of the Virgin Mary. Contacts with aliens. Entities

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X-FILES

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whose existence isn't quite on the same plane as ours. (UFO researchers) John Keel and Jacques Vallee have similar theories."

Is *X-Files* dealing with the mythology of the twentieth century?

"I think there is some kind of correlation," says Chris Carter. "Myths try to explain the invisible. We're playing, but we're not trying to draw any hard conclusions. We work with the unknown, we explore the unknown, but we don't pretend to have any hard answers."

Other journals take a different tack on these unusual subjects.

The Skeptical Inquirer is a fusty magazine filled with grumpy essays by brilliant people. Though a vital antidote to open-minded magazines and the more credulous of the other media, ultimately it is not as much fun.

What, pray tell, do the editors think of *X-Files*?

"I've seen it on a number of occasions," says Barry Karr, executive director and public relations director. "It's funny you should ask. Last week we were talking about it at a meeting.

"CSICOP (the Committee for the

Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal) is a group of individuals with different opinions. Some would have problems with the *X-Files*, since it presents the paranormal as a given. I enjoy the show. It's fiction; it's labeled as fiction. Our culture loves horror stories, and this series is entertaining.

"There are a lot of TV programs these days coming across as true documentaries. TV has gone crazy on the paranormal bandwagon. *Encounters*. *Unsolved Mysteries*. *Sightings*. They label them as true. *X-Files*, though, is a good show."

Karr voices the opinion of many concerning the other "true" paranormal shows. They all seem to be tabloid television, far closer to *Hard Copy* than the *McNeill-Lehrer Report*. As "infotainment," they pander to the sensational with only the occasional mutter of journalistic skepticism. Alas, they also possibly feed the paranoia of the less-educated and more psychologically susceptible. They exist more because of inexpensive production costs and ratings hunger than any true interest in digging up the truth.

Paradoxically, by plunging into fiction, *X-Files* gets closer to the facts.

One such fact is that this is a paranoid age we find ourselves living in today.

The very stuff of *X-Files* is paranoia.

In "Fallen Angel," we discover that the source of Mulder's UFO leads, Deep Throat, has a stranglehold on the FBI and seems to be playing them like a violin. Or is he?

In the final show of the first season, "The Erlenmeyer Flask," Deep Throat is killed. "Trust no one," he croaks before he croaks.

Is this a responsible message for this day and age?

"I think so," says Carter. "It's a distrust of authority coming through there. I just think it's a personal thing I have about institutions and authority. That's why I put it in the show."

"It's hard to get a handle on what is going on in the world both politically and spiritually without being a little paranoid," says Jay Kinney, publisher of *Gnosis* magazine. "All sorts of revelations about covert operations foster a certain paranoia. Some of that is a healthy paranoia.

"Social paranoia is a growing niche market. There is a large portion of the population that is primed not to believe what newspapers print or television says. To me, that's healthier than forty years ago when no one challenged the official line."

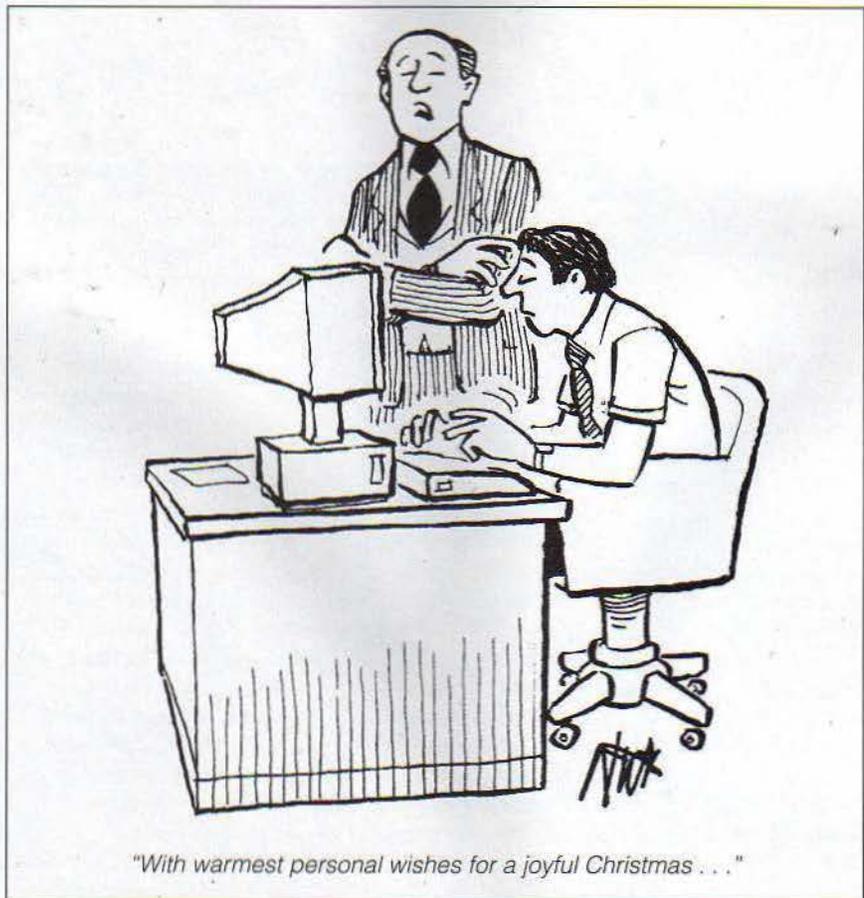
After a slow start, *X-Files* seems to be experiencing a growing popularity. Virtually all the people I spoke with during my investigations enjoyed the show. HarperPrizm Books will be publishing a series of original books based on the series. The first three will be written by Charles L. Grant, who promises more background material, particularly concerning Scully and Mulder's private lives and pasts. Comic-book versions and lunch boxes seem inevitable.

X-Files fans abound in cyberspace. Fans in the *alt.tv.x-files* newsgroup on the Internet discuss each episode in nitpicking detail. Scully and Mulder find themselves sent on fan-created investigations in the companion *alt.tv.x-files.creative* newsgroup. The agents even pop up in discussions in serious UFO- and paranormal-related newsgroups such as *alt.paranet.ufo*.

There's no question that people have experienced the unusual and bizarre. The true question is, just what is the source of that experience? Here is the essential beauty of *X-Files*, and why the show's format works so well.

Ultimately, through a fictional medium, the show takes a scary fun-house freakshow ride through the human heart, mind, and spirit with no conclusions, only questions as to the very nature of reality.

Questions that can only linger in viewers' minds—and lives. ☐



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