

# Why We Need The Lies

From *The Prisoner* to *The X-Files*, argues Bryan Appleyard, every generation has to find its own source of paranoia.

"The truth," runs the motto at the beginning of every episode of *The X-Files*, "is out there."

"There is no a priori reason," wrote the American philosopher C.I. Lewis, "for thinking that when we discover the truth, it will prove interesting."

**T**HE *X-FILES* IS TO THE PRESENT ADOLESCENT generation what *The Prisoner* was to mine – the supremely brilliant and convincing distillation of paranoia. Almost every teenager seems to watch this show, and almost every one of those believes its central premise – that, out there, there is a truth to be revealed.

Number Six, the hero of British show *The Prisoner*, was in rebellion against the government and uncertain as to who – his own people or the enemy – was keeping him in The Village. Fox Mulder, the hero of the American *X-Files*, is also in rebellion against the government, and he is convinced that aliens and the paranormal are essential but concealed constituents of our world. The fierce, driven intensity of both Mulder and Six stems from their clear conviction that the truth is not only out there, but that it is also intensely interesting – a matter, in fact, of life and death.

The paranoid faith that drives both shows is the same: there is a pattern, a logic, in the world that is systematically being concealed by a malign conspiracy. It is a faith shared by many of the most characteristic art forms of our time. In the thriller or whodunit, for example, the detective hero seeks out the pattern that the surface facts conceal. Above all, he believes in the existence of that pattern, in the concealed truth, and that belief makes him virtuous. At least for the duration of the story, we share his belief. Like Dennis Potter's child hidden in his tree, we all want to be singing detectives when we grow up.

Psychologically, this is consoling. Everybody likes to think that one more piece will complete the jigsaw, that one day it will all fall into place. And, for young adolescents, it seems like the most obvious truth. They do feel there is a secret – sex – being withheld from them by a conspiracy of adults. Mulder's aliens and psi-forces are early-teen metaphors for unimaginable delights and intimacies. But any idle browser of Freud could say as much, and there is more, much more, to be said about *The X-Files* and dozens of other related contemporary phenomena.

New Age mysticism, alternative medicine, dabbling in horoscopes and necromancy, the American-led pursuit of authenticity and self-realisation, the naturalist spiritualities arising from environmentalism, even the fierce desire of Prince Charles to defend



some transcendent truth, are all symptoms of the pressing contemporary need to find something more in the world than the finalities of mainstream science.

Let me start with those aliens we now know so well. Extraterrestrials have become a routine aspect of our culture. We agree on what they look like – oval heads with slanting, black eyes and vestigial nostrils. We even know where they are being kept – in Area 51, a secret American base somewhere in the Nevada desert where their bodies were stored following a crash-landing in the late forties, the Roswell Incident. This place appears in *The X-Files* and in *Inde-*

everyday

pendence Day. Area 51 is now more imaginatively "real" than most of the locations that appear on the nightly news. It is the place where truth is held prisoner.

Mulder discovers that, at the time of the alien crash, the leading governments of the world agreed that aliens were too hot for the public to handle and a deal was made that, if found, they would at once be killed. Why? This is not clear, but it seems that the earthly powers cannot handle the possibility of a general realisation that we are not alone and that there are forms of knowledge in the universe beyond the control of govern-

the psychological complexities of quotidian human existence. Now, however, aliens have become more generalised emblems of otherness and of entirely different forms of explanation. They are a reflection of a general sense that there is more to the world than there appears to be. Aliens are there to tell us that the truth, in spite of C.I. Lewis, really is interesting.

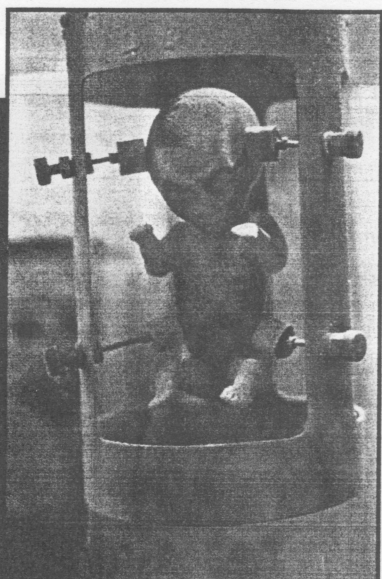
The same message is being sent by the numerous popular invocations of the paranormal. In *The X-Files* it is taken for granted that telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance and a whole range of other inexplicable phenomena are real and visible to those whose eyes are open to the truth. Mulder is blessed with a divine clarity of vision to accompany his purity of purpose. Again, the real but concealed world is far more interesting than the one we are daily sold by the scientific materialism that routinely pours scorn on these strange manifestations.

Here the need to believe is more important than any so-called evidence. The idealised emphasis on the word "truth" seems to be a deliberate rebuke to the debased, dull and relativised conception of truth we are taught at school. In allowing these things to enter our imaginative lives, we all implicitly agree with William Blake's remark that everything that is possible to be believed is an image of the truth. Yet, in addition, this truth is distant, hard to attain. We feel deprived of it.

"Our popular obsessions," writes the American literary critic Harold Bloom in his latest book, *Omens of Millennium*, "with angels, telepathic and prophetic dreams, alien abductions and 'near-death experience' all have their commercial and crazed debasements, but more than ever they testify to an expectation of release from the burdens of a society that is weary with its sense of belatedness, or 'aftering', a malaise that hints to us that we somehow have arrived after the event."

There is some lost knowledge, a way of truth, that we can only dimly glimpse in signs, portents and in traces of corrupted evidence. In the film *The Right Stuff* the life of the astronaut John Glenn is apparently saved by the rituals of Australian Aborigines. No explanation

is offered: we are simply referred to the common suspicion that the Aborigines know something fundamental that we do not, something that can rescue us from our technological hubris. The same sense of lost and distant wisdom appears regularly in popular culture - as, for example, the Force in *Star Wars* or the more familiar environmental dread that humanity has severed itself from the benign workings of nature. Then there is Prince Charles, with his constant appeals to the wisdom of the past, his desire to believe in some lost form of organic unity. Or there is the desperate wish to believe in almost anything, however strange, that will cure us more



**ALIEN-ATED:**  
The weekly adventures of Mulder (David Duchovny) and Scully (Gillian Anderson) in *The X-Files* are a search for the concealed - and real - truth. Such quests have been a human preoccupation since the times of ancient Greece; only the aliens, above, have been changed.



ments or conventional science. Governments are, therefore, obliged to place a veil of denial between us and the truth.

Of course, aliens in general are old hat. They have been around as long as science fiction. But previously they have always been obvious expressions of specific anxieties and aspirations. H.G. Wells's invaders in *The War of the Worlds* express the fear of a superior but uncontrollable technology. The pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are cold war warnings of the secret, subversive power of communism. And Steven Spielberg's benign aliens in *ET* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* are all about the desire to escape from

He sent it  
to his own  
government  
was

of the hidden truth



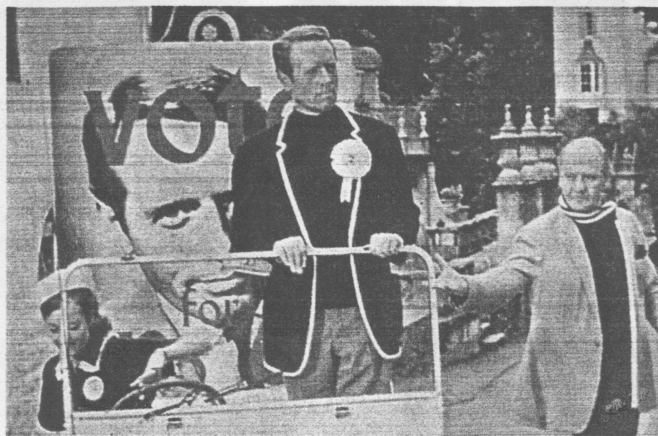
wholly than the pills and potions of conventional medicine.

In such a context, government becomes a force of the occult – a keeper and concealer of esoteric knowledge. In both *The Prisoner* and *The X-Files*, only the government knows ultimately what is going on. The administration is always demonic, standing between us and the truth. Events like Watergate confirm our belief that something is being kept from us. Change cover-ups into an alien crash-landing and the point becomes obvious. Government has become the demonic aspect of a world that has fallen from an initial position of pristine truthfulness. Exposure has become a moral absolute. Hounding real, errant ministers or even revealing the private lives of duchesses, like subverting the corrupt workings of a fictional FBI, has become a virtuous end in itself because it offers the possibility of living in complete truthfulness.

Bloom's theory about this is radical and exotic. We are all, he believes, unknowing gnostics, adherents of an ancient heresy that states that deep within ourselves we know the truth of God, but it is systematically concealed from us by the demons of this world. Gnosticism is about knowledge, not faith, and ultimately it derives from Plato's belief that "knowledge is memory, ignorance is forgetting". We feel we have arrived late because all knowledge is in the past; we cannot learn, we can only remember.

Indeed, the whole colourful spectacle of American Christianity is, for Bloom, an expression of this heresy. The hell-fire television preachers and the hard fundamentalism of the US are based not on mainstream religion, but on the paranoid conviction that the world is keeping us from our true, knowing selves. Again, in this context, government becomes an occult, truth-concealing force – anti-Washington feeling is at its strongest among the hard religious right.

So, for the contemporary gnostics, the truth really is out there, but is also deep within here. Mulder is a Platonist and a gnostic, a romantic, divinely inspired heretic. For him, "out there" and "in here" are one. It is symptomatic of the differences between American and British paranoia that *The Prisoner* ends in despair – though Number Six escapes, he himself turns out to be Number One and the door of his London house closes with the same sinister hum as that of his home in The Village. He was his own prison. But *The*



Patrick McGoochan as the crusader after truth in *The Prisoner*.

GLENN A. BAKER ARCHIVES

*X-Files* cannot really end, for Mulder's quest is outwards into the world. His truth will not be reduced to psychology and can only end with the arrival of the kingdom of the gnostic's god, when all the *X-Files* will finally be opened and their demonic, scheming keeper, Cancer Man, will be destroyed.

Bloom thinks these current popular expressions of an unknowing gnosticism are driven by the calendar. We all feel the irrational pressure of the millennium. And, even though he

does not believe the millennial apocalypse will come, he thinks the significance of the time drives us to believe in the hidden but soon to be revealed truth.

Maybe this is going too far, maybe this revival of an ancient heresy is, in fact, just the colourful idea of an imaginative and brilliant literary imagination. But it remains impossible to deny that now, more than ever before, conspiracy theories, alternative explanations, deviant readings of the world are in the air. And all seem to point to the central idea that there is a concealed truth and that it is interesting. This is a clear sign of the fact that the adult orthodoxy – the orthodoxy of Mulder's sceptical scientist partner, Dana Scully – is simply not enough. Confronted only with the imperatives of managed lives and a dominant, all too coherent, reductive science, we seek to become wondering children again, hiding in the wardrobe to hear what our parents get up to at night. Paranoia is okay, it keeps life interesting, it implies that the world involves us.

But what if, as C.I. Lewis suggests, the truth is not interesting? What if there is no pattern, nothing hidden but a few tawdry scandals? What if, as Norman Mailer found with his examination of the life of Kennedy's assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, there is nothing there, no conspiracy, not even a coherent psychological drama, just a contingent mess? This is the modern, secular gnostic's worst nightmare – that the truth, when revealed, will be that there is no "Truth".

Take your pick. Personally I'm with Number Six, Mulder, the teens and all other paranoids. The government is up to something, aliens have landed, nothing is ever what it seems and there is concealed significance in all things. That, anyway, is what it feels like to be alive now. And the good thing about feelings is that their truth is in here and cannot, finally, be challenged by anybody. □

## BRAIN GAMES

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

### CRYPTOSQUARE

Answers read the same down as across.

1. First pupil got up to Writing?
2. More mature royal follows tide.
3. Twisted rope a production.
4. Little referee smashed between Souths. Peasants!
5. Wipeout Queen as Easterner?

### RIDDLE

I am a word with letters four,  
I'm a nasty mess and a little bit more,  
I'm a beast if my letter order's not sure.  
Change them again, and I am, therefore.

### WHO SAID THAT?

Progress might have been all right once  
but it has gone on far too long.

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