

The X-Files

Subversive Ideas & Recuperative Media

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2017

The X-Files, the science fiction television series that aired from 1993 to 2002, featured fictional FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully concerned with unsolved cases involving paranormal phenomena and aliens. Its popularity was such that it made many young people aspire to be FBI agents of the same type. However, I never wanted to be Mulder or Scully. I wanted to be a member of the Lone Gunmen, three geeks on the program who published a conspiracy research zine which was often Mulder's source for information related to his cases.

I wonder how much influence the Gunmen had on my own practice of publishing zines. Probably much more than I realize. I still feel a very strong affinity for them. I can't watch the episode in which they die ("Jump the Shark") without crying at the end.

Still, the question needs to be posed, was The X-Files recuperation or subversion? Did it introduce ideas that undermine the current state of affairs? Or, did hegemony transform dangerous ideas into safe commodities?

Media theorist and early cyberpunk culture writer, Douglas Rushkoff, argues that subversive ideas were being introduced into mainstream media by countercultural hell raisers. He made the case in his 1996 book *Media Virus!* that "children's television and MTV, in fact, are the easiest places to launch countercultural missiles." He explains how this occurs using the science of memetics, the theory of mental content based on an analogy with Darwinian evolution, which rejects the idea that this was metaphorical, stating that media viruses are "not like viruses. They are viruses."

He explains that "the virus code mixes and competes for control with the cell's own genes, and, if victorious, it permanently alters the way the cell functions and reproduces." With this model the power of hegemony is minimized and the subversive possibility of counterculturalists is maximized.

However, Stephen Duncombe, author of many books on media and cultural studies, argues from the opposite position, that hegemony always attempts to recuperate subversive ideas. He writes that "the effect of watching The X-Files is to reinforce inactivity. Yes, conspiratorial forces do undermine our democracy, but knowing about it is simply 'cool...cool like us' as the Fox [network] billboard campaign for the show goes. Because this variety of political culture is something that people just watch, their natural role is that of audience to a spectacle."

Duncombe developed this critique of mainstream media's use of subversive themes from the work of German philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, particularly in his 1934 essay, "The Author as Producer," where Benjamin asserts that the means of production are critical to the quality of a text or work of art.

The form of manufacturing used to produce the work, the nature of its distribution, the literary forms used, are all crucial to the artwork itself. The meaning is not separate from the medium. The end product is formed through the modes by which the piece is produced. Benjamin writes that "the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it, seriously into question."

The author produces not only the obvious content, but also maintains and replicates the structures which they use to produce a work and distribute it to an audience. This also duplicates the role ascribed to the audience, whether they are complacent receivers or participants in the social process.

Take, for instance, one of the major influences on *The X-Files*, the work of conspiracy theorist Jim Keith. Chris Carter, the TV show's creator, acknowledges that Keith's book, *Secret and Suppressed*, was a major inspiration for the television program. Keith came out of the counterculture zine scene of the 1980s and '90s. He published "Dharma Combat," one of the best conspiracy zines, which included strong historical conspiracy research, lunatic fringe paranoid rants, occult exercises, and anarchist critical theory.

It featured a veritable who's who of the late '80s/early 90s counterculture. An issue could feature the conspiracy research of John Judge alongside polemics of Hakim Bey and Feral Faun; mind control articles next to flyers by Anti-Authoritarians Anonymous created by John Zerzan and Dan Todd. But the zine was participatory, as any reader could easily contribute, and often did. This was, obviously, not the case with a television program.

There are always unanticipated consequences. Look at the influence of early 20th century science fiction pulps on later zines and underground publishing. Pulp fiction magazines were capitalist products publishing to create a profit. Yet, from the letters section arose the contemporary fanzine, an anti-capitalist compositional form. Science fiction readers first connected to each other through letters columns.

Soon, they began publishing their own fanzines and editors quickly made the transition to the burgeoning alternative tabloids of the mid-1960s, as was the case with this publication 52 years ago. They transformed from passive consumers to active producers.

The X-Files may not be as subversive as some of its theme might suggest, but it contains something of a contemporary mythology. After one of the episodes featured an earlier edition of their book, authors Jonathan Vankin and John Whalen devoted a chapter to *The X-Files* in *The 70 Greatest Conspiracies of All Time*.

They point out "its canny ability to tap into the paranoid zeitgeist. Conspiracy theories have become a latter-day mythology, an alternative explanation of how things really work. And the *X-Files* mined that psycho-terrain every week. The program dealt with issues that provided a set of mythological themes and useful concepts that were not subversive to hegemony, but might now be used subversively.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/399-fall-2017/the-x-files>
Fifth Estate #399, Fall, 2017

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