“The Truth Is Out There”: The X-Files and QAnon in Popular Conspiracy Culture

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North American Studies

Master’s Thesis

University of Leiden

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Date: June 20, 2024

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Introduction

A secret cabal covertly guiding the destiny of humankind. A lone outsider fighting to uncover the truth, often at the cost of his reputation and sanity. Clues hidden in plain sight that have the potential to reveal how far the insidious web of lies and deception has been spun, just waiting to be assembled with the correct key. The classic conspiracy narrative has always held a strong appeal in the popular imagination of U.S. society, from tales of British plots against the fledgling republic in the eighteenth century to anxiety about communist infiltrations in the 1950s and the pervasive belief in government coverups spurred on by Watergate and other era-defining scandals.[1] More recently, the growing visibility of movements like QAnon elicits more profound questions about conspiracies' cultural and political potency in American society. After all, while the typical idea of conspiracy theories tends to invoke images of tinfoil hats and outsiders operating on the fringes of political discourse, there is an undeniably mainstream appeal to the very notion of conspiracy—that unseen forces are operating out of the view of the public eye. One would only have to look at the popularity of such shows as *Homeland* (2011-2020) and the original run of the cult classic *The X-Files* (1993-2002). However, these popular representations are, of course, first and foremost works of fiction. Does this fact thus imply that the cultural and political power of conspiracies is limited to entertainment? In other words, are conspiracies something to be indulged in for pleasure but otherwise safely marginalized, like some forbidden commodity?

This thesis is interested in engaging with these questions and the broader debate underpinning them. It will seek to critically investigate the cultural stigmatization of conspiracies and consider what it obscures and highlights. To do so, this thesis will use two particular cultural objects, namely *The X-Files* and the QAnon movement, and consider them through the lens of conspiracy studies. Though this choice may seem surprising, considering both as phenomena with their roots in a shared political and cultural heritage allows for a more meaningful discussion than treating them as

[1] See, for instance, Michael Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in American History," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London: Routledge, 2020), 648.

mere products of their contemporary contexts. As this thesis will illustrate, both operate within a compelling intersection of conspiracy discourse and popular culture, providing particular ways for their audiences and followers to grapple with feelings of uncertainty and distrust against authority. Considering both objects in this manner allows for contemplating such questions as how both speak to the power of conspiracy in the American popular imagination or how their decentralized ways of constructing mythos speak to the evolving nature of fiction and pop culture as political forces. And how do they function—or perhaps, fail to do so—within a context of resistance or conforming?

These questions will take center stage in the following inquiry. The more common sociological and psychological approaches to conspiracy theories will be set aside in favor of a more historical approach. The aim is to put the political in conversation with the cultural, interrogating the significance and processes of both *The X-Files* and QAnon through a lens of conspiracy and fiction as meaning-making processes in U.S. society since the Cold War. Through this approach, this thesis aims to build on the growing body of scholarship concerned with contemplating conspiracies in similar contexts in the past few decades.

In general, the study of conspiracy theories as a political force can be traced back at least half a century. Historian Richard J. Hofstadter's classic 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," for instance, already described a particular style deployed by American political figures to incite fear and rally followers by conjuring the image of malign forces covertly working to subvert their will.[2] Scholars such as Darren Mulloy and Roderick Hart have later applied Hofstadter's thesis in other political contexts, such as the emergence of extremist groups on the far right, and more recently also to the political style of Donald Trump, connecting his rhetorical techniques and other elements of his political persona to a broader historical current.[3] This connection between political extremism and conspiracy theories is featured as a central thread in many studies on the political

[2] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: An Essay: From The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (United States: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2016), 5.
[3] Darren Mulloy, *American Extremism: History, Politics and the Militia Movement* (Taylor & Francis, 2004), 17; Roderick P. Hart, "Donald Trump and the Return of the Paranoid Style," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (June 2020): 348.

potency of conspiracy culture, for instance, the influence of extremist political ideologies on conspiracy beliefs and the role of ideological media in perpetuating conspiracy theories.[4]

Similarly, the cultural implications of conspiracies have also been of great interest to scholars over the years. Peter Knight's *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X-Files* traces the history of conspiracy culture in America from the Cold War to the 1990s, positing the argument that conspiracy theories have gradually shifted away from the realm of the far right, as epitomized by McCarthyism in the 1950s, and came to embody a legitimate social response to globalizing attitudes by later decades.[5] This strand of thought, which no longer dismisses conspiracy theories as the delusional product of extremism but considers them as meaningful expressions of postwar anxieties, is critical in informing the realm of academic inquiry in which this thesis seeks to position itself. Scholars like Mark Fenster have continued to build on the argument, for instance, in his book *Conspiracy Theories Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, in which he posits that the dismissal of conspiracy theories as fringe and far-fetched risks marginalizing their potential as a form of resistance against authority structures.[6]

On the other hand, scholars like Katharina Thalmann have sought to counter the narrative that conspiracy theories have become more mainstream since the heydays of the 1950s-60s. In *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s*, Thalmann argues that while conspiracy movements like QAnon may have become more *visible* due to the proliferation of social media and the conventions of the modern media ecosystem, the actual substance of their beliefs is still widely disqualified in academic discourse.[7] In this reading, the ascent of a new populist right—think,

[4] Jan-Willem van Prooijen, André P. M. Krouwel, and Thomas V. Pollet," Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6, no. 5 (2015): 570; Esper Strömbäck, Elena Broda, Salma Bouchafra, Sofia Johansson, Gregor Rettenegger, and Elina Lindgren, "Conspiracy thinking and the role of media use: Exploring the antecedents of conspiratorial predispositions," *European Journal of Communication* 38, no. 3 (2023): 255.
[5] Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2013), 4.
[6] Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy theories: Secrecy and power in American culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii.
[7] Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make us Look Foolish"* (London: Routledge, 2019), 12.

Trump—that has increasingly offered a place for conspiracist beliefs is in itself not quite evidence that conspiracy theories have attained more legitimacy, because it is precisely at the fringe of the political spectrum that these movements meet and fuse. Indeed, Thalmann proposes that conspiracies exist as a kind of subculture, a commodity that exudes some level of popular appeal yet is also stigmatized in broader society.[8]

These debates illustrate the extent to which conspiracy theories' political and cultural capacity remains a source of interest and discussion among scholars. This thesis will offer its intervention in the ongoing debate by critically interrogating the cultural stigmatization that Thalmann details, in particular by examining how it obscures or otherwise marginalizes the compelling intersection between conspiracy and popular culture. In doing so, this thesis will draw upon a few scholars whose work covers these realms, such as historian Timothy Melley and television and media scholar Henry Jenkins. In his book *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Melley looks at the broader history of paranoia in the postwar United States, proposing that the emergence of a sense of crisis about individuality lies at the core of many contemporary anxieties that are strongly linked to popular conspiracies. Melley considers "agency panic," or the fear that individuals can be controlled by external entities, as a vital expression of these anxieties and explores the notion within a range of forms, including popular culture.[9] *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* deals with a separate but closely interrelated history, surveying the development of government secrecy since the Cold War and proposing that it has informed a unique kind of popular discourse. Melley claims that while the covert work of the state technically takes place out of the public eye, it is the subject of constant fascination and speculation, informing a whole body of popular culture. In other words, popular fiction like spy thrillers and black ops games are key cultural artifacts through which the public "knows" or

[8] Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory*, 13.
[9] Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 14.

"imagines" the secret work of the state.[10] In this sense, popular culture is a critical component of civil discourse, and a certain kind of paranoia is legitimized as a condition of good citizenship.[11]

Furthermore, while the television and media scholar Henry Jenkins has not written about conspiracy culture in particular, his pioneering work on fan culture in books such as *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* is nonetheless vital in informing some of the links between conspiracy and popular culture that this thesis seeks to explore. Specifically, Jenkins' conceptualization of participatory culture, which examines the creative agency of consumers of media as producers of content, forms an essential link through which the cultural objects of this critical inquiry—*The X-Files* and QAnon—will be put into conversation with one another.[12]

In terms of methodology, a blend of approaches will be applied. The majority will consist of a combination of content and discourse analysis, partly considering *The X-Files* and QAnon as distinct phenomena with their roots in specific contexts (90s culture, the rise of the Internet, populist movements) but mainly focusing on their overlap in terms of epistemology and their capacity for offering a space to act out fantasies of resistance. In other words, this thesis aims to investigate how both *The X-Files* and QAnon engage with the construction of knowledge and notions of 'truth' through both individual narratives and a broader community of 'fans' and 'followers' around them and then consider how these constructed spaces allow for a kind of imagined resistance against established authorities. To do so, this thesis will partly draw upon analyses from scholars who have separately investigated relevant facets of *The X-Files* and QAnon—such as *The X-Files* episodes and fan-produced content, as well as QAnon posts—to synthesize its original argument. Conclusions drawn from these analyses will also be read through the conceptual frameworks of Melley's covert sphere and Jenkins' notion of participatory culture, which shall be the crux of this thesis' intervention in the academic field.

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[10] Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 14.
[11] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 12.
[12] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 229.

Chapter 1 will set the stage for this analysis by discussing the historical context of conspiracy culture and the stigmatization of conspiracy theories since the 1960s through the lens of conspiracy films and television, drawing on research by Katharina Thalmann and Michael Butter. Certain particulars, such as the emergence of a self-reflexive trend in conspiracy media, will be introduced and contextualized for use in later chapters. Chapter 2 will then focus on *The X-Files* and its position in 1990s conspiracy culture. Attention will be devoted to the show's distinct position in the broader landscape of television, particularly the effect of "Quality Television" on its portrayal of conspiracies, in order to consider how *The X-Files* can be read as both a representation and problematization of conspiracy culture. Most prominently, the chapter will spotlight the first-of-their-kind online fan communities that emerged along with the show's original airing and contemplate these through the lens of participatory culture. Finally, Chapter 3 will shift the focus to the QAnon movement, investigating its dynamics as a notably different kind of conspiracy theory and interrogating how it differs from 'traditional' conspiracies regarding its online activity and roots in popular culture. Comparisons to *The X-Files* will, of course, take center stage. In performing this analysis, this thesis hopes to formulate an answer to the question: what is the significance of the cultural stigmatization of conspiracy theories in American society since the Cold War, particularly as it relates to the intersection of popular and conspiracy culture?

Chapter 1: Communists agents and the enemy within: the historical context of popular conspiracy culture

Conspiracy theories have been a feature of American political culture and public discourse since its very founding. As Richard Hofstadter observed in his classic 1964 essay, the fear that foreign and external forces were conspiring to overthrow the American republic had been successfully marshaled by U.S. political leaders for decades, reaching its crescendo at the onset of the Cold War, when paranoia about communist influences permeated every realm of American society.[13] Nevertheless, today, the notion of conspiracy theories is more likely to raise eyebrows than to invite any serious form of contemplation. Indeed, despite holding a prominent position in the popular imagination, it would be safe to say that conspiracy discourse has been relegated to the fringes of political culture, often dismissed as irrational or paranoid by mainstream society and marginalized within academic and intellectual circles.[14]

This apparent tension between the stigmatization of conspiracy thinking and its popularity in popular culture exposes some key questions that are both relevant to the historical assessment of (conspiracy) fiction as a meaning-making process and the scholarship on conspiracy discourse at large. It invites a deeper contemplation on media like literature, films, and TV shows as living cultural texts that produce a distinct meaning through an intersection of contemporary context and narrative tradition. Conspiracy films in the 1950s, for instance, had an inherent political potential that was markedly different from conspiracy films in later decades, especially as the status of conspiracy thinking began to shift in broader society and the conventions of Hollywood allowed for more complex and ambiguous narratives. To understand *The X-Files* and QAnon as lenses into a particular strand of popular culture, it is imperative to make some historical sense of this strand.

The objective of this chapter is, in short, to engage with the history of the cultural stigmatization of conspiracy theories since the 1950s, mainly through the lens of films and TV

[13] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 5.
[14] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in American History," 654.

shows. How did the paradigm shift from treating conspiracies as sources of legitimate knowledge to pushing them out to the fringes of intellectual and cultural discourse, and more importantly, how did this reflect in popular media?

Popular conspiracy fiction at the onset of the Cold War

The assertion that the very nature of the Cold War itself enabled a proliferation of conspiracy thinking is hardly a stretch. As Kenneth Osgood describes in his article on the construction of the communist threat in the American consciousness, in the few years between the end of World War II in 1945 and the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s, the American perception of the Soviet Union as an aggravating competitor shifted to one of an existential threat to civilization, a menace with its sinister tentacles reaching deep into every segment of U.S. society.[15] Indeed, the construction of communism as a primarily *ideological* threat had far-reaching implications for how the U.S. would wage war on its perceived adversaries moving forward and how ordinary citizens understood those adversaries. No longer confined to faraway states overseas, the enemy could now be found working its influence through any potential source of domestic anxiety. As Osgood further notes, this shift in thinking provided a fertile breeding ground for paranoia, which manifested itself in the form of a rabid anticommunist hysteria that targeted every realm of American society, from Washington to Hollywood.[16] McCarthyism's effect on public discourse was particularly potent, as Ellen Shrecker argues. The fear that any idea or argument straying from accepted norms and values could be perceived as treason led to a significant moderation of public debate. This development was underpinned by inherent distrust as a condition for civil participation.[17]

[15] Kenneth Osgood, "The American Construction of the Communist Threat," in *The Cambridge History of America and the World*, vol. 4, David C. Engerman, Max Paul Friedman, and Melani McAlister, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 126.
[16] Osgood, "The American Construction of the Communist Threat," 126.
[17] Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 369.

Cultural anxieties were not the only force reshaping the contours of American democracy, however. As indicated, the implications of a communist menace that poisoned the minds of ordinary people prompted the U.S. government to drastically rethink its approach to waging war. Although espionage and covert operations were by no means novel elements of warfare, the extent to which the Truman administration and successive administrations escalated them certainly marked a turning point in U.S. foreign and military policy. As Melley argues, the enactment of NSC-10/2 by President Truman in 1948—which significantly expanded the CIA's mandate to include a host of subversive activities and further stipulated that the government should be able to plausibly deny any responsibility for them—meant that he "institutionalized not simply secret warfare but also public deception as a *fundamental* element of U.S. policy."[18] In other words, the U.S. government paradoxically understood a suspension of democratic processes as key to preserving those same democratic processes.

The point here is not to engage with the broader question of whether the Cold War permanently instilled a culture of paranoia in U.S. society or whether a shadow bureaucracy undermined the democratic system, but rather to reflect on how these historical developments reconfigured the boundaries of public knowledge and created suitable conditions for a new mode of discourse to emerge. As Melley notes, the fact that the U.S. government framed its position as being in a "war of minds" with the Soviet Union and thus explicitly embraced a strategy of "counter-lies" to combat lies, fostered a culture of irrationalism, one that conflated fact and fiction and prompted the public to distrust *all* stories, no matter their source.[19] Melley, in other words, understands the Cold War and its regimes of covert action as not the sole but one of several factors that "altered the conditions of public knowledge in postwar Western societies, generating a pervasive skepticism about the public's ability to know what is real and true."[20]

[18] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 11.
[19] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 36.
[20] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 37.

Popular culture reflected—and, to a striking degree, also played an influential role in perpetuating—this reality. One handy example to illustrate this point is the cultural phenomenon of brainwashing. As mentioned, fears of external influences have long been a feature of U.S. political culture. However, not until the onset of the Cold War would these fears morph into a perceived threat to the individual body that citizens experienced on such a profoundly personal level. According to Melley, the concept of brainwashing, as it eventually came to take shape in the American popular imagination, was first popularized in 1950 by journalist Edward Hunter, who used it to explain the mass "reeducation" of Chinese citizens.[21] This concept, as articulated by Hunter, would soon start to be used to explain away the confessions given by American POWs who condemned U.S. criminal activity in the war or even the war itself, providing instead the narrative that these POWs had been captured by communist forces and subsequently conditioned to sympathize with their ideology. The fear that perfectly healthy, ordinary men could have their personalities taken control of and turned into unwitting drones fit both within a broader pattern of cultural anxieties related to a loss of bodily autonomy—such as insecurity about emasculation, to name another one—and a larger propagated narrative of free American spirit being under siege by communist collectivism.[22]

This narrative was bolstered by a body of scholarship that was essentially, as Melley compellingly shows, influenced by fiction. The dystopian, totalitarian fiction of writers such as George Orwell and Arthur Koestler served as legitimate academic references, forming accurate expressions of news coming from communist countries.[23] Such a conflation of legitimate scholarly discussion and fictional writing testifies to how the contours of early Cold War epistemology and public discourse had been altered, lending an undeniable strength to the cultural fantasies of conspiracy—imagined or otherwise.

[21] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 47.
[22] Gregory A. Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 3.
[23] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 54.

Films and TV shows also reflected this reality, where the perceived threat to individualism and bodily integrity was clear-cut and ever-present. As Michael Butter argues, a combination of a loosening of legal restrictions on the film industry and Hollywood's commitment to burnishing its anti-communist credentials in the face of HUAC investigations led to a wave of films that were generally very straightforward in their depictions of the threats facing American society. Reflecting the authoritative status of conspiracy theory in early Cold War society, these films featured the fundamental premise that the existence of a conspiracy was always a given and thus focused less on the potentially ill-fated pursuit of an elusive truth than the valiant efforts to foil these foreign plots.[24] Examples include *Suddenly* (1954), Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which recasts a potential invasion of the U.S. as an invasion of alien imposters.[25]

What is more, the cultural construction of brainwashing produced profound political consequences within the realm of democracy, civil rights, and state policy. As Melley explains, most of the initial reports that popularized brainwashing were part of a CIA propaganda campaign to inspire public fears of communism and increase support for military buildup. However, the compartmentalization of the CIA's bureaucracy and intelligence activities led the agency *itself* to take the reports of brainwashing seriously, prompting it to pursue the development of a mind-control weapon through the program of torture and chemical experimentation that would eventually come to be known as MK-ULTRA. While this program in itself proved to be ineffective, it did end up producing the techniques that would form the foundation of the enhanced interrogation programs during the War on Terror.[26]

This dynamic, in essence, underpins what Melley refers to as the "covert sphere." The concept describes not just a secret U.S. government bureaucracy, nor does it assume that cultural

[24] Michael Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London: Routledge, 2020), 460.
[25] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 459.
[26] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 59.

works like spy thrillers and special ops movies are merely fictional representations of this bureaucracy. It centers around "an ideological arena with profound effects on democracy, citizenship, and state policy."[27] Melley presents this arena in contrast to Jürgen Habermas' idea of the public sphere, which is usually defined by rationality and critical thinking, and thus emphasizes the role of "irrational" narrative fiction in shaping the covert sphere.[28]

The covert sphere helps contextualize the power of conspiracy discourse and its expression in popular conspiracy culture during the onset of the Cold War. The unprecedented escalation of psychological warfare, the institutionalization of public deception, and a proliferation of domestic anxieties all blended in a powerful epistemological crisis where cultural fantasies like brainwashing held immense sway over the public imagination. Films and TV shows like *Suddenly* and *I Led 3 Lives* (1953-1956) served not merely as inconsequential entertainment but as expressions of a widespread sense of threat that affected Americans on a profoundly personal level. Furthermore, the CIA's experiments with "brain warfare" also testify to the political strength of these fictions, which served not merely as propaganda but also actively directed government policy.[29] Hofstadter's paranoid style, as it seems, had transformed into a potent political-cultural force that played a fundamental role in postwar U.S. society. The question is, then, whether it would remain a *lasting* force.

Popular conspiracy fiction 1960s-1980s: knowledge or fiction?

In 1962, *The Manchurian Candidate* was released in American theaters. Featuring a storyline about an American POW who returned to his homeland as a communist sleeper agent who was crucial to a plot to overthrow the U.S. government, the film would seem like a shoo-in for the cultural tradition that routinely depicted an unequivocal communist threat. However, a small scene between

[27] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 10.
[28] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 10.
[29] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 67.

the conditioned main character and his love interest problematizes this assumption. The love interest's strangely assertive questioning of the sleeper agent and his confused reactions initially seem to suggest her implication in the communist plot. By the film's conclusion, however, it turns out that she had nothing to do with the whole plan.

The way in which *The Manchurian Candidate* surreptitiously attempts to evoke a sense of paranoia—who are the real communist agents here?—functions as a microcosm for the change in cultural treatment of conspiracies in the decades following the Korean War. While the threat of external influences still loomed large over American life, cultural depictions of conspiracies increasingly began to reflect the epistemological environment that allowed them to thrive in the first place. As Butter argues, building on Thalmann's argument, conspiracy films since the 1960s reflected a trend of conspiracy theories not growing in mainstream influence but instead undergoing a process of stigmatization that explicitly problematized their status as knowledge.[30]

One key distinction that started to emerge in their narratives, for instance, was with respect to the *nature* of the threat. Films like *Executive Action* (1973) and *All the President's Men* (1976) no longer depicted straightforward communist evildoers plotting against America but featured a more comprehensive array of antagonists that tapped into a broadening spectrum of domestic anxieties about corporate and social control.[31] Moreover, these narratives increasingly started to suggest the possibility that the grand conspiracies threatening the American way of life originated within the U.S. government itself. Distrust of government actors was, of course, a long-running feature of American political culture—the premise of McCarthyism was in no insignificant measure rooted in perceived communist elements working their influence in the federal bureaucracy—though what is clear is that the cultural shocks brought on by watershed events like the Kennedy assassination, growing disillusionment with the Vietnam War, as well as leaks about the CIA's covert operations

[30] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 458.
[31] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 459.

in the 1970s lent a growing sense of credibility to the idea that the federal government was growing dangerously out of control.[32]

On the one hand, conspiracy theories can be viewed as a natural, cultural expression of these sentiments. Still, the question remains whether their popularity in this sense can be attributed to a mainstreaming of conspiracist discourse in general. Indeed, as far as depictions in popular culture were concerned, the notion seems doubtful at best.

Butter, for instance, makes an explicit distinction between the conspiracy films of the 1950s and the conspiracy *theory* films of later decades, which he reads in connection to the emerging stigmatization of conspiracy theories writ large. Building on depictions of ambiguous threats, as mentioned earlier, these features focused less on the effort to defeat the conspiracy. Instead, they centralized the protagonist's quest to uncover the truth, which often involved arduous efforts to convince others of the existence of an insidious plot. Thus, in making the protagonist's own suspicions and process of investigation a key subject of the narrative, filmmakers highlighted the paranoid nature of conspiratorial thinking and problematized its function as a way of getting to the truth. In this sense, Butter argues, conspiracy theory films attained a kind of self-reflexive aesthetic that treated conspiracies as something to be approached both with seriousness and ridicule.[33]

Butter goes on to chart the trends of conspiracy films and conspiracy theory films into the present, observing that even as recent decades marked the return of filmic traditions in which the conspiracy is played straight, the self-reflexiveness is often shed because conspiracies have already attained a stigmatized status in larger culture.[34] In other words, delegitimizing conspiracies as sources of legitimate knowledge is no longer relevant or necessary because such conspiracies are already broadly accepted as inconsequential fictions within non-serious discourse.

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[32] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 542.
[33] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 460.
[34] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 461.

In his examination of this history, Butter makes a point that is worthy of deeper contemplation. He argues that the changing portrayals of conspiracies and conspiracy theorists were as much influenced by shifting cultural attitudes as shifting filmic conventions.[35] Thus, the conspiracy theory films, focusing on paranoid protagonists, were not merely the results of a different outlook on the value of conspiracies as explanatory models but also on New Hollywood practices that emphasized nonlinear and ambiguous narratives and questioned the narrative agency itself.[36]

This notion is important because it underlines the nature of conspiracy films and TV as constructs shaped by cultural discourses and informed by their narrative traditions. In other words, to revisit the question of how to read popular conspiracy fiction within broader frameworks like the covert sphere (as political action or harmless entertainment?), it would be imperative to consider both their contemporary context and the narrative traditions from which they emerged.

This helps to contextualize the apparent shift between the conspiracy films and TV shows from the early 1950s and the conspiracy theory films and TV shows in later decades. The political function of conspiracy media in the 1950s can be understood as perpetuating conspiratorial thinking as a mode of explanation in larger society because 1) conspiracies were accepted as an orthodox form of knowledge and 2) the narrative traditions of Hollywood reflected simple, linear, and unambiguous plots, thus lending themselves well to propaganda purposes or, as Melley describes them, "strategic fictions."[37] By contrast, the political quality of conspiracy theory films of the 1970s and later decades can be more understood as *delegitimizing* conspiracies as models of explanation, which was enabled by both a broader cultural trend and the shifting conventions of New Hollywood.

[35] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 461.
[36] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 461.
[37] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 16.

The 'Post-Truth' Society of the 1990s

By the onset of the 1990s, some diverging interpretations concerning the state of popular conspiracy culture can be distinguished. On the one hand, the cultural fantasy of conspiracy still had a clear appeal: the release of Oliver Stone's controversial *JFK* in 1991, for instance, garnered both attention and intellectual criticism for its unabashed engagement with conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination.[38] Underpinning these reactions was an implicit sense of conspiracy discourse as a whole; conspiracy theorizing *was* an appealing commodity, but more in the way that pulp fiction or comic books were consumed for simple enjoyment rather than engaging in rational discourse. The genre was something to be enjoyed for the mere purposes of entertainment but hardly had any place in the serious marketplace of ideas—let alone serve as a legitimate epistemological model or produce any meaningful political action.[39]

On the other hand, though, the broad popularity of conspiracy fiction—like *JFK* and, indeed, later, *The X-Files*—would suggest an appeal that extended beyond mere amusement. Indeed, some scholars have put the apparent attraction of conspiracy theories in conversation with the larger emergence of a strand of "post-truth" politics that was epitomized by such scandals as the Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s, wherein the practice of government deception bred public anxieties about what can reasonably be claimed as the truth.[40] Scholars such as Simona Stano, Clare Birchall, and Peter Knight have also spotlighted the advent of the Internet and its implications for public discourse, democracy, and information sharing.[41] In this sense, conspiracy discourse can be

[38] William D. Romanowski, "Oliver Stone's JFK: Commercial filmmaking, cultural history, and conflict," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21, no. 2 (1993): 63.
[39] Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory*, 13.
[40] See, for instance, Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 4; William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* [Fifth Edition] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 469-470.
[41] See, for instance, Simona Stano, "The internet and the spread of conspiracy content," in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. Micheal Butter and Peter Knight (London: Routledge, 2020), 483; Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, "Do your own research: Conspiracy theories and the internet," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (2022): 579.

understood as a potent political and cultural force that, despite its mainstream stigmatization, offered a space to make sense of an increasingly modernized and globalized world.

The brief history of conspiracy thinking and its representation in popular media that has been explored in this chapter illuminates some fundamental notions and questions that will frame the following chapters. As mentioned, there is a discernible shift from the Cold War paradigm of conspiracies as orthodox knowledge to cultural stigmatization, one that was reflected in the depiction of conspiracy plots in popular films and TV shows. Nonetheless, these depictions still acknowledge a particular value in conspiracy discourse while simultaneously problematizing it as a way of thinking. Thus, the question follows how to make more sense of conspiratorial thinking from the 1990s onwards, particularly within political action and popular culture. This is where *The X-Files* enters the fold.

Chapter 2: The *X-Files* as Imagined Resistance

The 1990s—or, more specifically, the dawn of the digital age and the rise of the Internet—had significant implications for the development of conspiracy culture and its larger societal position. As Michael Butter details, the decentralized nature of the Internet fostered the emergence of counter-publics that resisted the hegemony of the public sphere and its information institutes. Instead, they produced their own discussion sites, media outlets, and public experts.[42] These developments would perhaps suggest a revitalized role for conspiracy theorizing as a mode of discourse. After all, reading conspiracy theories as a rebellion against authority—piecing together the *real* story, as opposed to the narratives generated by institutes like government agencies—positions conspiracy theorizing as a particularly suitable language for these counter-publics. On the other hand, cultural stigmatization—as explored in the previous chapter—clearly problematizes the notion that conspiracy theorizing became a mainstream practice. Thus, one would be right to ask how the power of conspiracy discourse during the 1990s and early 2000s could be appropriately described.

This is where *The X-Files* comes in. The show lends itself particularly well to making sense of popular conspiracy culture because, as the following analysis will show, it functions as a cultural artifact that both comments and actively feeds off conspiracy culture. To clarify, this refers to how the show represents conspiratorial thinking through its characters and narratives, as well as how the show's central structure functions as a kind of grand conspiracy that invites fans to look for hidden meanings and construct their own theories and narratives.

Thus, dissecting why *The X-Files* is such an emblematic expression of 90s conspiracy culture requires a more thorough examination of several separate but interrelated components. The following analysis will be divided into two parts. The first half will mainly focus on the show's representation of conspiracy, taking Butter's analysis of conspiracy films and TV shows as a

[42] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in American History," 656-657.

starting point. A central focal point will be how the show embraces conspiratorial thinking as a way of resisting authority while also problematizing it as a method of getting to the truth, a dynamic most clearly visible in its central narrative, or mytharc. (This term will be further elaborated on in the following sections.) The analysis will also show how this representation is not merely rooted in general cultural attitudes towards conspiracies but also in the show's technical shift to what media scholars have referred to as quality TV and postmodern conventions, to further nuance *The X-Files*' twin positions as part of a broader cultural landscape and television in particular. The second half will examine the relationship between fans and the show through the lens of participatory culture, focusing on how *The X-Files* functions as a broader search for meaning through its online communities. The two central elements of this analysis—how the show problematizes conspiracy as an epistemological model and how it furnishes its fans with a creative and political capital—underpin the question of how *The X-Files* creates a space for imagined resistance, which will also form the main point of comparison to the QAnon movement in the following chapter.

"The truth is out there"

As outlined in the last chapter, the general depiction of conspiracy theorizing in film and television by the 1990s had taken on a distinctive self-reflexive quality that emphasized the precarious nature of its search for the truth. Notably, while these depictions often featured overtones of paranoia, and some media certainly portrayed conspiracies as irrational affairs, they did not necessarily deny the premise of conspiracy theorizing. Put differently, even if conspiracy theories were usually the bread and butter of paranoid protagonists desperately searching for clues to discover what was really going on, the underlying premise that the 'official' narrative provided by institutional sources was a lie often remained uncontested.

Reading *The X-Files* through this lens already provides some insight into its political and cultural power. As Charles Taylor writes on the relation between the show and the political scene of the 90s:

> What links up the show to the zeitgeist is that Mulder and Scully are working to get out from under the most enduring legacy of the Reagan/Bush era: the way government, in the words of the Situationist philosopher Guy Debord, "[proclaims] that whatever it said was all there was." In other words, that the truth is irrelevant. The X-Files is about insisting on truth that runs counter to all ideas about how things are supposed to work, ideas so deeply ingrained that those in power can call them up to deny reality merely because it sounds crazy. Week after week, in the course of their investigations, Mulder and Scully find that behind their cases lies some secret government experiment or program kept from the public because it won't be able to "handle" the truth.[43]

Taylor's connection between the *X-Files* and its contemporary political context underlines a critical dimension of the national security state that Melley has also given attention to in his discussion of the covert sphere. Although Melley's initial conceptualization of the national security state and its relation to the public is primarily formulated through the lens of the Cold War, some relevant implications are also helpful here. Put summarily, Melley analyzes the national security bureaucracy and its reliance on secrecy through a gendered lens, arguing that the government takes on a strong, fatherly role by keeping the public safe from external threats—primarily by keeping them blissfully unaware of said threats. In this view, the public is transformed into a kind of domesticated, feminine herd, which is to take every narrative provided to them as an accurate representation of reality because the 'truth' would be too complex and distressing to handle.[44]

[43] Charles Taylor, "Truth decay: Sleuts after Reagan," *Millenium Pop* 1, No. 1 (Summer 1994): 9.
[44] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 66.

Read through this prism of the all-knowing state and the docile public, *The X-Files* attains a kind of resistive quality, expressing a sense of social anxiety about being kept in the dark for the sake of one's own good. So much is reinforced by Mulder's frequent declarations that the actual threat being posed to the public is not so much the aliens as the government that is ferociously working to deny their existence, for instance, in the Season 1 episode "Fallen Angel:"

> Mulder: How can I disprove lies that are stamped with an official seal?
>
> Section Chief McGrath: That will be all, Mr. Mulder.
>
> Mulder: You can deny all the things I've seen, all the things that I've discovered. But not for much longer. 'Cause too many others know what's happening out there. And no one—no government agency—has jurisdiction over the truth.[45]

Interestingly, this resistive quality is seldom portrayed as being wholly rational. Although one of the show's trademark aesthetics is the juxtaposition of science and fringe beliefs through the characters of Mulder and Scully, their search for one universal truth that underpins both the show's individual episodes and the larger, overarching narrative is more often than not depicted as elusive, ill-fated and at worst, paranoid. Season 3 episode "The List" as well as Season 5 episode "The Pine Bluff Variant," for instance, both serve as examples of standalone episodes that usually have the two agents deal with some mystery that either proves supernatural in nature or the result of a covert government project, but that also often end with the duo failing to uncover the real reasons behind

[45] *The X-Files*, season 1 episode 10, "Fallen Angel," directed by Larry Shaw, written by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, aired November 19, 1993, https://www.disneyplus.com/nl-nl/play/dd168ab0-a68a-4706-a255-4e0c07f1acc9, 00:43:10.

the plot after all.[46] "The List" deals with the agents investigating several murders inside a prison complex that are mysteriously linked to a deceased death row inmate. While Mulder eventually comes close to the apparent culprit behind the murders, namely the reincarnated inmate, the episode ends inconclusive, with Scully eventually persuading him to drop the case. In "The Pine Bluff Variant," Mulder goes undercover in an anti-government militia that has come into possession of a mysterious pathogen, which eventually turns out to be a bioweapon manufactured by the U.S. government. While the agents thus manage to uncover the government involvement, any evidence of the toxin has been removed or taken away by the end of the episode. As it would seem, the 'truth' appears to be as elusive as ever.

Part of the narrative technique embedded in such episodes can be ascribed to the larger self-reflexive cultural tradition that defined a large collection of conspiracy theory fiction after the Cold War. This dynamic is, to a large extent, present in the central aesthetic of the show itself, which represents the concept of conspiratorial thinking through the duality of 'serious' conspiracies (Scully's scientific thinking, government coverups) and more 'playful' ones (Mulder's goofy obsession with aliens, outlandish supernatural plots). Thus, in other words, the show at its heart reflects the paradoxical, blurred nature of conspiracy culture as both played for laughs and serious consideration.

As mentioned earlier, however, it is important to note that *The X-Files*' mediation of conspiracies is as much rooted in cultural attitudes as the changing conventions of television production. To properly analyze the significance of *The X-Files* in television history and the broader context of popular conspiracy culture, it would thus be appropriate to consider how the show represented a break with previous conventions.

[46] *The X-Files*, season 3, episode 5, "The List," written by Chris Carter, directed by Chris Carter, aired October 20, 1995, https://www.disneyplus.com/nl-nl/play/a0c491fb-b206-4f72-8d1d-bf2f31fcd4e5; *The X-Files*, season 5, episode 18, "The Pine Bluff Variant," written by John Shiban, directed by Rob Bowman, aired May 3, 1998, https://www.disneyplus.com/nl-nl/play/4bee7eae-bc98-4586-a3dc-9a9398a1b981.

The mythology episodes

Writing about the history of television since the 1950s, media scholar Robert J. Thompson in 1997 described a nostalgia-fueled view of the 1950s as television's "golden age" that was quite problematic when looking at the actual quality of the programs.[47] However, the late 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a notably distinct trend in television programming that critics "thought was better, more sophisticated and more artistic than the usual network fare."[48] It is thus against this historical background that *The X-Files*—and other television shows in this vein—should be considered. They represent, in other words, a new paradigm in television that Thompson defines by characteristics such as breaking established rules of television, defying genre classification, containing literary qualities, having a "memory" (referring back to previous episodes), and containing sharp social and cultural criticisms with cultural references and allusions to popular culture.[49]

Some of these aspects have already been touched upon in the previous analysis of *The X-Files*' cultural portrayal of conspiracies, but of particular concern here is the show's development of multiple narratives around a central mythology, or "mytharc" as it has been referred to by the show's writers and fanbase, a contraction of the terms "mythology" and "(story) arc."[50]

This central mytharc should be read as follows: the show consists of a blend of so-called standalone monster of the week-episodes, which usually follow self-contained plots and thus resemble more episodic television, and mythology episodes, each of which is connected and advance an overarching conspiracy narrative. This narrative follows Mulder and Scully's attempts to uncover a sinister government plot involving a shadow syndicate, the coverup of the existence of

[47] Robert J. Thomspon, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 12-13.
[48] Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 13.
[49] Thomspon, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 13-16.
[50] A.J. Black, *Myth-building in Modern Media: The Role of the Mytharc in Imagined Worlds* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), 4.

extraterrestrial life, and experimentation with alien DNA on unwitting civilians. Although the mytharc was initially praised for its compelling direction and positively received by audiences, it began to be criticized over its progression as the narrative grew more unfocused and convoluted.[51]

At its heart, the mytharc provides a quintessential dramatized conspiracy narrative: the tale of two lone agents working to uncover a covert plot, meticulously chasing down clues that reveal the extent of the conspiracy bit by bit. However, the construction of the narrative in the broader show is worth paying further attention to, particularly with regard to Thompson's point about memory and self-referencing. Honing in on the show's blending of episodic episodes with mythology episodes, Butter observes how the *X-Files* complicates narrative causality in a way that produces compelling implications for its portrayal of conspiracy. Many mytharc episodes do advance the broader conspiracy narrative but also end up with the agents seemingly no step closer to unraveling the full extent of the secret plot, or end up with some false flag with no connection to the conspiracy at all. Moreover, because it is often not immediately apparent whether a seemingly standalone monster-of-the-week episode is, in fact, standalone at all, the audience is left contemplating any potential connection to the broader mythology.[52] In this sense, the show represents a quest for meaning and truth, where every tiny detail, story beat, or character development could have potentially profound ramifications in the larger scheme of things, or perhaps none.

This particular impact made by quality TV conventions is made more explicit by Kristin Thompson, who explicitly links the complication of causality and the production of ambiguity in television narratives to postmodernism. Focusing on postmodern influences in *Twin Peaks*, which in many ways served as a spiritual predecessor to *The X-Files*, she describes conventions within this strand of television production as "...a loosening of causality, a greater emphasis on psychological or anecdotal realism, violations of classical clarity of space and time, explicit authorial comment,

[51] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: the poetics of contemporary television storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 19.
[52] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows," 465.

and ambiguity."[53] Read within this context, it can be concluded that *The X-Files* deliberately positions its portrayal of conspiracy in the framework of postmodernism, raising meaningful questions about the show's epistemology. On the one hand, it seems to suggest that an objective, tangible truth exists (the government is lying; the truth is out there), though, on the other hand, it seems to undermine its own protagonists 'capacity for knowing this truth (mainly through an ever-expanding and diffuse mythology.)

Reading *The X-Files* as an act of resistance

How, then, could one characterize *The X-Files*'s political and cultural significance, particularly concerning conspiracy theories and resistance against authority? As the previous analysis has illustrated, the show, on the one hand, offers a salient resistive quality in its portrayal of the overbearing national security state and the emasculated public, serving Mulder and Scully up as a heroic duo through which the audience can imagine themselves rebelling against the government and its need for secrecy. On the other hand, the show deliberately undermines its capacity for resistance by problematizing its epistemological basis for knowing the truth, most prominently by invoking conventions closely aligned with postmodernist quality TV.

One more dimension relevant to this problem is how watching *The X-Files* qualifies as an act of resistance—or perhaps not. As Charles Soukup argues in his article *Television Viewing as Vicarious Resistance*, while the show offers a straightforward kind of *fantasy* of resistance through the characters of Mulder and Scully and their fight against covert forces, in which the audience can imagine themselves and relate their disillusionment with the government, watching *The X-Files* as a *show* is not quite an act of resistance, because it does not produce any substantive and meaningful political action against the actual hegemonic systems in the real world.[54] In other words, Soukup

[53] Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, May 2003), 110.
[54] Charles Soukup," Television Viewing as Vicarious Resistance: The X-Files and Conspiracy Discourse," *Southern Communication Journal* 68, no. 1 (2002): 16. doi:10.1080/10417940209373248.

interprets the show within a paradoxical context, proposing that *The X-Files* offers a capacity for imagined resistance while perpetuating the same systems it pretends to resist. To some extent, this view can also be read in conversation with Melley's covert sphere, which also rests on the notion that fictional portrayals of the national security state and its secret work are, in fact, a vital part of that same system, offering people salient fantasies through which they imagine the covert work of the state.[55]

Without fully engaging with all the specifics of Soukup's argument, a limited reading of his claim raises an interesting question concerning the show's cultural-political appeal. There is, after all, little evidence to suggest that the show inspires an actual belief in conspiracy theories.[56] But does this also mean that, much like conspiracy discourse in broader society, its political capacity should be marginalized because the show is an 'inconsequential' work of fiction?

Before attempting to answer this question, one more significant part of the show and its surrounding discourse should be investigated. After all, while much of the analysis so far has focused on the show's dynamics that have mainly been given shape by the producers and staff, there is one additional area in which *The X-Files* broke ground, namely the rise of online fan communities.

X-Philes and the Power of Participatory Culture

As mentioned previously, *The X-Files* found itself in a unique moment in media history, not merely in terms of the shift to quality TV but also in how the burgeoning Internet provided a new platform for fans to deepen their engagement with the show. An explicit link between the Internet and conspiracy culture has already been established by Butter, who describes the rise of counter-publics

[55] Melley, *The Covert Sphere*, 14.
[56] Kenzo Nera, Myrto Pantazi, and Olivier Klein, "'These Are Just Stories, Mulder': Exposure to Conspiracist Fiction Does Not Produce Narrative Persuasion," *Front Psychol* 9 (2018), 684.

and their own sites of information, which thus resist traditional information institutes.[57] The point here is to directly connect with Jenkins, whose notions of participatory culture and textual poachers also rest on the agency of fans as producers of new cultural materials that are "poached" from a traditional mass media production like *The X-Files*.[58] In doing so, this thesis will illuminate yet another way in which the show positions its relationship to conspiracy culture.

One helpful lens for analyzing this dynamic is the relationship between the two main characters, Mulder and Scully. While there are varying angles from which their dynamic could be interpreted—the contrast between science and conspiracy theories, skepticism and belief, for instance—the main question that occupied many of the show's fans during its original airing was of a notably more romantic kind. Indeed, as Christine A. Wooley writes, "In the long-running debates over the current status and future direction of Mulder and Scully's relationship, we see the ideology of *The X-Files* […] intersect with the experiences of fandom."[59] In other words, Wooley refers to how the show constantly deferred any meaningful resolution on the true nature of Mulder and Scully's relationship—romantic or platonic—and how this strongly parallels the show's overall conspiracy narrative. Much like the mytharc and the agents' pursuit of the truth, hints of a romantic relationship between Mulder and Scully were constantly teased through plot developments, dialogue, and their underlying chemistry, providing a relatively steady source of speculation for the X-Philes who discussed the show on such online platforms as *alt.tv.xfiles* and *alt.tv.xfiles.analysis*.[60] The resulting debates surrounding the chemistry between the two main characters thus became a critical background against which fans constructed their engagement with the show and its creators.

This dynamic rests on the fundamental assumption that fans engaging in such discourse have a capacity beyond passive viewership, acting as producers of cultural content rather than mere consumers. In the case of *The X-Files*, this is, to some extent, already reflected in the very existence

[57] Butter, "Conspiracy Theories in American History," 656-657.
[58] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 64.
[59] Christine A. Wooley, "Visible Fandom: Reading The X-Files Through X-Philes," *Journal of Film and Video* 53, no. 4 (2001): 30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688369.
[60] Wooley, "Visible Fandom," 39.

of *alt.tv.xfiles* and *alt.tv.xfiles.analysis* themselves, where fans utilized existing methods—such as literary analysis and philosophy—to analyze the show's many inconclusive and fragmented storylines on a deeper level.[61] But it is also aptly captured by the dynamic between the X-Philes and the creators, who regularly interacted with the fandom on the message boards during the show's early run.[62] This thus appears to signify an implicit acknowledgment of fans as passionate individuals with creative agency.

One critical method of understanding this level of fan engagement is Jenkins' notion of textual poaching, which he describes as borrowing elements from mass media productions by fans that are reworked into cultural expressions.[63] Jenkins explicitly positions this practice as transformative; by reproducing media materials, fans reshape them according to their own views and preferences and thus create a new kind of meaning.[64] In other words, fans can use textual poaching to 'correct' official narratives (for instance, from their favorite show) when they fall short of their expectations, such as in their writing of fan fiction.

Applying this framework to the fan discourse of the X-Philes and its treatment of Mulder and Scully's relationship in particular, one can see this resistive dynamic emerge in fans' criticism, for instance, during season 8 of the show and how the absence of David Duchovny, who portrayed Mulder, affected the development of the Mulder-Scully relationship. Venting their frustration about the season's premiere, to give one example, one fan noted that "at this point in time, one of them [referring to Mulder or Scully] can't inhale without the other exhaling… It didn't further the story… and it makes me ill to think CC [Chris Carter, creator] believes he can tamper with that aspect of the show."[65] Wooley further points out how this criticism is couched in economic terms: "I understand one thing. Season 8 is 'NOT' about what's good for the show. It's about what's good

[61] Bambi L. Haggins," Apocrypha Meets The Pentagon Papers: The Appeals of The X-Files To The X-Phile," *Journal of Film and Video* 53, no. 4 (2001): 15. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688368.
[62] Haggins, "Apocrypha Meets The Pentagon Papers," 13.
[63] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 64.
[64] Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 227.
[65] Wooley, "Visible Fandom," 44.

for the FOX network… More to the point, if you [the creators] 'were' on the same side as the fans, the Mulder-less episodes would not have been handled in so clumsy a fashion."[66]

In the words of these fans, there exists an apparent creative deficit on the part of the creators concerning the proper handling of Mulder's character and his relationship with Scully, one that is explicitly ascribed to meddling by Carter and possible influence by the broadcasting network. The question thus becomes how these deficits can be adequately remedied by fans exercising their agency as creative producers. Once again, bringing Jenkins' model of participatory culture into the fold, the answer lies in how X-Philes take these 'flawed' narratives and rework them into their own content, for instance, through fan fiction. To give another example, the platform *alt.tv.xfiles.creative* hosts a plethora of fan-made content, with plenty of stories rewriting individual episodes or borrowing the characters of Mulder and Scully to create and showcase fans' interpretation of their relationship. One piece of fan fiction, posted by user "leighchristine" in July of 2010, expands on a romantic scene between the two characters in the Season 8 episode "Existence," creating a scenario where Mulder asks Scully to marry him.[67] Another work posted by user "mountainphile" in February of 2001 draws upon Mulder's absence during the majority of Season 8, featuring an imagination of Scully reflecting on his feelings for him.[68]

Viewed through the lens of participatory culture, *The X-Files* thus provides yet another compelling insight into popular conspiracy culture and its dynamics of imagined resistance. As illustrated, the focus here is not so much on resistance acted out through passive viewership as resistance performed through textual poaching and the high level of fan engagement with the show's themes and narratives. It would be helpful to point out that this dynamic is not necessarily facilitated but certainly encouraged by the show's open-ended narrative style and its complication of the truth. Indeed, in this sense, *The X-Files* can once again be read as a kind of grand conspiracy

[66] Wooley, "Visible Fandom," 44.
[67] leighchristine, "[all-xf] Tomorrow (no archive)," alt.tv.x-files.creative, Google Groups, last modified July 17, 2010, https://groups.google.com/g/alt.tv.x-files.creative/c/jZy6KpBb3tk/m/krPEQOIc0zIJ.
[68] mountainphile, "xfc: NEW: Sins of Omission (1/1)," alt.tv.x-files.creative, Google Groups, last modified February 17, 2001, https://groups.google.com/g/alt.tv.x-files.creative/c/wlVHubw0oQA/m/zHGv2mTIduMJ.

narrative in itself, with dedicated X-Philes acting on their creative agency to produce their own content where they see the narrative falling short, such as in the famous case of the Mulder-Scully relationship. The significance of this dynamic will become more apparent when compared to how QAnon followers interact with their grand narrative, which will be further explored in the next chapter.

This chapter has pursued a deeper engagement with *The X-Files*, particularly the cultural phenomenon it represented in the larger context of the 1990s and conspiracy culture in general. The primary conclusion that should be drawn here is that in labeling *The X-Files* as subversive, one should ask what *kind* of subversion the show truly embodied, both textually and in the broader sense of popular discourse. It undoubtedly excelled in capturing the *aesthetics* of resistance, tapping deeply enough into the well of national anxiety about government lies and a national security state spiraling out of control to give Mulder and Scully's crusade for the truth an air of plausibility. At the same time, though, it demonstrated a keen awareness of the outlandishness of its cause, both in standalone episodes and its main mytharc narrative.

Perhaps most interestingly, though, *The X-Files* captured the early incarnations of a newly emerging fan culture that placed an increasing amount of creative agency in the hands of fans. In doing so, it elevated them to the position of producers of their own creative content rather than passive viewers who merely followed along with the show's narratives. As the following chapter will show, this culture previewed a critical dynamic that would become central to modern conspiracies like QAnon, thus emphasizing their roots in contemporary popular culture.

Chapter 3: QAnon and the Modern Conspiracy

This thesis has mainly focused on conspiracist fiction, like *The X-Files*, in assessing popular conspiracy culture's cultural and political potency. For the second part of the analysis, a substantial pivot will be made to assess the dynamics and impact of an actual conspiracy *movement*, namely QAnon.

This choice to hone in on QAnon is explicitly made for several important reasons. Read through Sunstein and Vermeule's pragmatic definition of conspiracy theories as "an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)," QAnon could certainly be interpreted as a traditional conspiracy.[69] It promotes a specific master narrative as a general explanation of certain events, which takes the form of a cabal of establishment forces acting in concert against the public interest, which is projected on a charismatic outsider (Donald Trump). Furthermore, its main appeal largely stems from its promise of exclusivity, of reassuring its followers that they are capable of seeing the whole truth. At the same time, the rest of the populace is blind to the actual fight that is waged in secret, thus giving QAnon followers a sense of control. The obvious parallels to *The X-Files*' mytharc—which, as explored previously, also in many ways functions as a classic conspiracy narrative—can naturally be distinguished here as well.

However, the primary analytical value for this thesis lies in how QAnon *diverges* from traditional conspiracy conventions. As Ethan Zuckerman notes, one key feature of QAnon that sets it apart from other conspiracy theories is its uncharacteristically high visibility in contemporary politics. While audiences for conspiracy theories traditionally tend to be located at the fringes of political discourse, QAnon defies this trend by virtue of arguably its most high-profile proponent(s), namely Donald Trump and his followers. Although debate persists over the question of whether Trump is a genuine conspiracy theorist or simply excels in manipulating QAnon believers to his

[69] Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, "Symposium on Conspiracy Theories Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, No. 2 (2009): 205.

political benefit, there is unquestionably merit to the notion that conspiracist rhetoric has been a defining thread of his political style. His frequent attacks on the mainstream media and government agencies like the FBI, for instance, lend credence to the narrative that there are forces out to undermine him—at least in the eyes of QAnon followers.[70]

Equally interesting is how QAnon functions as a form of discourse. In Zuckerman's words, "Qanon may be the first conspiracy to have fully embraced the participatory nature of the contemporary internet," forming a highly decentralized online community that places a great deal of creative agency in the hands of its individual members.[71] Zuckerman quotes author Walter Kirn, who has made a compelling observation concerning the way in which QAnon marshals the appeal of online storytelling: "The audience for internet narratives doesn't want to read, it wants to write. It doesn't want answers provided, it wants to search for them."[72] Thus, in feeding followers fragmented pieces of information in the form of so-called Qdrops, which subsequently need to be assembled into narratives by individual followers, QAnon taps into a powerful form of internet discourse that certainly seems to have precedent in other expressions of popular culture.

Indeed, it is here where the connection with *The X-Files* and the cultural moment it represented becomes most apparent. The point is not to draw a wholesale comparison—there are, after all, substantial differences between the two—but there are enough compelling parallels to connect to a broader, shared strand of popular conspiracy culture. Thus, just like the previous chapter contemplated *The X-Files* and its representation of conspiracy within the framework of imagined resistance, this chapter will take a similar analytical look at QAnon and draw some valuable comparisons where possible.

This analysis will, again, be guided by the central question of how QAnon functions as a subversive text. Like *The X-Files*, it assumes that QAnon excels at promoting the *aesthetics* of

[70] Ethan Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," *Journal of Design and Science* 6, no. 6 (2019): 5.
[71] Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," 5.
[72] Walter Kirn, "The Wizard of Q," *Harper's Magazine*, June 2018, https://harpers.org/archive/2018/06/the-wizard-of-q/.

resistance, promising its followers a way to see the big picture and a sense of control over otherwise uncontrollable events. Pragmatically, however, it fails to produce any form of coherent and effective resistance because of several factors, such as its highly decentralized nature and its preoccupation with raising one's profile within the QAnon community rather than organizing any meaningful acts of resistance.

The analysis will proceed in a broadly similar fashion as in the last chapter. First, proper contextualization will take place to create a basic understanding of what QAnon is and how its master narrative functions within the context of epistemology—in other words, how does QAnon construct knowledge and how does it represent the 'truth'? The second part of the analysis will then focus on the other half of QAnon's meaning-making process by investigating its symbiotic relationship with popular culture and social media. Once again, substantial links to *The X-Files* will take center stage and be given significant attention.

The Coming Storm: QAnon's claim to the 'truth'

The precise origins of QAnon appear to be somewhat diffuse. However, most sources seem to classify the movement as the offspring of the Pizzagate conspiracy, which reared its head in the heat of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.[73] This conspiracy already exhibited many features that would come to be known as the hallmarks of QAnon, such as the fact that it originated on the anonymous online message board 4chan and centered around the alleged illicit activities of prominent political figures, namely Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her campaign chair, John Podesta. It also harkened back to the substance of previous mass conspiracies, such as the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, by invoking the idea that these political figures were part of secret child trafficking rings that engaged in the ritualized abuse and sexual exploitation of children.

[73] Brian Holoyda, "QAnon," *Britannica*, accessed April 3, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/QAnon.

Donald Trump's victory in the election has been suggested to be one of the main influences that gave rise to QAnon in its current—and most recognizable—form.[74] Indeed, 2017 saw the first of many entries on 4chan posted by an anonymous user named Q, who claimed to be a top-level government official connected to the Trump administration who possessed special "Q clearance." Q erroneously asserted that the arrest of Hillary Clinton was imminent and that Trump's election victory was part of a larger fight being waged against the deep state, which was claimed to be responsible for the human trafficking rings invoked by the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. These claims then grew into a prominent and viral movement in the following years, mainly due to its effective use of social media and propagation by influential figures.[75]

Again, reading QAnon against traditional conspiracy narratives tends to yield compelling insights because, at its core, it *does* resemble a classic conspiracy theory. Compared to *The X-Files*' mytharc, for instance, one can distinguish similar elements of so-called deep-state actors working against the public in secretive plots that involve the exploitation and violation of human bodies. This, in turn, closely aligns with Melley's idea of agency panic, which he identifies as a central feature of many postwar conspiracies: the fear of a loss of control over one's body (see: communist brainwashing).[76] The connection to *The X-Files* and the earlier conspiracy film and TV narratives that inspired it becomes even more apparent when also taking into account the role of the charismatic 'outsider' who wages his secret fight against the malicious forces. In *The X-Files*, the outsider is the goofy and mildly antisocial Fox Mulder, played by the arguably charismatic David Duchovny. At the same time, QAnon finds its lone crusader in the form of Donald Trump, who, despite his prominent profile, has also embraced his outsider status as a key part of his political persona.[77] This, of course, partly testifies to the level of dramatization often inherent to the classic conspiracy narrative, but it also illustrates the extent to which a modern viral conspiracy like

[74] Brian Holoyda, "QAnon."
[75] Brian Holoyda, "QAnon."
[76] Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 12.
[77] Thomas Gallagher, "The outsider on the inside: Donald Trump's Twitter activity and the rhetoric of separation from Washington culture." *Atlantic journal of communication* 27, no. 3 (2019): 183.

QAnon feeds off popular culture. Indeed, if *The X-Files* can be read as a fictional pop culture staple that finds its appeal in channeling conspiracy culture, then perhaps QAnon could be interpreted as a conspiracy that gains a large part of its popularity by tapping into popular culture.

Such an assertion rests on more than passing resemblances in terms of narrative structure and main characters, of course. It also refers to QAnon's somewhat unique position in relation to political discourse—sometimes arguably at the very center of it. Indeed, while traditional conspiracies tend to eschew conventional political discourse in favor of fringe beliefs and communities—as has been touched upon in the first chapter—QAnon can be said to have a distinct political quality in blending its beliefs with political support for Trump.[78] Then, there is also the matter of its traction in the upper echelons of the U.S. political system. Not only has Trump himself interacted with the movement on numerous occasions—both in implicit rhetoric and, more directly, through retweets of QAnon posts on his then-Twitter account—but it would likely be challenging to press the case that politicians like Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene are obscure outsiders without any significant political following.[79]

To be sure, these observations should not be construed as any claim that QAnon has gone mainstream; if anything, they are perhaps more illustrative of the realignments in the U.S. political landscape over the past few decades and how certain brands of politics have become more conducive to conspiratorial thinking. Nonetheless, they also illuminate a compelling dimension to how QAnon stakes its claims to legitimacy and how these relate to traditional notions of conspiracy.

Properly elaborating on this point requires a deeper contemplation of the epistemological foundation of conspiracy theories. As *The X-Files* has already shown, discussing epistemology concerning conspiratorial discourse can be tricky because of its inherently unstable nature and its rejection of established traditional information sources. On the other hand, these are also aspects that *make* the study of conspiratorial epistemology compelling because they give a better insight

[78] Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," 5.
[79] Matthew Rosenberg and Jennifer Steinhauer, "The QAnon Candidates Are Here. Trump Has Paved Their Way," *International New York Times*, July 18, 2020, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A629755171/AONE?u=anon~648d6aa6&sid=googleScholar&xid=d6032010.

into the striking resilience and pervasiveness of conspiracy theories. It explains, in other words, how a movement like QAnon is able to survive and maintain a relatively stable following despite its prophesied events failing to come true (Clinton was never arrested, Trump was officially removed from power in 2020, for instance), and how conspiracies themselves are quite difficult to discredit.[80]

To be sure, there have been plenty of studies that have sought to attach a pathological explanation to conspiratorial thinking, framing it as the result of either some form of individual or collective delusion or the byproduct of some other form of mental illness.[81] To a certain extent, these ideas have also found reinforcement in trends of cultural stigmatization, as the first chapter has illustrated—even *The X-Files*, which arguably was willing to entertain the existence of conspiracies more seriously, still featured plenty of self-reflexive episodes and often portrayed its main conspiracy theorist character as antisocial and borderline paranoid.

As Sunstein and Vermeule argue, however, the label of mental illness is often unhelpful in explaining the inherent appeal of conspiracy theories because it "obscures more than it clarifies."[82] As outlandish as most of the foundational QAnon beliefs may appear to be, it would be difficult to press the case that all of its followers suffer from the same kind of pathological afflictions. Instead, Sunstein and Vermeule propose that a more helpful approach to examining the appeal of conspiracy theories is to look at how people acquire their beliefs. They understand the power of conspiracy theories in terms of the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge; stated more concisely, they describe them as the result of so-called "crippled epistemologies."[83] This explanation is essentially predicated on the notion that in some domains—particularly where the regular flow of information is hindered, for instance through the restriction of civil rights and liberties—people have only limited or no access to relevant information, and what little information they have often supports erroneous or even extremist worldviews. This dynamic also helps explain why conspiracy theories

[80] Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," 7; Sunstein and Vermeule, "Symposium on Conspiracy Theories," 210.
[81] Sunstein and Vermeule, "Symposium on Conspiracy Theories," 211.
[82] Sunstein and Vermeule, "Symposium on Conspiracy Theories," 211.
[83] Sunstein and Vermeule, "Symposium on Conspiracy Theories," 211-212.

usually function in tandem with (political) extremism; the less likely a person is to come into contact with information that challenges their worldview and biases, the more susceptible they are to extreme beliefs.[84]

Returning to the original point of how QAnon acquires its legitimacy—at least, in the eyes of its followers—then, the idea of crippled epistemologies establishes a crucial context for understanding QAnon's appeal. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, it underlines the role of social media and prominent political figures; propagation in promoting and expanding the movement. Recently, for instance, there has been an increasing deal of attention paid to how social media reinforces biases and nurtures extreme worldviews, which has played a role in QAnon's growth.[85] And it probably goes without saying that a willing entertainment of QAnon views by Trump and other officials—either earnestly or out of political benefit—also works in a powerful, reinforcing way.

Secondly, and more relevant to the overall point of this thesis, crippled epistemologies help explain why the premise that QAnon entails is so powerful and so hard to discredit. Indeed, the fact that many of Q's predictions have failed to manifest would have been enough to discredit its core narrative in an environment where information flows from the same, equal sources. QAnon, however, flows from its very own epistemology—one of hope. As explored in the previous chapter, a vital part of the conspiracy fantasy that *The X-Files* promotes is that despite the many weird tangents, side plots, and dead ends, the truth always seems to exist in some tangible form—attainable but just out of reach. Like *The X-Files*, QAnon also reassures its followers to "trust the plan," to keep the faith that the promised "Storm" will eventually arrive and bring about the demise

[84] Sunstein and Vermeule, "Symposium on Conspiracy Theories," 211; Russel Hardin, "The crippled epistemology of extremism," in *Political Extremism and Rationality*, ed. Albert Breton, Gianluigi Galeotti, Pierre Salmon, and Ronald Wintrobe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.
[85] See, for instance: Matthew N. Hannah, "A conspiracy of data: QAnon, social media, and information visualization," *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 3 (2021): 2; Paul Bleakley, "Panic, pizza and mainstreaming the alt-right: A social media analysis of Pizzagate and the rise of the QAnon conspiracy," *Current Sociology* 71, no. 3 (2023): 509.

of the deep state as prophesied.[86] But while *The X-Files* demonstrates a clear awareness of its form as a work of fiction that is perfectly willing to play to the ludicrousness of conspiratorial thinking, QAnon plays its narrative entirely straight. Every potential setback or breakdown in its predictions is ultimately reframed as merely another step in the greater plan.

The highlighting of this dynamic—how QAnon revolves around its own epistemology—serves to underline the broader point that any effort to engage with the gravitational pull of the movement meaningfully requires treating it as more than merely the byproduct of political extremism or that one would err in examining its rise only in connection to newer technologies or the implications of internet culture. While *The X-Files* and QAnon are ultimately very different expressions of conspiracy culture, both in form and substance, there is a plausible case to be made that a core part of their appeal speaks to the same sense of epistemological crisis: that the 'true' explanation for events is always hidden away.

Considering QAnon in this way opens up the possibility for compelling questions that are also more broadly relevant. For instance, one logical question is how conditions for knowledge in society at large have shifted to allow for the emergence of these alternative epistemologies. The answers to such a broad question are obviously multifaceted and could be formulated from several angles: structural factors, the rise of alternative media, government scandals, etcetera. However, in line with this thesis' overall scope—investigating QAnon in the context of imagined resistance—the following analysis will hone in on one aspect in particular, namely the potency of participatory media and its implications for the QAnon movement.

QAnon as Participatory Culture

[86] Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," 4; David G. Robertson and Amarnath Amarasingam, "How conspiracy theorists argue: Epistemic capital in the QAnon social media sphere,"*Popular Communication* 20, no. 3 (2022): 200.

The previous chapter has already devoted some attention to the notion of participatory culture, particularly positioning it within the context of the expansion of the Internet and the growing visibility and agency of counter-publics. As discussed during the analysis of *The X-Files* and its remarkable level of fan engagement, participatory culture emerged as a significant new cultural model for the relationship between fans and producers of popular culture, which previously had been defined by more top-down dynamics. In this new model, participatory culture instead extended to fans/consumers the tools and opportunities to act as producers of their own content, thus giving them a level of agency that had been hard—if not outright impossible—to attain in pre-Internet days. As explored, this had some particularly interesting implications in the context of *The X-Files* as a resistance fantasy; it allowed its fans to take the element of rebelling against established authorities and information a step further by, in a sense, rebelling against the narrative of *The X-Files* itself, revising it and making it their own through fan fiction and online messaging boards.

Of course, the proliferation of participatory models of engagement has not been merely confined to the realm of popular culture. If one is to answer the question of how QAnon's construction of truth and reality has been able to attain such validity in the minds of so many people, then it would be worth searching for explanations in some other but nonetheless closely related fields—like participatory or civic media.

Civic media can essentially be understood as the result of the democratization of the media landscape over the past few decades. It generally entails the transition of the broadcast model of media, in which information narratives were selected and interpreted by small groups of professional individuals and subsequently disseminated to audiences with limited opportunity for feedback and interactivity, to a model where the audience "is a full participant, an essential circulator of information by retweeting, sharing and remixing it."[87] Much like fans revising the narratives of their favorite productions, audiences in the context of civic media exploit their agency by recontextualizing, reframing, and reworking existing stories to produce their own narratives,

[87] Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," 8.

usually to draw attention to marginalized issues. Zuckerman notes, for instance, the role civic media has played in shedding light on civil rights issues, such as how the marrying of individual reports about instances of police abuses to a broader history of race-based violence was key in elevating the cause of movements like Black Lives Matter. Similarly, the work of individuals spreading and disseminating stories online can also be seen in the contemporary #MeToo movement and its focus on long-marginalized sexual harassment issues.[88]

Crucially, however, there is another dimension to how participatory media has lowered the bar to civic participation and amplified marginalized voices. Indeed, significant as its contribution has been in opening up the whole of societal discourse to alternative views and perspectives, so too has it arguably allowed conspiracy discourse to thrive by providing them a space and methods to cultivate their own epistemology.

This dynamic becomes even more apparent when considering how QAnon functions as a form of discourse. One helpful way of illustrating this would be to closely examine how a Qdrop is typically structured. Consider, for instance, the following post made by Q on 4chan on the 9th of December, 20217:

> What has been said about the US Military?
>
> The speech yesterday verified and unlocked so much.
>
> Expand your thinking.
>
> Re-read crumbs.
>
> Re-listen to yesterday's speech.
>
> Connect the 'markers.'
>
> News (in all forms) unlocks the map.
>
> Expand your thinking.

[88] Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," 8.

The Great Awakening.

Q[89]

The 'speech' in question that the post refers to is likely a speech that Trump gave the day before at a rally in Pensacola, Florida. In a sense, the Qdrop echoes classic conspiracy rhetoric by calling on followers to "connect the 'markers'" and thus figure out the 'true' narrative. But what is at least equally interesting is how much the post also resembles a form of participatory news-making. Indeed, in typical Q fashion, the post does not provide solid stories. Instead, it points to recent events and asks QAnon followers to contemplate their significance in the broader scheme of things. Thus, much like practitioners of civic/participatory media choose elements from existing stories and events to remix them into their own narratives, QAnon furthers its narrative by interpreting and contextualizing contemporary events. Thus, while the substance that QAnon propagates could certainly be considered politically fringe, it would be difficult to say the same of the techniques and discourses that perpetuate its inherent appeal.

Returning to the overall question of how QAnon presents an opportunity for imagined resistance, there is again a noteworthy comparison between *The X-Files* and the QAnon movement. After all, while part of the appeal of both communities stems from their reinforcement of an alternative epistemology—appealing to contemporary anxieties about a loss of autonomy and the truth—there is certainly an argument to be made that their popularity also lies in the methods by which this autonomy is restored to audiences/followers. As already briefly touched upon at the beginning of the chapter, QAnon's manner of discourse—in which Q provides the elements that are subsequently baked into narratives by an entire community of discussion boards, podcasts, YouTube channels, etc.—does bear some compelling resemblances to the fan discourse of a popular cultural staple like *The X-Files*. Thus, QAnon followers may not be so interested in finding out the

[89] Hannah, "A conspiracy of data," 7. The post was initially taken from an archive of Q posts located at https://qposts.online; however, this link is no longer accessible.

truth as producing the narratives that are most likely to garner the attention of their fellow bakers and turn others to their cause. As Zuckerman notes in his quotation of QAnon Anonymous, a popular podcast that devotes itself to studying the inner workings of the movement, QAnon from this perspective can be very much understood as an "improvisational game," one where players compete with each other for the most viral and salient stories.[90] According to Zuckerman, QAnon bakers are thus "not only co-authors of the narrative, they're proselytizers, both for the broader conspiracy and their particular interpretive frame."[91]

All of this raises the question of how QAnon's cultural and political power could be appropriately characterized. After all, while—much like *The X-Files*—it excels at providing its followers with an environment where they can act out fantasies of resistance through the crafting, remixing, and sharing of narratives, its lack of a cohesive, centralized structure renders it practically incapable of organizing on a conventional political level.[92] Moreover, despite its unprecedented support by prominent figures in the upper echelons of U.S. politics, the overall stigmatization of conspiracies and QAnon in itself makes it unlikely to effect any meaningful change. (This is, of course, stated under the presumption that politicians who endorse QAnon are genuine believers of its tenets and are not merely seeking to exploit its popularity in right-wing circles for political gain.)[93]

QAnon, *The X-Files*, and the aesthetics of resistance

[90] Travis View, Julian Feeld, Jake Rockatansky, "Episode 66: CICADA 3301," *QAA Podcast*, November 17, 2019, Podcast, MP3 audio, 1:11:31. https://podcasts.apple.com/nl/podcast/episode-66-cicada-3301/id1428209307?i=1000457020626.
[91] Zuckerman, "QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal," 7.
[92] Adam M. Enders, Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey A. Klofstad, Stefan Wuchty, Michelle I. Seelig, John R. Funchion, Manohar N. Murthi, Kamal Premaratne, and Justin Stoler, "Who supports QAnon? A case study in political extremism," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (2022): 1847.
[93] Matthew Atkinson, Darin DeWitt, and Joseph E. Uscinski, "Conspiracy theories in the 2016 election," in *Conventional Wisdom, Parties, and Broken Barriers in the 2016 Election*, ed. Jennifer C. Lucas, Christopher J. Galdieri and Tauna S. Sisco (London: Lexington Books, 2018), 176.

In this final chapter, the line of inquiry that started with *The X-Files* and its significance within contemporary conspiracy culture has been extended to QAnon. Although there is a host of interesting aspects about the movement that have remained unexplored here, this analysis hopes to have given credence to the point that dismissing it as the product of a right-wing echo chamber or similarly marginalizing terms risks overlooking many of its compelling implications. As this chapter has attempted to show, what sets QAnon apart from traditional conspiracies is the way it sometimes seems as much a product of popular culture as much as it seems a classic form of conspiracy thinking. Indeed, it is no incidence that its particular style of discourse—with Q providing regular drops of small hints and information that are to be assembled into narratives by a community of invested followers—sometimes seems reminiscent of a popular TV show where fans tune in every week to follow along with the development of their favorite narrative, and subsequently take to online messaging boards to exchange views and remix their own content.

While considering QAnon in this way does open up a whole field of analytic possibilities, the main focus of this chapter has been to reflect deeper on how it functions as a discourse of subversion/resistance. As discussed previously, while *The X-Files* provides a space for its fans to act out a fantasy of resistance against authority through its plot and characters, its actual political capacity for subversion is relatively limited by its status as a fictional medium and the inherent pitfalls of conspiracist discourse. To an extent, the show also demonstrated an awareness of these constraints by invoking a cultural tradition of self-reflexivity that clearly emphasized its own outlandishness. Nevertheless, its spiritual search for an elusive truth continues to have a strong cultural appeal.

In certain ways, one could see how QAnon is rooted in similar dynamics. While there is something inherently subversive about the idea of uncovering the truth about a secretive deep-state and assembling the separate clues into a coherent narrative, it is worth asking to which extent QAnon *actually* engages in meaningful political resistance and is not merely concerned with producing the most attention-grabbing and likely-to-go-viral narratives. As Thalmann argues, it

would be wrong to equate a higher visibility in broader society with the notion that conspiracy theorizing has become more mainstream.[94]

[94] Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory*, 12.

Conclusion

On January 6, 2021, the world bore witness to a stunning act of political violence in the United States. Swept up by the rhetoric of outgoing president Donald Trump, a sizable crowd of his supporters, many of them bearing the sigils of the QAnon movement, stormed the U.S. Capitol, broke their way inside, and assaulted police officers while chanting their belief that the 2020 presidential had been stolen and that they were the faithful and loyal citizens who had come to exact repercussions for it. While the mob did eventually fail to stop the certification of the election and order was restored, the fact that what has commonly been described as an "insurrection" had taken place on the very seat of the U.S. Congress shook the American political system to its very core.[95]

The role of QAnon in the January 6 attack on the Capitol—more than any of the previous, more minor violent incidents connected to the conspiracy—raises pertinent questions as to the political capacity of the movement and its believers. After all, as this thesis has argued in the last chapter, QAnon fails in the arena of conventional political discourse for several reasons, which is likely why the conspiracy has not seen any widespread representation on the political level. Yet the fact that the January 6 attack *has* been understood as inherently political—coupled with the fact that law enforcement agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation have clearly recognized the potential of conspiracies like QAnon to radicalize and inspire acts of domestic political violence—does raise the question of how the political potency of the movement should be appropriately characterized.[96] If not conventional, then perhaps through the use of force and violence?

A definitive answer may be hard to provide, considering the many ongoing debates regarding QAnon and the power of conspiracy in contemporary society in general. However, this thesis hopes

[95] See, for instance: Kevin B. Anderson, "The January 6 insurrection: historical and global contexts," *Critical Sociology* 48, no. 6 (2022): 902; Bayleigh Elaine Bond and Ryan Neville-Shepard, "The rise of presidential eschatology: Conspiracy theories, religion, and the January 6th insurrection," *American Behavioral Scientist* 67, no. 5 (2023): 692.

[96] U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *(U) Adherence to QAnon Conspiracy Theory by Some Domestic Violent Extremists*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, June 4, 2021, https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/20889411/adherence-to-qanon-conspiracy-theory-by-some-domestic-violent-extremists4.pdf.

to have illuminated an essential dimension of the overall discussion by highlighting tensions between the cultural stigmatization of conspiracies and the mainstream appeal of some of conspiracy discourse's most defining features.

As the initial portion of this thesis' analysis has sought to illustrate, drawing on studies by Katharina Thalmann and Michael Butter, while conspiracies held the power of orthodox knowledge in the 1950s and early 1960s, the decades after saw the increasing prominence of a cultural trend that relegated conspiratorial thinking to the fringes of U.S. society. As visible in a newly emerging tradition of conspiracy (theory) films from the 1970s onwards, conspiracy discourse increasingly came to be associated with paranoia and delusion, leaning into a postmodern aesthetic that often explicitly problematized the existence of objective truth. Even films and TV media that were more sympathetic to the plight of conspiracists frequently embraced self-reflexive portrayals that acknowledged the open-endedness and problematic epistemology of conspiratorial thinking.

Yet the general idea of conspiracy unquestionably continued to hold some sway in the public consciousness, not to mention the many scandals and revelations over the years—the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, Iran-Contra, etc.—that fueled fears of a government out of control. Thus, when *The X-Files* debuted in 1990, it did so not merely as a popular TV show that benefited from a captivating narrative, but as a cultural phenomenon that managed to effectively capture the paradoxical status of conspiracy discourse in broader society; not entirely accepted as a legitimate mode of discourse, yet undeniably exuding a kind of popular appeal. Moreover, its coming-of-age during the early years of the Internet provided it with a vibrant fan community that interacted with the show on a more interactive level than passive viewership.

Even more importantly, however, the cultural value of a show like *The X-Files* becomes even more apparent when read in conversation with a modern conspiracy theory like QAnon. While the two may appear miles apart in terms of actual form and substance, reading them through a lens of popular conspiracy culture—that is, expressions that simultaneously feed off conspiracy discourse and popular culture—reveals some striking similarities in the way that both offer a space to act out

a kind of imagined resistance. As an analysis of key narrative dynamics has illustrated, both forms find a substantial part of their appeal in their promise of an alternative epistemology, one that generally resists challenges to its internal logic and relies much more on interpretation and dissemination by a large group of invested fans/followers rather than any central authority. Through this process, both X-Philes and QAnon followers are given the *sense* that they are engaging in essential processes of creating meaning, with the former's process of weaving clues and hints into coherent narratives—such as pertaining to Mulder and Scully's ambiguous relationship—being analogous to how QAnon bakers interpret and connect seemingly unrelated contemporary events. However, the extent to which both forms can produce meaningful political change is substantially limited due to several factors. *The X-Files* seems more aware of its limitations as a fictional medium by employing a self-reflexive approach that QAnon obviously lacks.

The general question of whether conspiracy theories have become more mainstream in modern society—and, by extension, have attained a kind of newfound political potency—is far from settled. The central aim of this thesis has not been to resolve the matter definitively one way or the other but to illustrate that blindly following the cultural trend of marginalizing conspiracy discourse as politically fringe risks overlooking many of the features that make its resilience so interesting. The fact that many of QAnon's sources of appeal can also be found in a popular cultural staple like *The X-Files* speaks powerfully to the connections that modern conspiracies have to popular culture. In other words, any attempt to make sense of an event like January 6 should take into account the fundamental question of *what* it is about conspiracies that speaks so profoundly to the popular imagination, despite its fringe connotations.

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