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“The Wilderness Masters the Colonist.” Nature, Culture, and the Truth Out There¹

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1. Introduction: Television / Twin Peaks

When talking about American culture, one field is usually represented only to a very shallow extent, in a way that is not doing justice to both its creative potential and material, and neither to its influence on American society. This field is television.

This is not entirely surprising. The humanities started out as philology, the love for the (written) word, and it must seem that only recently has the field been opened by cultural studies. Yet it is not quite open enough. There's more to culture than just literature, or some selections of music, and even fewer selections of movies. When you look at the homes of any American or European, there's one thing standing there which has a central importance, the television set. Television is the daily routine of most people, it is a truly popular phenomenon, more popular than cinema, more popular than literature, it could even be considered “the real American curriculum.” And still, though televised images and stories have a lasting effect on our culture, there are lots of negative images attached to it, mostly coming from a flawed elitist attitude or a tradition fixated on the written text that may be easier accessible.

Some of it may also come through the medium itself. Television is a younger medium than the movies, it seems to have only just left its cradle. Some fifteen years ago, critics of television would have been more or less right in looking at the medium a bit skeptical. In 1987, there was maybe one show that tried to move forward the creative dimensions and narrative structures, that show was *Magnum, p.i.*, which succeeded in introducing the story arch for prime time drama shows, aiming at breaking down the barrier between the much ridiculed soap operas, which were told with grand and over-arching master narratives in the making, and the drama shows of the time, mostly crime and detective stories. Another creative step, one could say, was undertaken by *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, starting in the year of 1987, which would succeed in reviving one of the cornerstones of American culture, while also serving as an inspiration for an awakening potential in the science fiction and horror genre.

That potential was put to the limit with David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, where we are introduced to the torn soul of a small town Middle American town near the Canadian border, a Pleasantville surrounding into which breaks in a story of drugs, child molestation and serial killing; both on an unfolded and enfolded, a direct and codified level. There is the evil in the Ghostwood forest, the gateway to the mystical forces of good and evil situated at the Black Lodge, an entrance hidden by a pond surrounded by Sycamore Trees, revealing a red curtain when opening, a tear in the fabric of reality which leads to a world of demons and

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doppelgangers. Yet there is also the evil inside the single human being, Leeland Palmer abusing his daughter, the virgin-like aura of the dead Laura Palmer being destroyed by revealing their history of drugs and prostitution. White Middle Class America is deconstructed as an artificial image, a myth which is just a mere façade. *Twin Peaks* thus is nothing but a closer study on *Blue Velvet*, just as the whole of the Lynchian oeuvre seems to be centered around this topic. *Twin Peaks* aired for two seasons between 1990 and 1991, and was followed by a theatrical film in 1993. What Lynch did was to make an artistic stand in the medium of television. Even his mere background of someone coming from cinema doing television is quite a revolutionary situation, combining two worlds which traditionally had been separated. He introduced a cinematic pace, the Lynchian slowness, and a focus not merely on the story but also on the visual aspects of television. In the long run however, *Twin Peaks* failed and was cancelled, but Lynch himself had lost interest in his project since the middle of the second season already, moving on instead to direct *Wild at Heart*. Everything else he tried on television had to remain an incomplete fragment, his latest attempt at creating a television series, the pilot for *Mulholland Drive*, was turned into a movie instead.

Yet even though *Twin Peaks* may not have been a plain success in the terms of longevity and financial success, his vision set the stage for things to come. He opened the stage of television for a new way of doing things, redefining the general expectation of what television was to be, setting new standards in terms of visual scope, narrative density, music, the love for detail, and a degree of self-reflexivity and the ability to introduce a more codified language into television, opening up a world dominated by sitcoms, detective stories and soap operas for the fantastic and the mysterious. One of the successors to *Twin Peaks*, in lots of ways, is *The X-Files*.

2. Approaching the X-Files

The X-Files is not simply a clone, an epigone of *Twin Peaks*. What is taken from *Twin Peaks* is rather a different understanding of how to do things on television. Ambition may be the keyword here: Lynch's television work was a direct offspring of his cinematic vision, *The X-Files* would then attempt to hold on to the same ambition: Not to do television on television, but to do a little movie each week. That requires quite some ingenuity: A television budget is nowhere near the budget of a motion picture, but by the nineties technology had evolved to such an extent that computer-generated effects were able to achieve a new level of realism for a smaller amount of money. Yet the financial aspect isn't everything. Cinema, more than old-fashioned television, is a medium which does not solely rely on plain old dialog but tries to convey its narratives also by visual means. The limitations of television regarding the length of each episode force television writers to develop a very quick-paced and dense style. Most shows, also in order to use their time effectively, rely thus on an easily recognizable formula. Once you've seen one episode of *MacGyver* or *T. J. Hooker*, you know what to expect from future episodes. The time used for exposition scenes, in which the conflict of the story is explained, is limited, there is little or no place for doing anything extraordinary.

That has been the rule till *Twin Peaks*. Lots of the core elements of televised storytelling are still at work today, while others have changed. *The X-Files* tells often complex stories about complex phenomena, and for that to work it relies on a formula which has remained valid for at least seven seasons. The main characters are the male FBI agent Fox Mulder (David Duchovny), who specializes in the paranormal and the unexplained, and female agent Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), who has a medical background and a strong scientific viewpoint on things. Mulder acts less on valid facts than on a gut feeling and instinct, thus rather representing the female stereotype and carrying an almost native American name, Fox, hinting at his fondness of mysticism, while Scully, whose name reminds of the rather clinical

dimensions of a skull, is the rational, male stereotype. Both develop a friendship and platonic love affair, which is mostly realized through exerting a technique of pleasure delaying, but ultimately results in the birth of a son, William; named after Mulder's father, Bill Mulder.

The scheme of the series is reversed throughout the eighth and final ninth season of the show, where Mulder is absent most of the time, and Scully takes over the role of the believer opposite the more skeptical agent John Dogget, his name equally revealing, portrayed by Robert Patrick, commonly known for his role as T2000 in *Terminator II: Judgement Day*. Joining Scully and Dogget throughout the last two seasons is Agent Monica Reyes (Annabeth Gish), an old friend of Dogget's and a follower of Mulder's interests.

Together, Mulder and Scully, and later, Scully, Dogget and Reyes encounter basically two types of stories. The first are stand-alone episodes dealing with all kinds of paranormal phenomena: the traditional supernatural, like ghosts, vampires, werewolves or other monsters; genetic mutants; serial killers, or whatever else is undermining the pleasant setting of Middle America. Most of that, by the way, happens in a rural small town setting, also incorporating stereotypes of hillbillies, small town folk, or white trash in general. The second type of stories is what's forming the general story arch starting with the very first episode, but only really kicking in with Scully being abducted by aliens in the beginning of the second season. That story arch is what is known as the show's "mythology"; basically the story of how aliens are trying to take over the world with the help of some shadow government of international proportions. In the course of the huge story arch, we are faced with topics like alien abduction, Nazi and Japanese scientists hired by the US after World War II, alien bounty hunters, shape shifters, alien-human hybrid super-soldiers, an alien virus known as Black Oil which, once it infest a human body, uses the body as a birthing mechanism for some alien creature, and, of course, a wide array of conspiracy theories, all of them rooting themselves in the mother of all conspiracies, the plot to kill John F. Kennedy. Thus the group of conspiracy theorists the agents frequently rely on is fittingly called *The Lone Gunmen*, referring to the official finding of the Warren Commission that Kennedy would have been shot by a Lone Gunman, that phrase being the title of their newsletter on government conspiracies.

The X-Files department of the FBI is a storage for unsolved cases, most of them being related to above mentioned phenomena. Mulder and Scully, as much as later Dogget and Reyes, are in charge of those cases, but their means are constantly counteracted by an increasingly aggressive conspiracy against the American people which has also set foot within the FBI. Their only reliable ally is Assistant Director Walter B. Skinner (Mitch Pileggi), who remains a figure in the shadows, a mediator between those searching for the truth and those trying to conceal it.

Though *The X-Files* has a sort of positive general theme, that of "The Truth is Out There," meaning that although it may be hard to find, at least there is a truth which can be found, a very existential thing, a concrete truth which will, in one way or another, render itself as not only philosophical but even more so biological; there still is a highly pessimistic undertone running through the mythology, depicting the methods and ideology of those hiding the truth from the people. It's slogans, which occasionally replace the dogmatic "The Truth Is Out There" in the opening credits, run like that of "Deny Everything," "Apology is Policy," "Everything Dies" and, one other crucial motto of the show, "Trust No One," the dying words of Mulder's first and shadowy informant, Deep Throat, the name referring to the informant uncovering Watergate.

The show is shadowed by a sister show, *Millennium*, running for three seasons between 1996 and 1999, drawing on more mythological conspiracy theories surrounding the millennium and an apocalypse intended to be brought about by a religious cult. *Millennium* is

an even darker show than *The X-Files*, with a strong focus on serial killers, demons, devils, and religious mythology. To a certain degree, both are inseparable, and are led together in the season seven *X-Files* episode "Millennium."

While *The X-Files* takes over the scientific viewpoint of Scully, *Millennium* defies science and mostly retreats into mythology. The two are interlinked, however, by a common aesthetics and a shared thematic surrounding, and they really have to be treated as one single phenomenon.

For the remainder of this paper, I will now turn to a specific issue which is dealt with in the context of both *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*. That topic is nature, and its position within human civilization. For that, let me recur to the topic of the frontier.

3. The Reappearance of the Frontier

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. ... Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In first, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. ... The fact is that here is a new product that is American. (Turner 32)

In describing its effect on American history, Frederick Jackson Turner sees the frontier as a phenomenon mostly of the past, as an experience which has shaped American society and thought throughout the history of the European colonization of the continent. The frontier has been continually moved westward, and with it what is called Western Civilization. Thus, the frontier is not just a geographic entity, a border between us and them, it is indeed an ideological construction allowing for a continued dichotomy and justification for the imposing of certain arbitrary standards and traditions which is no less crude than the classic differentiation between Greeks and Barbarians, civilized and uncivilized, good and evil.

However, the frontier is also a very specific place. It is the area where the known meets the unknown, a point of converging and merging, but also of dissolution and destruction. In Turner's description, the frontier is made a concrete thing, but the focus lies on the result, a bright outline of the product, of something not anymore belonging to the old Europe but something American. The frontier becomes a catalyst for an improved version of civilization, whereas prevailing success of the latter must never be doubted. In his description, the wilderness is performed by the actions of this new man, someone already praised by Crèvecoeur. The wilderness is transformed into cultivated land: From the untamed and raw, the tamed has arisen, undoubtedly, irreversibly: As the frontier disappears, the wilderness is being assimilated, resistance to that process is irrelevant, even futile.

The challenges faced by the very concrete place of the frontier, by the experience the frontier constituted to the European settlers on American ground, have been portrayed throughout American culture; be it accounts by the settlers themselves, tales of Indian captivity, texts of a certain religious nature topicalizing the frontier between nature and culture, narratives about the actual life in or presence of the woods, reflections upon the grandeur of the American hinterland, be it the Grand Canyon or the Great Plains; as much as more contemporary art forms as the Western.

One topic overwhelming those themes is nature herself, and the impact nature exerts upon the human beholder. If we for the moment restrict ourselves to the American

Renaissance, this reaction can be positive and transcending, as with authors like Emerson and Thoreau, or utterly frightening and destructive, as with Hawthorne, Poe and Melville. Nature is a sublime force, positively or negatively. And if we think of the *The X-Files* episode "Quagmire," which we have seen yesterday, we are reminded of such images by constant referral to Melville's *Moby Dick*, Mulder's quest for the lake monster Big Blue compared with Ahab's quest for the White Whale, Mulder being Ahab, Scully Starbuck, Mulder's obsession with his White Whale, the paranormal in general, determining his fate and endangering the life of himself as much as that of Scully. The constant referral to the Woods, mostly refuting their positive image brought about by Thoreau and Emerson, and rather referring to them as a place of the unknown, a stage for strange forces and mysterious occurrences, constituting mostly an errand into the wilderness which takes on more horrific sides, like in the stories of Hawthorne and Poe.

With the progression of science and its forthcoming totalitarian rule strengthened in the Twentieth Century, more and more parts of previously unexplained nature are constantly lifted from the level of uncertainty to the level of scientific explained-ness: Nature is transformed into culture, nature is made dependent upon culture and civilization. Nature suddenly has to be regionally protected and preserved for posterity in national parks and wildlife reserves, biology has finally moved into the realm of science, having been removed from the realm of divine grace and punishment. More and more, what was left inexplicable before in any branch of science, now carries a more or less descriptive label. Following its Roman roots, the American, and European, dream has for long become a technological and scientific one.

And still, the dichotomy already visible within the American Renaissance, if not already earlier, continues to be productive. Culture and especially human nature are portrayed as continuing negotiations between wilderness and civilization; the frontier has moved towards a place inside culture, even inside the human psyche, making journeys into the heart of unexplored darkness into journeys charting the darkness of the human heart and mind. The frontier, like the colonist, has been stripped off the garments of geography and been reduced to its effects on humanity.

4. Visualizing the American Sublime

The historical frontier marked the contact zone between what was perceived as culture and nature. If we take the description Emerson gives of Nature, we will find references to the sublime element in nature. Nature is seen as overshadowing humanity, man is dwarfed by the woods, by the plains, by the sky; and if we follow Thoreau into the wilderness, we can witness the humbling effect nature has on him. In the pantheist world of the positive sublime in nature, the experience of the wilderness has a transcendental effect on the human psyche, it lifts him up to the sphere of the divine. It is different with more terrifying accounts of nature, where she is not perceived as a civilizing force but something wild, untamed, and untimid of human authority. The White Whale cannot be tamed, it will take those attempting to kill and unmake it to their grave. When on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a government effort to control the mystical forces fails terribly, it is stated that "The demons cannot be harnessed, cannot be controlled" (B 4.21 "Primeval" 40:48-40:54). The supernatural as a reflection of the natural is a sublime force which is not only challenging but ridiculing any human notion of controlling it. This is a topos throughout all kinds of horror tales: Civilization is just a very thin layer of artificial control which can break down at any single moment, and which in a time of confrontation and crisis will discard its allegedly moral grounds and return to a state which is raw, untamed and primeval. Nature as the sublime element is superior to culture, be it human nature or the environment of nature surrounding humanity.

This natural sublimity is still today visually translated into images following descriptions given by Edmund Burke and Ralph Waldo Emerson. If we think of *The X-Files* again, we will find an abundance of incidences where light breaks into darkness, where smoke ascends into the sky, where a grand scale setting dwarfs human identity, where light and shadow are in a strange interplay obscuring rather than revealing what's there. The traditional setting of the frontier, the woods, is mirrored on *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files*, both shows also playing with some elements of Native American mythology. In *Twin Peaks*, you also have a giant waterfall, one of the key elements of the sublime, as in paintings the Catskill mountains by Thomas Cole (1801-1848).

The negative sublime, in whose grasp awe and mystery lead to a mixture of fearful submission and angst, can break down the meticulously arranged façades of civilization, be it within the walls of the House of Usher, on board the whaler Pequot, or en route on a river leading into the heart of darkness. An overtowering nature dwarfs the puny existence of the human heart and mind, terrorizing and humbling it as a force majeure, as something challenging the boundaries of civilization. As said in "Quagmire," you ought to "respect nature, for it has no respect for you."

5. Nature as Alien, Within and Without

Nature on *The X-Files* is portrayed as something superior to culture, nature, in Scully's scientific terminology, becomes biology, one of the hard facts of human existence. The time of *The X-Files* is the time of a basically unchallenged rule of biology and science. When in the episode trilogy of "Gethsemane," "Redux" and "Redux II" linking seasons four and five, the search for the truth becomes once again a matter of life and death for Mulder and Scully, Mulder being chased by the shadow government and Scully threatened by her cancer resulting from her "alien" abduction, both turn to their respective methods of research: Mulder goes looking for evidence in an archive located under the Pentagon, Scully searches for the biological truth within a sample of alien blood which carries some concrete evidence also found in her body. The alien is fused with the human, the entire conspiracy plot since the very beginning focused on alien-human hybridization sarcastically called "Purity Control."

Scully's child is not a matter of natural circumstances, it is a matter of the unnatural interfering with the natural, manifesting itself in the biological. Through her abduction she has lost her ability to give birth to a human child, but through the machinations of the conspiracy, her body becomes the vessel for the birth of a successful alien-human hybrid, the alien has entered her body, her child is both her own and it still is not, it is also referred to as a prodigal child by some UFO cult in the season 9 episodes Provenance and Providence. Religion enters the formula, but it is either distorted by the occurrence of demonic forces, which is mostly the terrain of *Millennium* but also *The X-Files*, or its idea is subverted by some sect leader, referring to the Waco case of course, or a reverence of the alien masters, challenging Scully's Catholicism to the brink of seeking for answers her own.

As the alien infiltration and the extent of the conspiracy, especially in the FBI, becomes more and more visible, there is also a breakdown of codes of conduct and rules of engagement. Cultural norms are breaking down, the FBI itself is seen as a demonic force, the agents of the X-Files department, which is fittingly situated in the basement of the J. Edgar Hoover building, become crusaders, lone gunmen themselves. As alien super-soldiers have taken over the structures of governmental institutions, there is nothing left to do but to either resist or serve.

6. Nature and Culture

Nature and culture are seen as two very much interlinked phenomena not just on *The X-Files*, but throughout most of the horror and nightmare genre. The settings, which I can only hint at during this late stage of this paper, often reflect stereotypes associated with the feminine element in culture; the dark, mysterious, soft, fuzzy and biological as opposed to the clear-cut, bright and hard associated with the male. Nature as the feminine standing against culture and especially technology as the masculine element, this constellation is often also to be found within the dramatis personae of horror and nightmares; and strangely, often in a reversed way. In *The X-Files* movie, but also on the *Alien* series, the alien ship is a dark, mysterious and fuzzy thing, there are lots of soft edges, lots of features rather associated with biology rather than technology; this dark place being also the origin of the unexplained, of something which cannot really be named, something alien, something raw, wild and evil. Yet throughout both *The X-Files* and the *Alien* films, the main character is a woman. Fox Mulder may be the icon of *The X-Files*, but his is not the authoritative view, the show is told from Scully's scientific perspective, and she's the one cast member to be there throughout the entire run of the series.

Scully and *Alien's* Ripley, as much as Buffy Anne Summers, of course, are female heroines that contrast the dark femininity of the horrific places they have to encounter with a femininity of their own which is far from the traditional cult of true womanhood, as much as the corresponding men, such as Fox Mulder on *The X-Files*, Dale Cooper on *Twin Peaks*, or Buffy's Angel, have an overly exaggerated sensitivity and a strong feminine side, so to say. As to what the motivations behind that are, there may just remain speculation. Maybe those characters can even function in constituting a new form of synthesis between nature and culture, maybe they're an attempt at androgyny even: Evidence for that genderbending could be the specific way the relationship between Mulder and Scully develops, as much as some stories involving some sort of gender-switching on other shows.

In any respect, the traditional role of either the male or the female are challenged increasingly on today's television shows, be it those mentioned throughout the course of this paper, or something completely different, like *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City*, and today's most popular television series, *The Sopranos*, in which the rather submissive woman of the first two *Godfather* films is contrasted with much more outspoken and much stronger women, be it Tony Soprano's wife Carmella or his psychotherapist Dr. Melfi.

The reversal and switching and re-building of stereotypes is challenging the position of the Natural within the Cultural, asking questions as to which degree private biology, in the case of biological sex, is supposed to determine the position of a human being in public society. Those things are not occurring by accident; Chris Carter, creator of *The X-Files*, explicitly mentions his intentions for performing a switch of gender stereotypes, while Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, frequently states his ambition to create a feminist show. To which degree those premises are fulfilled, however, still remains an object of closer study.

7. Closing

"The wilderness masters the colonist," not vice versa: At the frontier - be it physical or spiritual - and underneath the masks of civilization and science breaks through what cannot be explained, that which cannot be named; names that cannot be spoken for both the context and the understanding are missing.

Contemporary society and civilization is contrasted with a culture of traumata and nightmares, of anything basically culture for a long time has been trying conceal. When that seal is broken, when the beast finally breaks out of its cage technology has been trying to erect around it, we're left aghast in the sight of a true counter-culture, thrown back unto our own primal fears and mortal coil, and a truth that cannot be named neither spoken nor tamed, but that is definitely out there.

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