How to Talk the Unknown Into Existence

AN EXERCISE IN X-FILOLOGY

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X is the kiss, the unknown, the fissure
In mystery stretching far back to the ape.
—Roy Fuller, ABC of a Naval Trainee

The Unknown as a Linguistic-Discursive Problem

There is an intimate relation between language and knowledge. Even if we can experience things nonlinguistically (by visual, tactile, and olfactory senses, for example), it is a moot point as to whether we can be said to know them unless they have a linguistic form. At least, if we can say or write something, we can usually also claim to know it. If so, language may well be said to come to an end, or to reach its limits, when it comes to expressing the unknown. That is, although it may be possible to refer to some general category of the unknown (as in the previous sentence), the particulars of some specific unknown thing by definition are not available to linguistic expression. However, language in actual situations of use (discourse) is more subtle than this. We know that it can hint, suggest, and imply, and through these mechanisms, it can arouse possibilities, vague ideas, and suspicions.

If we think of this as a problem (and a solution), we can see how pertinent it is to the science fiction writer. One of the unique qualities of SF is that it works by building up a puzzle and (at least in some cases) offering a solution to that puzzle in the course of events, or else
(in other cases) leaving the reader/viewer with a conundrum to solve. In many instances, this is achieved through a disjunction between agents and practices. Ever since the early masters Wells and Verne started to refer to "the thing" or "the creature"—or else to describe peculiar events that could have no earthly agent—SF has worked in this way, and The X-Files is no exception to this time-honored technique.

With visuals to aid it, agents and practices in The X-Files can be made suitably mysterious—until we find out how, in the end, such a one (or ones) could do such a thing (or things)—or else we can be left, as before, with an imponderable mystery. Agents of a suspected alien or paranormal kind can be presented through mirrors, or from their own points of view (thus not revealing them), or else from the victim's distorted point of view. Actually-filmed frames can be skipped (as they were to great effect in the Alien's movies), or the "thing" can be seen from the rear, through speed-ups or blurs, through incomplete scenes, half-views, and so on. On the other hand, we might see the effects of their actions but not the method of perpetration. Thus, in "Humbug," the first shot of the mysterious creature terrorizing Gibsontown is shown through a heavily greased lens. In this case, the agent could actually be any of the many possible suspects, from The Conundrum to the fabled Fiji Mermaid, and the action could involve anything from the victim being eaten to... well, whatever the Mermaid is supposed to do to its victims.

Over and above these remarkable televiral effects, however, the speculations of Scully and Mulder, as they talk together about the possible arrangements of weird agents and practices, add a considerable amount to the viewer's sense of a problem—and, sometimes, its solution. In fact the dialogue may be utterly crucial to such matters. (If there is any doubt about this, one might try watching a fresh episode with the volume off, to see whether anything like genuine puzzles and [proto-] solutions can be found at all.) What I want to show in this essay is the micro-discursive means by which this is achieved.

Routine Dialogue

If SF stories and films work with puzzles or problems about the connections between agents and practices—that is, if they pose the questions What is it? and What's been done? along with What's the connection between the two?—then it is also the case that, in everyday life, such questions are few and far between. In fact, in routine situations, if we are given a description of an agent, we can usually hear along with that description the sorts of expectable practices that she or
he engages in, and vice versa. Thus, if I describe someone as a postal worker, you will be able to hear, immediately, the sorts of practices they routinely undertake: sorting and delivering letters, wearing a certain uniform, and so on. Then again, if I tell you that someone exhibits their intimate parts on street corners while attempting to seduce passers-by, you will be able to tell me which agent-description is most plausible for that range of practices. For routine discourse, then, there may be a loose rule: if we know the agent-description, we will know the practice; and if we know the practice-description, we will know the agent. That is how life-as-usual proceeds. I’m a bass player (agent description) — so you know what I do. You dig flower beds and prune roses (practice description) — so I know what you are. In both cases, we can hear these things without being told in so many words; in ordinary talk, the doing tells us the being, and the being tells us the doing. It is as routine as knowing which predicate goes with which subject.

Examples of this routine kind of inference from practice to agent (or vice versa) can be found in The X-Files itself. In “E. Masculata,” when Mulder is on the trail of two escaped convicts and the trail leads to a gas station where the two have been holed up, the policeman leading the investigation is puzzled as to where they should look next. Mulder draws on a routine agent-practice connection and reminds the cop of how such commonsense techniques work:

MULDER: If they [the escaped convicts he’s tracking] had girlfriends they probably tried to call them. (Walks to phone booth to check the last number dialed.)

The agent-practice connection is simple: if the agent is “boyfriend” or “girlfriend,” a routine and expectable practice is that they will call each other, especially if they are apart and especially if there is news to tell (in this case, that the boyfriend is out of jail). The same thing

1. This analysis of what I am calling “agents” and “practices” is based on the conversation-analytic technique of membership categorization device (MCD) analysis pioneered by Harvey Sacks. Sacks uses the terms “category member” and “category-bound activity” for much the same things; I have simply altered this to get a slightly less cumbersome and less technical terminology for the general reader. Interested readers might like to look at Sacks’ original formulations in “On the Analyzability of Stories by Children” and “An Initial Investigation of the Usability of Conversation for Doing Sociology.”

2. Formal conversation analysis usually employs a more elaborate system of transcript notation, taking careful note of speech delivery features. For my purposes here, however, such features are not relevant, and so my transcripts will follow the standard format.
can work in reverse; that is, a practice can be disassociated from an agent if it is not routinely connected to it. Thus, in “Humbug,” when Scully and Mulder discover that Sheriff Hamilton was once “Jim, the Dog-faced Boy” and then find him burying something in his garden at night beneath the full moon, they decide to see what he has buried. Just prior to this, however, Mulder cautions Scully about the assumption they are making by connecting a particular agent-description (“hairy faced person”) with a possibly nonroutine practice-description for it (“lycanthropy,” “aberrant behavior”).

**Mulder:** Y’know Scully, hypertrichosis does not connote lycanthropy.
**Scully:** What are you implying?
**Mulder:** We’re being highly discriminatory here. Just because a man was once afflicted with excessive hairiness we’ve no reason to suspect him of aberrant behavior.
**Scully:** It’s like assuming guilt based only on skin color, isn’t it?
(Mulder nods. They start digging, only to find a potato.)

This instance has a number of interesting features. First, as with the previous case, the agent-practice connections are made explicitly through such terms as “connote,” “implicate,” “assume,” “suspect,” and so on. Second, if actions speak louder than words, then obviously both Scully and Mulder do not believe in the agent-practice disconnection they have just made explicit, given that they do exhume what the sheriff has buried—somewhat to their embarrassment, since the sheriff has merely buried the potato as a cure for warts. Third, the example shows how what may or may not count as a “normal” agent-practice connection can be the basis of many claims and struggles about political correctness or incorrectness. We cannot go from skin color to guilt (or innocence), and we cannot go from gender to, say, strength (or weakness) and so on. However, it is not entirely clear whether we can go from hirsuteness to lycanthropy. What counts as an acceptable agent-practice inference, then, is not fixed once and for all; rather, it is part of a particular historical conjuncture between discursive descriptions, morality, and politics. The ways persons are discursively categorized tell us not only about their moral positionings but also about those who make the categorizations. (We will see another aspect of this later, in the case of “Fresh Bones.”)

If this is how agent-practice inferences work in more or less routine situations, as soon as we move even slightly outside this sphere of

3. On the moral and political aspects of membership categorization, see Jayyusi, *Categorisation and the Moral Order* and “Values and Moral Judgment.”
life-as-usual, things get more complex. They also get more puzzling and alluring. For example, newspapers would not be able to sustain themselves if they only reported routine conjunctions of agents and practices; that is why "Dog bites man" is less interesting (news-wise) than "Man bites dog." My favorite is an actual magazine headline: "Killer Nun!" What is going on here—and it brings us close to X-Files territory—is a disjunction: nuns may do all sorts of things except kill; and killing might be done by almost anyone except a nun. Hence, throughout "Humbug," Scully has to continually remind the sheriff that just because he regards his "freakish" townsfolk as "normal," this does not mean they cannot be killers—and she cites the fact that most relatives of serial killers think of them as perfectly normal persons until the truth about them comes out.

The question in SF is similar to that of news reportage: what is the practice, and who is the agent of that practice? Or: if one is supplied, how can the other be possible? These are the sorts of questions that The X-Files poses to viewers—and it is possible to watch episodes precisely as puzzles of this sort. True, certain episodes are quite disappointing if viewed this way, for sometimes both agent and practice are known to the viewer very early on and the only interest resides in seeing how Scully and Mulder manage to arrive at the same connection. By and large, at least the puzzle (and sometimes the solution) gets announced early on in the piece, during the scene-setting moments; given The X-Files' format, this usually means just after the (often mysterious) opening scene and the initial credits. At that point, we usually see Scully and Mulder in the lab or the morgue, examining the evidence, or else at the scene of the crime. It is at those crucial points that they set up—through their dialogue—the main pieces of the puzzle to be solved, and it is those "missing pieces" that are, precisely, unknown. It is then that they start to ask who and what agents and practices are involved, and to speculate as to how they can be related, thereby establishing the main narrative interest for the rest of the episode.

X-Dialogues

A brief but typical instance of the kinds of conjoint inference made by Mulder and Scully comes near the start of the "Fresh Bones" episode. A Marine working at the Folkstone resettlement camp, Jack McAlpin, has died after having driven himself into a tree: the audience know that McAlpin has crashed the car believing a strange disfigurement to have overtaken his face. Mulder and Scully investigate the crime scene, where they notice a strange marking on the tree itself.
MULDER: Most of the refugees at Folksstone are Haitian. *(Long pause.)*
SCULLY: Mrs. McAlpin believes that voodoo is behind her husband’s death?

Given that the agents in this case are Haitian refugees and that a strange death has occurred, Scully and Mulder have to find a practice tied to the relevant agent-description that will render a plausible account of their (the Haitians’) possible agency in the death. A practice that is routinely bound to the national group in question is voodoo—and that is the solution they hit on. This also gives Scully her chance to deliver what has now become a standard line of skepticism in the face of Mulder’s belief in aliens and the paranormal: “You don’t mean to tell me that you think X is responsible for Y?” or variations on that trope. (We will see another example of this later in connection with the “Calusari” episode.) For now, we can note an interesting change in the format: instead of charging Mulder with the expectable-but-weird agent-practice solution, Scully attributes it to the dead man’s wife, Robin McAlpin. We can only speculate as to why this may be, but there is at least one candidate reason here, namely that the Haitians-voodoo connection has more than a slight element of “racial” or “ethnic” stereotyping about it. It is one of the possibly politically incorrect agent-practice connections we noted above in the case of Sheriff Hamilton. By attributing the connection to a third party, Scully is able to get the (as it turns out correct) narrative solution off the ground, while at the same time attributing any negative ethics it may connote to a minor character.

The next instance is found in the post-credit lab scene in “Humbug.” Following the death of the Alligator Man in Gibsontown (a haven for practicing and former sideshow acts), Mulder notices a trail of such inexplicable deaths around the country. Showing Scully a selection of photographic evidence, he goes on:

MULDER: The victims range from all different age groups, races, both male and female. The mutilations appear so motiveless that one would suspect some form of ritual. Yet they adhere to no known cult. No known serial killer would have been expected to escalate the level of violence of these attacks over such an extended period of time. So what do you think, Scully? What are your initial thoughts?

This again is a typical device for (what many think are the best) episodes in which neither the FBI agents nor the audience know the solution to a set of inexplicable events. Mulder describes the evidence, looks for patterns in it, and then invites Scully to speculate on the
possible forms of agency that could have brought about those events. In this case, as well, he rules out lists of possible agents given his professional knowledge of the kinds of criminals to which the practices in question can be tied. Hence, the practice-description "ritual killing" goes with the agent-description "cults" and, somewhat less clearly, the practice-description "low escalation of violence" goes with the agent description "serial killer." These—among other things—can be ruled out in these cases, and Scully is invited to speculate. As is often the case, she refuses to be drawn into paranormal kinds of agent-practice solutions. Instead, she turns to the photo of the Alligator Man and comments, "Imagine going through your whole life looking like this."

Since the scene-setting in this episode does not yield a plausible agent-practice connection, Scully and Mulder have to probe more deeply. They visit Gibsontown itself, and going with Sheriff Hamilton to the shop of one Hepcat Helm, Mulder wants to check out an illustration he has found in one of Helm's manuals:

**MULDER:** Just hang on. I wanted to ask you about this manual illustration. I recognize most of the historical portraits you've drawn here. But what's this here? (Pause.)

**HEPCAT:** It's duh Fiji Mermaid. (Pause.)

**HAMILTON:** Is that what that thing is? (Pause.)

**SCULLY:** What's the Fiji Mermaid?

**HEPCAT:** The Fiji Mermaid—it's, it’s the Fiji Mermaid.

**HAMILTON:** It's a bit of, er, humbug Barnum pulled in the last century.

**HEPCAT:** Barnum billed it as a real live mermaid. But—people went in to see it, all they saw was a real dead monkey sewn on the tail of a fish. (Pause.)

**MULDER:** A monkey? (Pause.)

**HEPCAT:** A mummified monkey.

**HAMILTON:** It supposedly looked so bad he had to exhibit it as a genuine fake.

**HEPCAT:** Ah, but see (Pause)—that's why Barnum was a genius. You never know where the truth ends and the humbug begins. He came right out and he said this Fiji Mermaid thing is just a bunch of BS. That made people want to go and see it even more. So I mean—who knows. Maybe for box office reasons Barnum hawked it as a hoax but in reality . . .

**MULDER:** The Fiji Mermaid was a reality?

**HEPCAT:** (Shrugs.)

. . .

**HAMILTON:** . . . what's all this about?

**MULDER:** (Showing him a photo.) These tracks were found at several of the past few crime scenes. They've defied exact identification.
But one expert speculated that they might be simian (Pause.) in nature.

**HAMILTON:** You don’t mean to tell me you think these tracks were made by the Fiji Mermaid?

**SCULLY:** (To both men.) D’you recall what Barnum said about suckers?

Here, a suspected agent gets inspected for the kinds of practice that might be or could be tied to it. Because something called “the Fiji Mermaid” is a complete unknown (except to sideshow insiders), its possible range of tied practices is therefore equally unknown. It is effectively “the thing” or “the creature.” The question is, Could one such tied practice be strange murders? Mulder, finding a suitably informed insider (presumably, as we find out a little later, because he has his suspicions about a possible “simian” agent), gets the agent-description mobilized: “But what’s this here?” Then Scully attempts to solicit a practice-description: “What’s the Fiji Mermaid?” The answer does not yield anything that might make the required connection. On the contrary, as is almost typical of this episode (cf. Dr. Blockhead’s several assertions to the effect that some mysteries are better not cleared up), the answer is of the “maybe yes, maybe no” variety; perhaps it’s a fake, perhaps it’s real, who knows? Then it is left to the Sheriff to articulate what is usually Scully’s line: “You don’t mean to tell me . . .?” This allows Scully an even more skeptical position, addressed to both men: “D’you recall what Barnum said about suckers?”

“The Calusari” is more typical of the narrative structure in which the audience has a fairly good suspicion of who the agent is and what the strange practice is—even though we can’t easily guess the connection to start with. It begins with a fairly direct suggestion that a young boy, Michael Holvey, has somehow “willed” the death of a toddler, Teddy Holvey, to whom he is related. It is the “somehow” that sets the narrative puzzle in this case; there is a suggestion of psychic powers and a barely seen “attacker” whom Michael seems to control—again, somehow. He appears to “think” the infant on to the track of an oncoming showground train. Later, in the lab, Mulder spots a helium balloon behaving strangely in a photo taken just before the death.

**MULDER:** You see this is a helium balloon here, and the one thing I did learn in kindergarten is that when you let them go they float up and away, but you see this is moving away from him—horizontally.

**SCULLY:** Did you learn about wind in kindergarten?

**MULDER:** Well, I called the National Weather Service and they said on the day that Teddy died the wind was blowing north, but you
see the balloon is moving south. As if it’s being pulled against
the wind.
SCULLY: Pulled? By whom?
MULDER: Well, I don’t know. That’s why I came to Chuck, the king of
digital imaging.

CHUCK: (Painting to a shape holding the balloon by a string.) Here it is.
(Pause.) It’s clearly a concentration of electro-magnetic energy.
(Pause.)
SCULLY: Uh, so you’re saying that, or, a ghost killed Teddy Holvey?
(Pause.) Has anyone checked the camera that took this photo?

Here, unlike the audience, Mulder and Scully have only the end event:
a toddler who has escaped an apparently escape-proof harness and, it
would seem, “wandered” onto a train track. (Did he wander or was
he led?) They have no agent and no possible practice that could cause
the event. In this computer-lab scene (again immediately following the
credits), they speculate first on the practice. It is somehow connected
with a helium balloon that we (although they do not) know Michael
wanted, having lost his own. It effectively becomes a substitute agent,
something that has “led” the toddler to his death. As an agent, it has
a set of typical predicates, which everyone knows: “when you let them
go they float up up and away.” This agent description, however, de-
feats those standard preferences (as we saw the headline “Killer Nuns”
does). It has done something that helium balloons cannot do: it has
drifted horizontally against the wind. Ergo, there is another agent
responsible for its movement, for “pulling” it along—presumably to
lure the toddler onto the track. Enhancing the image, the computer
scientist, Chuck, is able to get a further visual unknown onto our
screens: “a concentration of electro-magnetic energy.” Thus, a possible
quasi-human agent has been found, and Scully can introduce her (by
now completely expected) “You mean to tell me?” line plus the
(equally expected) dismissal of what she thinks Mulder might have in
mind: “Has anyone checked the camera that took this photo?”

As a final example, there is an interesting twist to these agent-
description conventions in the “F. Emasculata” episode. More than one
X-Phile has noticed and complained that this episode is anomalous for
the series, containing neither paranormal nor alien activities. Instead,
it is a straight conspiracy narrative about a big pharmaceutical com-
pany that secretly experiments on captive live populations. Given that
this part of the story is “outed” very early in the episode, the main
puzzle does not have to do with peculiar events or “beings”; rather,
the agents in this case are literally the agents, Mulder and Scully,
themselves, and the unknown practice is: why are they on this case? —apparently one in which two mere convicts have escaped from the state pen.

The episode begins with a biodiversity scientist in the jungle who finds a dead animal body with strange pustules and crawling with peculiar insects. Investigating, he is squirted in the face by one of the pustules. Later, a similar-looking piece of meat is delivered to a penitentiary. Some infected prisoners manage to escape, and Mulder and Scully are called in—but only with a brief to aid in the recapture of the convicts.

MULDER: I thought this was about escaped prisoners.
SCULLY: It is.
MULDER: (Indicating a medical crew in an adjacent room.) Then who are the men in the funny suits? (Pause.)
SCULLY: I don’t know—it looks like some kind of decon. situation.

...

MULDER: Where did this case originate, Scully?
SCULLY: Came out of Skinner’s office.
MULDER: Did he say why he gave it to us?
SCULLY: No—why?
MULDER: Well, this isn’t the type of thing the FBI normally gets called in on—I have a feeling we’re not being told the entire story here.
SCULLY: I’ve got the same feeling.

Mulder’s first line is interestingly self-reflexive here; it could just as easily refer to the episode itself as to his own narrative situation within it. He then raises a side-puzzle: What agent goes with wearing funny suits? Decontamination outfits, Scully speculates briefly. Then, Mulder gets to the main point of the puzzle: if the agent is an FBI agent, then getting called in on a fairly normal prison break is not a suitably tied practice to that agent-description. On the contrary, that cannot be a solution to the question “What are we doing here?” It must have to do with some other, more FBI-like, practice, presumably connected with the side-puzzle, the men in funny suits. Thus, while the audience can have pretty good suspicions about “the whole story” (and this is what makes the episode far from the best ever), Mulder and Scully are not “being told the whole story.” Once they find out, of course, there is nothing much to do other than pursue it to its inevitable conclusion. Eventually it leads to the series’ own continuing puzzle: Who is Cancer Man and what does he have to do with The X-Files? The solution to this master agent-practice puzzle may (or may not) have to wait until the fourth season. However, it remains a continuing instance of what
each episode does, with varying degrees of success: it talks the unknown into existence.

Finally, is there another running puzzle in the _X-Files_ that a membership categorization analysis could partly illuminate? If this type of analysis connects agents with practices by offering a grammar (or set of rules) for connecting agent-descriptions with practice-descriptions, one puzzle for fans has been along the following lines: Is the sentence “Mulder and Scully have sex” grammatical? That is, is such an agent-practice combination legitimate within the narrative grammar of the _X-Files_? This is perhaps the longest-running _X-Files_ “unknown” to date and a source of speculation in both fan and mainstream _X-Files_ literature. Indeed, advertisers have begun to make the puzzle explicit; for example, as the third season started (in Australia), Frutopia drinks ran a mid-episode ad with the following captions: “Scully and Mulder are always dealing with bad apples. When are they going to try some passion fruit?” _Who Weekly_ magazine put the matter succinctly just prior to the opening of the third season (again in Australia):

_Not so easy in their affections are _The X-Files_ FBI paranormal investigators Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), who, although spending every waking hour joined at the hip, have so far resisted romantic entanglement. Each lives alone and is professedly in love with their work, but it’s still the sexual chemistry between the two that gives the plots added zest and keeps viewers turned on._ (Casey, 35)

However, as the _Who_ article acknowledges, there is almost no actual evidence for the possibility, except for one episode where Scully goes on a date (to Mulder’s fairly apparent consternation) and a second involving Mulder’s ex, recently arrived from the U.K. to assist in an investigation (eliciting barely-disguised jealousy from Scully). Bob Goodwin (co-executive producer) is quoted by _Who_ as writing off the possibility altogether, comparing the agents to Matt and Kitty in _Gunsmoke_: “They just never quite connected. . . . They have a professional relationship.”

In this sense, “professionality” and “sexuality” vie as candidate predicates for the description of Mulder and Scully’s relationship, with the episodes themselves steering a course very close to the former and the secondary literature continuously speculating on the latter. The contrast came to a head in the 1995 _Rolling Stone Yearbook_ under the titles “_X-Files_ Uncovered” and “Alien Sex Fiends” (see Denton). The cover shows Duchovny and Anderson in bed, possibly naked, and the article includes a double-page spread of Anderson, Duchovny and Chris Carter indulging the “complacencies of the pel-
gnoir,” faking a postcoital threesome shot, and smaller stills of the two actors cavorting in bed with Duchovny’s dog, Blue. The accompanying text makes it clear that this was no more than a sales pitch for the magazine and, perhaps, the series: the photos show the actors (and Carter) and clearly not Mulder and Scully.

The case is illuminating, however, for it shows that what I have identified as the show’s peculiar narrative grammar (agent-practice puzzles and their full or partial solutions) is a quite conscious part of the *X-Files* production and marketing strategy. We keep watching the individual episodes because we want to know “Is it possible?”—for example, that the dead might return to seek revenge—but more importantly, we keep watching the series for a much broader development of the narrative grammar, where we want to know, again, “Is it possible?”—but in this case whether Mulder and Scully (will) fuck. In the first case, we routinely get hints, occasional conclusions, and from time to time, completely blank slates. In the second case, if there’s any flirtation at all, it’s between the production team and ourselves. As with strange happenings, alien possibilities, and the paranormal, sex appears to have most success (as in 40 million viewers) when subject to a tantalizing scarcity.

Throughout his work on membership categorization, Harvey Sacks insists that what I am calling “agent descriptions” are assembled into groups or teams (see footnote 1). He calls these groups “devices” and shows that when a member of a device is mentioned, we can routinely hear the other members. If someone is called “a cellist” or “a fullback,” we can hear what other sorts of descriptions might be relevant to the context. What we have seen here is that there may be a rather peculiar device called “the unknown.” It is peculiar in that by definition we cannot know in advance the sorts of agents or members that the device collects. This device is indefinite, fuzzy; it could range from having no members at all (hence Scully’s occasionally total skepticism) to having infinite members (hence Mulder’s occasionally crazy acceptances). The opening credits to *The X-Files* reveal or mention several possible members of the device: flying saucers, paranormal activity, and so on. However, the device is potentially much wider than this, and thus part of the puzzle in each episode is to identify possible device members—with the equally possible proviso that there may actually be none.

In addition to showing how agents are collected in devices, however, Sacks also finds that categories (agent descriptions) within such groups or devices have activities or practices bound to them. He calls these “category-bound activities.” These can be very useful in routine discourse. To cite one of Sacks’ own examples, the category “baby” can belong to two devices (“stage of life” and “family”). If “baby” is
from the device "family," then the person so referred to could be in their twenties, thirties, forties, and so on, and would still be the baby of the family. However, if we hear an utterance like “the baby cried,” we can hear that it is a reference to “baby” from the device “stage of life” because it carries a category-bound activity for that particular variety of baby (crying). What’s more, if we hear the category-bound activity, we can usually infer the category from it, and vice versa. What we have discovered about possible members of the device called “the unknown” is that they do not have routinely bound activities or practices. Thus, one way in which Mulder and Scully can get to “the unknown” is through investigations that tie activities to agents in a piecemeal or case-by-case fashion, relying on assumptions and inferences quite different from the norm. This may be what “the unknown” is, then: a device that contains any members whose routine practices cannot be tied to them through any kind of commonsense or scientific inference. Making the unknown known therefore consists in seeing how it is a particular unknown agent, is tied to a particular practice. What this requires is a means of connection based on assumptions beyond both common sense and science; it invites us to imagine alternative sets of “rational” connections outside the ones we routinely use. In short, it invites us to imagine, via alternative rationalities, other worlds: not just the objects, beings, and activities of those worlds but also the alternative forms of knowledge that might inhabit them. This is one of the unique features of The X-Files and it might, in part, account for its currently massive fascination and following.