



## The Postmodern Prometheus: Collective experience and the carnivalesque

Leanne McRae

Transformations, No. 3 (May 2002)

<http://www.cqu.edu.au/transformations>

ISSN 1444-377

---

**Abstract:** The resistive potential of the marginal collective has framed cultural studies interrogation of popular culture. It has often mobilised an ethic of play and inversion that sits comfortably with cultural studies politics. The capacity for official versions of history to mask these local and fragmented experiences has silenced the range of alternative identities that circulate through the fringes of culture. *The X-Files* episode "The Postmodern Prometheus" creates a visibility for unofficial and popular versions of the past. This paper tracks the metamorphosis of the carnival moment from official inversionary practice through the deviancy of American B-grade horror and science fiction films to its reanimation via a celebration of radical difference mobilised through the popular media. *The X-Files'* rewriting of *Frankenstein* dislodges social meanings from their original context and articulates a distinctly visual memory of a popular past to rewrite the collective experiences of the present.

**Key terms:** The X-Files, Carnivalesque, Popular Memory, Unofficial Discourses, Mediated Memories, Grotesque.

---

### **Somewhere in the land, a monster lurked...**

Opening subtitle, *The X-Files*, "The Postmodern Prometheus".

Historical sources that frame the truths of our reality are most often interpreted through official discourses, and by the empowered groups that benefit from their currency. However, an entire life exists on the fringes of this officialdom in which marginalised identities and their histories circulate in vibrant ways. Consciousness of official identity is often at odds with fragmented and individual identity politics. The manner in which the self is performed may be contrary to the overarching ideologies that sanction legitimate identities. Official truths circulate with a deep resonance due to their entrenchment within collective (mainstream) visualisations of historic narrative. Stories on the edges of legitimated history are often hidden from a wider visibility within a culture.

Where official records of the past mask disempowered identities and the experiences attached to them, the media forms a reservoir of popular memory. The range of moments and memories that do not find their way into official renderings of the past are finding increasing visibility through mediated artefacts. Contemporary, mediated and popular visualisations of past events are creating a space for unsanctioned

identities within our culture. These alternative histories and experiences embody unofficial renderings of the recent past.

This edition of *Transformations* is devoted to interrogating visual memory. This paper traces the trajectory of popular memories in the media. *The X-Files* in particular, recontextualises a plethora of past events through the memories that are activated in the nostalgic imagery of the popular media and form a hyperreal rendering of the past. This paper will trace the resilience of the popular in claiming resistive terrain. It will demonstrate how *The X-Files* mobilises contradictory imaginings of the past to reclaim hidden histories. By mapping the metamorphosis of the carnivalesque, this paper will demonstrate the resonance of popular visualisations in disrupting the official order. It will trace the carnival from its position as a legitimate, but separate, celebration of otherness, through 1950s horror films that reinterpreted this otherness as deviance, to *The X-Files* that embeds the carnivalesque disruption in the popular media. This paper articulates the manner in which popular culture embodies a bubbling cauldron of identities and experiences that can challenge the official discourses that shape the truths of our time. It champions the disruptive potential of the popular media in visualizing the past and the present. *The X-Files* provides a crucial intersection of images, meanings and identities that demonstrate a rupture in the social fabric articulating contradictory, vibrant and joyful imaginings of historical narratives.

## Rethinking hi(story)

Scully: I think that what we're seeing here is an example of a culture for whom day-time talk-shows and tabloid headlines have become a reality against which they measure their lives. A culture so obsessed by the media and a chance for self-dramatisation that they'll do anything in order to gain a spotlight.

Mulder: I am alarmed that you would reduce these people to a cultural stereotype. Not everybody's dream is to get on Jerry Springer.

Scully: Psychologists often speak of the denial of an unthinkable evil, of a misplacement of shared fears. Anxieties taking the form of a hideous monster for whom the most horrific human attributes can be ascribed. What we can't possibly imagine ourselves capable of we can blame on the ogre, on the hunchback, on the lowly half-breed...Common sense alone will tell you that these legends, these unverified rumours are ridiculous.

Mulder: But nonetheless unverifiable and therefore true in the sense that they're believed to be true.

"The Postmodern Prometheus"

The philosophy of history has been theorized within Cultural Studies in order to gain a more complex understanding of the relationship between the historian and the

past. Keith Jenkins suggests that the past does not exist - it has gone forever.<sup>1</sup> Time cannot be arrested. The only way in which we are able to access those events is through the sources and artefacts left behind. These can only come to us in "different media, for example in books, articles, [and] documentaries".<sup>2</sup> However, there are very strict criteria through which the validity of that media is determined, and the truthfulness of the source valued. It is the job of the historian to examine these artefacts and decide which of them provide a 'truthful' account of the past. Indeed, Arthur Marwick suggests that the historian must endeavour to provide "an interpretation of the past, one in which serious effort has been made to filter out myth and fable".<sup>3</sup> This attention to truth and seriousness masks the intensely interpretive nature of historical inquiry. History is a narrative that must be edited and controlled for a coherent picture to be constructed. This process - by its very nature - can eliminate rich sources of unofficial history that circulate on the fringes of legitimate discourses. For people are sewn into history in bizarre and diverse ways. Official records of human life often fail to take into account the enthusiasm, joy and heartache of that reality.

The deep focus on objective analysis in historical scholarship is due to the profound impact the recording of past events has on contemporary reality. Memory of the past serves to shape present values and judgements in distinct and deeply resonate ways. It creates an anchor through which to interpret everyday events and identities. Indeed, "as memory is to the individual, so history is to the community or society".<sup>4</sup> It shapes collective experiences. However, official history is the luxury of the empowered. The official records and biographies that pepper national, governmental and economic archives are the traces of valued knowledges and peoples. Disempowered communities leave traces in more ephemeral, less visible ways. For, "the poor do not leave much in the way of primary sources"<sup>5</sup> and "[t]he more personal, local, and unofficial a document, the less likely it [is] to survive".<sup>6</sup> However, marginalised memories of the past gain visibility through contemporary popular culture. The popular media is no longer simply a tool for re-telling past narratives, it too is a historical source. This is not to suggest that film, television or comics can open our eyes to the truth of the past - for all historical interpretation takes place within and through an agenda. However, *The X-Files* is one such text that offers identities and experiences via unofficial memories of the past. It is a text that deliberately embraces the myths and fables Marwick has warned us about.

---

<sup>1</sup> Keith Jenkins questions the role of historians in accessing and evaluating historical events. He suggests that all historiography is by its nature problematic precisely because it is always inherently interpretative, "For historians, of course, never access the past *as such*, so that the problems formulated along the traditional lines of, 'how can historians truly/accurately know the past?', or, 'if historians cannot access the "real past", then how can we have checks on historians' accounts that are "real" checks as opposed to being "just interpretations"?' are beside the point. For what is at issue in historiography - and indeed what can only ever be at issue - is what can be derived and constructed from *historicised* record or archive". *On what is history?: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*, London: Routledge, 1995 pp. 16-17

<sup>2</sup> K. Jenkins, *Re-thinking history*, London: Routledge, 1991 p. 6

<sup>3</sup> A. Marwick, *The nature of history*, (third edition), Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989 p. 3

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44

<sup>6</sup> P. Thompson, *The voice of the past: Oral history*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978 p. 3

## Proselytizing the postmodern

*The X-Files* generates a series of competing collective memories around convoluted accounts of the past. This program creates a visibility, and a visualisation for unofficial histories. It provides a unique blend of official truths and popular memories within our culture, by interrogating knowledge within distinctly visual and devalued frameworks. By integrating film, televisual and other popular media, it forms a postmodern pastiche of contradictory historical sources. A viewing highlight in the fifth season of *The X-Files* is an episode entitled, "The Postmodern Prometheus".<sup>7</sup> Intermittently, *The X-Files* writers and producers indulge the show's postmodern inflection of pastiche, and overtly interrogate knowledge, truth and reality. They indulge in a witty and knowing repartee with audiences. The peculiar and humorous nature of "The Postmodern Prometheus" is based on a very specific celebration of popular culture and a self-reflexive critique of *The X-File's* role as a popular culture artefact.

This episode is a direct rewriting of *Frankenstein*.<sup>8</sup> However, this reinscription is hailed through fragmented signifiers that resonate across time, in which literary and filmic imagery combine. "The Postmodern Prometheus" overtly traces the movement of carnivalesque resistance through the cultural terrain and the consciousness that has reshaped it within different contexts. It animates a series of contradictory memories -legitimate and illegitimate - through the popular media and creates a perverted allegiance of postmodern signification that recontextualises the carnivalesque inside contemporary televisual discourse.

*The X-Files* seeks to problematise and displace official sources of historical truths in order to activate marginalised histories and experiences. *The X-Files* activates popular memory. It pools together many of the devalued knowledges and experiences of past events that pepper popular culture. From the conspiracies surrounding the assassination of John F Kennedy, to the UFO sightings in Roswell through *Star Wars*, *Twin Peaks*, and Elvis, *The X-Files* mobilises a collective experience in the popular that creates, "a repository of collective memory that places immediate experience in the context of change over time".<sup>9</sup> It composes the historical value of culture as everyday life by using popular knowledges and artefacts as legitimate historical sources. It uses film imagery, icons and characters, for example, in order to hail the consciousness of the contemporary world in ways that will resonate with disempowered groups. As a disempowered site, the popular is the node through which many disempowered groups make sense of themselves and their lives. *The X-Files* reshapes the knowledges that emanate from these sources in reference to the contextual movement of social reality. This program is less interested in the undiluted facts of official history than the way in which popular culture has enriched the past via interpretation, embellishment and speculation. Official truths are reinscribed in light of unofficial experiences. This program does not take for granted the impartiality of the historian, and recognises that contextualising past events is always a multifarious activity. *The X-Files* mobilises a range of

---

<sup>7</sup> "The Postmodern Prometheus", *The X-Files*, original air date 30.11.1997, written and directed by Chris Carter, Ten Thirteen: Twentieth Century Fox episode 5x06

<sup>8</sup> M. Shelly, *Frankenstein*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983

<sup>9</sup> G. Lipsitz, *Time passages: Collective memory and American popular culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990 p. 5

interpretive practices and knowledges to create a patchwork of multiple truths and memories.

## Alternative histories

The media creates a collectivity of images whereby disempowered groups can mobilise and reinterpret the memories and meanings in past events that resonate with their experiences. Moreover, there is an entire spectrum of past events that are mediated and occupy historic truth in so far that entire generations have only hyperreal recollections of collective experience. We need only think of the assassination of JFK, witnessed by every generation since the actual event, through the famous Zapruda footage. More recently, the Berlin Wall, Tiananmen Square, the Gulf War and The World Trade Centre terrorism shape the popular memory of the recent past in dynamic ways. The polysemy of media texts opens spaces of negotiation in reading practices that can operate contrary to historic discourse and its seriousness. Popular culture is unstable terrain. It is simultaneously a force for unity and disruption. The tension between these two forces shapes the discursive debate surrounding the role of the popular as the everyday. It is indeed 'of the people', however, who these people are and how they engage with the popular is the source of struggle within Cultural Studies. When popular culture is placed in a binarial relationship with High Culture as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart figured at the birth of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, it is championed as the terrain of difference and otherness - of radical destabilisation of the status quo. It becomes attached "to some pure, unsullied, primitive and originally peasant or peasant-like community".<sup>10</sup> This community offers a radical reinterpretation of the dominant hierarchy and contains ingrained disruptive potential. Nevertheless, the popular is now also "that which can be marketed as entertainment".<sup>11</sup> It is no longer necessarily resistive but intimately embedded within a dominant, capitalist, patriarchal and hegemonic system that seeks above all things, to maintain the stability of the empowered. Hence the popular is the hegemonic dance floor. The constant struggle between the disruptive and stabilising elements of popular culture is precisely that which makes it such dynamic interrogative landscape. The possibilities for alternative identities, experiences, and histories, offered in this space, is why Cultural Studies remains so enamoured with this struggle. Indeed, Cultural Studies has insistently championed the value of localised, resistive communities or collectivities in challenging the mainstreaming of society. They are offered as ruptures in the social fabric that can alter the rules of social life momentarily to disrupt and redirect the flow of power. This is also the reason traces of the carnivalesque are significant, for Bakhtin offers a legitimate, state sanctioned space for otherness - of "world upside-down"<sup>12</sup> in which the rules *are* broken, alternative truths are visualised and difference is embraced. It is in this space that the marginalised community disrupts the stable silence of official lives and identities.

Alternative histories and popular memories occupied a central role in carnival ceremonies. Carnival was "a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and

---

<sup>10</sup> J. McGuigan, *Cultural populism*, London: Routledge, 1992 p. 11

<sup>11</sup> A. Cranny-Francis, *Popular Culture*, Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1994 p. 7

<sup>12</sup> J. Docker, *Postmodernism and popular culture: A cultural history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 p. 179

extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man and of human relations".<sup>13</sup> It provided a moment removed from the maintenance of the official hierarchy via legitimate histories in order to hail the truths of the popular. The spectacular ridicule of officialdom served to deconstruct the claim to authority by the empowered. The laughter at carnival was collective, bound together by common experience and communal identity. Those normally external to, or marginalised within the community (freaks, giants, dwarfs), were privileged and valued as a site of collective allegiance. They were centralised as visible sites of transgression and inversion. The grotesque was allocated a coherent space within the collective consciousness. The world was literally turned upside-down as women became men, the poor became rich and authority was ridiculed. The richness of the carnival lay in its capacity to not simply operate as a pressure valve for the disempowered, but that it functioned to align and regenerate the community, and embrace a sense of "relativity [in] prevailing truths and authorities".<sup>14</sup> However, John Docker has noted that Bakhtin mapped significant changes to the meanings of the carnivalesque grotesque from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance by which Others appeared as "comic monsters".<sup>15</sup> By the Romantic period they were "nocturnal, sinister, ghostly, ghastly".<sup>16</sup> The disruptive potential of the carnival faded in light of more subtle hegemonic negotiations whereby the hierarchy of a society was more insistently maintained. Collective moments of resistance declined as a part of public life. The grotesque was equated with deviance, and the truths of the local, the personal and the intimate were devalued by the consistent maintenance of the official order. Otherness declined in its visibility and the grotesque placed behind the mask, rather than celebrated in front of it.

This shift in the role of grotesqueness in dividing rather than uniting a community, is visualised most insistently via the 1950s American horror and science fiction films whereby a series of monsters terrorise small towns with their hideous deformities and murderous intentions. In such films as *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Fly* (1958), *The Mummy* (1959), *King Kong* (1933), *The Thing* (1951), *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Godzilla* (1955) the monster, or freak, or mutant threatens the stability of the community. This community must come together to defeat the monster and restore order. The grotesque is not a site that activates unofficial truths. It is not celebrated. It is dangerous. The monster's role is not to challenge or disrupt the dominant hierarchy, but to restore it and stabilise the authority of the empowered. The collective identity animated around this figure is focussed on the maintenance rather than the deconstruction of the official order. Vivian Sobchack explicitly argues that "[t]he Creature films of the fifties (and the early sixties as well) are less about horror and science fiction than they are about the preservation of social order".<sup>17</sup> The monster was most commonly a threat to community identity rather than a signifier of collective marginal experience. Community allegiance is defined via the destruction

---

<sup>13</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, (translated by Helene Iswolsky), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984 p. 6

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>15</sup> Docker, *op. cit.*, p. 182

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> V. Sobchack, *Screening space: The American science fiction film*, (second edition) New York: Ungar, 1987 p. 45

of this deviance for "[t]here is no salvation for the disorganised mob, running amok under the creature's feat. What is called for is teamwork, cooperation, and above all, organisation".<sup>18</sup> Hegemonic maintenance is amplified as the spaces for alternative community collectivities are eliminated. After much monster madness, order was restored to everyday life and the stability of the official order reinstated. Indeed in Bakhtin's (or Rabelais') world, the rules are always restored. However the meanings in the 'monstrous' moment of collectivity have been radically rewritten. For Bakhtin it was a precious moment of social life. Difference and diversity was special and crucial to community formation. Monstrousness was embedded in celebration rather than in fear.

Contemporary popular culture offers us a way to alter social rules by causing the social landscape to shift. The moment of Bakhtin's carnival has left us - we are no longer allocated our space for difference.<sup>19</sup> Now we can encounter it in fragments in Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardis Gras. We can also find it in the Wrestling, on *South Park* (and the range of contemporary cartoons from *The Simpsons* to *Ren and Stimpy*) and on *Jerry Springer*. Each of these texts mobilise their own version of the carnivalesque. The struggle between the celebration and demonization of the carnival is played out most visibly within popular media artefacts. It is not a carefully crafted strike-force, or battle of grace and precision. It is a street fight full of scratching, hissing and spitting, which is why *Jerry Springer* offers the quintessential boot camp in the politics of popular culture. While it offers a stabilisation of middle class values through a spectacle of obscene otherness, it simultaneously activates an animated and deviantly grotesque interpretation of everyday life. *The X-Files* uses *Jerry Springer* to locate the carnival moment in contemporary lives. The episode entitled "The Postmodern Prometheus" combines laughter, parody, grotesqueness, bodily humour, masking, pantomime and excessiveness to shape a celebratory otherness that generates community collectivity around and through unsanctioned historical truths. The sense of belonging that is activated through popular sites speaks to a range of disaffiliated subjectivities on the fringes of legitimate discourse. These identities mobilise a collective experience that is outside "official limits of belonging"<sup>20</sup> and therefore entails reflexive interrogations of the self, the past and popular culture. Henry Jenkins has demonstrated the manner in which fan communities create a collective consciousness through radical revelry in difference. In mobilising alternative trajectories, these audience members reify contradictory identities that are not visible within official discourses.

## The Great Mutato

*The X-Files* activates a popular memory of the carnivalesque in "The Postmodern Prometheus". It layers the spectacular, folktales, myths, popular stories, scientific inquiry and film history in a bizarre blend of legitimate and illegitimate truth. It takes issue with the deviance of the grotesque in 1950s B-grade horror films and animates the celebratory context of the carnival. Contemporary mediated knowledges are

---

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Robert Stam suggests in *Subversive pleasures: Bakhtin, cultural criticism and film*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989 that we now see the grotesque and excessive bodily pleasure in pornographic films.

<sup>20</sup> E. Probyn, *Outside belongings*, New York: Routledge, 1996 p. 8

perverted and combined with official discourses in a humorous parody of the carnival itself.

Mulder: When Victor Frankenstein asks himself "Whence did the principle of life proceed?" and then as the gratifying summit to his toils creates a hideous phantasm of a man, he prefigures the postmodern prometheus - the genetic engineer. Whose power to reanimate matter - genes, into life - us, is only as limited as his imagination is.

Scully: Mulder, I'm alarmed that you would reduce this man to a literary stereotype...a mad scientist.

"The Postmodern Prometheus"

*The X-Files* performs the shift within popular culture whereby memories of the past are moved through time with the use of signifiers that have become dislodged from their original codes. The mobilisation of B-grade horror movies in this episode of *The X-Files* functions as a marker of the manner in which the popular memory of carnival persists and how it has mutated into new forms.

"The Postmodern Prometheus" is the story of 'The Great Mutato' a monster who - in classic horror generic convention - is 'terrorizing' a small town. The theatrical theme of this episode hails the grotesquely carnivalesque sideshow and the simultaneous fascination and revulsion embraced in this space. From its commencement, this episode is framed within popular narrative as the camera introduces us to The Great Mutato through the opening of a storybook that contains his story. It begins with single mother Shaineh Berkowitz and her son Izzy in small-town Bloomington in semi-rural Indiana. Overweight and working class, Izzy finds escape in comic books depicting the grotesque and macabre. As he heads off with his friends to a comic book convention in a nearby town, his mother finds her own escape in the day-time talk shows of *Jerry Springer* and the side-show of freaks and misfits that parade across the screen. She does not notice her windows being covered by a large tent. A noxious gas renders her unconscious and she awakens a few days later to discover that she is pregnant. Mulder and Scully enter the narrative when she writes to them explaining the bizarre circumstances of her conception claiming she saw a monster and heard Cher singing. When the local scientist's wife is impregnated in the same manner and an old man is murdered, the townsfolk turn into an angry mob complete with pitchforks and torches of fire in order to hunt down and kill the monster.

Shot entirely in black and white, punctuated by a sideshow soundtrack and a large circus-like tent, the use of distinctly nostalgic techniques mobilises the popular memories of otherness that are activated through B-grade horror films. *The X-Files* creates a chimeric reality whereby past, present and future trajectories collide in a postmodern suspension of official history in which competing truths occupy simultaneous spaces. This episode does not function to simply rework or retell past events from a disempowered position. It does not relay the events in Bloomington, Indiana in flashback. For, "the limitation of the function of the flashback is only



possible, of course, if we posit a pastness, a 'having happened'".<sup>21</sup> These events are revealed in a space where the contemporary media offers a radical interpretation of the real. Scientific rationalism, horror movies, carnival, music and popular media combine in a bizarre suspension of linear history. Contradictory discourses are visible simultaneously in "The Postmodern Prometheus" and they exist out of time. A series of powerful, but diverse signifiers are used to conjure up a collection of popular memories that resonate within the popular media and its discourses in order to create a pastiche of collective experiences (of the circus, horror movies and comic books) that are removed from their original context. The black and white film stock, semi-rural setting, circus tent, horror-film lighting all combine in a postmodern allegiance of perverted signification. As these signs travel through time they carry with them a series of official and unofficial histories that are all given currency within "The Postmodern Prometheus". This does not simply create a space for alternative historical truths to surface, but critiques the very narrative of official history and the collective consciousness that is embraced as a result of those truths. *The X-Files* creates a movement in which it reworks the carnivalesque in new collective experiences.

In "The Postmodern Prometheus", the carnival is simultaneously hailed in its original inversionary form through references to the circus sideshow that celebrated difference, demonised like the B-grade horror films that depicted the monstrous as a threat, and reanimated as a collective celebration within contemporary daytime talk-shows. The series of carnivalesque imagery from excessive embodiment, procreation, reproduction, feasting and food, to laughter and parody are visualised in "The Postmodern Prometheus" in which, "[t]he pious and the carnivalesque grotesque exit...side by side".<sup>22</sup> However contrary to Docker's observation of Bakhtin that they "never merged"<sup>23</sup>, in this episode they are connected and melded in significant ways. Every member of the Bloomington community embodies a transgressive corporeality, as they have been the unwitting counterparts in scientific experimentation for many years. The Great Mutato, as a product of 'abnormal' reproduction, functions metonymically for the intense reproduction and regenerative qualities of this community. His own excessive consumption of peanut butter hails the carnivalesque feasting metaphors for procreation and fertility. Food is a powerful metaphor for the resistive carnivalesque moment. As Mulder and Scully meet in the local diner, food is mobilised as a gathering point and legitimised as a connective ritual. It is significant that when Mulder falls out of favour with the townsfolk, it is signified via the defiling of his food. With a monster in their midst, the Bloomington community is faced with their own radical transgressiveness. He is a threat to their 'normality'. However *The X-Files* consistently parallels the grotesque otherness of The Great Mutato with the excessive 'normality' of the townsfolk. A direct reference is being made to the thin line that separates the legitimate and illegitimate bodies and identities. They exist together in a bizarre alliance of collectivity stimulating and energizing everyday life. In the absence of a legitimised collective celebration of difference, collective allegiance is generated via the celebration of popular media texts. The carnivalesque is being found less in a moment of grotesque deviance and inversion of the official order - and more in the spaces of popular culture and

---

<sup>21</sup> K. Mann, "Narrative entanglements: The Terminator", in *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, v43 n2, 1989-90 p. 18

<sup>22</sup> Docker, *op. cit.*, p. 174

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

alternative reading practices. In "The Postmodern Prometheus" *Jerry Springer* and Cher provide these moments of collective gathering and identification.

## Masked memories

The Great Mutato is a fan of Cher. His identity is inherently tied to his embrace of Cher's role in the film *Mask*.<sup>24</sup> In this film, Cher plays Rusty Dennis, the mother of a child (Rocky) who, like The Great Mutato, is deformed with a severe cranio-facial disease. Hailed by the marginalised identity he witnesses in Rocky Dennis, The Great Mutato embraces the film as a source for identification and plays out his fantasy by attempting - erroneously - to find love in likeness. His desire is to repeat the genetic error that produced his deformity and create a 'mate' for himself. His 'belonging' is 'conceived' in the grotesque. The people of Bloomington rigorously police this boundary, as they too desire a belonging, a collective bond to create a connection to their lives and the wider social hierarchy. The Great Mutato articulates the necessity of difference in creating this bond within a community. Not simply by articulating an externalised otherness, but by mobilising an internalised otherness - a common diversity that is always out of phase with socially sanctioned identities. He strips away the masking of everyday ideologies and disrupts the stability of 'normality'. He embodies a shift within the diegesis, whereby official histories are inadequate to hail a sense of belonging. Otherness cannot be contained and categorised - brought out on special occasions. Popular artefacts, articulated by and through "The Postmodern Prometheus", provide space for the allegiance of diverse individuals who experience alternative truths within a culture. Within "The Postmodern Prometheus", popular memories and experiences hold contemporary truths that generate community building more potently than official ones. In the end, The Great Mutato and the Bloomington community find belonging together through fandom. The official discourses of history do not provide an adequate space for his difference in their community, nor their negotiation of it. The carnivalesque must be reinscribed within the popular media, in ways that offer alternative histories and identities new visibility. Fans activate unofficial sources of collective behaviour, community building and belonging. For they "enthusiastically embrace favoured texts and attempt to integrate media representations into their own experience".<sup>25</sup> Fans do not obey official viewing and reading practices. They disrupt the social order by interpreting and embracing texts outside the standards of taste that validate valuable media artefacts. In the end *The X-Files* moves out of the official versions of past events into the convoluted and contradictory truths of the popular. These are less certain, but more vibrant in their renderings of collective experience and belonging.

---

<sup>24</sup> *Mask*, 1985, directed by Peter Bogdanovich, written by Peter Bogdanovich and Martin Starger.

Scully: We should go Mulder. The prisoner's in the car.

Mulder: This is all wrong Scully. This is not how the story's supposed to end.

Scully: What do you mean?

Mulder: Dr Frankenstein pays for his evil ambitions, yes, but the monster's supposed to escape to go search for his bride.

Scully: There's not going to be any bride Mulder, not in this story.

Mulder: Where's the writer. I wanna speak to the writer.

In the end, Shaineh ends up on *Jerry Springer* with her deformed child. The community of Bloomington, Indiana including The Great Mutato, creates a sense of belonging in their collective fandom of Cher. In mobilising this history, *The X-Files* activates alternative historical truths that operate parallel to legitimate discourses. This episode blends individual histories with official frameworks in a complex layering of contradictory historical sources.

The references to the bizarre, monstrous and grotesque are supported by the black and white film stock, sideshow soundtrack and punctuated by the large circus tent that covers the houses of the violated women. The carnivalesque moves across the screen and through the narrative in a pastiche of signifiers that hails an era of nostalgia in a simulacra of PT Barnum theatrics and festive medieval inversion. The consequences of The Great Mutato's difference spill beyond the tent and into the wider community. Radical difference and inersive practice can no longer be isolated within a specific carnival moment. It permeates entire communities where collective experience exists in fragmented and incomplete ways. The fan experience shapes this collectivity in radically subversive ways. Popular culture holds the traces of unofficial truths and identities. Fandom effectively creates a sense of belonging that relies on illegitimate pasts and experiences that the historian often chooses to ignore.

---

<sup>25</sup> H. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*, London: Routledge, 1992 p. 18

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Bogdanovich, Peter. and Martin Starger. "Mask". Directed by Peter Bogdanovich, 1985.
- Carter, Chris. "The Postmodern Prometheus". *The X-Files*. Directed by Chris Carter, 1997. Mutant Enemy Inc: Twentieth Century Fox
- Cranny-Francis, Anne. *Popular Culture*. Geelong: Deakin University Press, 1994.
- Docker, John. *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Jenkins, Keith. *On what is History: From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. London: Routledge, 1995
- Jenkins, Keith. *Re-Thinking History*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
- Mann, K. "Narrative Entanglements: The Terminator". *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 43, no. 2 (1989-90): 7 - 21.
- Marwick, Arthur. *The Nature of History*. Third ed. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989.
- McGuigan, Jim. *Cultural Populism*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Probyn, Elspeth. *Outside Belongings*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Shelly, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983.
- Sobchack, Vivian. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. Second ed. New York: Ungar, 1987.
- Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

**Note on the author:** Leanne McRae is a PhD candidate at Murdoch University in Western Australia. Her thesis is entitled *Questions of Popular Cult(ure)* and is devoted to interrogating the movement of popular culture across and through the social landscape. [lmcrae@central.murdoch.edu.au](mailto:lmcrae@central.murdoch.edu.au)