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Television series: the end of capitalism, the end of the world?

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David Buxton

The man fits in because nobody knows what he is. Can we really know our neighbors? He walks his dog. Does yard work. Solitary activities appeal to him. But if you watch closely, you'll see that he pays a little too much attention to the neighborhood kids. This largely goes unnoticed because he isn't perceived as a threat. [...] Do you know what program did the most harm to this country in terms of crimes like this? Child abduction? «Stranger Danger». Flooded the schools with it. Taught a whole generation about a scary man in a trench coat hiding behind a tree. Then we learnt that strangers are only a fraction of the offenders out there. Most are people you see every day. Your family, your neighbors, your school teacher. You know the rest. We prepared our children for 1% of the danger and made them more vulnerable to 99%.

Thus Jason Gideon, head of the section of profilers at the FBI, lecturing his team and the American public. Must we really suspect all those who walk their dog, who like gardening, are fond of children, or who keep to themselves? «Trust no-one», routinely declared Fox Mulder (*The X Files*) already in the 1990s. No less routinely would Gil Grissom assert in the following decade that he preferred conversations with the dead, for only they never lie. For Doctor House, only objective symptoms must be taken into account in establishing a diagnosis, never the words of patients, who "always lie".

The world is a giant crime scene in which everyone is a suspect; the criminal is often someone in authority (sheriff, doctor, teacher), the very persons one would spontaneously eliminate from the enquiry in another epoch. The police investigation is more often than not an opportunity to bring to the surface a range of vices and treasons: lies, acts of adultery, cowardice and neglect of responsibility. A double life with dirty secrets is almost the norm. Only rarely does the incursion of the police into the lives of others not give them an occasion to sermonize, to make disobliging and cynical asides, even if the behavior in question falls outside the jurisdiction of the law. The police officer (seconded since the 1990s by the hospital doctor) is the only social agent authorized to intervene in the private lives of others, the only one able to use his or her experience to make general assertions about society as a whole, all the more that the police team is a model of diversity and disinterest in a world ravaged by egotism and violence. Paranoia becomes a normal reaction when market relations have penetrated every aspect of social life, when everyone calculates in terms of self-interest and little else. A ground bass is sounded: economic greed is displaced onto abnormal sexual drives, an explanation for crime

that can be universally understood. The modular organization of stories allows for the juxtaposition of these two forms of vice. Thus in a typical episode of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (season 1, ep. 18, 2000), two storylines are organized in parallel: a student – venal but not perverse – who sells photos of naked teenage girls on the internet, and a ring of pedophiles who take advantage of this. The episode concludes with a warning about the number of sexual predators on line at any given time. Another storyline establishes a parallel between the necessary surveillance of deviants by the police, and the surveillance by one of the police team of his teenage daughter. Already, in the 1980s, *Miami Vice* insisted on the rupture between capitalism (assimilated in its pure form to the markets for drugs, prostitution, and financial speculation), and the puritan values that founded the social contract. As a banker tells the two detectives in *Miami Vice*, it is no longer possible to separate bad money from good, and any attempt to do so would only lead to the collapse of the American banking system. The social dimension of police work, to the fore in the 1970s (*Kojak*), has largely disappeared, and crime investigations are merely a pretext for the showcasing of intellectual and scientific skills, for preening and posing to one's advantage against a background of decadence and decline.

The idea of society survives only as an extension of the crime scene, which allows for a series of meetings with disparate characters, most of whom have something to hide. In these conditions, distrust and even hostility towards others is the mark of successful social interaction, but will ultimately prove fatal to the very idea of society which requires a minimum of trust. We are a long way from the fundamentally harmonious society of the 1960s television western in which the threat comes the abnormal drives of outsiders, people passing through with overweening greed or lust and a propensity to stir up trouble.

Of course I have regrets, senator. I regret having lost my family. My wife was murdered because my job was to protect senator Palmer during an assassination attempt.

“Someone like me”? An improbable schizophrenic, capable of being a caring father and husband, a tender lover, a loyal team member, athletic,

My daughter won't even look me in the eyes. Every day, I regret having to watch men, women and children knowing that at any time their lives could be judged as being of no importance so that a greater number can be saved. I regret every decision or mistake I made which cost the life of an innocent person. But you know what I regret most? It's that the world needs someone like me. [7:11]

practical and expert in computer technology ; and equally a mad dog impervious to pain, capable of killing and torturing without undue remorse. Incredibly, we learn that Jack Bauer is no cultural sloth, possessing a degree in modern literature from the prestigious University of California at Los Angeles, where in all likelihood he encountered the works of Fredric Jameson. What is this world that needs someone like Jack Bauer? Is this cartoon character (who extends and exaggerates that of James Bond) the only way we know to breach the divide between the actions of an individual – an *agent*, licensed to use extreme force for a meaningful and legitimate cause – and the destiny of the world, nothing less? The individual's relation to the totality of social relations, difficult enough in earlier stages of capitalism, is now on a global scale; it is the very impossibility of adequately conceptualizing this relation – one has only to think of the phantom-like existence of finance capital and its influence on the “real world” - that leads inevitably to a fixation on faceless conspiracies on an international scale, in which a mostly unseen foreign threat is remote-controlled by traitors from within.

The very first episode of *24* (2000), broadcast several weeks after the attack on the Twin Towers (but written and shot several months before), manages to link two parallel threats : one to the fragile nuclear family (Jack Bauer has just moved back in after a separation and an extramarital affair) wherein Jack's teenage daughter sneaks out in search of a good time involving drugs and sex ; the other, a planned assassination attempt on the probable Democrat candidate and next President of the United States, a progressive black senator named David Palmer who will go on to provide a liberal justification for the illegal activities of Bauer. (The series can be read in two directions: the conservative, militaristic outlook is upheld in exchange for a few concessions like a black, Democrat president; for liberals, the ghosts of the Kennedys can be exorcized in the form of a black president in exchange for adopting a security-laden agenda). At first Bauer tries to minimize his daughter's behavior, even after learning that a joint has been discovered in her room: we were young once too, he says. His wife Terri corrects him: “It's

a different world now Jack". This functions as an ideological *shifter*; meaningless in itself, it makes sense only through whatever investment in it the viewer wants to make. In context, it constitutes an invitation to ratify the truth of a world marked by spiraling disorder.

Superficially, a social dimension is largely absent from *24* insofar as it is organized around a binomial: the headquarters of the fictive Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU), and the outside world composed of terrorists and potential victims. In a security-dominated world, the citizen is first and foremost a victim in waiting. The threats against national security are related to current affairs (the Middle East, Russia) and the action takes place in a world which is largely our own, but "improved" in several respects: a black and later a woman president; all the confidential information in the world is only a few keystrokes and clicks away. This slightly displaced world, an alternative present, is one of wish fulfillment, of desire. It is a world in which in the same day an employee unjustly suspected of treason can be tortured, cleared, reintegrated and fired because of being vindictive and unfocused on the job at hand. A world in which, quite naturally, *no-one is to be trusted, not even one's closest and most intimate friends*. To a certain extent, *24* can be read as an allegory of social relations in the workplace wherein spying on and denouncing fellow workers is normal behavior; so is working 24-hour shifts in artificial light in front of computer screens in a semi-comatose state, processing data in what resembles to all intents and purposes an ordinary desk job. In this respect, the desire which is realized in this displaced world is a profoundly masochistic one.

The wife of president Logan rightly suspects her husband of being a traitor in collusion with terrorists planning chemical attacks on American soil, but is seen as being mentally unstable by friends and family. Treachery comes from one's husband (Logan), wife (Sherry Palmer), former lover (Nina Myers), friend and colleague (Tony d'Almeida), father (Philip Bauer) and daughter (Olivia Taylor). In season 6, the ultimate traitors responsible for the assassination of former president Palmer are Bauer's own father and

Secretary of State Heller (to his son): I do not want you to attend or to speak at that rally at Lockerbie this afternoon.

Richard Heller (a protesting "slacker"): You don't have any leverage over what I do any more. You haven't since I stopped taking your money.

Secretary Heller: Can't you think of anything besides yourself? If you do this, it will humiliate the President and it will be dangerous to national security.

Richard Heller: What? What could be more dangerous than the delivery of 2500 missile systems?

Secretary Heller: Oh, spare me your 6th grade, Michael Moore logic. The world is a little bit more complicated than that, Richard. We do not live in a utopia. America has enemies.

Richard Heller: Enemies who were our friends a year ago, and in another year, it'll change again, unless people stop supporting your psychotic need to patrol the world.

Secretary Heller: Psychotic need? WE serve our country. WE serve the cause of freedom. What do YOU do?

Richard Heller: Why don't you go back to your motorcade and drive somewhere where people actually buy the lies you sell.

Secretary Heller: OK, look, we don't have to do this, we don't have to.

Richard Heller (lighting up a joint): Fine, Dad, what do you want to do?

Secretary Heller (slaps his son): Do not disrespect me! I am your father! [4:1]

brother. In the 1960s, where in an equally paranoid series like *The Invaders*, family, close friends, and people known since childhood can be trusted if no-one else, natural limits are placed on the parameters of legitimate suspicion ; in *24*, there are no such limits. Political corruption, the dissipation of the nuclear family, the decline of traditional values in favor of commercialism and multiculturalism, mean that *no-one is innocent a priori*, and that the very possibility of an organic society (which relies on a minimum of trust) has disappeared. For all of Jack Bauer's frenetic patriotism, *there is little or nothing left to defend in value terms.*

In season 1, the presence of Serbian assassins on American soil is the direct consequence of an American commando operation on Serbian territory (ordered by senator Palmer as chair of the Defense commission) which led to the deaths of the father and brother of André Drazen. In season 4, an Arab terrorist tells Bauer: "*no-one is innocent. I believe in what I believe in just as much as you do*". As in *Starsky and Hutch* some thirty years earlier, criminals are allowed to make cynical truth statements ("*if you've got money, you can make your own law*") which go uncontested. In this respect, *24* confirms and extends the ideological passivity of police series since the 1970s. Unlike in police or spy series of the 1960s, little attempt is made to justify the superiority of American power in moral or political terms, or to differentiate American actions in ex-Yugoslavia (or even worse the use of napalm and chemical weapons in Vietnam) from those of Drazen in America. In the pathetic, and classically oedipal exchange between secretary of state Heller and his protestor son (opposite), the "legitimate" arguments of the former are vacuous and self-serving; only the "disrespect" for his father and the marginal behavior of the latter makes him "lose" the argument for most viewers. In the "war against terrorism" which is the series' backdrop, this is curious, and suggests a certain ambivalence about defending American values on their own terms. For all of Jack Bauer's ruthlessness and reactivity, there is an element of sheer and improbable luck involved in his eleventh-hour trumping of the terrorist cards. What is more, the terrorists' desire to obtain revenge is limitless, and can rely for

Senator Mayer: What you have lost Mr. Bauer is tragic. What you've had to do to save lives is tragic. But sometimes one must suffer terrible losses to maintain the ideals on which this country was founded. How can we pretend to lead the world if we don't give an example?

Jack Bauer: It sounds so simple when you say it.

Senator Mayer: It's simpler than you think. Maybe what you have seen and done clouds your vision of things. [7:14]

logistic support on internal treachery (including a Republican president who is a lookalike of late president Nixon); one day, clearly, Bauer (and America's) luck will run out. In season 7, Arab terrorists succeed in wiping out a suburb of San Francisco with a nuclear weapon; Bauer manages *in extremis* to avert a similar fate for Chicago and New York. The executive producer Joel Surnow made no attempt to hide his ultra-conservative politics: "Every American wishes we had someone out there quietly taking care of business. It's a deep, dark ugly world out there... It would be nice to have a secret government that can get the answers and take care of business – even kill people. Jack Bauer fulfills that fantasy... Our only politics are that terrorists are bad. In some circles, that's political". To be fair, sometimes the series is explicitly anti-Bush, notably in season 2 where Bauer (as always *in extremis*) averts a declaration of war against three middle-eastern countries (no less) by conservative elements who have deposed the liberal president Palmer on the basis of manipulated evidence. But on the whole, *24* avoids political argument other than a Manichean opposition against Evil, even if the forces of Good must resort to "evil" methods. For the enemy is as much internal as external. From here, it is but a short step from defensive reason to sadistic desire; the "war on terrorism" triggered by September 2001 (one hesitates to imagine the state of the American body politic after a major terrorist attack every year for nearly a decade) contains the possibility of the destruction not only of major cities like San Francisco, but also of the moral decadence which has contaminated traditional American values, especially among the elite. This, and the masochistic desire for punishment for American actions in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, seen as a betrayal of the belief in America as a force for Good, is the major line of tension within the series. One thinks here of the wish-fulfillment dreams analyzed by Freud wherein a tragic event is a harbinger of sexual desire, or of so many post-apocalypse movies in which the disaster clears the way for a world wherein humankind can start afresh.

David Philips (beginning the autopsy): Don't forget to

CSI in its various declensions is famous for its graphic autopsy scenes, and one cannot really

breathe through the mouth! (He pours a thick, foul-smelling black liquid onto the mortuary table).

Nick Stokes: Human soup. Well, we're 73.5% liquid, right Dave?

Philips: Add in bacteria and a few gases and there you are! A decomposed body like this one can stink out the whole building forever. The sooner we get rid of it, the better. [2:4]

Grissom (looking at a body): Right now I want to talk to him.

Detective: How do you talk to a dead body?

Grissom: I let him talk to me actually. In fact, he just spoke. Didn't you hear him? He just told me he didn't commit suicide... This guy fell to his death wearing prescription glasses. Jumpers take their glasses off. [1:2]

imagine the series without them. No effort is made to spare the viewer the biochemical reality of cadaveric decomposition, in fact the use of computer-generated images even heightens the experience by showing the damage incurred to vital organs by the trajectory of a bullet or knife through the body. The grosser the better. Clearly, these images serve no other purpose than purely scopical pleasure, a feature *CSI* shares with other police shows like *Bones* and *NCIS*.

The series has a certain amount of work to do here: to take up the slack between the sadistic and humiliating presentation of cadavers, and a consistent moral vision of the world so depicted. To a large extent, this is done through relatively colorless but highly competent scientists nailing the truth using pop psychology and various forensic techniques on the stains and scrapes found on pieces of material evidence, bodily parts included; the mandatory autopsy scene is one scientific procedure among others. The fragility of this "solution" can be seen in the desperate portrayals by television and advertising executives of the series as a form of comfort in an uncertain, post-9-11 world. Thus the senior vice-president of a Minneapolis advertising agency: "*From people's back yards all the way to Afghanistan and Iraq, there is clear sense of certainty that CSI addresses cleanly, clinically and satisfyingly to many viewers*". The worse offender in this respect is producer Anthony Zuiker whose attempts at pseudo-existentialist moralizing ("*world peace... too much violence in the world... life is precious... a sense of community... when Evil dominates we have a voice, the corpse is a voice*") are particularly specious.

Yet it is precisely this spurious moral dimension that is projected onto the character of chief scientist Grissom, who several times insists on the right of the dead to be respected in the form of an autopsy which will allow them "to have a voice". Grissom goes so far as to express a preference for the dead, who "tell the truth", whereas the world of the living is one of lies and appearances. It is not for nothing that the series is set in Las Vegas, nicknamed "sin city" for its leading place in most vice indicators (notably gambling, but also prostitution, murders, suicides, alcohol and drug consumption; add in appallingly bad taste); the two

Grisom: You ever see the movie "The Exorcist"? The old priest and Father Karras are about to exorcise the demon. Father Karras explains that he's recorded the little girl's voice, and he's broken down the spirit into three distinct personalities. But the old priest quickly corrects him: "There is only one". Forget about the husband, Warwick, forget about the assumptions, forget about your promotion. These things will only confuse you. Concentrate on what cannot lie – the evidence. Follow the reason we're having this conversation.

Warwick Brown: Follow... the shoe! [1:1]

Catherine Willows: Her eyes were looking in the wrong direction. Carla Dantini was looking left when she was telling me about the accident. When you're trying to recall, you look right and when you're creating, you look left.

Sarah Sidle: And when you say "creating", you mean

franchises are also set in cities famous for vice: Miami (drugs) and New York (finance). To set police activity in cities like these magnifies the heroism of law enforcement officials fighting a losing battle against human nature. Foregrounding the efforts of forensic scientists in this battle is also a way of emphasizing that the wages of sin is death. In the original concept proposed by Zuiker, there is the idea of a mass of out-of-towners converging on the city every weekend in search of fun and games: if some of them end up on the mortuary table, it is because they have come to the "right place" for a violent and premature death. *CSI* manages to radicalize the passivity of earlier police series like *Miami Vice* by downplaying ordinary police work (often in contemptuous fashion) in favor of experts who let the science do the talking, objectively and without prejudice. But to read this, as many critics do, as a hymn to science and technology as opposed to the vagaries of human judgment, is to give a too positive, too definite interpretation of activity which, however impressive, arrives too late to make any difference to those concerned; in any case, the scientific procedures are wrapped up in hokey pop culture, some of it quite obscurantist like the reference to *The Exorcist* opposite. Insisting that an autopsy is the ultimate form of respect due to another human being helps the self-image of the criminalists but from a social point of view contains no possibility of salvation; by definition, no social project is possible within the confines of forensic practices which tend to stand in for science itself.

Seen in this light, the forensic scientist is more akin to the archeologist who reconstructs the life of dead civilizations from material fragments including bones. The criminalists even have their own archeological site, a stomach-turning "body farm" in which corpses in various states of decomposition can be excavated and studied. Likewise, modern society, seen through the prism of vice and unnatural death, a future site in waiting, is leaving the proof of its own decadence to scientists of the future. The passivity of this vision, its sheer morbidity, forces the forensic scientists out of the laboratory, even if by so doing they must abandon the authoritative protection of the biomedical, ballistic, chemical and physical sciences

“making it up”... Neuro-linguistic programming, behavioral science... [1:21]

Nick Stokes (in Lady Heather’s dungeon): You know what I’ve just realized? All this no longer freaks me out.

Catherine Willows: People here are just as twisted in their own living rooms. The accessories are different, that’s all.

Stokes: Not everyone’s twisted.

Willows: Everyone, Nick. Wake up and smell the species.

Stokes: Catherine, do you really think that all these freaks running around with dog collars being spanked are like you and me?

Willows: It’s not because you’ve never done it that you never will.

Stokes: No way! That’ll never happen.

Willows: Relax Nick. I’m just saying that you’re human.

Stokes: Well my mother and father are human and...

Willows: If there’s one thing you learn in this job, it’s that human beings are capable of anything. [2:8]

Scully (view of planet Earth): From space it seems an abstraction, a magician’s trick on a darkened stage, and from this distance one might never imagine that it is alive. It first appeared in the sea almost four billion years ago in the form of singled-celled life. In an explosion of life spanning millions of years, nature’s first multi-cellular organisms began to multiply. And then it stopped. 440 million years ago, a great mass

applied to objects first and only indirectly to people. Out in the world, the *CSI* team prepare the way for charlatans like Patrick Jane (*Mentalist*), falling from the high ground of hard science (DNA tests) to the realm of pseudo-scientific bullshit (neuro-linguistic programming). A truly bizarre text published in a serious industrial psychology journal (*Workforce management*, sept. 2007) establishes a metaphorical and practical link between forensics and management “science”, wherein breakdowns in social relations (labor disputes, bad job hires) are like “pathologies” requiring “autopsies”.

Out in the world, Grissom and his team are confronted with the weirdness of human behavior and a society struggling to adapt to so much “modernity”: a “tribe” disguised as furry animals, gothic vampires, biters, nappy and women’s panty wearers, transsexuals, Sherlock Holmes imitators, and a dominatrix in charge of a sadomasochistic dungeon, Lady Heather, to whom the emotionally challenged Grissom has no answer and who becomes the voice of reason by default: “*You think that what happens here is abnormal? Every job has its particular risks. Rock stars damage their eardrums, football players break their kneecaps. In this line of work, it’s scars... It’s people that don’t come to places like this that worry me. People that don’t have an outlet, someone like you?*”. Will the archeologists of the future, excavating the dungeon, even begin to understand this sentiment? Behind the “truth” of human nature upheld by Lady Heather is a society where drives are no longer sublimated, a society which has lost its traditional sense of equilibrium (now weighted in favor of sado-masochistic sex games!). The forensic laboratory, and the possibility of pacified relations with the dead, has become a sort of sanctuary.

Thus FBI agent Dana Scully in a long monologue at the end of season 6 of *The X Files* (1999) at a time when the threat of climate change was still mostly below the political radar. The death of humankind, the earth and the cosmos itself is evoked in mystical tones appropriate to end times. All beginnings have endings, including capitalism and American empire, here subsumed in a series of

extinction would kill off nearly every species of the planet, leaving the vast oceans decimated and empty. Slowly, plants began to evolve. Then insects, only to be wiped out in the second great mass extinction upon the Earth. The cycle repeated again and again. Reptiles emerging independent of the sea, only to be killed off. Then dinosaurs struggling to life, along with the first birds, fish and flowering plants. Their decimations: Earth's fourth and fifth great extinctions. Only 100 000 years ago, Homo sapiens appear. Man. From cave paintings to the Bible, to Columbus and Apollo 11, we have been a tireless force upon the Earth and off, cataloguing the natural world as it unfolds to us. Rising to a world population of over five billion people, all descended from that original single cell. That first spark of life... Is there a plan, a purpose, a reason to our existence? Will we pass, as those before us, into oblivion? Into the sixth extinction that scientists warn is already in progress? Or will the mystery be revealed a sign? A symbol? A revelation?

[Later] ... Are we born only to die? To be fruitful and multiply and replenish the Earth before giving way to our generations? If there is a beginning, must there be an end? [...] Will this all end one day? Life no longer passing to life? The Earth left barren like the stars above? Like the cosmos? Will the hand that lit the flame let it burn down? Could we too become extinct? Or if this fire of life inside us is meant to go on, who decides? Who tends the flames? Can He reignite the spark even as it grows cold and weak?
[6:22]

metaphysical questions. The hysterization of the world, present in so many symptoms defying logical explanation, originates in a primal guilt, a return of the (historical) repressed, notably the fate of the American Indians; as in *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells, where the parallel between the Martian invasion and the colonial extermination of the Tasmanians is explicitly drawn, the figure of the alien represents the unspeakable guilt that accompanies the overwhelming domination of Nature and of other peoples. "A child is being experimented on"; that is how we imagine the relation between Samantha, the sister of agent Mulder and the aliens who abducted her when she was eight. This is closely akin to the prototype phantasm elaborated by Freud, "a child is being beaten", a primary structuration valuable for all phantasms. The sadistic pleasure provoked by the idea of a young woman lying on her back with her legs wide apart, attached - like Scully in some of the most memorable images of the series - to an operating table and undergoing a medical intervention on her sexual organs is saved from tipping over into guilt-ridden, moral pain by the masochistic side of the phantasm where one takes refuge in the position of the victim. We're responsible for the unsettling of natural processes, says Mulder in substance after discovering the existence of giant parasitic self-replicating worms linked to the Tchernobyl disaster [2:2]. But on another level, we are not responsible insofar as we are the playthings of the desire of the Other, the extraterrestrials who have their own agenda for the future. The series reveals in its own obscure way that humans are to the aliens what laboratory mice are to their human experimenters; (recent) human history is thus an experiment on a grand scale carried out by the aliens for their own purposes. If the experiment extended back to the Nazi final solution, then the appeasing of guilt would be much greater; this may be stretching the reach of the series a little, but its "mythology" does include Nazi scientists continuing their experiments in human cloning in the United States after the war. Ultimately, when the dust of the series clears, it seems that the project of the aliens, aided and abetted by their human accomplices in high places, is to replace the human race by a hybrid variety (in

Deep Throat (in front of a shark aquarium): Mr. Mulder, I place my life in jeopardy every time we speak. I've been a participant in some of the most insidious lies and witness to deeds that no crazed man could imagine. I've spent years watching you from my lofty position to know that you were the one I could trust... However, there still exist some secrets that should remain secret. Truths that people are just not ready to know.

Mulder: Who are you to decide that for me?

Deep Throat: The world's reaction to such knowledge would be far too dangerous.

Mulder: Dangerous? You mean in the sense of outrage? Like the reaction to the Kennedy assassination, or MLAs, or radiation experiments on terminal patients. Watergate, Iran-Contra, Roswell, the Tuskegee experiments... Where will it end? I guess it won't end, as long as men like you decide what is truth.

Deep Throat: ... A lie, Mr. Mulder is most convincingly hidden between two truths. If the shark stops swimming, it dies. Don't stop swimming.[1:16]

2012!), mixing human and alien DNA. A more intelligent species, finally the only chance of confronting the enormous tasks facing a (reconstructed) humanity.

So it will be a genetically improved species that will have the daunting task of saving the planet. Should we humans protest? Is there even the remotest chance that we can meet this challenge? The absence of any political dimension to the series other than a conspiracy of the powerful, its incredible passivity in this respect, means that the question itself has already been answered. Agents Mulder and Scully (whose purely platonic relation opens the way to perfect gender equality, sexual reproduction being in any case pointless at this stage) are simply marking time; there is no pretense that their investigations will have the slightest effect on the course of events. The future is already written and the knowledge of what is to come is useless. Others will take care of the problem, even if current elites are traitorously collaborating with the aliens in the hope of securing some small advantage. It is clear that the shadowy involvement of aliens tends to foreclose any political dimension to the conspiracy theory which involves (or so it seems) the military-industrial-biotechnological complex.

All of these series (*The X Files* most graphically) confront in their own way the impossibility of incarnating a positive social project in their protagonists, one that would give deeper meaning to their activity in the world, and a sense of direction to the historical process. Passivity and powerlessness, the absence of "grand narratives"; all this gives modern serial narratives their skeletal (*CSI*) or else static quality (*The X Files*). (In a current development, the fictional return of the zombie represents the zero degree of social relations, and of history). In *The Seeds of Time*, Fredric Jameson says in effect that we can more easily imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. On the cognitive map of history, we are "here": drifting aimlessly without as yet the remotest, utopian vision of a post-capitalist world (assuming the failed experiment of Soviet-style socialism belongs now definitively to history). Allegorically, is the ultimate unsustainability of a

zombie capitalism, kept alive by massive credit and purely fictional value, one of the “*dangerous secrets that must remain secret*”? Ecological disaster and financial markets which function increasingly without human agency: the end of capitalism and the end of the world are seen to be one and the same.