COPING WITH A CRISIS OF MEANING: TELEVISED PARANOIA

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Abstract: Across all genres, television communicates a host of perceived dangers or risks to human survival as entertainment, responding and reproducing the victim and risk consciousness of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Terrorism has captured the imaginations of not only politicians but also producer/writers, and as a consequence of this, and the visual spectacle that war and terrorism provide, it has featured regularly and consistently in British and American television programming. This article presents the analysis of some British current affairs entertainment programming (film and documentary) broadcast by the BBC during the height of the misnamed 'war on terror'. Through the analysis of these programmes, I will demonstrate a psycho-cultural approach to textual analysis informed by early object relations psychoanalysis. Being aware of the degree to which political elites have shaped what is known about the 'war on terror' allows us to apply knowledge of the political and historical context of these elites to understanding why the dominant 'war on terror' perspective is paranoid in character. I will offer an explanation of why a paranoid style predominates in terrorism related programming in my conclusion.

We live in a culture highly sensitized to its own perceived vulnerability which is socially constructed through dominant, mainstream representations, in particular, broadcast television and national presses. Across all genres, television communicates a host of perceived dangers or risks to human survival as entertainment, responding and reproducing the victim or risk consciousness (Furedi, 2005 [1997]) of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Terrorism has captured the imaginations of not only politicians but also producer/writers, and, as a consequence of this and the visual spectacle that war and terrorism provide, it has featured regularly and consistently in British and American television programming since the late 1990s.

Television is a vast motorway network featuring an immense array of drivers (producers, primary definers, writers) and vehicles (programmes), only a few of which can be analysed here. Through my doctoral research, I have identified a broad set of television programmes that exhibit and are structured by a paranoid style of representation (Hofstadter, 2008 [1964]; Knight, 2008). This article presents the analysis of some of these

representations[1], taken from British current affairs entertainment programming (film and documentary) and broadcast by the BBC during the height of the misnamed 'war on terror'. Through the analysis of these programmes, I will demonstrate a psycho-cultural approach (Bainbridge & Yates forthcoming; Yates forthcoming) to textual analysis informed by early object relations psychoanalysis. I will firstly outline the politico-cultural context shaping the 'war on terror' and the creative process of these programmes, and then explain the provenance and method of my approach. Being aware of the degree to which political elites have shaped what is known about the 'war on terror' allows us to apply knowledge of the political and historical context of these elites to understanding why the dominant 'war on terror' perspective is paranoid in character. I will offer an explanation of why a paranoid style predominates in terrorism related programming in my conclusion.

The loss of modern political subjectivity through the discrediting of modern grand narratives and with it its meanings (Laïdi, 1998) came with the conclusion of the domestic battle between left and right wing visions of society and the collapse of the Cold War[2]. Closely connected to this change in the way western societies think about political subjectivity is a process of major socio-economic change since the 1980s, producing a cultural and social atomization of society. Reflecting this change is the shift away from realism towards the use of melodrama (Geraghty, 2006) across all programme formats, since the end of the Cold War (Joyrich, 1992). Terrorism related programming occurs within an entertainment industry already pre-disposed to emotional intensity as a consequence of this shift.

Terrorism is only one of a number of social problems framed and shaped in current affairs and entertainment media by what is referred to as 'a discourse of fear' (Altheide, 2002); 'risk aversion' (Furedi, 2005 [1997]); 'dangerization' (Lianos and Douglas, 2000); 'trauma culture' (Luckhurst, 2003) and 'post-traumatic' culture (Farrell, 1998) in American and European societies. These concepts refer to a single cultural script whose pre-dominance suggests that this is the most meaningful way to express how we subjectively feel about the world and its others in this post-modern political period. The greater 'consciousness' of perceived dangers in the world provides a credible mode of expression for film and television programme makers to engage meaningfully with audiences using concerns driven by the political elite, who are themselves attempting to re-engage meaningfully with the electorate as its protectors through political discourse referred to as 'securitization' (Waever, 1995). Like them, series creators and writer/producers need to connect meaningfully in order to gain

an audience. The drama, excitement, fear and emotional intensity associated with terrorism, extremism and the tragic loss of life is a product of this representational work. My contention is that the paranoid style is a product of the loss of political meaning and subjectivity, it is a paranoid coping technique (Fairbairn, 1952) for the loss of modern political grand narratives which gave people, in particular political elites, meaning to their agency. Television is central to the expression of this crisis because humans cope and manage through representations. Television, and media more broadly, are key spaces of consciousness in contemporary and archaic societies. I will now turn to my rationale for using a psycho-cultural[3] approach to analyze these representations.

One way in which psychoanalysis can be used to understand popular culture narratives is by recognising television as a process of engagement which communicates emotionally, through both showing and telling, and thus exhibiting the dominant phantasies of a culture at any given point in time. My attention to the relationship between meaning, emotion and the re-configuration of subjectivity in popular representations employs the British object relations school of psychoanalysis (Klein, 1975 [1946]; Fairbairn, 1952, 1954, 1958; Meltzer, 1968; Ogden, 1991; Grotstein, 1994) combined with a contextualized semiotic approach to textual analysis (Bignell, 2009). This form of psychoanalysis provides a socially and practice-based means for understanding the affective dynamics of the human subject and society. 'Object relations' refers to significant experiences and fantasies as mental objects (the 'object' is anything which has meaning, and therefore an emotional connotation), which because of their significance become a fundamental part of perceptive and cognitive structures. These meanings are communicated through a range of mechanisms, which form the basis of human subject formation and interaction. The chief mechanisms at play in these programmes, through which unconscious object relations become expressed, are splitting, projection, introjection, and projective identification, and these produce distinct, related subject positions (Klein, 1975).

I treat television texts as repositories and modes of engagement of British political culture at a specific time (Kellner, 1995; Rustin & Rustin, 2002) using them to find out what they suggest about their specific cultural and political producers *and* the national political and popular culture generally in their contexts. My method involves identifying the emotions and characterizations represented and how they are conveyed using the formal elements of audio-visual representation. This means focusing on how the formal elements of television (cinematography, dialogue, narration, music, lighting, *mise en scène*) function as

communicative mechanisms that shape characters and subjectivities relationally. In particular, my concern is with how subjectivity is represented. Once this has been done, object relations psychoanalysis is used to produce analysis and interpretations of these programmes. Of course, gathering this type of information is itself an interpretive activity.

The following descriptions, analyses and interpretations are of three different types of programme, a film, an investigative documentary and a current affairs programme. All deal with different aspects of the 'war on terror'. They were chosen to illustrate the paranoid style and are representative of a wide range of terrorism related programming produced in the USA and the UK by a number of different production companies and channels across a number of genres including news (Ortega Breton, 2010) and serial drama (Ortega Breton, forthcoming). It is important to recognise that the chief group providing the content of these narratives are the political elites of the UK and the USA and that these narratives are provided via political and news discourse. In turn, this is arguably legitimized by the uncritical generation of 'authorised' expertise that such political elites indirectly fund through universities as a result of the proliferation of terrorism focused disciplines in the last twenty years. The exception to this is *The Conspiracy Files: 9/11* (Prod. Guy Smith/BBC, Tx. BBC2, 18/02/2007) which features independent responses to this official, mainstream discourse. I do not want to imply by this that creative writer/producers uncritically reproduce government perspectives on the 'war on terror', as the first example will illustrate. However news discourse is nevertheless a key source for these programmes. In relation to threats of all kinds, particularly the 'war on terror', news journalism, with the notable exception of the David Kelly story, has generally lacked any ideological criticism of or support for the fundamental premises of this conflict (McNair, 2006) and has instead propagated a discourse of fear (Altheide, 2002, 2006).

Dirty War

Dirty War (BBC/HBO, Tx. 26/09/2004) tells the fictional story of a 'dirty' (radioactive) bomb attack in the heart of London. Since the mid-1990s, this form of attack by terrorists has captivated the imaginations of Anglo-American political elites[4] and, subsequently, those of journalists and writers/producers. The likelihood of this form of attack is low for a number of practical reasons but, since the mid-1990s, it has consistently featured in drama, current affairs and news stories. For example, *The Grid* (BBC1, Tx: 7-9/09/04), broadcast in the run up to the third anniversary of the 2001 attacks in USA, included conventional bombings in Africa and the Middle East and sarin gas attacks in the UK. Most terrorist attacks are of the

more conventional car bomb and recently the suicide bomb form. The film was broadcast in order to promote discussion about preparedness for such an attack and achieves this through the communication of alarm, panic, fear and anxiety. The BBC was criticised for broadcasting the film by the then Home Secretary, who described it as sensationalist[5].

Crucially, *Dirty War* is presented as a pre-enactment of something that could, on the basis of factual research, occur. Introducing the film on national broadcast television (the film is also available as a DVD), the female continuity announcer describes the film as a 'shocking reality'. It is visually billed as being as accurate as it possibly can be without being a re-enactment of an actual event. This is important because even though the audience is told that the film is fictional, its events and information on emergency planning are claimed to be based on actuality. This blurred status of the film sutures its fantasy aspects to an actual conception of the world and its subjectivities. This billing, the title of the film and the music clearly set out to disturb and provoke anxiety about malevolence, which is a key subject position of the paranoid style because it validates the belief in persecution and the central position of the victim and its sense of vulnerability. The awareness of the possibility of catastrophe from the outset produces both catastrophic anxiety and a need for an object upon which to focus this anxiety. A sequence of real official statements on the terrorist threat by politicians and intelligence officials continues interspersed with slow-motion shots of people walking through the streets and children playing in a fountain, conveying a dream-like state. Slow motion signals threat and accentuates the content of the shot (Bignell, 2009) of the children, signifying innocence. These are statements of certainty of an incalculable risk, giving expression to the authorities' paranoid anxiety about terrorism but also offering some comfort by providing a fateful form of certainty, even if it is catastrophic. Predicting the future also has an omnipotent quality, contrasting with the other polarized extreme of powerlessness emphasised later on in the film. In combination, these sources of expert and authoritative knowledge communicate a sense of catastrophic anxiety and helplessness about terrorism because of their perilous content. They also suggest scepticism or foreboding because they come before the action, suggesting they are about to be contradicted or confirmed. This sequence produces a clear contrast and separation of internal-subjective and external-objective states, suggesting a stark reality is about to impinge on a dream-like, quotidian scene. Reality, by contrast, is a persecutory nightmare. This is a perhaps necessary reversal of fantasy and reality to achieve the desired effects of the film because by presenting

normal life as a pleasant dream, the film is then poised to awaken us to its 'shocking reality' of persecution and the failure to protect.

The government's fulfilment of its role is implicitly and explicitly questioned at the beginning of the film by foregrounding the unsuitability of the protective clothing the fire service uses. A rescue operation after a gas attack opens the action. Anxiety is confirmed and extended by the opening scene, which features fire service personnel in protective suits rescuing unconscious casualties from a dark, smoky underground car park. It is not clear what has occurred. Through the smoke the audience can discern the bodies of unconscious victims (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Dirty War*, BBC1, Tx. 26/09/2004

Are these bodies an example of the visual representation of the dead objects of unconscious fantasy that Meltzer (1968) describes in his explanation of paranoid anxieties?[6] The terror of terrorism is provoked by the awareness of death. From the outset, this presentation of anonymous, dead victims and faceless rescuers in protective suits grounds the film in a frame of danger, victimhood and violence. One of the firemen has a panic attack as a result of wearing the suit. It is only after the moment when he rips his mask off that the audience realizes that this is a drill. Our ability to discern fantasy from reality has already been played with. Their bulky, uncomfortable, claustrophobic and restrictive suits are a visual metaphor

of the restrictive and fallible character of risk management. When one of the suits is found to be torn, a fire fighter is told: 'You're dead!' As it is a drill, this is a moment of signal anxiety – warning the audience of what may be to come. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we are in a fantasy space, as this is a drill. In this space are dead 'objects' (victims) and cumbersome 'protectors' restricted by their own protection. The realization that this is a drill generates uncertainty about the validity of what is being shown, evincing a paranoiac belief in the falsity of appearances (Bersani, 1989), as well as providing relief from the initial tension and anxiety the panic attack produces. The suits continue to be used as a metaphor for the problems with protection and the protector role, shown by the way they tear and physically restrict their users. This scene also demonstrates the use of the visual field to connote a lack of knowledge (Bignell, 2009) evoking uncertainty and anxiety, and this is shown through the use of smoke, the concealment of faces and partial views, produced by particular camera angles which slowly reveal their subject.

Dirty War evokes suspicion by raising the issue of the validity of political communication to the public. Photographers are shown taking close-ups of police in gas masks and these images are anchored by a journalist's question to the minister about scaremongering. This raises the issue of the projection of government anxiety and is met with reassurance by the minister. The minister's (aptly named Painswick) statement references the British government's CONTEST strategy (to reassure, protect and prepare) and presents the government as a 'good' protector. At the end of this scene, a bird's eye view of the city tracks away from the emergency drill scene to a wider view of the city of London, with a repeated electronic looped soundtrack growing in volume connoting an eerie and suspenseful feeling. This camera movement, paired with music, suggests that the danger lies beyond the safe and secure confines of the drill and the public relations image of purposefulness, threatening a far greater space. This scene projects the anxiety of the government (expressed privately by the government minister) into public discourse through the contrast of the media appearance and the subsequent 'off camera' recognition that the preparations are inadequate[7]. As with the drill, this sequence emphasises the distinction between appearance and reality in a way that arouses suspicion through the paranoid motif of distrust in appearances (Bersani, 1989).

At the end of the film, after the failure to contain victims within the danger zone and respond sufficiently to the catastrophe, two control room officers are shown watching the spectacle on CCTV monitors, reduced to the position of witnesses, as if they were the audience of an immediate but distanced spectacle – the image of the emerging smoke cloud

taking centre stage between them on their CCTV monitors (Figure 2). This expresses a sense of futility and powerlessness to help the victims seen on the screens.
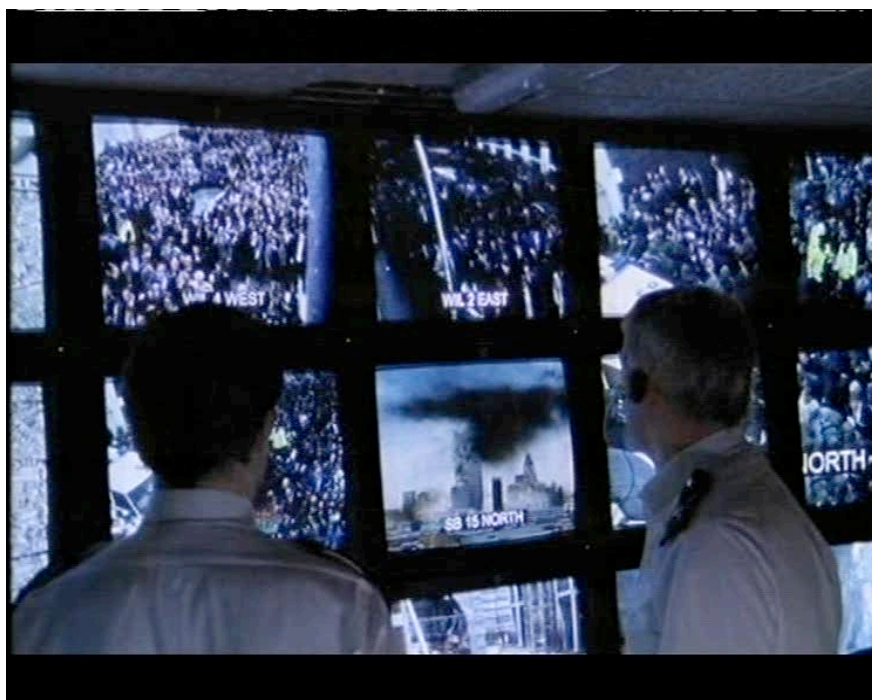

Figure 2: *Dirty War*, BBC1, Tx. 26/09/2004

The use of multiple CCTV monitors in the control room serves to expand the visual and physical extent of the explosion. These screens allow the audience to witness the radioactive cloud expanding across the city, suggesting the experience of the catastrophe at a distanced, aerial city level as well as the personal level of those caught in the blast, replicating the many angled views of TV news disaster coverage. The multiple screens filling the frame evoke both the idea of total catastrophe and of fragmentation. In addition, London, and by metonymic association the UK, is depicted not as alone or isolated but rather as united in this disaster, providing compensation for the isolation or social atomization which arguably leads towards the need for paranoiac coping[8]. However, the contrast of omniscience with the powerlessness to intervene is paramount, emphasizing the victimhood at the centre of paranoia. This theme is also evident in the final example presented in this essay.

Kevin Robins suggests that consuming televised disaster is a form of defence against 'profound existential fears'. He draws on a Freudian framework to suggest that DeLillo's interest in televised paranoia and conspiracy echoes elements of 'our political and cultural unconscious' (1996: 118-9). Citing Kracauer's (1927) evaluation of news photographs, Robins argues that in our experience of disasters via television, we are actually avoiding

fundamental fears of reality through compensatory phantasmagoria. I want to challenge this and instead suggest that, at least in the case of contemporary terrorism representations, Anglo-American culture is giving expression to these fears. The number of representations of the 'dirty bomb' form of attack in political and news discourse despite the lack of its occurrence raises the question of why this *form* of attack has had such media and political prominence and whether it counter-intuitively provides some kind of coping or compensation for symbolic annihilation, namely a lack of political meaning. Psychoanalysis suggests that it is not only the content of representations but also their form which gives expression to paranoid anxieties and suggests a provenance to their meaning (Winnicott, 1967). The weapon's form has three characteristics. The gas form of attack is usually described in terms of chemical or biological agents. The status of biological weapons as alive facilitates the projection of agency into them. The invisible form of dirty bombs makes them hard to control and defend against; their agents can get inside us and attack us from the inside. Given the way sight is used to provide knowledge and so control, particularly in a risk-surveillance society (as in the use of CCTV in the *Dirty War* 'control room'), things that are invisible become references or signifiers for anxiety because they are difficult to know, control and *identify*. Whilst in *Dirty War* we know what the weapon is, its invisibility means that it is associated with persecutory anxiety. The meaning of the dirty bomb lies in these three characteristics of its form: invisibility, infiltration and agency. It is the destructive agent that can transgress meaningful boundaries, which suggests a fear for the loss of identity, because these so called 'agents' invade and damage us through the physical boundaries that mark who we are. The consistent representation of the dirty bomb as the terrorist's weapon of choice is therefore symptomatic of one of the fundamental anxieties of Anglo-American societies and, in particular, its political elites, because they have the greatest influence on the content of terrorism news discourse through their control of intelligence services and knowledge about terrorist threats.

From this analysis we can see that the representation of terrorism and emergency response in *Dirty War* has a paranoid structure in a number of different respects. The use of melodramatic devices in *Dirty War* such as extreme violence and the chronic threat of it; the visual representation of emotional states in particular through close-ups; the focus on disaster itself; the representation of the duplicity of appearances evoking suspicion; the blurring of fantasy and actuality and the representation of subjectivity as a triadic relationship of victim-persecutor-protector subject positions together evidence a paranoid style of representation.

The subject positions are communicated through the representation of paranoid anxieties concerning these relationships through framing, camera movement, dialogue, shot selection and music. The mutual needs of the potential victim (security) and the protector (meaningful role) complement each other and come together in respect of a third, the dangerous terrorist or malevolent persecutor. Televisual mechanisms of audio-visual portrayal project paranoid anxieties outwards into audiences, building relative subject positions in the process. The next example, a documentary about non-official explanations for the '9/11' attacks, illustrates how a paranoid style of representation effectively combines emotional and rationalistic rhetorics to produce a compelling narrative.

The Conspiracy Files: 9/11

The Conspiracy Files: 9/11 (BBC2, Tx. 18/02/2007, hereafter *CF9/11*) explores the relationship of recorded images to their interpretation by exploring a number of conspiracy theories regarding the attacks on the USA in September 2001. At the beginning of the programme, the female narrator says, 'Look closer through the smoke and horror, say conspiracy theories, and you'll find not everything is as at first appeared' (01:00 mins). What is shown are the smoke, fire and collapse of the World Trade Center building, accompanied by a slow piano loop evoking a chilling, foreboding and mournful feeling. The audience is shown close-ups of fireballs and smoke coming from the building with the diegetic sound of emergency sirens. This is followed by a montage of images, including rapid zooms into close-up of protagonists' faces, including George W. Bush, connoting close examination, and a fake dollar entitled 'The Uninformed State of Denial'. These images explicitly question the official explanation, anchored by statements from conspiracists and questions by the narrator. The images of a fighter plane cockpit and a hand on the control stick pressing a button connote destructive attack. Close-up images of conspiracists examine and assess their appearance. Overall, the very fast movement of the camera and fast cuts to close-up over a large number of images connotes that the camera itself is a tool of examination and evaluation. Its erratic movement suggests that this tool is being controlled by a non-rational, anxious agent.

The centrality of catastrophe as loss, which provokes the paranoid style, is illustrated by the second sequence of the programme, creating a contrast with the first. As the camera pans around the warehouse containing the remains of the World Trade Center, the idea that we are in a mortuary or graveyard is emphasized by the pace of movement of the camera,

images of the remains of the building and the question, 'Could the secrets of 9/11 lie here?' (02:53 mins). The sadness and tragedy of the attack is now mobilized before the claims are presented. The audience hears a sad but edgy, funereal soundtrack produced by the combination of a wind instrument interspersed with a distorted synthesizer sound. The overall pace of the sequence is much slower than the previous one and there is no other sound except for the voices of air traffic control speaking to American air force command on the morning of the 2001 attacks. The question 'Is this a test?' and the looped response, 'No, this is not an exercise, not a test' (02:16 mins) expresses the knowledge of the semblance between 'real world' and 'exercise'; the need to check what one hears or sees, of uncertainty and disbelief. Again, the blurring of actuality and fiction is foregrounded as it was in *Dirty War*. As the audience hears this, it is shown the remains of the WTC slowly and in close-up as if each remnant was being examined. This is then cut with extreme close-ups of photographs of the terrorists who crashed the planes and CCTV footage of them in airport security. In between, a slow, close-up tracking shot of the remains of the building and damaged cars in the warehouse, connoting both rationalistic investigation and mourning, the audience is shown footage of onlookers, some crying, some running from the engulfing smoke, and their shocked reactions. The distress and sadness in these pictures and the mournful music create a sense of gravitas and solemnity.

Taking the catastrophic event as the starting point could create a rationalistic, empirical impression but this representation of the remains of the attack focuses on damage, death and loss. In its combination of emotional and rationalistic rhetoric this sequence illustrates well how the paranoid style and its conspiratorial claims of responsibility resonate. In this way, the beginning of the programme communicates death, mourning, investigation and loss, of the truth being lost in the remains of the wreckage. Camera movement, music, content and narration characterise the programme as a type of emotionally invested investigative activity, excavating artefacts in a search for truth. This emotional investment is secured through the representation of a child's doll, lying on its back as if dead (Figure 3); the connotation of childhood adding to the tragedy of loss. The suggestion is that the owner of the doll, an innocent child, has lost their valued object. The stains on the doll connote that something has been sullied and damaged. This constitutes a visual metaphor for the loss of truth. The gravitas of the event, of the loss through death that it represents, is emphatically established before the main part of the programme, which explores 'conspiracy theories'.

Figure 3: *The Conspiracy Files: 9/11*, BBC2, Tx. 18/02/2007.

This emotional rhetoric is carried over into the rest of the programme through the use of the same slow, mournful and slightly sinister music that is used in this sequence, maintaining a preferred association with the idea of tragic loss.

Two sequences of unreferenced photographs of charred and deformed plane fuselage and personal effects (21:16-25, 36:33-48 mins) are presented as evidence countering conspiracists' claims. Our common sense understanding of indexical representation is that the 'camera never lies'. This therefore produces a degree of certainty. The narrator states, 'Photographs taken at the crash site tell their own story' (narrator: 36:32mins) signalling the authority and counter-positioning of the photographs and omitting to mention who took them. This 'story' is one of extreme violence, damage and death as the wreckage is of a passenger plane and this is stated clearly by the narrator. These part-objects, which imply victimhood, are photographed at medium range from directly above and positioned in the centre of the frame, connoting an objective and dispassionate process of recording and examination (Figure 4). However, this sequence has the sound of a military march low bass drum punctuating each change of shot containing a different photograph, similar to the sound commonly used in horror and war films to create suspense and herald the arrival of a malevolent protagonist. This fixes the photographs' connotation of violence and threat. The
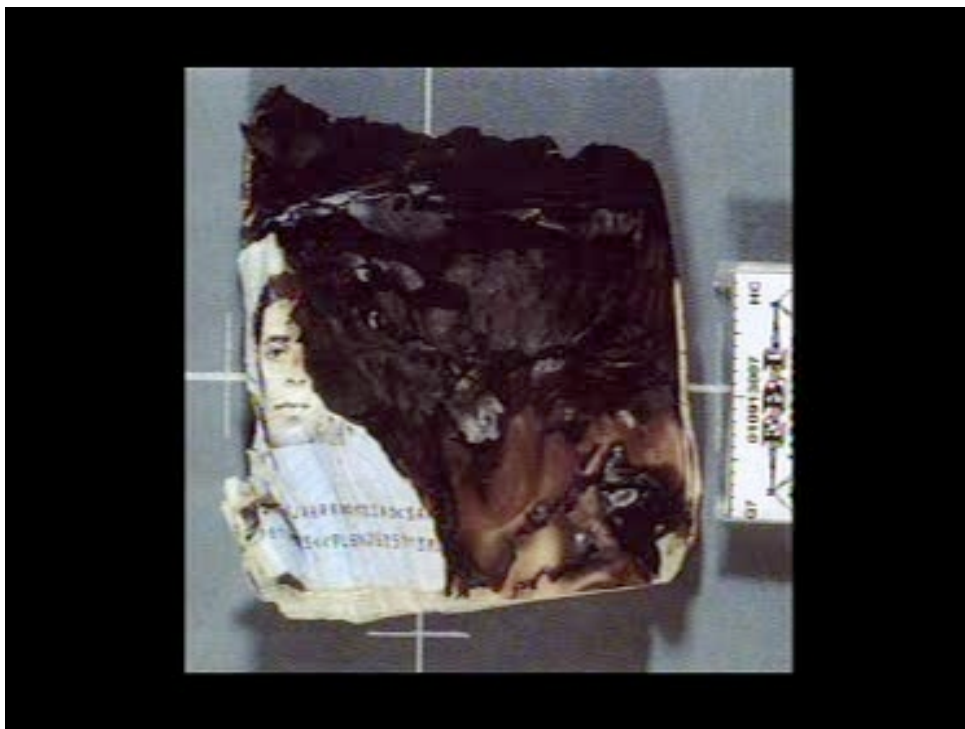
Figure 4: *The Conspiracy Files: 9/11*, BBC2, Tx. 18/02/2007.

connotations of death and loss are fixed by subsequent pictures of a memorial stone at the crash site.

This programme illustrates the way that fear, sadness, grief, pain and suspicion can function rhetorically to claim that malevolent, conspiratorial subjects are responsible for loss and suffering. What do these manifest emotions suggest about the meaning of these texts? The pain of loss framing the representation of materials as evidence produces a set of paranoid signs that communicate a terrifying and credible view of human agency. In the paranoid style, evidence is found and selected to support a belief in malevolent agency. The materials must enable creative reading and association with other selected pieces of information, as demonstrated in the presentation of CCTV footage and photographs. The 'evidence' presented is insufficient to uphold the claim, but the claim can nevertheless be considered 'reasonable' through the rationalistic rhetoric of explanation and visual recording used.

If *CF9/11* investigates and deconstructs conspiracy theories, then how is it itself evidence of the paranoid style? Alternatively, it could be argued that this type of programme is in fact a form of investigative journalism in the traditional role of the media as fourth estate, because it 'debunks' conspiracy theories and offers explanations for them. However, even though each theory is debunked, they are given exposure in a grave, foreboding tone

that lends credence to them before they are briefly explained away. The series as a whole is effectively a vehicle for the paranoid style, adding legitimacy to conspiracy claims by broadcasting a serious treatment of them. They leave the emotional premises of a paranoid outlook largely unexamined, and so confer legitimacy on the use of the paranoid style. In particular, suspicion as a way of perceiving the world is legitimized by describing theories and interviewing conspiracy theorists. A suspicion of authority and belief in conspiracy is sustained when governments and other state agencies receive criticism for their actions ('the evidence points to a conspiracy after 9/11 not before' [Narrator, 57.02mins]). The suspicion and malevolent characterization of governments makes conspiratorial explanations preferable. From the victim's perspective, these claims accuse and hold those in power, our 'protectors', responsible. The series signals an increased interest in and meaningfulness attributed to conspiracy theories as a result of a lack of meaningfulness in official accounts and the cynicism with which mainstream politics is now held. This, I suggest, is the result of an alienation from political agency, which explains why all agency is attributed to governments and seen as malevolent in these claims. This characterization of agency as evil is a key feature of the paranoid style. Highly simplified characterizations of agency continue to be a theme in the following examples, from the current affairs programme *Panorama: Real Spooks* (BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007). Here we can see how the visual treatment of its narrative plays equally on two contradictions: of revulsion and excitement for the persecutory, terrorist other and of the omnipotence and powerlessness of the protector and victim positions.

Panorama: Real Spooks

Following the development of real life crime programming (Biressi, 2001; Jermyn, 2007), *Panorama: Real Spooks* makes extensive use of the dramatic devices of reconstruction, non-diegetic sound and visual signifiers of surveillance (specifically grids and crosshairs overlaid on film) with sequences of CCTV and photographs. This edition was broadcast on the day Omar Khyam and his accomplices were convicted of 'Conspiracy to cause explosions' and 'Possessing an article for the purpose of terrorism' in 2007. This was the outcome of 'Operation Crevice', otherwise known as the 'fertilizer bomb plot' and is perhaps the most well-known British counter-terrorist plot and investigation alongside that of the liquid bombs airline plot of August 2006, having been extensively reported and its suspects successfully brought to prosecution. However, despite this counter-terrorism success, much of the press and the *Panorama: Real Spooks* programme dwelt on the fact that Mohammad Siddique

Khan, a '7/7' suicide bomber, had been in contact with Khyam during the surveillance operation in 2004 but was not followed subsequently. As with *The Conspiracy Files: 9/11*, loss and grief are key to this representation. A widower who lost his partner in the 2005 attack is shown recounting the day and showing deep regret in light of the possibility that the bombings could have been averted, had the surveillance operation been extended.

Throughout the programme the viewer is made aware of the full extent of police and intelligence service surveillance capabilities. At the beginning of the programme surveillance is initially used to demonstrate our protectors' ability to survey and know the threatening other as well as demonstrate the severity of the terrorist threat. The viewer's attention is drawn to a range of intelligence capabilities or powers. The first six seconds establish the centrality of surveillance through a series of shots of surveillance in process and its graphic representation through visual volume levels and strafing camera movements. Visual

Figure 5: *Panorama: Real Spooks*, BBC1 Tx. 30/04/2007

surveillance, connoting omniscient control, is signified by changes in focus, distance and movement to emphasise the act of watching, from the point of view of the security personnel observing. A few seconds later the audience is shown the inside of a surveillance room; flashing light panels in the dark; a man with headphones on; a drill in a wall, then something being put into the wall from the perspective of a CCTV camera (Figure 5). The viewer's

attention is drawn to the unseen agency of the camera, where the audience is positioned, making the subject more exciting. The low lighting and facial expression of the actor contributes to giving this shot a sinister feel. Through this shot the audience is put into a position of power, as the surveyor of terrorists' actions.

     Panorama: Real Spooks extends the blurring of a hybrid form of programme which first appeared in the late 1980s-1990s using a combination of dramatic reconstruction with direct address to camera by the narrator.[9] Reconstructions position the audience as witness to the staging of the surveillance operation itself, from the position of the intelligence operatives. When reconstructions show the intelligence officers surveying, it is only partially and in dark light and this contributes to the threatening mood of the programme (Figure 6).

Figure 6: *Panorama: Real Spooks*, BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007

     Presenting reconstructions of the conspirators' movements and conversations conveys the intelligence agencies' power to reveal, to monitor members of the public without detection. In these reconstructions, the presenter is shown walking into shot without a cut (Figure 7), where the terrorists can be clearly seen in the background. Dramatizing a past event through a reconstruction and combining it with direct, embodied address from the presenter makes the past more proximate by positing the viewer in a contemporaneous position with the criminal investigation as it occurred. This re-incarnates the past terrorist threat for entertainment purposes, more effectively conveying its severity through statements

Figure 7: *Panorama: Real Spooks*, BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007

made by the conspirators. This merging of past and present events blurs the distinction between actuality and fiction through the combination of generic forms. One moment, the viewer is watching the plotters talk to each other and the next being directly addressed in the present from the same dramatic space, which we know is also in the past. The presenter authoritatively bridges different times through his narration. This ability to be in two different times and modes of representation constitutes him as a powerful subject and demonstrates that television can be a mode of experience transcending fundamental boundaries of meaning. The ability to merge fantasy and reality, or the inability to distinguish between them is of course a key feature of paranoia. Being in the same *mise en scène* as the actors without any recognition between them also emphasises the otherness of the group. By subordinating reconstructions to the familiar narrator's shot presence, the threat is diminished. The blurring of the distinction between actuality and fiction, either through narrative or generic devices, is a common feature of all these examples and many other televisual representations of terrorism.

The threat is amplified through the use of the reconstruction of surveillance scenes (Figure 8) and excerpts from an interview with the former Counter-Terrorism chief. The dominant meaning is one of malevolent threat, heightened by the audience's proximity to the terrorists' plan produced through reconstructions. Figure 8 shows how the programme makes

Figure 8: *Panorama: Real Spooks*, BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007

associations with street CCTV cameras, bringing the terrorists within the public spaces of everyday life. Grids over the shot connote a rationalistic, measuring and de-humanizing attention, defining the subject as subject to examination and evaluation. The angle of the camera, looking downwards onto its subject connotes the protector's relative dominance and control over the subjects, suggesting mastery. The grid turns the sequence into a form of data and explicitly treats the subjects as objects of surveillance, always drawing our attention to the relationship between the watchers and those they are watching. These combined associations, communicate the anxiety and excitement of the terrorist threat. In all these cases, signifiers of surveillance still represent the terrorist as other to the self but with a relative degree of power over them by means of the camera. This fantasy of power is promulgated alongside the complementary fantasy of threat signified by the terrorist's conversations in the programme. Through pictures designed in this way and by showing surveillance in process, the programme attempts to replicate the experience of covert surveillance, of being a spy, producing a voyeuristic pleasure.

Recorded CCTV connects us with traumatic and catastrophic events, revealing the myth of the power of public surveillance to prevent such events occurring. Spectacular and sublime CCTV surveillance footage of previous terrorist attacks is now recorded and then

used in future representations, allowing us to experience violent catastrophes in a mediated and spectacular form, separate from its actual occurrence. In this programme, it is used to create a link between disparate events of terrorism that have no proven connection, amplifying the extent of persecutory threat. The CCTV footage of the train platform where bombs exploded in Madrid 2004 is particularly powerful because a large crowd of people crying out disappears in a large fireball in the centre of the CCTV shot. This is followed by a shot of a large bag of ammonium nitrate fertilizer purchased to make a bomb and then more CCTV footage. A slow visual overlaid fade, back to the fertilizer links the terrorist attack in Madrid to bomb making material in the UK (Figure 9).

Figure 9: *Panorama: Real Spooks*, BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007

Through editing, the terror and horror produced by the Madrid footage is associated with the plot that was averted by Operation Crevice. This linking through editing also expands the extent and threat of terrorism, disregarding the particularities of different national contexts. This is, of course, the construction of 'international' or 'global' terrorism. This totalization of terrorism, colonizing the entire lifeworld, is evidence of the apocalypticism that Hofstadter (2008 [1964]) identified in his study of the paranoid style. The embeddedness and fixity of the surveillance camera and its automatic recording of the everyday, without a specific subject focus, without any direction, give its representations an unrivalled authenticity (Figure 10). The sudden blast produces awe, compassion, terror and horror. The formless, fluid representation of flame is associated with the power of the other

and the futility of escape is represented by the victims' attempt to escape the blast which envelops them. In completely filling the frame, these representations symbolically destroy the 'symbolic fabric' (Figlio & Richards 2003) of the safe and secure society. This presentation of the worst case catastrophe heightens the fear/excitement and dread associated with the British terrorists shown plotting in the programme.

These images put both the power and the failings of MI-5 and the local constabulary into relief. *Panorama: Real Spooks* demonstrates the benefits of secret counter-terrorism surveillance: it shows the successful apprehension of terrorists but in a manner that still expresses a fear of terrorism. The representation of the capacities of public and covert surveillance does not mitigate against fears of the threat of terrorism; rather it compounds a

Figure 10: *Panorama: Real Spooks*, BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007

sense of helplessness by showing footage of terrorist attacks and terrorists 'captured' on public CCTV who nonetheless succeed in exploding bombs and causing death. *Panorama: Real Spooks* sustains the hope and omnipotent phantasy that intelligence agencies can prevent terrorism. As a consequence, surveillance is represented as having not been utilized enough. State-sponsored intelligence surveillance is represented as having both succeeded and failed as a result of restrictions on resources, so the failure is ultimately that of the state, producing a sense of fatalism. Thus, as in *Dirty War,* we are represented as compromised by our own

procedures and limits. This apportioning of responsibility returns the focus back to the government as the 'bad object' more so than the terrorists, for failing in its chosen responsibility as a protector, so promoting further anxiety.

The psycho-cultural approach accounts for the central role of affective dynamics in how culture is used to address social experience. It is important therefore to give consideration to how television, alongside other forms of media, functions as a system of emotional management, circulating emotions. Television provides us with condensations of dominant social attitudes and acts as a vehicle for the expression of emotions. In the case of terrorism, these arise primarily from the concerns and agendas of the political elite, which are then represented by producer/writers in popular television culture, because of their entertainment value and what producers think audiences will be engaged by. The psycho-cultural approach demonstrated here shows how television is used to cope with social experience through narratives of physical danger by giving expression to existential concerns about subjectivity and its meaning. The discourse of terrorism and other situations of persecution are narrative vehicles that give expression to emotions whose real origins are not yet openly considered in mainstream television or public discussion.

These analyses can help us to observe the cultural role of television in expressing and promoting specific emotional states as a form of coping, in these cases, paranoia. These programmes are above all emotional experiences that project a paranoid perspective of persecution and victimhood. By identifying how subjectivity is represented (polarized, omnipotent, powerless); how threats to it are characterized (invisible, invasive, malevolent) and what is presented as meaningful (disaster, victimhood, suspicion), we can ascertain the fundamental concerns of a culture at historically specific times. Whilst these programmes take terrorism as their topic; it is more accurate to say that paranoid anxieties about identity and meaning are the fundamental subject matter. What we see in these programmes are extremes of subjectivity (victims, persecutors and protectors), fear, terror and persecutory anxiety, a distrust of appearances, and the blurring of reality and fantasy, all of which are paranoid characteristics. The association of paranoid anxieties with terrorist subjects, governments and acts of terrorism appears natural but is, in fact, socially constructed through communicative and unconscious mechanisms. For example, the projection or objectification of specific, negative characteristics (evil, maliciousness or malevolence, violence, deception) map out and distinguish different subjectivity types (in this case the 'persecutor'), reifying the fear and paranoid anxieties that can then be associated with the character (the terrorist or

extremist) from the perspective of audiences addressed or positioned as potential victims. In this way, emotions with unconscious determinants (the historical experience of a loss of political meaning and subjectivity) are systematically rationalized through their objectification as the meaningful risk of terrorism or government conspiracy. These programmes 'work' because these emotions fit the objects and subjects through which they are expressed. However, this connection is not necessary and the emotions have a provenance of their own in the cultural losses of the 1980s.

The historical and contemporary contexts of representations are crucial for providing a better understanding of the prevalence of representations of terror and terrorism when actual incidences of terrorism are few and far between. Humans revert to primary modes of experience when they lack the means to make sense of their experience more fully. It is my contention that the fundamental loss of political subjectivities brought about by the significant social and political changes of the 1980s have brought about a period in which those who have experienced this loss most forcefully view the world as fundamentally persecutory. The individualization of social problems in the 1980s, the growth of risk consciousness in the 1990s (Furedi, 1997) and the extent of mainstream representations of personal loss and suffering in the 1990s (Luckhurst, 2003) suggest that a political loss of meaning has been displaced onto the individual subject, because these cultural developments directly follow the loss of modern forms of political subjectivity. Not only has social and political change arguably resulted in a form of politico-cultural trauma in society (which has not been recognised in the public sphere), but the discourse subsequently used to make sense of individual and individualized experience and to engage with others is one that represents traumatic and persecutory experience. This has been recognized by a number of researchers (Luckhurst, 2003; Perri 6 et al, 2007; Radstone, 2008 citing Brown, 1995). It is as if a social loss and ideological trauma has been displaced onto individuals and expressed through the discourses of victim/risk consciousness that shape representations of terrorism. The paranoiac tells stories in order to survive, creatively narrating their experience in order to connect meaningfully with the world they inhabit. The stories function as bandages, attempting to conceal and strengthen the wound left by a traumatic loss (Freud, 1924 [1923]: 151). The story recovers a sense of meaningful subjectivity for the storyteller.

In contextualizing the use of a paranoid style to represent terrorism, we see parallels with previous uses of melodrama in periods of major social change. The use of melodrama in programmes dealing with terrorism, in particular its polarized and idealized structure,

suggests a strong link between melodrama and the paranoid coping technique. Not all uses of melodrama can be described as having a paranoid style structure but key features of the melodrama genre (such as the hero/villain characterization) are paranoid in character and, historically, melodrama has also thrived in a context of negatively experienced social change (Gledhill, 1987).

Paranoid anxieties and paranoid structures of identification are also present in other television programmes dealing with different subjects and using different genres, for example, the narcissistic internal monologues of the main characters of *Peep Show* (Objective Productions, 2003 –) and the contradictions of 'Tony Soprano' and others in *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007). In these cases, it is the representation of subjective reality based on an effective emotional rhetoric which ensures credibility, or the disjuncture between the two which produces humour. The resonance of victim-persecutor relationships and subjectivities continues with successful television shows in 2011 which are based on anti-heroes – fundamentally 'bad' people whom audiences nonetheless want to know and experience, for example 'Draper' in *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007 -), 'Dexter' in *Dexter* (CBS, 2006 -) and the key protagonists of *True Blood* (Your Face Goes Here Entertainment / HBO, 2008 –) and 'Gatehouse' in *The Shadow Line* (Isle of Man Film / Company Pictures, 2011).

Television may be a paranoid medium *par excellence* for its attempt to create truth and depth through an image. What gives plausible depth to those images is not only the production values of the programmes that are successful, and sound is a very effective means of communicating paranoid anxieties, but of views of the world which are seductive because they do bear some similarity to the fantasy world of viewers at the level of emotions, and it is these emotions which are tasked with bearing the meaning of narratives. Destruction, survival or near death experiences are not the fodder of our everyday lives but associated with them are perhaps emotions which are in fact necessary to a full, human experience. A world of threat and persecutors is an exciting one, especially when one is at a safe remove from what is occurring, enjoying the spectacle of near death and destruction. There might be something compensatory about media, allowing us to experience and give form to emotions that some of us are unlikely to experience in our safe, routine and predictable lives. Despite this, the dominant perceptions of human experience in western culture are that we are at risk all of the time from a number of various possibilities in the face of which we are helpless and powerless. A paranoid style of representation is perhaps a more entertaining albeit less realistic way of correcting for the loss of modern political subjectivity.

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Notes

[1] The examples used here are taken from my PhD thesis. The thesis explains and illustrates four key features of the paranoid style in television: paranoid conceptions of related subjectivities; surveillance as dramatic device and the objectification of a paranoid object relationship; the blending of emotional and rationalistic rhetoric in the making of truth claims and the centrality of catastrophe to paranoid narratives. For examples taken from news, see Ortega Breton in Brecher, Devenney & Winter (eds.), 2010.

[2] War is an enduring feature of 'peacetime'. For a review and analysis of psychoanalytic work on war, read Barry Richards' 'Military mobilizations of the unconscious' in *Free Associations 7* (December 1986).

[3] This chapter has its origins in a panel of papers given at the Media and the Inner World research network seminar series in partnership with the Bournemouth University Media School Skillset Academy in September 2009, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. For further information about the project, please see http://www.miwnet.org and Yates (forthcoming).

[4] According to Blumenthal, Clinton was 'virtually obsessed with the dangers of bioterrorism' (2003: 656). Clinton read *The Cobra Event* by Richard Preston (1997), which claimed to be based on extensive research including sources from the FBI and American public health officials. The novel told the story of a bio-terrorist attack on New York. Like *Dirty War*, the book's claim to be evidence-based combined with its imaginative storytelling made the book very successful. Clinton's receptiveness to the possibility allowed speculation and fantasy to flourish. This merging of the popular and the political contributed to building the West's belief in its vulnerability during the 1990s.

[5] 'Blunkett clashes with BBC chief over *Dirty War*', *The Telegraph*, 3/10/04.

[6] 'The object of terror, being in unconscious fantasy dead objects, cannot even be fled from with success' (Meltzer, 1968: 399). Terror, a paranoid anxiety, is provoked by a dead object in unconscious fantasy.

[7] This need for public reassurance is also present in news and political discourse. On 18 November 2002, *ITN News* reported on Blair's reassurance to the public that he would announce specific threats: JOURNALIST: 'Travelling home just got scarier. In an effort to calm nerves, Tony Blair pledged tonight that if he knew of any specific threat to the public, he'd warn us or shut down stations. But it wasn't enough to comfort all'. SHOT: woman talking to interviewer on right shoulder of camera. VOX POP: 'Well you don't feel safe do you?' (*ITN New*, Tx. ITV1, 18/11/02).

[8] This representation of not being alone but together was continued shortly after the film by *Dirty War: Your Questions Answered* (BBC, Tx. BBC1, 29/6/04 22:50hrs) – a live panel and audience discussion on the government's preparedness for future terrorist attacks. This demonstrates an important characteristic of television, its liveness or immediacy, which strengthens the link between fantasy and actuality by showing a forum on real world concerns voiced by members of the public, the potential victims, with experts on hand to re-assure (our protectors).

[9] For a description and evaluation of the development of true crime television during the 1990s, see Biressi, 2001.

Television Programmes Discussed

Dexter (USA, James Manos Jr, CBS, 2006 -)
Dirty War (UK/USA, Luke Alkin, BBC Films/HBO, Tx. BBC1 26/09/2004)
Mad Men (USA, Matthew Weiner, AMC, 2007 -)
Panorama: Real Spooks (UK, Howard Bradburn/BBC, Tx. 30/04/2007)
The Conspiracy Files: 9/11 (UK, Guy Smith/BBC, Tx. BBC2, 18/02/2007)
The Grid (UK/USA, Mikael Saloman, BBC/Fox, 2004)
The Shadow Line (UK, Hugo Blick, BBC, 2011)
True Blood (USA, Alan Ball, HBO, 2008 -)

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