

The Paranoid Style: Television as Coping and Relating 1998-2007

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Across all genres, television communicates a host of perceived dangers or risks to human survival as securitainment (Andrejevic, 2011), reinforcing victim and risk consciousness (Furedi, 2005 [1997]). In the late 1990s, the international terrorist risk 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 regularly featured in British and American television programming since then, when stories of possible Iraqi chemical bomb attacks and the malevolent character of Saddam Hussein first gained prominence.

Using a psycho-cultural approach I have identified a broad set of television programmes about terrorism and related issues that exhibit and are structured by a paranoid style of representation (Fairbairn 1952, Hofstadter, 2008 [1964]; Knight, 2008). This chapter presents some examples from this extensive analysis of British television programmes¹, broadcast by the BBC during the misnamed ‘war on terror’.

The key changes engendering a historically specific paranoid style of representation occurred in the 1980s, the end of the battle between left and right wing visions of society and the collapse of the Cold War². This meant the loss of the modern forms of political subjectivity and with them their meanings (Laïdi, 1998). Closely connected to this fundamental change in political ideologies was a process of major socio-economic change, producing a cultural and social atomization of society. Reflecting this change there has been a shift away from realism towards the use of melodrama in soap opera (Geraghty, 2006) and since the end of the Cold War, an expansion in the use of melodrama across all other programme formats (Joyrich, 1992). Historically, melodrama has also thrived in contexts of

negatively experienced social change (Gledhill, 1987). There has also been an increase in the use of fear discourse within both news and entertainment programming (Altheide 2002). This is significant because melodrama shares a number of key characteristics with the paranoid style, in particular its polarized and idealized structure. Not all melodramatic programmes can be described as having a paranoid style but key features of the melodrama genre (such as the hero/villain characterization) are paranoid in character.

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]) and ‘trauma culture’ (Luckhurst, 2003) in American and European societies. These concepts refer to the same cultural script which treats risks as dangers to be avoided rather than opportunities to be taken.

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. 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.

It is important to recognise that the main group influencing the structure and content of these narratives are the political elites of the UK and the USA, via political and news discourse. I do not want to imply by this that creative writer/producers uncritically reproduce government perspectives on the ‘war on terror’. However news discourse is used as a key source for these programmes and has generally lacked any ideological criticism of, or support for, the fundamental premises of this conflict (McNair, 2006, Hammond 200?). The result has been the uncritical reproduction of a paranoid mode of experience in television dealing with terrorism. I will now turn to my rationale for using a psycho-cultural³ approach to analyze these representations.

To begin with one must address the symbolic character of television. It is a process of engagement which communicates emotionally as well as rationally. I treat television texts as repositories (Kellner, 1995; Rustin & Rustin, 2002) and modes of engagement with British political culture through popular culture, analysing them to find out what they suggest about national political and popular culture. My contextualised semiotic approach (Bignell 2009) involves identifying the emotions and characterizations represented by means of the formal elements of audio-visual representation (cinematography, dialogue, narration, music, lighting, *mise en scène*). This means focusing on how the formal elements of television function as communicative mechanisms that constitute subjectivities relationally. Object relations psychoanalytic theory is used to analyse and interpret these programmes (Fairbairn, 1952, 1954, 1958; Meltzer, 1968; Ogden, 1991; Grotstein, 1994).

The following analyses are of an investigative documentary and a current affairs programme. They illustrate the paranoid style and are representative of a diverse 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 drama (Ortega Breton in Lacey & Paget, 2014).

The Conspiracy Files: 9/11 (BBC, 2007)

This 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. The growth in the popularity of conspiracy theories also begins with the end of the Cold War (Birchill 2006). This I suggest is the result of an alienation from political agency which is only attributed to governments and represented as malevolent in conspiracists' claims. This characterization of active political agency as evil is a key feature of the paranoid style. In particular, suspicion as a way

of perceiving the world is legitimized by describing theories and interviewing conspiracy theorists.

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 2001 attacks and illustrates how a paranoid style of representation effectively combines emotional and rationalistic rhetorics to produce a compelling and credible narrative. The questioning of appearances frames the programme's introduction: a 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 feelings of foreboding and loss. 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, shot with rapid zooms into close-ups of protagonists' faces, connoting close examination. These images problematize the official explanation, anchored by statements from conspiracists and questions by the narrator. The image of a fighter plane cockpit and a hand on the control stick pressing a red button connote destructive attack. Close-up images of conspiracists examine and assess their appearance. Overall the very fast and erratic movement of the camera and editing to close-ups over a large number of images connotes that the camera itself is a tool of anxious examination and evaluation, suggesting a paranoid belief in the falsity of appearances (Bersani, 1989), rather than a simple contestation of its interpretation.

In the second, contrasting sequence of the programme, the sadness and tragedy of the attack is now mobilized before the claims are presented. The overall pace of the sequence is much slower than the previous one. The audience hears a sad but edgy, funereal soundtrack as the camera pans around a warehouse containing the remains of the World Trade Center; a

mortuary or graveyard is emphasized by the pace of movement of the camera, and the question, 'Could the secrets of 9/11 lie here?' (2:53 mins). The audience then hears the voices of American air traffic control speaking to American Air force command shortly before the first attack. The question 'Is this a test?' and the looped response, 'No, this is not an exercise, not a test' (2:16 mins.) expresses the uncertainty produced by the semblance between the 'real world' and a drill in conversation; the need to check what one hears or sees. The slow, close-up camera carefully examines each remnant, connoting both rationalistic investigation and mourning. This is cut with extreme close-ups of photographs of the terrorists and CCTV footage of them in airport security. The audience is also shown footage of onlookers, some crying, some running from the engulfing smoke, and their shocked reactions. The distress and sadness of these pictures and the mournful soundtrack create a sense of gravitas and solemnity. This editing clearly reduces subjects to either victims or persecutors. Overall the beginning of the programme communicates melancholic investigation, of a search for truth which does justice to the severity of loss.

This representation of the attack and its remains highlights the emotions associated with loss as a warrant for the suspicious mode of investigation that follows. In its combination of emotional and rationalistic rhetoric this programme illustrates how the paranoid style can be driven by a melancholic sensibility of solemnity and gravitas. Both the conspiracy theories featured and the programme itself analyse artefacts in a search for evidence that will confirm the paranoid suspicions evoked by the narrator's foreboding tone. This emotional investment is secured through the representation of a child's doll, lying on its back as if dead (Figure 1); the connotation of innocence compounding the tragic loss. This emotional rhetoric continues throughout the programme through the use of the same slow, mournful and slightly soundtrack, maintaining the association with loss and malevolence. The pain of loss framing the representation of materials as evidence for conspiracy produces a set of paranoid signs

that communicate a terrifying and credible view of human agency as malevolent and persecutory.

In a paranoid mode, evidence is found and selected to support a prior belief in malevolent agency. The materials must be open to interpretation and association with other selected pieces of information. The 'evidence' presented is insufficient to uphold the claim, but the claim can nevertheless be considered 'reasonable' through the rationalistic rhetoric of explanation and the strong emotions associated with the event.

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. *CF9/11* is a successful series using the paranoid style, adding legitimacy to conspiracy claims by broadcasting a serious treatment of them. The suspicion of a paranoid outlook is left largely unexamined, conferring legitimacy on its use.

Panorama: Real Spooks (BBC, 2007)

Panorama: Real Spooks (BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007) (hereafter *Panorama*) makes extensive use of the dramatic devices of reconstruction, non-diegetic sound and visual signifiers of surveillance (specifically grids and crosshairs overlaid on sequences of CCTV and photographs) to create a paranoid style. The visual representation 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 conferred onto the audience. It uses a combination of dramatic reconstruction and direct address to camera by

the present to make the events portrayed feel more immediate. However this presentation blurs the distinction between actuality and fiction. Despite being about a successful counter-terrorist investigation, this programme dwelt on the fact that a '7/7' suicide bomber had been in contact with one of the arrested conspirators during the surveillance operation but was not followed. 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. The futility evoked by this tragic oversight contributes to a paranoid perspective.

Throughout the programme the viewer is made aware of the full extent of police and intelligence service surveillance capabilities. Surveillance is a key motif of the paranoid style, as it produces a 'semiotics of suspicion' (Frohne 2002:269). I would argue that public CCTV surveillance is the materialisation of a paranoid object relationship because it objectifies and socialises suspicion (Lyon 2003) representing social actors as potentially risky or threatening. At the beginning of the programme surveillance demonstrates 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. Visual 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. A few seconds later the audience are shown signifiers of active, covert surveillance: flashing light panels in the dark; a man with headphones on; a drill in a wall, then a camera being put into the wall, shown from the perspective of the camera (Figure 2). The viewer's attention is split between the unseen agency of the hidden camera, where the audience is powerfully positioned, and the subject of the camera's gaze – the would-be terrorists.

Public, CCTV surveillance is also important in constructing a paranoid style located in quotidian life. The terrorist threat is amplified through the use of stylised reconstructions of quotidian surveillance scenes (Figure 3) combined with excerpts from an interview with a former Counter-Terrorism chief of police, which anchors the meaning of the images as a real and serious threat. The dominant meaning is one of malevolent threat, heightened by the audience's temporal and visual proximity to the terrorists' plan, produced through reconstructions. Figure 3 shows how the programme makes associations with street CCTV cameras, locating the terrorists within the public spaces of everyday life. Grids over the shot denote a rationalising, measuring and de-humanising attention, framing the subjects as objects of examination. This draws our attention to the relationship between the watchers and the watched. The downward angle of the camera connotes the protector's relative dominance and control over the subjects. These combined associations, communicate both the anxiety of the terrorist threat and the voyeurism of the surveillant gaze. In all these cases, signifiers of surveillance still represent the terrorist as a feared other but with a relative degree of power over them, by virtue of the camera. This fantasy of power is promulgated alongside the complementary fantasy of threat signified by the terrorist's conversations in the programme.

Spectacular and sublime recorded CCTV footage (of the train platform where terrorists' bombs exploded in Madrid in 2004) is also used to remind the audience of the destruction that can be caused by terrorist attacks, revealing the myth of the power of public surveillance to prevent such events occurring. The CCTV footage is particularly evocative of loss and tragedy because a crowd crying out disappears into a fireball. This is followed by a shot of a large bag of ammonium nitrate fertilizer purchased to make the bomb in the UK. A slow visual overlaid fade, from a shot of the destruction caused in Madrid back to the fertilizer links the terrorist attack in Madrid to bomb making material in the UK. This display of destruction amplifies the persecutory threat. Through editing, the horror produced by the

Madrid footage is associated with the plot that is the subject of the programme. 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. The sudden blast produces awe, compassion, terror and horror (Figure 4). The formless, fluid representation of flame is associated with the power of the feared, persecutory 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. Through editing, this presentation of the worst case scenario, characteristic of risk-averse discourse, heightens the fear, excitement and dread associated with the British terrorists shown plotting in the programme.

These images put both the power and failings of MI-5 and the police into stark relief. *Panorama* shows the successful apprehension of terrorists but in a manner that still expresses terror and other paranoid anxieties. The representation of the capacities of public and covert surveillance does not mitigate fears of the threat of terrorism; rather it compounds a sense of helplessness and futility by showing footage of terrorist attacks. It is clear that the media logic of fear-as-entertainment (Altheide 2002) is at work here. However *Panorama* still sustains the hope and phantasy that intelligence agencies and their media technologies can prevent terrorism. 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 which contributes to a paranoid perspective. The

government aim to prevent terrorism is represented as compromised by the UK security agencies' finite resources. This apportioning of responsibility returns the blame back on the British government more so than the terrorists; failing in its responsibility as a protector, so promoting further paranoid anxieties and fatalism.

These analyses can help us to observe the psycho-cultural role of television: expressing specific emotional states as a form of coping with anxieties and a mode of relating (Fairbairn 1952). These programmes are above all emotional experiences that project a paranoid perspective of persecution and victimhood. By identifying how subjectivity is represented (reduced, polarized, omnipotent and powerless); how threats to it are characterized (malevolent) and what is presented as meaningful (loss, disaster, victimhood, suspicion) we can ascertain the fundamental concerns of a culture. 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 (malevolence, violence, deception) 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 or protectors. In this way, emotions with unconscious determinants (the loss of political meaning and subjectivity) are systematically rationalized

through their objectification as the meaningful risk of terrorism or government conspiracy. The political and historical contexts of representations are crucial to understanding the prevalence of representations of terror and terrorism, when actual incidences of terrorism were few and far between. It is my contention that the fundamental loss of political subjectivities brought about by the significant social and political changes of the 1980s brought about a period in which those who 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-as-potential-victim, because these cultural changes follow the loss of modern forms of political subjectivity. Not only have social and political losses resulted in a form of politico-cultural trauma in society (which through disavowal has not been recognised in the public sphere but is apparent in various attempts to find meaning), but the discourses used to frame experience and to engage with others represents the lifeworld as persecutory and traumatic. This has been recognized by a number of researchers (Luckhurst, 2003; Perri 6 et al, 2007; Brown, 1995). An ideological trauma has been displaced onto individuals and expressed through the discourses of victim/risk consciousness. These stories arguably 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, albeit in a paranoid mode.

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 dramas focusing 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 -); the protagonists of *True Blood* (Your Face Goes Here Entertainment / HBO, 2008 –) and ‘Gatehouse’ in *The Shadow Line* (Isle of Man Film / Company Pictures, 2011).

These programmes and many others represent a paranoid mode of experience which resonates with audiences because it bears emotional similarity to a universal and personal experience, and it is these emotions which are tasked with bearing the meaning of these narratives rather than their substantive content. The dominant, over-riding perception of human experience in a powerfully influential western culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that the west is constantly at risk from a number of fatal and injurious dangers, in the face of which we are helpless and powerless. It is crucial that reality be brought to bear on these perceptions and that westerners acknowledge and evaluate the fundamental political changes which have occurred over the last thirty years, in order to see the world as one of opportunity rather than danger.

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Television Programmes Analysed

The Conspiracy Files: 9/11 (UK, Guy Smith/BBC, Tx. BBC2, 18/02/2007)

Panorama: Real Spooks (UK, Howard Bradburn/BBC1, Tx. 30/04/2007)

Other Television Programmes Referenced

Dexter (USA, James Manos Jr, CBS, 2006 -)

Mad Men (USA, Matthew Weiner, AMC, 2007 -)

The Shadow Line (UK, Hugo Blick, BBC, 2011)

True Blood (USA, Alan Ball, HBO, 2008 -)

Endnotes

¹ The examples used here are taken from my PhD thesis (2011, Roehampton University). The thesis explains and illustrates four key features of the paranoid style in television: related, paranoid subjectivities (victims, persecutors, protectors); surveillance as 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. For television news examples see Ortega Breton in Brecher, Devenney & Winter (eds.), 2010 and from drama see Gregorio-Godeo & Mateos-Aparicio (eds.), 2013 and Lacey & Paget (eds.) 2014. My primary corpus was as follows:

BBC News, various dates 2000-2007

ITN News at Ten, various dates 1998-2006

Target London: An ITV News Special, Tx. ITV1, 7/07/2005, 21:00 (125mins).

9/11 Conspiracies, Prod. Morland/Channel 4, Tx. Channel 4, 09/09/2004, 21:00 (60 mins).

Dirty War, Prod. Alkin, BBC Films/HBO, Tx. BBC1 26/09/2004 (90 mins).

Dirty War: Your Questions Answered, Tx. BBC1, 26/09/2004, (45 mins).

Dispatches: Undercover Mosque, Prod. Hardcash/Channel 4, Tx. 15/01/2007 (55 mins).

Loose Change, Second Edition, Prod. Rowe/Louder Than Words, 11/12/2005.

Panorama: Real Spooks, Prod. Bradburn/BBC, Tx. 30/04/2007 (60 mins).

Spooks / MI-5, Creator Wolstencroft, Kudos Productions/BBC, 2002-2009.

The Conspiracy Files: 9/11, Prod. Smith/BBC, Tx. BBC2, 18/02/2007, 21:00 (60mins)

The Conspiracy Files: David Kelly, Prod. Sigsworth/BBC, Tx. BBC2, 25/02/2007, 21:00 (60 mins)

The Grid (UK/USA, Mikael Saloman, BBC/Fox, 2004)

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).