Chapter 12
Screening for Meaning: Terrorism as the product of a Paranoid Style in Politics and Popular Culture

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Since the mid 1990s danger, risk and conspiratorial fears have appeared to characterise the safety-conscious world we inhabit. Since President Bill Clinton’s declaration of a war on terrorism in 1998, and particularly since the attacks on US in 2001, the response has been an expansion, or rather an irruption (Baudrillard 2003) in representations of the terrorist threat. A glut of representations in news, current affairs, documentary and drama using the genres of investigation, thriller and melodrama in particular, testify to a fantasy world of conspiratorial fears and terrorist dangers. Such programmes extend the speculation prominent in news and political discourse about the forms and severity of the terrorist threat. In a period of increased emotional expression; decreased political engagement and aversion to taking risks, the representation of subjectivity is driven from the perspective of a fearful, isolated self. It is important to assess and evaluate this shift in popular conceptions of subjectivity because these representations can help us to understand why fear, security, persecution and victimhood dominate political and popular discourse today.

Using a psycho-cultural studies approach I will present analyses of the representation of subjectivity in terrorism-related factual and fictional programmes. I will suggest that ‘paranoid’ subjectivities and recurring ideas in these television narratives elicit and are determined by a crisis of meaning and identity. In object relations psychoanalysis, ‘paranoid’ refers to a coping technique for such a crisis which can also be formulated as a mode of representation, as in Richard Hofstadter’s (2008 [1964]) The Paranoid Style in American Politics (see also Knight 2008). The analysis will show how communicative mechanisms driven by socially repressed fears shape the representation of terrorism, counter-terrorism and extremism in a manner which can resonate with fundamental aspects of individuated emotional experience by representing fears of persecution. Examples from the successful espionage-thriller-melodrama Spooks (Kudos Productions, 2002-2011 – titled MI-5 in the US) and from the documentaries Dispatches: Undercover Mosque (Hardcash Productions, 2007) and Dr David Kelly: The Conspiracy Files (BBC, 2007) will be used. Before doing this
it is necessary to outline the politico-cultural context shaping the creative process of these programmes.

Crucial to understanding contemporary political and popular culture today is the significance of the loss of modern political subjectivity and meaning (Laïdi 1998). There has been a chronic need for politicians to re-fashion a meaningful connection with the electorate ever since the collapse of the Cold War, declining rates of political participation and the declining relevance of traditional political ideologies of left and right. Whilst the US and the UK alongside them have great military and economic power, clearly evident as part of the propaganda spectacle that is postmodern war (Baudrillard 2004; Hammond 2007), governments’ hegemony (moral and cultural leadership) is dependent upon achieving meaningful identifications with the electorate. In Western societies since the mid 1990s such meaningful identifications are based upon the expression of personal, emotional experience in relation to perceived dangers. Personalised emotional engagement and risk perception are the central planks upon which this new form of engagement is based. Terrorism is only one of a number of social problems framed and shaped by what is referred to as ‘a discourse of fear’ (Altheide 2002); ‘risk aversion’ (Furedi 2005); ‘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, the predominance of which suggests that this is the single most meaningful way to express how we subjectively feel about the world and its others in this post-modern political period. This means that suspicion of others (a belief in malevolence with no evidence to support it) and fear for survival are prevalent characteristics of British and American societies in particular.

The greater ‘consciousness’ of perceived dangers in the world provides a credible mode of expression for film and television programme makers as well as for the political elite in its efforts to re-engage with the electorate as its protectors. Like political leaders, series creators and writers/producers need to connect meaningfully in order to gain an audience, through the dominant cultural script. The drama, excitement, fear and emotional intensity associated with terrorism, extremism and the tragic loss of life is a product of this representational work. While Spooks/MI-5 is ostensibly about responding to attacks on the nation, identifications are based on the emotional suffering and conflicts of the main characters. While the fictional world of victims and persecutors they inhabit gives symbolic form to a fundamental and universal part of individual emotional experience, this is not to suggest that this cultural
phenomenon is not historically specific and socially constructed. I will now turn to my rationale for using a psycho-cultural approach to analyze these representations.

The representation of social life in terms of its fearfulness is considered to have reached such a scale that ‘fear has emerged as a framework for developing identities and for engaging in social life’ (Altheide 2002: 3, my emphasis). Rather than fear being a framework, fear is the conscious, taken for granted response to the projection of characteristics which develop identities. 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 1978; Ogden 1991) combined with a contextualised semiotic approach to textual analysis. This form of psychoanalysis provides a socially- and practice-based means for understanding the affective dynamics of the human subject and society. It posits, on the basis of successful and reliable clinical practice, a set of communicative mechanisms which form the basis of human subject formation and interaction. My method focuses on the construction of meaning and subjectivity through these communicative mechanisms using the formal elements of audio-visual representation. This means focusing on how formal elements of texts function as communicative mechanisms to shape subject types in relation to one another.

This relational psychoanalytic approach is based on the premise that taken-for-granted and ostensibly rational signification practices conceal ideological or unconscious dynamics which shape these representations. Experiences and emotions which are extremely painful and unbearable (that cannot be thought about) are repressed. This act of repression makes these particular object relations unconscious and dynamic. ‘Object relations’ refers to these significant experiences (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. In order to manage or cope with these ideas and experiences, objects are often split. Splitting is a fundamental concept of object relations psychoanalysis because it refers to what we do when subjectivity is in crisis. In the absence of a meaningful frame we revert back to simplistic polarisations to construct order. Once ideas are split, that is to say once they have been simplified into binary relationships of good and evil for example, then one part of this binary can be projected onto another group or attached to a specific object or signifier. In other words, it can be got rid of by attributing it to someone else through representations. The chief ‘mechanisms’ through which unconscious
object relations become expressed are projection, introjection, and identification, and these form a process producing distinct but related subject roles or identities. The emotions that are generally associated with the ‘war on terror’: fear, persecutory anxiety, helplessness and of course terror, are the fabric of these communicative mechanisms. Their association with terrorist subjects and acts of terrorism appears natural but is in fact socially constructed through these 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’) in terrorism-related news stories, 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 (historical experiences which have been forcefully ignored) are systematically rationalised through their objectification as risks in news and political discourse.

The paranoid technique consists in the projection of disavowed, unbearable emotions of all types that are subsequently conjoined in unconscious fantasy. This partly accounts for the contradictory repulsion and fascination Anglo-American culture has with Islamic extremism as well as our culture’s general fascination with practices, people and characters we consider to be morally wrong, such as serial killers and gangsters, in history and popular television. Our interest in malevolent subjectivity continues to increase with many successful television shows which are based on anti-heroes – fundamentally bad people who audiences nonetheless want to know and experience – for example, Donald Draper in *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-present), Dexter Morgan in *Dexter* (CBS, 2008-present), and Tony Soprano and others in *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007).

Terrorism-related programming occurs within an entertainment industry already predisposed to emotional intensity as engaging and meaningful through the widespread use of the genre of melodrama, which has expanded through this post Cold War period (Joyrich 1992). The shift towards the use of melodrama reflects the social atomisation of society which has been in process since the 1980s (Geraghty 2006). The increased use of melodrama as a response to negatively experienced social change (Gledhill 1987) is the aesthetic corollary of the resort to the paranoid perspective as a coping strategy when identity is threatened in psychoanalysis. The use of melodramatic devices in *Spooks* – such as victims and villain caricatures, extreme
violence and the chronic threat of it, and the visual representation of emotional states, in particular through close-ups – all contribute to the paranoid style of representation. Melodrama focuses on the individual’s emotional experience and portrays the world in a Manichean form. The clear-cut hero and villain structure of narratives organises emotions which express subjectivity as split into simplified and polarised extremes. The following examples demonstrate how melodrama, in these respects at least, has a paranoid structure.

*Spooks/MI-5* ‘None of the normal rules of identity apply.’

In *Spooks/MI-5* British political elite concerns and popular suspicions, such as the falsity of news, and threats posed by other states, are expressed through stories about a team of intelligence officers preventing persecutory threats to the British state. Story topics are normally chosen from topical security concerns and international conflicts. Plot lines developed from news narratives are rendered meaningful through an intimate engagement with the emotional lives of the main characters; a trait of melodrama. Surveillance technologies, especially visual and aural, are foregrounded as an expression of sophistication and power. Risk and excitement are conveyed through the narrative structure of the programme via a narrative device called ‘jeopardy’, which attempts to maintain engagement by consistently problematising protagonists’ attempts at achieving their aims, thus consistently heightening the level of tension (Van Loon 2003) by deferring the resolution of the protagonists’ objectives. Re-titled *MI-5* for the French and American markets, it has generic elements of action, police and melodrama genres, in particular: the clear divide between good and evil (splitting in melodrama); the foregrounding of identity changed through routine deceptions (the action series: see Miller 2001) and of what can be seen and so known and how conclusions are drawn (the police series: see Bignell 2009). The heroes are portrayed as normal, typical human beings through their personal problems and flaws, characteristic of the *verité* style (Cooke 2001). *Spooks* is an example of the ‘play between the internalization of political crisis and the projection of repressed fears’ (Donald 1985: 133). Through seeing the hidden lives of MI-5 agents we are witness to the multitude of threats to the national ‘way of life’. The very *raison d’être* of *Spooks* is to manage or eliminate these persecutory threats. The audience know that MI-5 will prevail but not without loss, trauma and personal suffering, elements characterising victimhood. Double agents, undercover agents, the manipulation of informants, lying to sexual partners: all these activities add to the levels of suspicion and tension that signify a paranoid map of suspicious and potentially
malevolent relations. The deceptions carried out on a regular basis by the main characters convey suspicion and uncertainty about characters’ true identities.

*Spooks/MI-5* is not the only example of successful terrorism-related drama exploring uncertainties about subjectivity in the twenty first century. The American spy dramas *Alias* (ABC, 2001-06) and *24* (Fox, 2001-present) feature spies transgressing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in the name of the security of others. What is significant is that these dramas, amongst others from the same period, also have subjectivity and suspicion as key themes. In addition, a number of films, drama-documentaries and mini-series have also dealt with these issues, for example *Dirty War* (BBC Films/HBO, 2004) and *The Grid* (BBC/TNT/Fox, 2004).

Such narratives inevitably involve victimisation or persecution and attempts to prevent and protect. In one episode of *Spooks/MI-5*, for example, an alleged terrorist falsely imprisoned is characterised as a victim not only of the police but also of a group forcing him to commit a terrorist act on pain of the death of his family. In keeping with the consistent theme of identity in the series, this man is also the victim of a case of mistaken identity. In the same episode (Episode 4.6), a civil liberties organisation (a ‘protector’) is associated with terrorists plotting a strike suggesting that the organisation may in fact be in league with the terrorists. The potential or actual victim can be a loved one of one of the officers, a sympathetic collaborator such as the helpful Algerian intelligence officer fleeing from foreign persecution (Episode 2.2.), or one of the officers themselves (Episodes 4.7, 7.1). These are just a few examples of where persecution-victimhood is used as a meaningful structure of identification.

Perhaps the key paranoid motif which can be exploited by audio-visual representation is the distrust in appearances (Bersani 1989). This concerns the problematised ability to know and identify others, evoking suspicion. *Spooks* contains familiar, stereotypical representations of otherness in the form of enemy Iranians and Muslims to clearly express, visually and culturally, the difference in paranoid subjectivities. However, it represents some characters ambivalently as security officers or collaborators with MI-5 who also perform as the terrorist other. The following example (Episode 4.4) illustrates the rejection of any ambivalence in the paranoid style, which is based on its opposite, polarisation (splitting). This foregrounds the centrality of the visual dimension as a source of knowledge and misperception. The presence of Adam (the main protagonist) as an undercover white Arab (an ethnic minority from Syria)
makes the white English truck driver (trafficking illegal immigrants) anxious, arousing suspicion. Lighting, mise-en-scène and close-ups create a focus on skin colour reduced to tonal differences. Lighting and the similarity in background colours draws attention to the similarity in skin colour between the British and Arabic men. Shots of Adam and the traffickers alternate and are followed by a close-up on the bundle of money that Adam offers them for his passage on the illegal truck. The downward-looking gazes of Adam and the other passengers contrast with the direct and commanding gaze of the traffickers. Adam is hit by the driver because the driver does not trust him as his ambivalent appearance makes him anxious. In this example aggression is the product of the ambivalence of familiarity and unfamiliarity (a white Arab) provoking anxiety. Acting out this anxiety by attacking the other displays a paranoid mindset of victims and persecutors, where the subject is unable to cope with the ambivalence because it does not offer clear distinctions between the self and the other. Although in this example the distrust of appearance is overcome, the decision to accept Adam on the truck proves fateful for the truck driver. The driver’s suspicion is later confirmed when he is beaten and taken by Adam’s accomplices, proving to the driver and to the audience that his anxiety about a white Arab was warranted. This effectively underwrites anxiety around ambiguity and identities which do not conform to stereotypes.

Melodramatic devices such as the use of light and shadow, slow motion and music are used to distinguish terrorists, giving them a sinister but stylish aura. A characteristic motif of paranoid representation is evident in Spooks/MI-5 where a sinister, threatening characterisation is created by capturing the subject in darkness, watching. For example in Episode 4.4 low lighting and the use of curtains to create shadows and which conceal the gazing eye connote partial knowledge of the subject, making him more threatening. These differing audio-visual characterisations distinguish the two identities of protector and persecutor, which is important because in terms of action protagonists and antagonists are both killers following orders.

The following is a good example of a paranoid style narrative because in it a suspicious mind-set is validated. The viewer is encouraged to believe in Yazdi through the security officers’ partial trust in him. The narrative twist in this episode’s storyline is that the intelligence authorities wrongly believe Yazdi to be intending to commit a terrorist attack on British civilians and consequently make the mistake of trusting Yazdi to question a senior Arab dignitary who they wrongly believe to be working with him. When Section D’s
concerns about this are ignored by senior officials, the foreign dignitary is murdered. Yazdi achieves his real mission, by manipulating MI-5’s attempt to use him. The MI-5 team have effectively failed to be suspicious enough. The message is that we should trust neither terrorists nor political masters, only our emotional selves, our intuitions. Deception and the ability to know and trust others are prominent themes of this and many other episodes involving officers going undercover.

As with many political and news discourse narratives, a central concern of Spooks/MI-5 is identification / definition of the perceived threat. In Episode 5.3 the paranoid anxiety associated with unknown others, the problematisation of identity, is apparent from the beginning. We are shown a close-up of a trembling/querivering piece of hessian, anchored by a deep, monotone male voice (Ibrahim – the antagonist) conveying indifference, detachment and rationality as he says ‘This man is an MI-5 spy’. The cut to a wider distanced shot shows us that the hessian conceals a person’s face, who is on their knees and lit from above in the centre of a circle of men standing in a large, dark warehouse. This organisation of people gives the scene a ritualistic quality as the men are evenly spaced forming a perfect circle around the lit area and on the edge of the darkness that dominates the visual field, the aura of light seeming to emanate from the man’s head. This focuses attention on to the prisoner whilst associating those standing silently around him with darkness. This use of light visually depicts the polarised splitting characteristic of the paranoid style, of innocent victimhood (light) and persecution (darkness). The focus is on the experience of persecution of a wholly innocent victim in a world of persecuting villains. The fourth shot reveals to us that one of the men is an MI-5 officer, punctuated by the use of a foreboding low bass tone and the mention of the word ‘spy’ in the dialogue.

Once the possibility of victimisation has been established the shot naturalistically peels to the right to reveal another layer of this world, and this is complemented by the sound of the antagonist’s voice changing from a clear, naturalistic quality to a lower quality associated with radio reception or standard audio recording equipment. We are shown three members of the MI-5 team, two sitting at large screens with headphones, and the main protagonist, Adam, running into the office and putting on his headphones/microphone headset. Through dialogue it becomes apparent that there is another team of MI-5 officers near to the location of the main scene who do not know where the man is being held. A lack of knowledge means that MI-5 are powerless to intervene. The MI-5 teams are positioned as radio audiences: they can
do nothing but witness the action via their headsets; they do not have ‘a visual on the warehouse’. This lack of view, combined with dialogue and their positioning as witnesses to the action conveys a sense of powerlessness which is characteristic of the paranoid style. Zaf, a undercover officer in the group at the warehouse, makes an argument for not killing the prisoner, claiming to have recognised him as a council employee and pointing out that the prisoner has not seen them. The significance of visual knowledge is thus emphasised again as determining whether someone is considered a danger or not.

The antagonist Ibrahim removes the bag covering the prisoner’s head. There is a close-up shot of the prisoner’s fearful expression followed by a low angled view of Zaf from the point of view of the prisoner, who is on his knees, looking up at him. From this perspective the officer appears ominous and threatening, as he is surrounded by darkness with the shadow thrown by the light concealing his eyes. The next shot is a slow zoom close-up into the prisoner’s eyes before a wide angle is used to show the shooting of the prisoner. This is followed by a rapid zoom which bends in its trajectory as it moves towards a semi-profile shot of Zaf. The movement of the camera is used to signify the emotional effect of the shooting on the officer who tried to save him in a situation where showing any kind of sympathy may endanger him.

The use of the sack and of lights as masking devices which prevent sight and the exchange of shots between the innocent victim and Zaf highlights the issue of identity, mistaken and concealed. In a paranoid mode of representation the only identities which are meaningful are the ones on display here, victims, persecutors and protectors. The terrorist cell’s suspicions lead them to capture the prisoner and to disbelieve his claim that he is an environmental health officer or ‘rat-catcher’. This suspicion is objectified through the arrangement of lighting in the scene. The lights that are shown are pearl bulb in open lampshades, reminiscent of the lights that feature in interrogations. The men are unknown to one another but their fates are inextricably linked together by other officers’ interpretation of the situation, who believe the drawn out event is designed to ‘flush out’ any undercover officers present. The metaphor of ‘rats’ and ‘rat-catchers’ also signals a confusion of the identities of self and other from the victim’s perspective. Zaf is metaphorically speaking the real ‘rat-catcher’ in this situation. Sight, as a source of knowledge, is a prominent motif of this scene and many others in Spooks, generating moments of suspense and fear. In the moments before his death the prisoner is seen looking in fear at the MI-5 officer who he falsely believes to be his
persecutor. In addition, futility, an emotion characteristic of paranoia (Fairbairn 1952) is evoked by the failed attempt that Zaf makes to save the prisoner’s life.

These examples evidence a number of characteristic features of Spooks. Through visual style, mise-en-scène, dialogue and narrative, ambivalence is rejected, malevolence is projected, suspicion is validated and a clear distinction between persecutor and victim subject positions is produced. As I will illustrate below, publicised cases of real victimhood give rise to another meaningful aspect of terrorism narratives: conspiracy theories.

Dr David Kelly: The Conspiracy Files

Conspiracy theories have been identified as present within many genres in popular culture (Knight 2000, 2002). Conspiracy theorising became increasingly popular firstly in the USA and then Britain after the Cold War. With increasing cynicism about the ‘war on terror’, from 2004 conspiracy theorising began to extend beyond the confines of popular entertainment culture (for example The X-Files) and contribute to the meaningful mainstream engagement with international terrorism, evidenced for example in the column inches devoted to it in the New York Times and the British national newspaper the Guardian (Birchall 2006). Most well known are the 9/11 conspiracy theory films Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) and Loose Change (2005). The secrecy which surrounds intelligence claims, and the general cynicism directed towards both American and British governments, contribute to the increased resonance that ‘war on terror’ conspiracy theories have. Conspiracy theories attempt to explain these losses in meaningful ways, providing alternatives to official explanations which lack this point of identification.

In conspiracy theories, accusations of malevolence are asserted through a process of claims-making that combines the presentation of proofs with the emotional orientation (grief, suspicion) that prompts and drives this process. Without this, such claims would appear ludicrous. Dr David Kelly: The Conspiracy Files (hereafter referred to as Kelly) investigates the suspicions of conspiracy theorists who question the Hutton Inquiry verdict on Dr David Kelly’s death. Kelly was a weapons inspector employed by both the United Nations and the UK Ministry of Defence to find evidence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq. Kelly was found dead in a forest near his home after it became public knowledge that he had expressed his opinion to a BBC journalist that a government report on Iraqi WMD had been
‘sexed-up’. Kelly was part of a series first broadcast in 2007 which included programmes on the death of Princess Diana, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001 and, in 2008, new programmes on the 1988 Lockerbie bombing and on World Trade Center Building Three which also collapsed on 11 September 2001. In 2009 a further programme was broadcast, on the London bombings of July 2005.

The programme includes reconstructions based on evidence given to the Hutton Inquiry alongside alternative explanations. Such theories are of analytical interest here because they both conceal and attribute agency to others constructed as malevolent. They directly problematise agency in respect of tragic deaths, which in and of themselves are meaningless. Expert opinion and an emotional rhetoric of suspicion and sadness are blended together to make conspiracy claims about well known cases of victimhood, aiming to attribute responsibility by constructing a case which positions political power as persecutory and malevolent.

As in other recent conspiracy theories, there is an explanation produced by an officially sanctioned body, in this case the Hutton Inquiry, with which both the conspiracy theorists and this programme engage. During the presentation of the official explanation, slow, sustained, low chords, familiar from horror films, evoke suspense (anxiety and uncertainty) and danger, establishing and maintaining a sinister mood, anchoring the discrepancies in a fearful frame. Kelly is introduced in its voice-over as an exploration of something sinister, immediately suggesting persecution. We thus have two emotionally framed competing positions or explanations. The official explanation is tragic and sad, the other sinister; however it is the sinister tone which is foregrounded through music.

Kelly’s own recorded persecutory perception of his situation is enlisted as proof of a conspiracy: Narrator: ‘there was one sinister message ... it doesn’t appear to show that Dr Kelly was a threat to himself but that he felt threatened by others. He told his friend ... that there were “many dark actors playing games”’. This is a quintessential conspiratorial statement. Its significance is increased by the slow iteration of the narrator as she reads the quotation and the very close shot of the quotation on a PC monitor from directly in front and behind the screen. This lends substantial weight to conspiracy claims by using Kelly’s own perception that something sinister was occurring around him, combined with concealed and surveillant camera positions connoting a voyeuristic pleasure as well as malevolent spying.
Hidden, malevolent agency is shown through low lighting combined with a slow tracking shot taken from behind the subject’s back, a shot commonly used in horror and thriller films. As the victim, Kelly’s own perception has a privileged value in Anglo-American societies at this time. Additionally, as the former purveyor of intelligence secrets, he is attributed with knowing what is really going on and revealing the truth. However it is the camera which knows what is really happening by occupying the position of the malevolent persecutor, surveying its unaware victim, thereby connoting danger.

The visual absence and aural presence of the narrator lends ethos and pathos to the claims being made. The tonality of voice is a very significant conveyor of emotional mood in everyday life. Here, there is a mild but consistent mournfulness, doom and foreboding in the pace and tone of the narrator’s voice. This is complemented visually by a shot of fast-moving dark cloud over the headquarters of the UK foreign intelligence service and shots of solitary ravens and gargoyles, throughout the narrative. The effect of these seemingly unconnected shots is to frame the narrative in a melodramatic gothic register by use of visual metaphors which connote evil, evoking a sinister, suspicious mood. The narrator’s constant aural presence maintains this sense of foreboding throughout the programme, occasionally changing tone and raising her voice when presenting a piece of conflicting evidence, expressing suspicion and lending credibility to the claims.

Discrepancies in accounts and imprecision in diagnosis are presented as traces of another agency absent from the official account. This is done by leaving experts’ questions without immediate response and this results in an accumulation of suspicion towards the official explanation. The final quarter of the programme is taken up mainly by eminent experts of high authority agreeing with Hutton’s verdict or explaining away the conspiracists’ claims. The programme thus offers a diminution of the sinister tension generated by the interviewing of conspiracy theorists and music and in doing this, resolves some of the persecutory anxieties that the programme had raised, providing some closure. We could interpret this heightening and diminishing of anxiety as ‘modulation’, an idea used by Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin (2007) in their study of television news discourse, which they argue functions as a container for anxieties, amplifying and assuaging them in the course of their representation. However, in these programmes paranoid anxieties are amplified much more than they are assuaged.
The belief in the malevolence of powerful others is an attempt to provide a meaningful account for a tragic loss. What appears to be meaningful is the idea of powerful malevolent agents working secretly. Identification with the tragedy, futility and powerlessness associated with loss is conveyed, coupled with a desire to identify someone or some group as responsible for this loss. Conspiracy theories and programmes about them provide a focus for the expression of alienation from political agency, formulated as suspicion and fear of formal political power and the characterisation of its political agency as malevolent.

Agency is concealed by its projection onto others through the conspiracy claim. The claim itself is evidence of the subjectivity of the conspiracist, but this draws attention to others who are constructed as not only more powerful but malevolently powerful. This is the form of powerful subjectivity which we find meaningful in Anglo-American societies today, if we consider the marked rise of interest in and popularity of conspiracy theories since the end of the Cold War. Conspiracy claims therefore evidence an alienation from subjectivity, through its projection and characterisation as malevolent. This is balanced by the related subject position of the ‘good’ innocent victim – Kelly. Conspiracy claims validate our culture of suspicion, in the same way that ‘in paranoia, the primary function of the enemy is to provide a definition of the real that makes paranoia necessary’ (Bersani 1989: 193). We should understand the WMD saga in the same way: the rhetorical and emotional structure of such theories and the truth claims of Anglo-American governments in the ‘war on terror’ are the same (Knight 2008). As I will illustrate in the example below taken from an investigative documentary, suspicion can also be mobilised through camera work producing an exciting and fearful representation of malevolent subjectivity.

Dispatches Undercover Mosque

Channel 4’s Dispatches Undercover Mosque features secret filming in a number of mosques using a hidden camera on an undercover reporter. This form of investigative journalism is underpinned by an overt ‘will to reveal’ (Bratich 2006) the truth that lies behind appearances. In Dispatches, this private and hidden surveillance structures the documentary’s narrative, supported by DVD footage of preachers and academic experts who express fears about extremist Islamist ideas. I will focus on how the use of the hidden camera and editing structure a paranoid relationship between the subjects of the film – members and imams of the mosque – and the programme’s audience.
The premise of the programme and its use of a hidden camera is that the public image of the Green Lane Mosque and the organisation that runs it, The United Kingdom Islamic Mission (UKIM), is false. Statements from the mosque’s website promoting inter-faith dialogue are presented alongside comments from selected preachers who use derogatory terms to describe non-Muslims. The title of the programme, Undercover Mosque, denotes that the mosque, not just the programme makers, are ‘undercover’, suggesting that their public-facing appearance as a ‘multi-faith’, tolerant organisation is disingenuous. The programme’s claim, voiced by a female narrator, is that despite appearances to the contrary the public face of these organisations conceals ‘a message of intolerance and bigotry’ presented as threatening through the tone of the narrator’s voice which is fearful, suggesting doom and foreboding. The programme confirms that some imams are homophobic and chauvinistic but these attitudes were quite common in British society only fifty years ago and are still held by some, so the distance the programme creates between mainstream British society and Islamic extremism is unjustified. This problematisation of imported culture and immigrants is a long-standing feature of popular culture. Since the end of the Cold War and the development of multiculturalist policies, and particularly since 2001, Islamic and Arabian culture has been consistently problematised in the mainstream press (Poole 2002, Poole and Richardson 2006). Domestically and internationally the perception of threat has become fixated on Islamism and the south Asian region (Brown 2006), with Muslims becoming the object of a paranoid and suspicious gaze.

The hidden camera is of course one of the conventions of investigative journalism regardless of the subject matter, used to get under the false surface of self-promoting or deceptive self-representation. The belief that, if one cannot be seen observing, then the subject will act ‘naturally’ and authentically, as if they were not being watched, is the premise of the use of hidden cameras. Hidden filming implies that the true character of the group is secret or inaccessible by other means. Through secret filming the investigator replicates the perceived false appearance of the other to get to the truth of the other’s character. This technique produces a paranoid object relationship because of the suspicion and distrust of the subject which it implies. Suspicion of the subject as threatening is reified as it is produced through the filming technique. The use of a caption, ‘Secret filming’ emphasises the perceived risk involved in this kind of filming, generating tension, excitement and apprehension. The camera view is blurred, obscured or unlevel, at a fixed distance with a central subject, and
unsteady and shaky in movement. This partial obscurity conveys the meaning that something hidden is being revealed whilst characterising what is being shown as concealed. This is important because the hidden camera is considered to provide indisputable evidence, regardless of how the choice to film in this way frames the subject in a particular relationship to the viewer. This rhetoric of revelation and truthfulness legitimates the paranoid frame of suspicion which determines the use of the hidden camera.

The audience is watching part of a highly differentiated group from within itself, but at a distance because of the hidden engagement of the reporter. This deception creates a non-dialogic, distanced relationship between the audience and the programme’s subjects because, by posing as a member of the group, the cameraman’s agency and identity is hidden; so he is not addressed as someone different or actively observing. The point here is that the relationship between the watcher and the subject is concealed by the method of filming so that the subject is othered, denying the existence of a shared cultural context in which to understand the subject. At the same time the hidden camera materialises the paranoid phantasy of being *inside* the persecutory other (Klein 1975 [1946]), creating fear and excitement about the surrounding potential danger. The hidden camera produces this perspective and a boundary marked by being inside the other, inside the mosque, but separate from it because of the absence of a dialogue. The choice of this format prohibits dialogue with others already considered dangerous. Contrast this with *The Mosque*, (BBC, 2001) made before the attacks in USA in 2001. In this documentary, a standard camera follows three different members of the mosque: its secretary, a sharia law advisor and the head of the mosque as they go about their daily routines. They describe their work and answer the cameraman/interviewer’s questions., creating a dialogic relationship with the subjects in the programme.

There is doubtlessly a certain pleasurable form of voyeuristic excitement and danger produced by this type of programme. It clearly positions the audience via the camera operator and direction in a position of anonymous surveillance of a subject represented as dangerous. The audience is positioned as the ‘citizen-spy’ (Bratich 2006: 500), through the camerawork concealing and revealing, thereby representing the Islamist as dangerous. The ‘engagement’ the programme attempts to make is based on an unconscious projection of malevolence which others the subject whilst at the same time creating excitement for the viewer because of its perceived dangerousness. This exciting but abhorrent contradiction is characteristic of
the paranoid coping technique (Fairbairn 1952, Grotstein 1994). The effectiveness of the representation is based on this repellent-exciting contradiction. This is produced through a combination of the secrecy of the camera and the statements made by the imams. In stark contrast to the absence of the camera bearer, the edit and subtitles highlight statements of violent action expressed by different imams, which in combination with the narration represents Islamic culture as homophobic, chauvinist and therefore dangerous, addressing the majority of audiences who are not and so providing an identification with potential victimhood and malevolence. Subjectivity is represented in simplistic, polarised and reductive terms through these statements. Rather than revealing anything real the secret camera surveillance method is used to produce revelry in British tabloid folk devil culture. This reinforces the simplistic association of extremist Islam with fear, validating a paranoid perspective.

Conclusion

The television programmes analyzed here exhibit the socially constructed anxieties characteristic of post-Cold War Anglo-American culture. The challenge is in sufficiently elucidating the link between detailed audio-visual analysis of popular television and the critical political context of which they form a part. I would like to return to the idea of a crisis of meaning and subjectivity and how these programmes and others give expression to this.

We can see from these programmes that the paranoid style produces clear and unequivocal subject positions of victim, persecutor and protector, with suspicion and fear as their fabric. Using melodrama, highly emotionalised and intimate engagements with characters through music, tone of voice, camerawork and lighting, and the aesthetics of mise-en-scène, are often employed to construct paranoid narratives which provide fearful/exciting entertainment and the relief of a clear distinction between ‘us and them’. Uncertainty about the self and its knowledge of the world takes the form of persecutory anxieties and suspicions directed towards others. In the objectification of the belief in malevolence, subjects are represented in a Manichean fashion with no tolerance for complexity or ambivalence, as was illustrated by Spooks/MI-5. The fears and anxieties that are conveyed in these representations – fears of extremism, suspicion of hidden malevolence, fear of being trapped inside the malevolent other and identity anxiety – all involve the projection, audio-visually and verbally, of
malevolent subjectivity. In *David Kelly: The Conspiracy Files* attempts are made at providing proofs to support these projections.

These representations and their concerns suggest a popular cultural coping strategy, giving symptomatic expression to the political crisis of meaning and subjectivity through conspiratorial and persecutory narratives. This is because these programmes seem to be responding to a sense of uncertainty and lack of knowledge about who and what people are. In all three programmes featured here, not knowing and seeking to know more, visually represented as concealment-revelation, is central to the plot. This search for knowledge is, however, driven by a suspicious belief in malevolence. Both melodrama and conspiracy theories have grown in use and popularity since the end of the Cold War, suggesting that they are the cultural forms giving expression to this crisis. Both these forms have a paranoid structure and address the problems of knowledge and uncertainty by providing clear positions of identification that validate suspicion and fear. The crisis of meaning and subjectivity is evident, I suggest, in the focus on active agency as malevolent and other whilst the passive identity of the victim is the position from where this world is witnessed and experienced.

The problem with paranoid conceptions of subjectivity is that they only portray people as malevolent when they are active and only positively when they are vulnerable, fearful and passive. Where are the positive and active subjectivities? Why are all the cult figures of recent television culture anti-heroes, compromised by addictive and neurotic defence mechanisms - Don Draper, Dexter and Tony Soprano? Where are the confident and proud promoters of the ‘war on terror’ and where are their opponents? Over the last decade we have all witnessed the alacrity with which responsibility and blame are apportioned and projected onto others and how responsibility is disavowed and denied in a string of conspiracy theories and inquiries – two forms which have more in common than we would ordinarily think, given that they are often represented as in opposition to one another.

How can a constructive critique of the paranoid style be made that leads to a progressive opposition to the trend of securitisation in politics? I think the key focus needs to be reclaiming political agency as positive whilst revealing the affective dynamics of risk aversion and fear. Risk aversion and subjective emotional experience have only come to political and cultural dominance because they resonate in the absence of meaningful politics. Revealing the dynamic structure of risk aversion and securitisation in political discourse as
well as popular culture is the necessary critical task. If engagement and identification are successfully achieved at the level of individuated emotions then critical public debate is entirely bypassed and important arguments about the diminishing of political agency and the positive potential of it will not be heard. Re-routing this bypass into critical, open-minded public debate is the political task.

Notes

1 Excerpts of this chapter were published in Free Associations, No. 62, July 2011.
2 Whilst providing a critical analysis of popular television culture and seeking to highlight that in this sense the narratives analysed are ‘paranoid’ I am not using the term to marginalise, de-value or ‘other’ these narratives. I am using ‘paranoid’ as an analytical concept to develop a deeper understanding of televisual representation. In psychoanalytical literature the term is not pejorative but refers to a process of relational identity formation and communication.