Locating the 'radical' in *Shoot the Messenger*

Sarita Malik, Sociology/Communications, Brunel University UK

Revised: July 2012

BIONOTE:

Sarita Malik lectures in the Department of Sociology and Communications at Brunel University, United Kingdom and is Chair of the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association Race Network. She is the author of *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (Sage). Her research interests include cultural diversity and public service broadcasting, reality TV and discourses of equality, and black and Asian British cinema. She is currently working on an AHRC-funded project in partnership with the British Film Institute exploring the relationship between Diasporic communities and film.

Contact Details:

Dr Sarita Malik

Lecturer, Media and Communications

Department of Sociology and Communications

Brunel University,

School of Social Sciences

sarita.malik@brunel.ac.uk

(01895) 266874

Locating the 'radical' in *Shoot the Messenger*

Abstract

The 2006 BBC drama, *Shoot the Messenger,* is based on the psychological journey of a Black schoolteacher, Joe Pascale, accused of assaulting a Black male pupil. The allegation serves as the trigger for Joe's mental breakdown which is articulated, through Joe's first person narration, as a vindictive loathing of Black people. In turn, a range of common stereotypical characterisations and discourses based on a Black culture of hypocrisy, blame and entitlement are presented. The text is therefore laid wide open for a critique of its neo-conservatism and hegemonic narratives of black Britishness. However, the drama's presentation of Black mental illness, as illustrated by Joe's schizophrenia, suggests that *Shoot the Messenger* can also be interpreted as a dramatic critique of social inequality and the destabilising effects of living with ethnicised social categories. Through an analysis of issues of representation, the article reclaims this controversial text as a radical drama and examines its implications for and within a critical cultural politics of 'race' and representation. The article argues that *Shoot the Messenger's* stylistic innovations, engagement with mental health issues and break from normative representations of 'the Black experience' support its radical credentials.

Keywords: radical, drama, BBC, black, community, representation, stereotypes, authorship, realism

Introduction

> *Shoot the Messenger* is a reflection of debates which are ongoing within the black
> community, and questions some of the stuff that black communities tell
> themselves and their children. It's like a fable.
>
> (Sharon Foster, writer, *Shoot the Messenger*, BBC Website, 2006)

Shoot the Messenger (BBC2, 30 August 2006) was heavily promoted by the BBC as
being both 'bold' and 'thought-provoking' (Jane Tranter, BBC Controller of Drama
Commissioning, quoted in BBC Website, 2006). The one-off 90 minute BBC Drama
production is based on the psychological journey of a Black[1] schoolteacher, Joe Pascale
(played by David Oyelowo). Joe is accused of assaulting a Black male pupil, resulting in a
mental breakdown that materialises through a mounting loathing of Black people. Joe's
piercing gaze and haunting to-camera iteration, 'everything bad that has ever happened to
me has involved a black person' invites the viewer to participate both in 'debates which
are ongoing within the black community' and in a meta-discourse around the processes of
racialisation presented in the text. For Joe, Black (and specifically African-Caribbean)
people start to carry negative significance and the extremely caricatured Black characters
he encounters form the evidence for his (self) hatred. These characters range from slack
single mothers to domineering matriarchs and from manipulative community leaders to
gangland killers. Joe later observes, 'We (Black men) go to prison and mental
institutions', highlighting a particular thematic concern in the text around Black
masculinity. Whether Joe is simply commenting on the destiny of Black men (and thus an
acceptance of a stereotype containing 'a grain of truth') or rather on structural inequalities
that might lead to such prospects is never entirely clear for the viewer. Indeed, *Shoot the
Messenger* (henceforth *STM)* deliberately occupies a politically ambivalent space and the

audience, until the very end, is left to negotiate the ideological orientations of the text.

If *STM* refuses to be pinned down to any obvious moral position, so it does to any clear-cut point of emotional identification. Joe is our lead protagonist and, crucially, the story is delivered through first-person narration and intermittent direct address to camera. At times this is employed as a technique for empathy with Joe occupying the emotional centre. But Joe's mental fragility and sometimes contradictory politics also render him an unstable character and, in fact, an 'unreliable narrator' (see Riggan 1981) for audience identification. There is always a tension therefore between the psychological realism of Joe's character and his wavering narrative authority. Joe's disdain for Black people, whilst intense in its delivery, also reveals flashes, at least tangentially, of compassion, connection and recognition. For Joe, Black people are a contaminative force in British society but he also refers to 'them' as 'we'. Through his romantic relationship with Heather (Nikki Amuka Bird), a compassionate and politically-conscious Black woman, Joe demonstrates both his ordinariness and humanity confiding in her at one point, 'I feel depressed looking at the state of our lives…being Black feels like a curse'.

The Black characters in *STM,* ranging from the God-fearing matriarch Mabel (Jay Byrd), to the various insolent young black people Joe encounters (both as a school-teacher and later job advisor) are mainly drawn as tabloid types. They are represented as feckless and amoral or as self-seeking with a sense of entitlement; the latter depicted in a climactic scene in which a group of local people at a Community Centre party blame the legacy of slavery for any current social disadvantage experienced by Black people. Importantly, when we consider the context in which the television drama was received, these various racialised characterisations tap into Blairite neoliberal discourses that prevailed at the time of *STM's* making and airing. Here, so-called 'political correctness' was derided, criminality was attributed to Black culture (see Wintour and Dodd 2007) and a growing

'blame culture' in British society was being denounced (see Harper 2008).[2] In these ways, the text invites a critique of the drama's neo-conservatism and hegemonic narratives of black Britishness.

How we then square this with my claim that *STM* can also be regarded as radical, is the basis of the dilemma explored here. Against the backdrop both of multicultural urbanism and a depoliticised multiculturalism since the 2000s, we have seen a growing preoccupation with individualised and personal screen dramas. Yet *STM* openly (but obscurely) addresses a range of sociological concerns around social identity, inequality and difference with a focus on Black racial politics. Through Joe's schizophrenia, the important but rarely discussed issue of cultural representations of race and mental disorder is raised. Stylistically, *STM's* non-realist techniques, non-linear form and out-and-out constructedness depart from the traditional modes of social realism that have prevailed in Black British television drama. *STM* was a widely anticipated production and remains a rare example of a single television play – and, moreover, has an almost totally Black cast. Also, *STM* is written and produced by two Black women; Sharon Foster[3] and Ngozi Onwurah respectively. (Onwurah is the writer and director of the also controversial *Welcome to the Terrordome*, 1995.) Screened in a 9pm slot, 'when television time is most likely to become special time' (Caughie 2010: 420), the production attracted significant publicity before and after its airing. It was widely acclaimed at the 2006 Tribeca Film Festival and Foster received the prestigious Dennis Potter Screenwriting Award in 2006 and BAFTA's Breakthrough Talent Award in 2007. All of this, as I will go on to discuss, positions *STM* as radical British small screen drama. Surprisingly, the production remains under-discussed in academic literature, perhaps precisely because of its challenging formal properties and obscure ideological orientations which make its message and meaning especially tricky for critics to identify.[4]

Predictably, given its controversial conceptual framework and stock characters, *STM* has however elicited diverse and powerful responses from critics and viewers. These have primarily been based around issues of stereotyping, reception and authorship. With regards to stereotyping, for the African media campaign group, Ligali, this is a 'flagship programme for racism' and, 'one of the most racist, demeaning and misrepresentative films ever broadcast and commissioned by the BBC' (cited in Mailonline, 20 August 2006). There is further debate around reception and whether such 'demeaning' representations simply re-produce dominant readings of Blackness or essentially make possible, as Foster claims, important 'debates which are ongoing in the black community'. That these representations occur and have been institutionally endorsed (through commissioning and awards) in the very public domain of BBC peak time drama apparently intensifies concerns about how these readings are negotiated by different (racial) audiences. The matter of authorship is also entwined with these questions of stereotyping and reception. For the *Guardian's* best-known Black columnist Joseph Harker, broader context is unnecessary because, 'That the play is professionally written, well directed, and well acted by a predominantly Black cast doesn't come close to neutralising its relentlessly negative message,' (Harker 2006). The major point of contention for this discussion is whether a drama that reifies certain well-established (not least by other parts of the British media) stereotypes of Black British life can also be interpreted as transgressive. Put simply, can a radical drama conform in some ways and subvert in others? *STM* is thus immersed in a critical cultural politics of how meanings around Black British representation are made on the small screen.

I want to propose that the major responses to *STM* have neglected its more complex nuances that can help us understand the process of racialisation in postcolonial settings. My reading suggests that, through its representation of mental illness, *STM* can in

fact be interpreted as a radical critique of social inequality and the destructive effects of living with ethnicised social categories. I therefore want to nominate *STM* as a fascinating case study in the respective screen histories of Black drama[5] and radical drama in Britain. Through critical cultural and textual analysis but with a focus on questions of authorship, form, themes and institutional context, this article aims to account for some of the discursive concerns and responses outlined but also offer an alternative reading of the text. I want to start by a broader contextualisation of the drama genre in its treatment of 'race' and reference an earlier BBC single play *Fable* (BBC1, 1965) written by the White playwright, John Hopkins. After setting up this relationship with *Fable*, the article will continue with a more focused discussion of *STM*. The aim is always to locate the 'radical' in *STM* and consider its implications for and within a critical politics of 'race' and representation.

Drama as radical space

Television functions as a privileged site in translating and organizing the imagined needs and definitions of the nation. These imagined needs and definitions – with the emphasis on translation – are especially important in relation to drama; because it is here that we can speak more unequivocally about 'representation' rather than 'reflection'. Compared to other television genres, the question of social construction (for example how the nation and its various communities are conceived) becomes especially salient with drama. In broad terms, there is no pre-given reality to reproduce in dramatic form, only a set of choices to make about whom, how and what to represent. This offers some exciting possibilities of what 'race' and racial difference – marked in this discussion by 'blackness' – are made to signify; because we know that race (and ethnicity) are also

essentially social and political constructions and ontologically unstable categories (Alexander 2006). Stuart Hall's work foregrounds the role of culture and cultural processes in determining how race is discursively constructed, so that 'race' is a 'floating signifier' whose meaning is never fixed (Hall 1997). So our question, if we take 'race' as an 'open political category' (Gilroy 1987/2002: 36), albeit with powers of fixity within the politics of the state, is what is *STM* saying about race through its representations?

As well a potential space where 'racial typing' can be challenged, drama has also been a significant genre for debates around cultural representation (for example, regarding multicultural content, integrated casting, narrative diversity and minority access). The history of black British drama has been well-documented (if still marginalised in British television studies) in, for example, the work of Pines (1992) and Malik (2002). Rather than restate a summative account of the academic work in this area, I want to pay particular attention to *Fable* because it serves as a useful example of an early 'race drama' in which the ambivalent openness of the text mobilises a range of interpretations.

When the BBC's second channel began in 1964, it became a critical outlet for new single drama slots such as *Theatre 625* (BBC2, 1964-68) and *The Wednesday Play* (BBC2, 1964-70). Many of the single plays kept within the prevailing discourses of ethical humanism (addressing moral issues such as homelessness, single mothers, race relations and abortion), but also matched the criteria of topical, populist and hard-hitting scheduling under Hugh Carleton-Greene's management. Although these 'radical' dramas (very few of which were interested in the Black presence or themes) emerged within a BBC environment that was still organised around notions of objectivity established by the Royal Charter and a conservative Board of Governors, many of them did inadvertently champion the need for, or critique the arbitrariness of, specific social and political legislation.

Out of this context emerged Hopkins' *Fable* (part of *The Wednesday Play* series). Like *STM, Fable* adopted a non-realist approach making a break from the governing hallmark of social realism that has prevailed in 'ethnic' drama representations. Hopkins had written a dramatic episode of *Z Cars, A Place of Safety,* focusing on police racism in the previous year, demonstrating his critical concern with the dominant social order and institutional discrimination. Although *Fable* made oblique reference to continuing repressive legislation in South Africa and the establishment of Bantustans by the South African government, it was set in a fantasy Britain where the balance of apartheid was reversed, so that Blacks held political power and Whites were subjugated; Blacks were the master-majority and Whites the slave-minority. In envisaging a world in which the dominant racial power relations were transposed, *Fable* took the viewers on an imaginative voyage (an entirely illusory scenario), in order to be reminded that racial discrimination is based on social, conceptual differentiations that manifest themselves in a political sense. For the starring Black actress, Carmen Munroe, 'it was actually very frightening...because suddenly you were being asked to perform the sort of acts that were performed against you in real life' (quoted in Pines 1992: 58).

At a time when Black characters were notable for their absence in 'serious' television drama and with Whiteness posed as a social norm in terms of address, content and looking relations, *Fable* unsettled otherwise taken-for-granted ideas of what Black and White ethnicities constitute (for example, in terms of casting - the murderers, pimps and prostitutes were White here). In this sense, it served as a unique early illustration of television's power in being able to reconceptualise the typical ways of representing race and race relations (through shifts in tone, format and characterisation). Like *STM*, *Fable* elicited a set of strong and mixed responses (BBC Audience Research Report, WAC Ref: T5/1,348 -*Fable*, 12.2.65). Despite Hopkins' anti-racist agenda, for some White British

viewers the image of themselves on screen as subservient, triggered fear not compassion. This was intensified at the time by broader anti-immigration sentiment, legislation and panic-merchants such as Enoch Powell. Thomas Baptiste, who appeared in *Fable* as Mark Fellows (a liberal academic who was part of 'the movement' which did not believe in the oppression of White people), received a letter after the broadcast, warning, 'How dare you appear on our television screens, even as a friend or a liberal. Get back to your country! Hideous ape!' (Quoted in Pines, 1992: 67.)

For Graham Murdock, in his discussion of radical drama and radical theatre, radical drama is a contestable term but one which might be identified by certain characteristics. This includes a critical interpretation of the present social order[6], an exposition of the gap between 'ideological promise and institutional performance', an investigation of social change and transformation and finally, a challenge to conventional theatre practices and institutions (Murdock 1980: 151). The relevance of *Fable* is that, like *STM*, I consider it as an obscure and multi-layered radical treatment and 'critical interpretation of the present social order'. In *Fable* we are offered a bold critique of prevailing racialised power relations and structures. In *STM,* and in spite of its seemingly hegemonic impulse, we are offered a critique of state inequalities and structural racism.

Fable and *STM*, aired over forty years apart, fictionalise the impact that ethnic social identities can have on our thinking in earlier and later postcolonial contexts respectively. Both accomplish an innovative treatment of realism and, partially through this, provoke real debate amongst their respective audiences. Put crudely, where the White-authored *Fable* unsettles White audience expectations of Black characterisation, *STM* sets a challenge for Black audiences, particularly for a drama authored by a Black writer. In both productions we find evidence of the playwrights' sociological imagination at work and a provocative mode of address that (by design) served to polarise viewers by

asking them to negotiate the particular racial message or 'fable' in the text. I will now present a closer textual reading of the useful provocation provided by *STM*.

Under the Skin of *Shoot the Messenger*: **A Textual Interpretation**

Originally titled *Fuck Black People*! the re-titled *STM* is a verifiably risky enterprise and pertains to many of the generic qualities we can associate with Murdock's account of radical drama. As noted, the main responses to *STM* are centred on its stereotypical representations, authorship and reception. However, my reading suggests that these stereotypical representations are entirely necessary in order to demonstrate the potential impact of structural racism on our cognitive state. Joe's mental degenerative condition materialises through his preoccupation with his own racial identity, marked simultaneously by recognition, shame and dis-identification. These personal anxieties manifest as a public retreat from what he perceives Blackness to constitute and thus the extreme representations are always filtered through his racialised consciousness. Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* suggests that, 'The Negro makes himself inferior. But the truth is that he is made inferior' (Fanon 1952: 115). This idea is pertinent because it chimes with what Joe considers society to have 'done' to Black people; his own experience of feeling undermined and 'exhausted' by his blackness is discussed openly with his girlfriend, Heather.

I want to offer an alternative textual reading that resists an over dependence on stereotyping theory or on questions of authorship (or even what the makers claim as their intention), for one which considers the role of power and social structures in shaping racialised categories and identities -- and upon which our lead character has to draw. Recent work on the area of social divisions and mental health has noted the significance of research that foregrounds the psychic consequences of ethnic categorisations (Carter

and Fenton 2011) rather than ethnicity itself. Emphasis is also placed on sociological processes that lead to the embodiment of social categories and the possible effects this has on the mental condition of those that are racially categorised by an authoritarian state. I want to suggest that *STM* can be read as a critique of social inequality and the destabilising impact of living with ethnicised social categories (as evidenced in the disproportionately highly represented in mental health units[7] (Keating and Robertson 2004)). Our anti-hero is entirely illustrative of such effects.

Joe opts for teaching over computer programming because it is, 'what I am meant to be doing…what I was put on this earth to do'. Our troubled protagonist is both conscious of his racial identity and wider racial inequalities from the outset. An early scene jump cuts to Joe recounting different headlines, 'Black Boys Failing', 'Gun Crime Goes up Again', 'Another Week, Another Death'. He describes becoming a teacher in this social context as 'like a call to arms'. The scene cuts to a local council education meeting where racial tensions proliferate around discussions of 'a racist conspiracy against black boys' and tabloid reports of Black under-achievement are 'yet another attempt to make the black community look bad.' We are privy to Joe's interpretation of the proceedings through the diegetic and non-diegetic narration; whilst critical of this blame culture lacking solutions, he also steps up to the mark and opts to be a Black role model. He registers his social significance (as a middle-class Black man) for working-class Black boys with limited choices beyond, it is said, self-destructive gang culture or glorification on the sports field. As a Black male teacher in a 'failing', predominantly Black High School, Joe is positioned as an empathetic character with a moral social purpose but is also imbued with a weight of expectation from the 'Black community' about the value of his pedagogic practice given the lack of Black male role models available. Like his creators (Foster and Onwurah) he utterly rejects such a representational burden. As his

disposition is shown to wane, so too is his authority as our narrator.

There is a murky element to Joe's apparently good intentions and he aims to 'force these boys to learn' through a self-devised system of 'Enforced Education' including detention plans; a hint perhaps at his already unhinged condition. A nonchalant Black male Year Nine student, Germal Forest (Charles Mnene) emerges as Joe's nemesis, accusing him of assault and becoming the catalyst for Joe's (and eventually his own) undoing. Whilst we start to get a social account of institutional racism in how the media, school and legal system are later shown to handle the Joe vs. Germal case, what follows is a strong critique and caricature of 'the Black community' articulated through Joe's intensifyingly degenerative state. The Black media, the baying publics outside the court and local councillors are each shown to turn against Joe, and *his* ensuing critique becomes systematically cruel. Mirroring the opening credit sequence in which 'Fuck Teachers' was written on the school wall by multiracial youth, we now see a devastated Joe walking away with the school wall splayed in red with the words 'Fuck Black people' in view. Within the text now, prevailing racialised power structures are circumscribed to the Black community and presented as a range of essentialist discourses and characterisations based on a Black culture of hypocrisy, blame politics and a sense of entitlement. For Joe now, all Black people are the same. Black community leaders exploit 'their' communities for their own agendas, violence is intra-ethnic and Black single mothers and absent Black fathers are the norm. Joe's explicit positioning as our narrator from the first scene prior to the opening credit sequence sees Joe in medium close-up telling us how Black people are to blame for his misfortune. Importantly, these representations and perceptions of Blackness are always filtered through Joe's disorientated paranoia; whilst listening to Miles Davies, even the jazz music is overlaid with the word 'traitor' and previous accusations of him as a 'house nigger' and 'a Klu Klux Klan man with a white face'

reverberate in his mind. Joe is now conscious of himself only through how he thinks he is perceived. W.E.B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) describes this idea, the 'peculiar sensation' of what he terms, 'double consciousness':

> this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body … (DuBois 1989: 3)

When the figurative Black people Joe encounters turn their back on him, we see how he deliberately and increasingly alienates himself from society and the 'warring ideals' come to possess Joe. The tense mood music is overlaid with the 'everything bad that has ever happened to me…' linguistic motif and the mise en scène (dim lighting in a disordered room) reflects the change in atmosphere. Unable to pay the rent and looking unkempt, Joe starts to live a life between cardboard city, psychiatric institutions and hostels. Even whilst in the psychiatric ward he is fixated with Black people and asks to be moved to a ward with White people because, 'I just don't do well around them' (Black people). Whilst on the streets he refuses charitable donations from Black passers-by. His 'twoness', to use DuBois' term, is presented here as a schizophrenic condition marked by an acute paranoia and reversal of more commonplace articulations of extreme (far-right White) racism. The surreal appearance of a congregation of church Evangelists emerges from the River Thames and he confides, 'They're not giving up. The Black people. They always find me'.

There is a particularly dark segment in which Joe witnesses a 'Black on Black' gun killing through flashbacks overlaid with Jay Z's pessimistic rap anthem *99 Problems.*

When he sees Mabel, an elderly black woman struggling with bags in the heavy rain he offers helps but then runs away when she invites him in. He later accepts Mabel's compassion and, in a rather surreal turn of events, spends Christmas with her and her family – but also talks himself (and us, by means of direct rhetorical questioning to camera) into the idea that she is trying to kill him. Mabel's family includes her daughter, Sherlene, and four grandchildren with four different fathers. Joe, in a condescension as much about class as race, ridicules their ascribed names and spellings, 'Kaylon' and 'Shanequa' and pours scorn on Sherlene who, 'probably gave more thought to their names than who should father them'. Mabel represents in-community racism when she says, 'black people too t'ief', and 'anything too Black is no good…because we're cursed'. A later scene in a wig shop introduces the issue of Black beauty and style and an account of a politics of Black aesthetics that can be related to Eurocentric ideals of beauty. We later see the effects of such beauty ideals on Heather, who is deemed ugly by the Black community because of her dark skin and knotty hair. The psychological-social dimension of racial categories and coding is always the underlying idea in the text.

Fanon uses psychoanalytic theory to explicate how feelings of dependency and inferiority can be engendered in the mind of the Black subject who experiences the 'White world' (Fanon 1952). Imitative behaviour, Fanon argues, is even more marked in upwardly mobile and educated Black people (such as Joe) who can afford to acquire status symbols. The questioning of Joe's authenticity as a 'Black man' is allegorized through his paranoid schizophrenia and inner voice to which we are privy. After being suspended, Joe recounts the head-teacher's words whilst looking at his own gloomy reflection in the mirror, indicating the dualistic character of his racialised identity, accentuated now by his loss of social capital. The close-up on the black and white chess pieces he plays with again symbolise the racial power struggles that consume him (and

particularly the issue of slavery for which he later uses the metaphor of chess). Joe's schizophrenia is mirrored stylistically in the making of the text. Within the text, he sits both on the inside and outside of the drama – he is our central protagonist 'inside' the production but his to-camera delivery also suggests his distance from it. Whilst the *loci* of Joe's paranoia are the Black community, his ethnicity (and indeed narrative authority) is drawn as unstable and always in a state of negotiation because it is filtered through the experience of mental illness.

Amidst this bleak version of denigrated social life that Joe experiences, some redemption is offered by Mabel, by the church and later by Heather. Largely thanks to Heather, the closing scenes see Joe accumulating some social capital including employment in a Job Centre where, in a reversal of fortune, he meets a regretful and troubled Germal. In fact, an oblique critique of the impact on structural racism is apparent here; without Joe's pedagogic guidance following his suspension, Germal has failed like so many of his Black male peers – the political case being made here for more social diversity in education roles. But it is the theme of slavery that constantly bubbles beneath the narrative surface with numerous references to either its melancholic effects or the need to relegate it to the past. In a climactic scene, Joe suggests at the Community Centre party that we should 'Get over slavery' and eventually an out-loud 'Fuck Black people'. This leads to his break up with an outraged Heather but also acts as a form of catharsis for Joe. Now working in the psychiatric hospital where he had previously spent two months, he discovers that Germal (with police intervention) has been admitted; signalling his depressing prophecy of the pervasiveness of mental disorder in the Black community. Through a mutual apology first from Germal to Joe and then *vice versa*, we are offered a sense of reinstated calm and bonding capital between these two Black men. Joe's significant apology to Germal for letting him down and for not recognising the fear within

is a big admission and Joe resumes his teacher role, wins his appeal against suspension and reunites with Heather. In this improved mental state, dressed smartly in a suit, the political ambiguities within the text still linger and Joe suggests to us that this is far from the 'happy ending' required by audiences of (this) narrative drama. With a direct provocation to the camera – and in turn to the audience who are likely to have taken offence to 'his' script – Joe calmly states, 'it's not the end is it? I'm not taking back *everything* I said. You didn't like the way I said it? So shoot me.'

Problems in the text

One of the struggles within *STM* and which has led to the offence rightly prophesised by Joe in this closing scene, is the subtlety of its critique particularly set against the gaudy stereotypes at hand. Joe's positioning of Black people as *the* problem, threatens to undermine any potentially transgressive position. But actually it is always the White-led prejudice within state institutions (for example the school, legal system, press, health system) that is the implicit underlying agenda and what arguably provokes Joe's mental illness. On the surface though, any hope of transformation is left with the Black characters themselves, regardless of broader socio-political circumstances. It is precisely through the marginalisation of Whiteness in the text that a depressing prediction of the future metropolitan space emerges. In spite of the way that it is first set up to deal with these issues, through the stylistic techniques employed (flashbacks, non-linear narrative, surreal encounters), the drama constructs an abstract view of the social structures that affect urban psychosis. The drama is not, as Phillip Drummond highlights, anchored in any identifiable geographical space and is thus abstracted from the social world (Drummond 2007). In this sense, we get an over dramatisation and stylisation that refuses to obviously

connect Joe's interpretation of Blackness with 'real' structural issues. So for example, the shooting script of the production[8] tells us that it is set in an 'inner city' space but there are few visual signifiers in the production that demonstrate this and which help us ground the story in relation to empirical reality.

Furthermore, the emotional and psychological realism – even Joe is drawn as an unsympathetic character – is undercut by its departure from realism. Comic asides, direct to-camera address, the use of ironic music (for example *Rule Britannia* in the White-led school) and flashbacks are techniques that work against a realistic reading of the text as socially conscious drama. The mediating effects of the screen are laid bare through the device of direct address. The shooting script tells us that Joe 'catches us looking at him'. From the outset, Joe provokes us into a response about the racialised politics under scrutiny here; inadvertently asking us to make a judgment about him and his dis-identification as a Black man. Joe teases us with his knowing looks to camera (more formally associated with the comedy genre) and whispers, 'I know what you're thinking', and appears to address us personally by inviting us to question our own racialised politics. Of course, contemporary audiences are now accustomed to this particular mode of direct address because of its prevalence in 'hybrid' forms such as docu-soaps and mockumentaries (such as *The Office*, BBC, 2001-2003). Whilst not a particularly radical narrative convention today, the point of significance is that through direct address we are made aware of how we are reflected and implicated in the meanings of the text that are produced.

Ien Ang (1985) draws the distinction between connotative and denotative levels of identification experienced by audiences in their viewing of soap opera; where they might find aspects realistic on a connotative level in spite of the unrealistic denotative basis of the form. We are aware of the mediating (denotative) effects but are also invited to

recognise – through the mobilisation of common stereotypes – the connotations of Blackness presented here. Adding to the implausibility is Joe's self-narration and therefore our awareness of his utter subjectivity. Whilst direct address can indicate persuasive intentions (Argyle 1975: 161) – and this is certainly Joe's ploy here – the effect of artifice instead undermines Joe's authority. Baggaley, in his work on the psychology of the television image agrees that the 'unusual intensity' of the speaker's eye-contact with the viewer can indeed weaken, rather than heighten, the speaker's credibility (Baggaley, 1980: 30). These various abstractions in the text are how *STM* draws attention to its own constructedness and, in so doing, requires us to actively negotiate (and certainly not passively accept) the stereotypes that are presented. Assembled as an open text, it is impossible to attempt a textually deterministic view of *STM* as fixing audiences in any particular way also because the viewer is unanchored in any one emotional reality. The ambiguous political lens can be regarded as both a strength and weakness, because it produces an anxiety within the text that both upholds and muddles its radical potential.

Psychological realism is also undermined by the alterations in generic conventions from drama to comedy. Joe's tone slips from wryness to exasperation and many of his observations about Black social life (delivered as witty asides to camera) seem better suited to the comedic and specifically ethnic comedy form; a genre that that has always been more at ease with presenting racialised stereotypes. When Reece, a Black student tells him he is unable to carry out detention because he has football practice, Joe whispers to us 'We've got enough black footballers...and Thierry Henry he ain't.' In the midst of a heated discussion about slavery and any positive effects he says, 'At least they took us somewhere sunny!'

Aspects of the narrative development also lack dramatic coherence. Joe slips in and out of his mental breakdown and his brief foray into church life lacks credibility. His

relationship with Heather seems antithetical to his repugnance of Black people, especially because it starts at the height of his inner chaos. Stephen Harper, in his review of *STM*, rightly draws attention to the film's failure to address the intersections of class and race and also, for inviting audiences to resolve the debates it raises whilst refusing to clearly 'disavow Joe's racial and class hatred' (Harper 2008). Drummond suggests that such ambiguity can also be seen as radical because it deliberately challenges the audiences' identifications with the camera and the character (Drummond 2007).

The upshot is that viewers are left disorientated and devoid of any particular emotional position to which we are safely directed, especially in the hands of Joe. William Riggan in his typology of the 'unreliable narrator' identifies 'the madman' as a first-person narrator whose fallibility as a spokesperson is shaped by their mental illness (Riggan 1981). In the crudest sense, Joe can be considered a 'madman' and his authority is therefore undermined. To this extent, the criticisms of the drama as 'racist', inevitably influenced by a legacy of representational politics and marginalisation, do not treat the drama on its own terms or consider the destabilised position from which our first-person narrator (or messenger) speaks. It is Joe's mental illness that is the real story here and yet there is a limited engagement with his psychological profile in the popular critical responses (although this is acknowledged in academic discussion, see Harper 2008 and Cross 2010). What is certain is that the world that is crafted is entirely based on Joe's interpretation. It is not, as the main evaluations of the production suggest, a statement (from Foster) about what Black people constitute *per se* or an attempt at literal truth.

Shoot the Messenger in context

What I have been suggesting is that *STM's* devices of unstable narration, irony and

abstraction adds to the difficulty of reading the text as a 'reflection' of reality. This makes especially superfluous the debates around stereotyping by directly challenging the major theoretical impulse of the well-rehearsed 1980s 'burden of representation' debate (Mercer 1990). The 'burden of representation' has commonly been applied to fictional treatments of Black life, highlighting how 'Black cultural representations' are expected to solve all the problems of Black representation at once and match up with a particular version of reality (in line with the values and beliefs of that group) against which all representations can be tested. This impulse has had an important bearing on the terms on which Black screen drama has been received, acclaimed and analysed, typically in relation to the dualistic framework of good and bad, positive and negative. 'Radical-ness' – vis-à-vis these traditional identity politics which aim to 'correct' so-called misrepresentations – has become a dominant trope (but not always achievement) of Black television drama. Paradoxically, the representational impulse at work here has facilitated a revised normative politics around the basis of Black British drama and expectations of the Black writer/producer (for example, as having to align themselves unambiguously with 'the Black community'). In so doing, an essentialising concept of ethnicity has been reconfigured.

It is of course important to recognise the basis of the criticisms based on stereotyping, reception and authorship levelled at *STM*, and to situate these within a historical screen context of marginalisation, racialisation (with race and racism as the prevailing themes) and politicisation (an intellectual reasoning and politicised Blackness). At the same time, these three annotations have generated an ideological politics of expectation hinged around the function and motivations of Black drama and its producers, something we can explicate as a substantial and still apparent representational burden.

With this legacy in mind, *STM* does not provide an easy basis for accepting it as

radical black British drama because on a certain level it does flaunt a politics that fixes the 'crisis of Blackness' within Black communities themselves. *STM* manifestly lays itself open to criticism that it reifies well-versed clichés of Black culture, and that it accordingly capitalises on traditional racialised pathologies which project difference and unassimilability onto the Black subject. In an early discussion, Neal links the Black Arts movement to the Black Power movement and suggests that it is, 'radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community (Neal 1968: 29). *STM* seemingly challenges any such artistic and political affiliations based around community alignment. Through its apparently deliberate provocation, extreme characterisation and ideological positioning which foregrounds the oppressive rather than facilitating character of racial identity, *STM* recklessly disrupts such clear-cut expectations that the Black artist needs to align, not alienate, 'his' community. Foster's production meddles with this idea, and in so doing, also makes the case for a post-structuralist imperative that transcends the 'stereotypes/positive and negative image' rhetoric.

In fact, *STM* endorses that 'typing' has to be recognized as an inevitable and necessary system of representation. As with *Fable*, the basis on which its 'positive' and 'negative' characterisations are constituted are also uncertain (for example, Germal is both a alienated black youth but only with reference to a state that offers limited opportunities, Mabel is a 'good Christian' but herself demonstrates hypocrisy and racism). This is not to suggest that stereotypes can be any easier identified in social realist texts, but *STM's* non-realist aesthetic does obstruct any simple reading of the text.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to very briefly consider the political economic value of *STM* as 'radical

drama' and this in turn as a 'media event' within recent shifting socio-political and institutional terrains. For Roly Keating, the BBC Two Channel Controller under whom the film was commissioned, *STM* is a landmark piece comparable to John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and with the potential to speak to a 'generation of black Britons' (cited in the *Guardian* 2005). [The question of what exactly it is 'saying' is not taken on board.] As audiences for television drama decline, one strategy for broadcasters is to present such 'strongly authored, contemporary dramas,' (Keating, 2006 Edinburgh International television Festival). Notably, Keating's comments also underpin a renewed emphasis (reminiscent of the early single play era out of which *Fable* emerged) on the agency of the writer as author of the single drama production. Thinking contextually, *STM* emerges in a mid 2000s overwhelmed by public debates around 'institutional racism' and 'hideous Whiteness' in the media, which can help make sense of the significance of context for the text (for example in how meanings of it are made based around a wider sense of institutional lack and/or bias). For one viewer, the founder of the independent film production company, riceNpeas (Ishmahil Blagrove Jr), *STM* is evidence of 'black writers who feel they need to assassinate their community to get commissioned' (Blagrove 2006), alluding to broader ideas about ongoing discriminatory institutional contexts.

A review of *STM's* publicity suggests that the controversy of the film was utilised by the BBC as a marketing manoeuvre and also as evidence of its own concern at the time with the issue of impartiality.[9] 'Race rows' are now a prominent theme in mediatised debates, apparent in the sensationalist meta-discourses of race, such as those around 2007's *Celebrity Big Brother* on Channel Four. It is how the question of what 'racism' is – from the football pitch to the talent show – is now played out in the public sphere. For all its potential co-option into this broader expedient agenda, the various interpretations of

STM themselves demonstrate that racism is polysemic, context-bound and experienced in different ways.

Ahead of its television screening, the production was already shrouded with controversy by virtue of an early theatrical screening in a London cinema. It was here that the film first drew intense criticism from some members of the audience for contributing to the problematisation of the black-British community in the British media. Sharon Foster was at the theatrical screening and later stated that she 'loved' the 'pandemonium' which the film had created. To further heighten the controversy, the writer and producer have both publically insisted that *STM* marks a watershed in Black screen representation precisely *because of* the 'authenticity' of its racialised stereotypes. For Foster, the public outrage was 'an authentication of what I had written. It was like real life following drama' (Foster quoted BBC website, 2006). This claim of 'authenticity' from the writer inevitably creates a dilemma for audiences, unsettling the basis on which we validate a text if we register the author's intent, rather than read it on its own terms.

It may be useful in this instance to think about the writer as only one aspect of a broader industrial process that shapes the text (Nelson 1997). This reading recognises *STM's* radical and transformative potential. The drama's ambiguous orientations, stylistic innovations, the critical work it demands of its viewers, and ultimately the heterogeneous interpretations that the production makes possible – essentially through the theme of Black mental illness – all cement its radical credentials.

References

- Ahmed, K. (2002), 'Black writer raps BBC over race bias', *The Observer*, 27 October.

- Alexander, C. (2006), 'Introduction: Mapping the issues', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Special Issue 'Writing Race: Ethnography and Difference'), 29: 3, pp. 397-410.

- Ang, I. (1985), *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination,* London and New York: Methuen.

- Argyle, M. (1975), *Bodily Communication*, London: Methuen.

- Baggaley, J. with M. Ferguson and P. Brooks (1980), *Psychology of the TV Image*, Farnborough: Gower.

- BBC News website (2006) 'Edgy new film tests opinion', 24 August.

- BBC Trust (2007), *From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding impartiality in the 21st century.* BBC Trust.

- BBC website (2006), Shoot the Messenger http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shootthemessenger/ (last accessed 15 May 2012).

- Blagrove Jr. Ishmahil (2006), Shoot the Messenger, Ricenpeas.comhttp://www.ricenpeas.com/docs/letters%20page2.html (last accessed 28 March 2012)

- Carter, B. and S. Fenton (2010), 'Not thinking ethnicity: A critique of the ethnicity paradigm in an over-ethnicised sociology', Journal *for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 40:1, pp. 1-18.

- Caughie, J. (2010), 'Mourning television: the other screen', *Screen* 51: 4, pp. 410-21.

- Cross, S. (2010), *Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and Cultural Representation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Drummond, P. (2007), 'Intercultural Identities in British Film and Television: *Shoot the Messenger* and *Yasmin'*, Paper presented to The Realist Impulse: Contemporary Film-making in Britain conference, St. Anne's College, Oxford. 12 July.

- DuBois, W.E.B. [1903] (1989), *The Souls of Black Folks*, Bantam Books, New York.

- Fanon, F. [1952] (1967), *Black Skin, White Masks,* London: Pluto Press.

- Gilroy, P. [1987] (2002), *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack*, London: Routledge.

- Hall, S. (1997), *Race, The Floating Signifier,* Media Education Foundation.

- Harker, J. (2006), 'Only Guns and Gangsters', the *Guardian*, 4 July.

- Harper, S. (2008), *Shoot the Messenger*. *Scope: an online journal of film and TV studies,* June 11. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/5274198.stm (last accessed 10 May 2012).

- Keating, F. and D. Robertson (2004), 'Fear, black people and mental illness: A vicious circle?' *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 12:5, pp. 439-447.

- Mercer, K. (1990) 'Black Art and the Burden of Representation', *Third Text*, 4: 10, pp. 61-78.

- Murdock, G. (1980), 'Radical Drama, radical theatre', *Media, Culture and Society*, 2, pp.151-168.

- Neal, L. (1968), 'The Black Arts Movement', *The Drama Review: TDR.* 12: 4, Black Theatre, pp. 28-39.

- Nelson, R. (1997), *Television Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change,* London: Macmillan.

- Pines, J. (1992), *Black and White in Colour*, London: BFI.

- Riggan, W. (1981) *Picaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns: The Unreliable First-Person Narrator,* University of Oklahoma Press: Norman.

- Wintour, P. and V. Dodd (2007) 'Blair blames spate of murders on black culture', the *Guardian*, 12 April.

Notes

1 The term 'Black' refers here to people of African or African-Caribbean descent.

2 *STM's* airing also occurred around the time of the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery and Tony Blair's public statement of 'deep sorrow' (November 2006).

3 Foster's first television drama was *Babyfather* (BBC, 2001, 2002) based around the rites of passage of four black men experiencing fatherhood, love and friendship.

4 Two important exceptions here are Phillip Drummond's detailed analysis of *STM* and *Yasmin* in relation to the question of intercultural identities and Stephen Harper's review of *STM*.

5 I use 'Black drama' here to refer to fictional treatments that are either authored by and/or focus on issues related to Black lives and experiences.

6 Later productions such as Mustapha Matura's *Black Silk* (BBC, 1985) have exposed racial bigotry within institutions and others have critiqued structural and socio-economic inequalities (for example, Lennie James' *Storm Damage*, BBC2, 2000, Ronan Bennett's *Top Boy*, Channel 4, 2011).

7 African-Caribbeans are the most over-represented minority ethnic group within Mental Health services.

8 The shooting script of *STM* is available from the BBC TV Drama website http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts/shoot-the-

messenger (last accessed 17 May 2012)

9 In this BBC Trust session 'Saying the Unsayable', Foster discussed responses to STM (BBC Trust 2007).