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## **Lesley Sharp and the alternative geographies of Northern English Stardom**

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### **Abstract**

Historically, 'North' (of England) is a byword for narratives of economic depression, post-industrialism and bleak and claustrophobic representations of space and landscape. These impulses often manifest themselves in aesthetic or structural frameworks, which in turn speak to gendered authorial discourses in film, literature and television: the so-called 'angry young man' tradition, for example, and the British New Wave. This article seeks to destabilize this male construction of Northern English visual and narrative iconography by suggesting that female stardom offers an alternative means of encountering regional television drama. Female Northern performers function intertextually across multiple narratives to assert specific thematic qualities that both pertain to a radical regionality and enable a sense of agency, which disrupts hitherto dominant constructions of regional and gendered space. Analysing the work of Lesley Sharp as a case study, this article suggests that Sharp, a British actress who has almost always performed in Northern dramas, valorizes and occupies a powerful feminine and feminist space. Disrupting the authority of Northern masculinity, Sharp's many performances as a range of complex female characters have, we argue, mobilized a shift in the location of a spatial identity and authority away from the realm of the masculine. Alongside other powerful Northern female performers, Sharp provides an alternative cartography that articulates the Northern landscape afresh and as such provides a more honest and inclusive view of the bodies through which it is performed.

## **Keywords**

Northern

stardom

gender

performance

region

television

Lesley Sharp

Constructions of the Northern English ‘space-myth’ (Shields 1991: 208), inculcated through realist narratives of working-class lives set against the ‘urban pastoral landscape’ (Davidson 2005: 199), are well worn. These representations are commonly literary and filmic, and are supported by concurrent iconographies of authority, iconographies that frequently foreground gendered discourses of authorship. Amidst this social realist backdrop, post-war narratives of region and realism moved towards a sense of autobiographical ‘authenticity’ – ‘angry young men’ writing from a first-hand experience of place and establishing a spatial identity. From this context the cinematic performance of (male) Northernness has since been centralized through the prominence of the British New Wave cycle and it has become increasingly difficult to identify an alternative to a Northern stereotype of ‘hyper masculinity’ (Cockin 2012: 14). The ‘myth’ of a Northern English space is also therefore a myth of gender.

This article seeks to disrupt this gendered, monolithic Northern landscape by bringing the significance of television, performance and female stardom to the fore. Whereas, we contend, the cinematic contextualization cited above marginalizes

narratives of womanhood, our aim here is to nuance and disrupt the nostalgic, masculine cartography, which we have described, thereby opening up a dialogue about the importance and position of Northern women, stardom and performance, which has been (in terms of the contemporary screen) displaced by this myth (at least in nearly all areas outside of the soap opera). Dave Russell identifies in *English Literature focused on the North* the ‘centrality of the “strong” or “dominant” woman, those who hold together families and wider social networks in the face of poverty and personal tragedy’ (2004: 92). We would argue that exporting this literary focus on gender to the discussion of television drama enables a further destabilization of the authority of Northern masculinity. While there is further work to be done in order to analyse the ways in which female writers situate female characters within Northern landscapes, our aim here is to approach the question of performance within the regional text.

To build on Russell’s identification of ‘strong’ female characters in Northern narratives, we want to suggest that the analysis of how such characteristics are developed through performance (intertextually across multiple televisual narratives) reveals specific thematic qualities that both pertain to a radical regionality and enable a sense of agency, which disrupts dominant constructions of regional and gendered space. Lesley Sharp, a Northern English actress who has worked across film, theatre but most prolifically in the area of regional television drama, provides a pertinent case study for this examination. Sharp’s near 30-year career has generated a critical discourse that is defined by a set of codes and narratives of performance; her ‘Northern’ identity equates with adjectives such as ‘gritty’ and ‘resilient’ (Stanford 2014), her performance reserved and minimal: ‘She has a knack of being able to communicate a lifetime’s frustrations in a flicker of a facial expression’ (McLean

2005); her physicality is 'ordinary' and authentic, and her modesty unshakeable: 'I don't have the looks of angel, I don't have the body of a goddess, I'm kind of invisible. But somehow I slipped through' (Rees 2005). This idea of 'slipping through' suggests both an ordinariness and an extraordinariness that is mystical or uncanny. In the following article we argue that Sharp's presence and performances are in many ways spectral, each haunted by what has gone before so that every new performance bears traces of the past performances. Indeed, her performances allow for an undercutting of the male, monolithic North, which has hitherto overshadowed a more nuanced, careful and feminized representation. Sharp's dominance in the field of television drama and an analysis of her multiple portrayals provide a way, we suggest, of reading region and reframing stardom through performance rather than through (male) authorship. Sharp's traversal of Northern spaces and iconographies is achieved through her multidimensional performances of region, identity and womanhood. Our aim here is to critically interrogate the origins and execution of these characteristics as they develop in Sharp's career, identifying four key Northern texts in which Sharp performs central roles.

### **Road (1987)**

In the October 2014 edition of the British film monthly *Sight and Sound*, a feature on overlooked and unavailable films focuses on Alan Clarke's adaptation of Jim Cartwright's play *Road* (1987). The article carries a single arresting image, that of Lesley Sharp in her role as Valerie, accompanied by a subtitle, 'Unforgettable: a black eyed Lesley Sharp paces the street' (Wrigley 2014: 103). Despite working predominantly in television, Alan Clarke's authorship has been justifiably afforded a significant amount of critical attention in Britain, not least for this late masterpiece,

and while we acknowledge his great craft we might also suggest that ‘unforgettable’ performances such as Sharp’s can also be read alongside such auteurist emphases.

Road was only Sharp’s second major screen role following her appearance as Michelle, the long suffering wife of Bob (George Costigan), in another of Clarke’s stylistically subversive accounts of Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, *Rita, Sue and Bob, Too!* (1987), and yet her involvement with the text preceded Clarke’s. She was part of the first Royal Court cast in 1986, playing, among other roles, Louise, taken on by Jane Horrocks in the broadcast version and second run performance. Indeed, the two Royal Court casts were consolidated for Clarke’s TV version, and bring a conspicuous trace of the play’s theatrical origins to the screen. Moreover, the play’s ensemble nature, its company of future Northern English ‘stars’, such as Sharp, Horrocks and David Thewlis, and its episodic structure, whereby Cartwright presents a set of almost self-contained vignettes, work to foreground performance alongside Clarke’s more than ever conspicuous style (the film is shot almost entirely on a steadicam). These points are reflected most vividly in Sharp’s performance as Valerie: her sole scene exists outside of the already sparse central narrative of the play; both the character and by extension the monologue were only added for the second run at the Royal Court, drawing specific attention to the nature of the performance of Valerie (and her monologue) as distinct from other episodes within the play.

The monologue follows a carnivalesque scene in a pub where Clarke’s use of steadicam foregrounds communal space and performance by moving within the ensemble cast and their narratives, while contemporary music plays throughout (‘Respectable’ by Mel and Kim). In contrast, for Valerie’s monologue, the focus is uncomfortably stark: we are left with the sound of footsteps and the rhythmic lyrical

speech in which she decries her ‘Big rough heavy dog’ of a husband and tragically pleads, ‘Can we not have before again?’ The steadicam unflinchingly frames her in a medium close-up, wearing a brown coat that almost acts as camouflage against the redbrick terraces that form the backdrop of the scene. The camera moves with her for four minutes and nine seconds before resting in a static composition for eleven seconds as she walks up one of the many ‘roads’ of the film, leaving the frame and the story.

The scene therefore combines multiple layers of authorship within its complex constitution. Cartwright’s dialogue poetically combines a ‘state of the nation’ quality with a deeply affecting human narrative of neglect and poverty: he was, as David M. Thompson states, ‘a real collaborator’ (Rolinson 2005: 114). Yet, the stage directions of Cartwright’s theatrical script describe Valerie as ‘[...] a woman waiting, smoking. She is in her mid-thirties, sitting on a hard kitchen chair. She has a scruffy dressing-gown on, a bit of a sad nightie showing’ (Cartwright 2005: 58, original emphasis). Clarke and by extension John Ward – the steadicam operator who recalls shooting the scene sixteen times (Kelly 1998: 187) – counteract the stasis of the stage version to imbue the scene with a sense of tragic mobility, what Rolinson calls Clarke’s rendering of ‘the wasted energy of unemployment by portraying working-class characters walking nowhere through deserted communities’ (Rolinson 2005: 115). Rolinson’s comprehensive analysis of Clarke’s work speaks of how the director ‘does not simply film a performance, but allies technique to its rhythms and underlying themes [...] there is a juxtaposition between her husband’s enforced inactivity and the activity expressed in the repetition of verbs (“telling... eating... squeezing” and so on)’ (Rolinson 2005: 115). Thus, for Rolinson, the auteurist deployment of steadicam elevates the scene’s impact beyond its dramatic origins.

We argue, however, that this emphasis might be further augmented by considering questions of performance. Sharp is vociferous in declaring her passion for the role, recalling how she ‘begged, “Please, please, please, I really want to be in the film, will you let me do Valerie?” Because I loved that character Valerie, and I loved that speech’ (Kelly 1998: 187); John Ward prefaces his account of the feat of endurance, which was the monologue shoot, by describing ‘Lesley’s scene’ as ‘a tour de force’ (Kelly 1998: 187); in his discussion of Scott & Bailey (2011–), Gary Day describes how Sharp’s performance of Valerie set in motion her ‘more grit than glamour [...] authentic’ star persona (2011); we might therefore seek to modify Rolinson’s statement that in *Road*, Clarke (and Cartwright) created a ‘platform for characters to discover their voices’ (Rolinson 2005: 118): it was a platform too for performance.

It is useful here to draw on John Hill’s discussion of steadicam in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!*, in which he argues that the technique captures the ‘energy of Rita and Sue and their movement through the public spaces of the estate and elsewhere [...]’ in shots that enable ‘women’ to become ‘the dominant presence and which challenge the conventional association of such places, in the realist tradition, with the young working-class male’ (Hill 1999: 175). While Hill is referring to the traditions of Northern working-class realism, here we might also suggest that Clarke’s use of steadicam up to and beyond his forays towards the North of England in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!* and *Road* (both of course featuring Lesley Sharp) unknowingly perpetuates a Southern English, working-class masculinity bound up in discourses of stardom, which, when reviewing Clarke’s career as televisual auteur, comes up against the more nuanced and feminized Northern stardom that we have discussed in relation to Sharp. Clarke’s steadicam is first used to convey the unhinged protagonist Colin in

Made in Britain (1982), played by Tim Roth, a performance and broader aesthetic that draws on Scum (1977, 1979), starring Ray Winstone, with these texts all anticipating Clarke and Roy Minton's study of Thatcher-era football violence, The Firm (1989), with Gary Oldman. These iconic character studies featuring charismatic male stars performing aggressive, regionally defined versions of masculinity are at odds with Road's poetic, desperate elegy for a lost North. Lesley Sharp's performance as Valerie might therefore be used to undercut and complicate hitherto dominant approaches to Clarke's rich and complex oeuvre, because it so vehemently stands in contrast to the performances in what Andrew Spicer describes as Clarke's 'three best regarded works' with their approaches to 'violence in young males' (Spicer n.d.).

### **Playing the Field (1998–2002)**

Based in South Yorkshire and focusing on the lives and loves of a ladies football team – Castlefield FC – Kay Mellor's drama *Playing the Field* aired between 1998 and 2002 on BBC One. Boasting an impressive ensemble cast of Northern actors such as Ricky Tomlinson, John Thomson and Debra Stephenson (as well as Northern Irish-born James Nesbitt), Lesley Sharp played the central character, 34-year-old Theresa Mullen. Looking at the first series of 6×50-minute episodes, it is important to recognize the centrality of Sharp in this drama as a character whose story the narrative arc of the series both singles out and revolves around. More specifically, it is Sharp's nuanced performance in *Playing the Field* of the complexities of female identity at a time of British political and social instability, against the backdrop of 'girl power' on the one hand and the continuing expectation of maternal roles and responsibilities on the other, that needs to be understood.

Mellor's drama (or perhaps this Mellor drama – written by a woman, about women and arguably for women) is clearly invested in gender politics from the outset via its focus on a group of women who are drawn together via a love of playing football. Traditionally a sport associated with men as well as a space frequently linked with issues of power and access as well as a particular type of aggressive masculinity, football is used as a tool to showcase not only strong female characters but to mine issues of gender and spatial politics – specifically women and the North of England. The opening credit sequence keys this out, showing the women proudly standing side by side in their blue and white football strips. The importance of the North is also highlighted from the outset by the lyrics of the title song, written and performed by Alison Moyet (originally a B-side track expressing her love for Southend United FC): 'Another Northern sky. Another motorway parade. Another day like this. Whatever will be will be, and we will be [...] going all the way!'

The accompanying visuals are also striking, starting with a medium shot of a tanned, slender leg, wearing a fallen-down football sock and a NIKE boot, energetically kicking a ball, followed by a shot of blue, roughly painted breezeblocks that function to brand the site as the 'home' of the Castlefield Blues. A crane shot then makes visible the team, from behind, in full strip, the lens of the camera initially focusing on their heels before tilting upwards to reveal their flowing hair. This is followed by a reverse shot of the team from the front, the women looking directly and seriously into the camera, their arms crossed as if for an official team photograph. While these images set the scene in a fairly conventional way, the images that follow are more stylized, perhaps hinting at the ways in which these characters have the potential to upset traditional identity and power binaries associated with both gender and the North. Alternating between close-ups of individual team members and blurred

match sequences, one shot shows the Goalkeeper, Gabby (Saira Todd), a woman who unashamedly enjoys ‘going all the way’, passionately kissing an unknown male, while another panning shot focuses on the women’s shirts hung neatly on pegs in their clubhouse before coming to rest on a bright, white sports-bra. Other shots show the team bath, the girls in the pub, drinking and singing onstage, Diane (Debra Stephenson) applying lipstick in her kit and Geraldine (Lorraine Ashbourne), Theresa and Shazza (Marsha Thomason) playing football, shouting at their teammates in an animated fashion and celebrating. The style, song, sequence and the ‘look’ of the characters here provides a sort of ‘Spice Girl’ aesthetic – setting these women up (fictionally, at least) as powerful, strong, sassy and sexy figures, figures that Susan Hopkins might refer to in her book *Girl Heroes: The New Force in Popular Culture* as potential ‘action heroines’ (2002: 36). Interestingly, there are clear visual similarities drawn between the team members and 1990s’ icons of ‘Girl-Power’, Scary Spice (Shazza), Baby Spice (Debra), Sporty Spice (Jo), Posh Spice (Geraldine) and Ginger Spice (Rita, played by Melanie Hill). Perversely, Sharp’s image does not take pride of place in the opening credits; rather she is situated as an ordinary member of the team, not the captain, or the star striker, but a midfielder who is seen but not identified as particularly special. Despite her pedestrian role and appearance in the credit sequence, Theresa is, in the series proper, revealed to be the ‘heart’ of the team and the drama.

Episode 1 opens on Theresa’s wedding day. Waking in her cramped and noisy family home, Theresa turns off her alarm, looks round to her left and smiles. Sharp’s smile here is not a beam or a taut gesture, but gentle and relaxed, flickering and fleeting before a reverse shot reveals her wedding dress hung up next to the poster of Manchester United footballer Eric Cantona. While this early placing of the dress and

the football poster in the same frame could be perceived as a little crude, it is arguably Sharp's performance that augments the framing, reflecting a delicate joy in these two passions rather than an excessive response to them. As the camera goes back to Sharp's face in a close-up, she blinks twice, slowly, before breaking out in a grin and sitting up in her single bed. The focus on Sharp's face is sustained and intimate in these moments, showing the imperfections of her white, Northern skin. Sharp's (older) face and her measured expressions work to establish that Theresa is not a young, naïve bride, but a mature woman with interests and desires of her own. Although the setting of the family home in which Theresa still lives could work to place her as a childish figure, within the environment Theresa stands out as calm, grown up and selfless – in contradistinction to her lovely but hapless father, Jimmy (James Ellis), her overbearing, agoraphobic mother, Mary (Elizabeth Spriggs), her 19-year-old sister, Jo (Jo McInnes), and her two unsophisticated brothers, Matthew (Chris Walker) and Luke (Ralph Ineson). Indeed, Sharp's performance as both ordinary and extraordinary is astounding. Her ordinariness is revealed in her performance of a stock type – a plain, straight-talking, working-class woman who has found love slightly later in life and believes in longevity and loyalty rather than excitement and romance. At the same time, however, Sharp adapts this stock type, making Theresa extraordinary. Although this multiplicity is written into her character via the fact that this ordinary woman is revealed to have an extraordinary secret – her sister, Jo, is actually her daughter – Sharp's sensitive and impassioned performance of complex and perhaps competing female identities is established via her performance, marking her out as the highest ranking character – the series' drama-queen.

Episode 2 sees Theresa tell her mother of the pain she has felt as a result of being persuaded to give up her daughter and allow her mum to bring the baby – Jo –

up as if she were her own. In a dramatic scene, Sharp's performance works with Mellor's writing to both bring out the melodrama of the confrontation while furthering the writing with a performative dignity. Head tilted to one side, face bare in a close-up shot Theresa says to her mother,

I used to cry myself to sleep 'cos I was longing to hold her. I wanted her cot in my room, next to me. I used to wake up every night waiting for the first whimper from your room and my breasts were that full they'd be aching [...] I wanted her to be laid in my arms when Father Thomas Christened her. But, you know, I said nothing. Watching my, my, my baby looking into your face, your eyes.

Although the dialogue is clearly emotional, the performance of this maternal pain is initially expressed through tense hunched shoulders, fixed icy eyes and anxious eyebrow movements that grow increasingly jittery. As Roberta Pearson (2010: 173) argues, 'Actors [...] use facial expressions, looks and glances to convey implicit meanings not necessarily overtly present in the script'. The developing tension is also performed through Sharp's mouth and in particular her increasingly animated sounding out of the words – words spoken in Northern dialect so that 'my breasts' becomes 'mi breasts' and 'hold her' becomes 'old 'er'. Looking subtly away from her mother and up towards the left, as if in recollection, Sharp brings additional realism to the scene, even in its most melodramatic moments. In addition, the dramatic pauses between words, such as 'but you know... I said nothing' make the emotions and actions described seem all the more desolate. Added to this, as Sharp says 'you know', she rolls her head back, her neck laid bare for the camera, her eyes brimming

with tears and looking into space, seemingly unable or temporarily unwilling to look again at her mother. And yet the gaze returns with the repetition of ‘my, my, my baby’, the stresses on the words ‘my baby’ and ‘your eyes’ proclaiming her distance from her mother even while they are face to face. Sharp’s simultaneous performance of defiance, of distance and of damage here is outstanding and the mixing of these complex emotions and characteristics are picked up and mined in her next performance in *Clocking Off* (2000–2003).

### **Clocking Off (2000-2003)**

Paul Abbott’s Manchester-set drama of factory life, *Clocking Off*, ran for four seasons on BBC One between 2000 and 2003. Among its ensemble cast, Lesley Sharp was a particularly prominent figure, playing Trudy Graham, the formidable assistant to the owner of Mackintosh Textiles, James ‘Mack’ Mackintosh (Philip Glenister). We will focus here on the first series, which featured an episode, ‘Trudy’, devoted to Sharp’s character. Indeed, *Clocking Off* provides a rich case study for the exploration of Northern stardom precisely because its structure so conspicuously evokes an emphasis on performance: the majority of episodes in the first series are named after a specific character or characters on whom the action focuses before the character returns to the ensemble as an auxiliary in further episodes or exits the narrative entirely. Many of these characters are played by recognizable television actors synonymous with narratives of Northern English life. For example, Sharp was, as already discussed, fresh from a prominent role within *Playing the Field*, having previously appeared in *Common as Muck* (1994–1997) and in Alan Clarke’s Bradford-set film *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!* alongside another of *Clocking Off*’s ‘Northern Stars’ Siobhan Finneran; John Simm, the ‘star’ of the first episode, had

himself featured heavily in Jimmy McGovern's Northern drama *The Lakes* (1997–1999), as well as in a number of prominent British films of the period; Christopher Eccleston starred in perhaps the most critically successful Northern serial of the period, *Our Friends in the North* (1996); and *Clocking Off* was for Sarah Lancashire the first major role following her long stint as the well-loved barmaid Raquel in *Coronation Street* (1960–). Crucially, these stars' prior appearances in Northern texts are defined by individual performances within ensemble drama, associations that *Clocking Off* seems to self-consciously evoke within its own textual fabric. This enables the serial to achieve two seemingly irreconcilable features: the retention of an authentic narrative dispersal through diverse representation of characters, what Johnson calls 'an aesthetic of realism' that conveys a 'diversity' that is 'more akin to contemporary experiences of everyday working environments'; and the enabling of a platform for multi-layered, complex individual performance of and through characters (2013: 59). Executive producer Nicola Shindler, who goes as far to attribute partial authorial status to Lesley Sharp, highlights the heightened emphasis on individual performance:

She genuinely works at a character [...] She thinks and thinks about who they are and why they are – and then she seems to throw away all that work and make the actual performance effortless. The subtlety and tiny nuances that she brought to Trudy completely centred *Clocking Off* for me, and that's not an exaggeration. I think Paul [Abbott] felt the same, and was inspired to write those later episodes of the first series about Trudy. [...] I think she makes the writers and the writing better. (McLean 2005)

Up to her own episode, Sharp's Trudy has contributed to other characters' stories in significant ways, not least in 'K.T' (Episode 3), in which we see her affection for her boss, Mack, most conspicuously. 'Trudy' (Episode 5) finds the eponymous character dealing with the loss of her father, attempting to heal the wounds of her divisive relationship with her sister, seeking to tackle her low self-esteem by undergoing breast enhancement surgery and inadvertently revealing the details of Mack's wife's infidelities. Through the relaying of this tumultuous narrative information, the episode also plays on and develops qualities that viewers already associate with Trudy (and Sharp) – she is shown as both emotionally strong and hardworking, and is simultaneously isolated through her gender (she is single, framed as maternal [both in relation to her father and Mack] but without a child or lover), and through her class she is frequently shown to be separated both physically and emotionally from the workers on the factory floor, aligned with Mack but persistently denied access to his social world.

As mentioned, a number of these characteristics might be mapped onto and connected with other Sharp heroines, but the knowledge of these intertextual traces of performance and character must also be contextualized alongside an understanding of *Clocking Off*'s unique narrative framework. For example, following the death of Trudy's father she is invited for a drink by Julie (Siobhan Finnernan). This is an attempt by the factory workers to bridge the social divide and to temporarily bring their superior into their circle of female solidarity. The resulting scene brings together Trudy alongside Freda (Joan Kempson), Julie and Yvonne (Sarah Lancashire) and serves to further emphasize Trudy's disconnection from the social hub of the factory. Shot-reverse-shots frequently contrast the three friends (Julia, Freda and Yvonne), who share or dominate a single frame, with Trudy, who is most often shown in

medium close-up, alone responding to her colleagues in an unenthusiastic fashion. This treatment of Trudy recalls spatial motifs earlier in the episode in which she is again visually and emotionally distanced: in the party scene at the start of the episode a two-shot shared by Mack and Trudy is broken when her boss leaves the frame to be with his workers as Trudy remains still, the shot resting on her for three seconds as her eyes follow Mack. However, although the narrative focus is firmly on Trudy during the episode, this is dispersed slightly by our prior knowledge of other characters and performers within the text: for example, of the three women in the bar scene the two most recognizable, Julie and Yvonne, have already contributed to the wider narrative of the serial, and thus their characters' fruitless attempts to ease Trudy's grief are contextualized and qualified. Our engagement with Trudy's isolation is also kept in check by an understanding of her colleagues' ultimately honourable intentions, an understanding drawn from knowledge of their own character arcs, emboldened by wider awareness of their extratextual status as recognizable Northern actors. What we can understand 'as a flexible mosaic rather than [...] fixed narrative focus' (Johnson 2013: 52) enables multidimensional engagement with character and performance.

It is notable that the scene to which we have just alluded brings together a group of female characters, as one of *Clocking Off*'s most prominent achievements is to destabilize the notion of a masculine conception of Northern stardom associated with wider traditions of regionally focused British realist texts. For example, the deployment of Eccleston and Simm in the early part of the series stands in significant contrast to the female stars already mentioned. Indeed, by the 'Trudy' episode Jim (Christopher Eccleston) and Stuart (John Simm) have exited the narrative completely. Here the ensemble, on which the 'flexible mosaic' (Johnson 2013: 52) draws both its

realist authenticity and its dramatic complexity, rejects fleeting male figures in favour of steadfast, multidimensional female characters such as Sharp's Trudy and Lancashire's Yvonne. Although Nicola Shindler consciously evokes social realist conventions in suggesting that 'the idea was to create a modern day Play for Today' (Anon. 2003), Lez Cooke is right to point out that the series progressively breaks away from realist paradigms in its treatment of women, departing from a tradition where 'When women did feature, they invariably suffered to a greater or lesser extent, being subjected, for example, to illegal abortions, homelessness, the loss of children and family, and mental illness' (2005: 194). Of course, Trudy experiences significant anguish in her episode, but precisely because of *Clocking Off*'s dispersed structure, these are experiences reframed within the broader context of the series as representations of resilience rather than of deficit. The multi-layered characterization that emerges is significant for the enlightened treatment of stardom and performance, which emerges within the serial. Cooke's use of social realist traditions against which to measure *Clocking Off* might be augmented with reference to social realism's complex relationship with stardom; despite its overt commitment to verisimilitude the genre has historically emphasized extratextual discourses of (male) performance. Peter Stead's discussion of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), for example, focuses heavily on Albert Finney:

We are interested in Arthur Seaton not because he is a worker but because he comes in the form of Albert Finney. The crowds turned up in their thousands because they had been told that at last there was a British actor who had not yet emasculated his personality in acting school and who knew that to convey reality you had to be far from ordinary. (1989: 195)

This conspicuous emphasis on masculine performance is radically overhauled in *Clocking Off*, whereby a more inclusive and relatable notion of stardom emerges. Through the writing of characters like Trudy and the use of recognizable performers like Lesley Sharp within a dispersed narrative framework, *Clocking Off* is positioned both as a star vehicle and a convincing ensemble drama that celebrates the diversity of everyday, Northern English life.

### **Scott & Bailey (2011-)**

Originally conceived by Sally Lindsay and Suranne Jones and written by Sally Wainwright, the detective drama *Scott & Bailey* first aired in 2011 on ITV. While in many ways the drama can be understood as deliberately echoing the American titular police procedural, *Cagney and Lacey* (1981–1988), via its focus on two detective constables, as well as its attention to procedural accuracy, the contemporary British series utilizes its titular stars, Janet Scott (Lesley Sharp) and Rachel Bailey (Suranne Jones) and its North Western English landscapes – Manchester city centre, Oldham, Chadderton – to explore the emotional and physical terrain of private as well as professional police lives, which are imbedded in and connected to the place. While we have noted above how the non-verbal can be used to augment performance beyond the script/dialogue, the focus in this case study is mainly on the performance of the voice and how the familiar and yet strange voice of Sharp, as we know her as Scott but also extratextually as Theresa, Valerie and Trudy (among others), functions as an uncanny point of connection anchoring Sharp's (Northern) stardom.

In *Scott & Bailey*, while Scott is initially positioned as a less overtly dramatic character than the hard-drinking, loose cannon Bailey, it is Scott whose character guides the series and binds the diegetic Manchester Major Incident Team together, working calmly and industriously under the accomplished and certain leadership of DCI Gill Murray (Amelia Bullmore). Though different, Scott is not diametrically opposed to Bailey and both characters are resolutely talented detectives as well as flawed individuals; however, Scott's age (approximately 48), her 'straightness' and working professionalism, precision and self-control lead to her functioning as a mentor to the younger Bailey in the first series, teaching and protecting her from others and at times her own self-destructive tendencies.

Unlike in the texts discussed above, Sharp's voice and more specifically her accent in *Scott & Bailey* is less conspicuously 'Northern' than in her previous work, containing fewer short vowel sounds and utilizing less regional dialect. Arguably, while still in evidence via a Mersey lilt, Sharp's Northernness is performed with more subtlety here than, for example, her distinct West Yorkshire accent performed as the Bradfordian character Michelle in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too!* Crucially, in *Scott & Bailey* the sound of Scott's voice is at once strange and familiar and can be aligned to received pronunciation, performing a new, 'professional' neutrality. While Jones' clear Northern (specifically Mancunian) accent provides an affirmation of both her background and is implicated as a factor in her impetuous characteristics, perhaps because of the neutrality/ambiguity of Sharp's place within 'region', her character's judgment is privileged and she is seen as more trustworthy. Although this could be understood as a problem in which the North/ern is positioned as less developed or sophisticated, we want to suggest that it is not in fact the case but rather it is Sharp's stardom – Sharp as Scott – who is awarded this narrative privilege and status.

It is notable within *Scott & Bailey* that while Sharp's accent is less overtly Northern than elsewhere, her speech is also performed markedly slower. While this slowness initially jars, differentiating her vocal performance from others and giving it character specificity, the slowness also allows for a reconnection, providing the audience time to hear Sharp in Scott, urging the viewer to act as aural detective. The slowness of Sharp's speech also invites a more precise focus on setting and place, and it is important to note here that the drama itself is proudly place-specific. Speaking of the importance of place, Suranne Jones (2012) aligns the geographical specificity with a sense of authentic or 'real' beauty, noting, 'The beauty of [*Scott & Bailey*] is that it is real. And you can watch it and go – this is really happening in Chadderton, Oldham, the North of England. This is what Sally Wainwright does'. This focus upon the 'real beauty' of the North – a space/place that is not slow but is busy and teeming with vitality and vigour – can be understood as a dramatic heartland, a character rather than a backdrop. In many ways it is contemporary Manchester itself that sets the tone of the series – Manchester itself that performs its own stardom. Importantly though, it is specific places in Manchester – Chadderton and Didsbury, for example – rather than the whole city that bring its distinctness into focus. Speaking of the series, Sharp recognizes both the specifics of place and the importance of Northern spaces to identity and attitudes. Situating herself as a 'Northerner', she noted in an interview with Megan Conner for the *Guardian* in 2012, 'I very much consider myself a Mancunian. There is something quintessentially Northern in my DNA, even though I've lived in London since I was 18. I think it's a sense of humour and desire to be friendly'.

The humour and friendliness that Sharp speaks of as aspects of her own character are also performed on-screen as Scott or Sharp as Scott. In particular, the

importance of friendliness is highlighted in Scott & Bailey, both in the performances of speech and in the gestures that accompany or stand in for these communications. Sharp's physical positionings as Scott are sensitive to the spaces, thoughts and feelings of others, in particular to Bailey with whom she spends much of her screen time. The intimacy of the friendship is performed not only in the subtle movements of her body and her gait but also in her facial gestures such as her expressions of concern or cheeky, conspiratorial smiles. Sharp's face is undoubtedly recognizable, but like her voice Sharp seems to perform a new poise in this role, a new yet known and friendly composure. We do not mean here that Sharp's performance as Scott is stiff but rather that her gestures are purposefully physically smaller than those in her earlier work. Sharp's lack of exaggerated gestures reflects, via our extratextual knowledge of her, her professional growth and performative nuance, but also arguably belies a sense of self-assuredness that has been achieved through experience and over time. Rather than this being alienating or distancing, Sharp's quiet confidence encourages the audience to see her as more than her character but as a 'friend' too, someone we have known, trusted and watched grow over the years. Sharp's stardom is attributable then to her talent (of course) but also, arguably, to the audience's recognition of her as an accomplished actor who we care about and who we perhaps feel we know rather intimately.

## **Conclusion**

The four case studies considered above foreground the importance of Sharp's Northern stardom, making visible her ability to augment dialogue through extraordinarily subtle performances of gesture, voice and movement. Sharp's ability to 'know' her characters, to perform Northern-ness (and class) through them,

frequently results in a seemingly effortless portrayal and yet it is in the precision of her performance that she so powerfully conveys competing and contradictory emotions and, as hinted at above in Shindler's comments, 'inspires writers'. This type of star performance works to create an overlap between iconographies of authority and iconographies of the performative, which have previously been overtly gendered. Sharp's performances showcase an outstanding ability and arguably a desire to unsettle these discourses, destabilizing the 'myth' of Northern space that has been conceived of historically as dominantly morose and male. The breadth as well as depth of Sharp's performances also points to the poignancy of the palimpsest – a layering of characterization and a recognition by the audience of the importance of extratextual connections between Northern characters and texts – as an important component in shaping and realizing the power and intimate pull of Northern English stardom.

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