Black Representation on British Television
Lesson four: The 1990s

This lesson focuses on how comedy can be used as a subversive tool, but also how it might be misunderstood and so becomes a tool for reinforcing dominant power structures.

Lesson Objective
To explore the 'comic effect' and consider how comedy may be used to benefit a minority group or culture.

Resources
- Black Star Resource four case study sheet (included below)
- Clips of Desmond's on BFI Screenonline: http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/490845/index.html
- Alternatively you can access the series box set of *Desmond's* (C4, 1987-94): http://www.channel4.com/programmes/desmonds

Starter:

Make 'em Laugh!
Students consider key elements of sitcoms and write a short synopsis of what they think would make the 'perfect TV sitcom' and create promotional material to accompany this. Students research codes and conventions of this form in order to complete this activity. Encourage them to read through this tour on British humour on BFI Screenonline for ideas:
http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tours/humour/tourBritHumour1.html

Activity 1: Theory

Students consider how issues around race can function within comedy sitcoms and how this might be seen as a process of empowerment or disempowerment. Using the Diamond Nine activity (slide 5), students consider some statements and order them on how much they agree or disagree.

Activity 2: Global humor

Students move around the room according to their relative nationalities and consider how self-deprecating humour differs to 'external' humour.

Activity 3: Stuart Hall

Students relate learning from previous lessons to this theory of representation and consider whether comedy might reinforce or undercuts racial power relations.

Activity 4: Case study

Students watch an episode of *Desmond's* and, using additional resources, create case study notes based on this.

Plenary

Students discuss the statement:

'Comedy can never be inoffensive. Attack and hostility are built into its very structure and the skill in producing good, successful political comedy lies in finding the right targets'.

Resource created by Alexandra E Greenfield, Teach First

Desmond's, (C4, 1987-94)

Summary:
- *What is this TV show about?*
- *What was interesting or unusual about this production?*

Reception:
- *How was it first received?*
- *Was the message conveyed as the creators hoped?*
- *How is humour used to convey this message?*

Representation:
- *How are the black community represented in this programme?*
- *How is stereotypical casting of black actors addressed in this TV show? What is the impact of this?*

Legacy:
- *What might the legacy of this programme be? How did it alter the landscape for black actors, particularly black comic actors, in the 1990s?*
- *How relevant are the issues raised in this show today?*

Diamond Nine

Place the statements into their relative boxes in the diamond nine.