**Terror, Gender and Ethics in American Media after 9/11:**

***Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland***

**Bio**

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**Abstract**

Traditionally, in popular media representations of national struggles, men are positioned on the front lines, defending the nation. Yet, a decade after 9/11, a number of active and resourceful women have appeared in leading roles in films and TV dramas dealing with terrorism and counter-terrorism. I suggest that this displacement of gender roles is related to the ongoing war on terror and to the epistemic and ethical crisis it entails. In the following analysis of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland*, I will show how this crisis is both expressed and contained through the unconventional female protagonist on the front line of that war. Furthermore, by means of this break with conventional gender representation, the dramas subversively offer an alternative approach to the enemy in this national struggle. Following Judith Butler’s ideas about the universal precariousness of life, I will suggest that, through similarities between the heroines and the terrorists and their shared vulnerability, an ethical concept of the terrorist Other, as a subject, emerges.

**Introduction**

“The defining feature of American war narratives is that they are a ‘man’s story’ from which women are generally excluded,” argues Susan Jeffords in her study of gender and the Vietnam War.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, traditionally and up to today, in popular media representations of national struggles, such as war, espionage, action and disaster films and TV shows, men are depicted as fighting at the front, defending women and the nation. Rebecca Bell-Metereau has shown how “clear patterns appear in the roles women have played in some of the most popular box-office films from before and after 9/11.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Part of the patriotic wave immediately following the 9/11 attacks, Bell-Metereau argues, films like *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, USA, 2001) and *Sum of All Fears* (Phil Alden Robinson, 2002) (146) cast women as nurses or doctors who wait out the fight and then serve as the sexual prizes for the survivors. In *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, USA, 2006), the first film dealing directly with 9/11, fire fighters are caught in the aftermath, while their clueless wives wait at home.[[3]](#footnote-3) When women do take an active part in the struggle against terror, their role is secondary to that of the man leading the battle. This can be seen, for example, in the TV series *24* (FOX, 2001-2010), in which Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) fights against various terror threats, defending his spouse, his daughter, and his granddaughter, among others.

Yet, a decade after 9/11 – a period that saw violent actions by both terrorists and western governments – while male heroes continue to be at the forefront of battles in popular representations, quite a few active, resourceful, and successful women have appeared in leading roles in films and TV dramas dealing with terrorism. In TV series such as *Covert Affairs* (USA, 2010-2015), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-today), *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-2018), *The Blacklist* (NBC, 2013-today), and *Quantico* (ABC, 2015-2018) the lead character is a woman fighting against terrorism and protecting others. In films as well, women are represented at the forefront of the battle, for example, in *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007) and *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, 2015), in which Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren respectively portray the commanding officers. In the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) a female CIA analyst brings a painful national chapter to a close with the long-awaited location and killing of Osama bin Laden.

Why, a decade after 9/11, were women characters given such precedence in representations of the struggle against terror, which they did not enjoyed in the past? I suggest that this reversal of gender roles should be understood in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism and the unprecedented challenges they entail.

In this article, I will focus on the figures of CIA analyst Maya (Jessica Chastain) in the film *Zero Dark Thirty* and CIA operations officer Carry Mathison (Claire Danes) in the TV show *Homeland*. *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts actual events in the ten-year-long search, led by a female CIA analyst, for Osama bin Laden and the US Navy SEALs’ operation to capture and kill him in Abbotabad, Pakistan, in 2011. *Homeland* is a fictional TV series, based on the Israeli show *Hatufim* (Hebrew for “prisoners of war,” created by Gidi Raff, Keshet, Israel, 2010-2012). Yet, it too indicates, in various ways, its relation to actual events in the struggle of America and its allies against terror. In the first three seasons, which are at the focus of my current analysis, Carrie is a CIA operations officer based first in Iraq and later at CIA’s Counterterrorism Center in Langley, Virginia. The target of her investigation, who eventually becomes her lover, is Nicholas Brody (Damien Lewis), a US Marine turned terrorist.

The war against terror involves unique challenges, as became clear to both policy makers and the public during the decade following 9/11. The difficulty of identifying terrorists within the civil population at home and abroad – the difficulty of distinguishing between “us” and “them” – confronts America with an epistemic and ethical crisis. In the following analysis of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland*, I will show how the female protagonist represents and at the same time contains this crisis. In each of these texts, the woman plays a double role in the national discourse: at once symbolizing the nation and the Other within. On the one hand, the heroines are identified with the nation as part of a national agency active in its defence. On the other hand, they are distinguished from their male colleagues and superiors, held back by the masculine security system, and represented as feeling, thinking, and acting similarly to the terrorist Other. Both Maya and Carrie display exceptional skills in deciphering terrorists’ motivations, conduct, and plans. Yet, their closeness to the terrorist Other represents terrorism’s problematic influence on the American Self. They represent the “otherness” that has penetrated the nation, while still keeping the male collective at a safe distance from it.

As scapegoats for the proximity of the Other to the American Self, these women experience what Judith Butler calls “the precariousness of life.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Following Butler, I propose that the pain and vulnerability these characters experience bring them even closer to the terrorist Other. The main lesson Butler draws from 9/11 is that all lives are precarious, dependent on others, sometimes on others whom we do not choose, or even know. The precariousness of life, physical or emotional, is a universal state that unites the Self and Other, on both the personal and national levels. For Butler, 9/11 is an opportunity to consider who else might be exposed to unexpected violence and suffering. Accordingly, I argue that in *Homeland* and *Zero Dark Thirty* the lead female characters represent this new proximity between the American Self and the terrorist Other, not only in their traits and motivations, but also in their vulnerability and pain. Through similarities between heroines and terrorists and through their shared precariousness, an ethical concept of the terrorist Other, as a subject, emerges.

**A woman at the forefront of the war on terror**

On September 11, 2001, the American public came to know a new political Other, the Islamic fundamentalist terrorist. This figure replaced the Communist Other, who had been relegated to the past only twelve years earlier, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Following 9/11, America and its allies embarked on two wars, in Afghanistan (2001) and in Iraq (2003), but terrorist attacks on western assets and citizens have continued, as has the global counter-terrorism effort.

I suggest that the appearance, a decade or so after 9/11, of a number of active, determined, and successful women in leading roles in TV shows dealing with terrorism, is linked to the crisis involved in this ongoing national and global struggle. Feminist writers have pointed out that popular culture depictions of women active outside of the domestic sphere often call into question conventional gender perceptions and indicate a crisis in the dominant ideology overall. For example, in her discussion of female heroines in action films in the early 1990s,[[5]](#footnote-5) Tasker argues that the female presence in the public, masculine domain creates or intensifies a crisis. Sexual desire or romance often interfere with the search for knowledge and disturb social stability.[[6]](#footnote-6) Similarly, Linda Mizejewski, following J. P. Alotte’s notion of *film noir*, argues that some films from this period, with a female detective as their lead character,[[7]](#footnote-7) continue to perform a “deconstructive movement to problematize investigation itself as part of a larger cultural anxiety about ways of knowing.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

In the same vein, Hilary Neroni observes that in numerous genres throughout film history, “on-screen violence has primarily been a masculine activity.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Yet in historical moments of ideological crisis, the violent woman emerges on a wide scale, in similar roles.[[10]](#footnote-10) Films that portray violent women perform a dual mission. They express the crisis through this break with gender conventions, while, at the same time, the narrative contains the crisis in various ways. Providing narrative explanations for the woman’s violence, depriving her of a romantic bond at the film’s end (as in *Thema and Louise*, Ridley Scott, 1992), or presenting a split between her professional involvement in violence and private expressions of femininity (as in *G. I. Jane,* Ridley Scott, 1997) are some of the means employed to restrain the trauma caused by the violent woman.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The female soldier is a relevant example. As “a boundary crossing figure – not really a woman and not really a soldier” (5), Tasker finds her to be “a contradiction in terms” (287).[[12]](#footnote-12) As an abnormal, unstable category, the female soldier threatens the social order. Jeffords shows how solidarity between combatants, which is vital for their survival, is typically defined along gender lines.[[13]](#footnote-13) The presence of a female soldier among male combatants threatens that solidarity. For the masculine collective at the front, women are excluded Others, just like the enemy.

If in battle the woman is the excluded Other, the woman waiting at home – a home the men are called to defend – often symbolizes the nation. As Anne McClintock shows, this dual position has deep roots in the roles constructed for women in the national project.[[14]](#footnote-14) Women often symbolize the nation, yet are excluded, in both space and time, from any active part in its history. While men are active in the public sphere, instituting change and progress, women are traditionally associated with the private space and with the past. In the domestic sphere, they are responsible for ensuring stability and continuity by maintaining tradition and by “proper” reproduction. The representation of a woman who is active in the public sphere and influences the future of the collective is an exception that feminist writers see as indicative of a crisis.

What then is the nature of the crisis underlying the numerous frontline female protagonists in popular media representations of the struggle against terror created a decade after 9/11? Terrorism and counter-terrorism are instances of what researchers have labelled “new war.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Until the middle of the twentieth century, wars were fought between states at odds over territory, interests, or ideology, and by armies in uniform meeting in decisive battles. Lines demarcating the Self from the Other were drawn along state borders. Wars were defined in time and space. From the declaration of war to surrender or a peace agreement, wars took place on known battlefields, along known front lines, and, if possible, away from civilian populations.

Today diverse groups, often without uniforms, have joined states in carrying out political violence. New wars are fought in the name of identity (ethnic, religious or tribal).[[16]](#footnote-16) Unstable boundaries between the Self and the Other are outlined inside states and across state borders. Combatants hide and operate among civilians, and tactics on both sides affect civilian populations. Struggles are no longer marked by a clear beginning or end, nor are they limited to a certain territory or location.

“New war” poses a double challenge that is at once epistemological as well as ethical. As Raya Morag points out,

In the new war traditional contrasts that either have been dismantled or are in crisis are terror-war… front-home, “us”-“them”, civilian-soldier… victim-perpetrator, defence-offense, beginning-end, victory-defeat, war-peace, moral-immoral.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The epistemological crisis lies not only in the challenge of identifying the enemy, but more deeply in the fact that binary concepts that have undergirded the notion of armed conflict no longer hold. In fact, the binary mode of thinking itself is now in crisis, including as it relates to the distinction Self/Other.

Georgio Agamben discusses the ethical implications of the blurring of the line between “us” and “them” in a struggle that has no definite beginning or end.[[18]](#footnote-18) Agamben focuses on the legal concept of “a state of exception.” This concept allows the sovereign to declare a state of emergency in times of danger to society or to the social order. In this exceptional state, the sovereign is paradoxically entitled, under the law, to exclude certain individuals from the protection of that same law. Those individuals are rendered nothing more than “bare lives” with no legal status, rights, or protections (Agamben, 2005, pp.3-4). This concept is central to the discourse surrounding 9/11. Five days after the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, President Bush proclaimed a national emergency, and government agencies were consequently allowed to violate some constitutional rights of US citizens[[19]](#footnote-19) and rights granted by international law to detainees offshore.[[20]](#footnote-20) Detainees of multiple nationalities, suspected of aiding the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other organizations, were all classed under the unique category of “unlawful combatants,” a term that served to deny them the legal status of prisoners of war.[[21]](#footnote-21) In fact, President Bush declared, based on documented legal opinion, that detainees held by the US are not entitled to **any** protection under national or international law.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Such an exceptional imbalance between the power of the sovereign and that of the law that normally controls it is justified by the assumption that any state of exception is temporary. However, in the decade following 9/11, the US was involved in an ongoing war against terror. In this continuous state of exception, a fierce public debate unfolded regarding the legal and ethical codes guiding the US.

Michel Foucault’s notion of the double power of the modern state is also relevant to the discussion of Agamben. As Foucault points out, traditionally, the sovereign had the right to put his subjects in mortal danger or to kill them (or to allow them to live). Since the late eighteenth century, an additional right has been granted to the sovereign state: the right to manage the life of its population, which Foucault termed “bio-politics.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The state became involved in biological processes such as birth and mortality, sexuality and reproduction, children and education, public health, productivity, and so on. This dual power – to kill and to manage life – demands that authorities draw a strict line between the lives for which it is responsible and the lives that must die or be excluded in the name of the former’s welfare. However, under the current conditions of the struggle against terror, when it is impossible to identify and isolate terrorists from the general population or to clearly define “us” and “them,” this political task becomes ethically more challenging.

Indeed, in the years following 9/11, it became evident that in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, US personnel tortured and sexually abused some of the detainees. US drone attacks in Afghanistan and elsewhere have resulted in civilian injuries and casualties,[[24]](#footnote-24) and revenge killings by US soldiers took place, for example, in Haditha, Iraq.[[25]](#footnote-25) The publication of these facts caused a heated public and political debate in the US. During the decade following 9/11, it became clear, then, that the continued battle against terror involves epistemological challenges, and political and ethical conflicts.

**The American Self and the terrorist Other: *Zero Dark Thirty***

The unconventional scenario of a woman leading a national mission to success is one of the ways *Zero Dark Thirty* reflects on the limitations of conventional representations, including that of the terrorist Other. By presenting Maya as different from the men serving in the national security apparatus, and as having certain similarities with the terrorists, the film reduces the gap between the American Self and the terrorist Other. It is noteworthy that this takes place even against the background of the bitter events of 9/11, and even in a popular film about a proven success by US security forces.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In 2003, Maya is stationed at the US embassy in Pakistan. Soon after her arrival, she attends an interrogation by torture of a detainee named Ammar (Reda Kateb), led by CIA officer Dan (Jason Clarke). Ammar talks about another suspect, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti (Tushaar Mehra). Other detainee intelligence reports on courier traffic between Abu Faraj al-Libbi (Yoav Levi) and bin Laden. Maya concentrates her investigation on Abu Ahmed, suspecting he is the courier of this traffic. In 2009, during the Camp Chapman attack in Afghanistan, Maya’s fellow officer and friend Jessica (Jennifer Ehle) is killed by a suicide bomber. Maya vows to kill everyone involved in this attack. Overcoming objections by her colleagues and superiors, Maya leads a CIA surveillance team that eventually tracks the courier to a large urban compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. After gunmen attack Maya, she is recalled to Washington, DC. The CIA puts the house under satellite surveillance, but President Barack Obama hesitates in approving a raid on the compound. Eventually, Navy SEALs fly at night, in two stealth helicopters, into Pakistan, enter the building, and kill bin Laden. Maya confirms the identity of the corpse and later boards a military transport back to the US.

The film opens with a black screen. On the soundtrack, authentic voice recordings from 9/11 eventually focus on a dialogue between a woman caught in a fire in one of the towers and a helpless, traumatised rescue operator, also female. The sub-text suggests that no male prince is coming to rescue the woman trapped in the tower. The dark screen and the sound track immediately direct viewers’ attention to the representational crisis associated with the trauma.[[27]](#footnote-27) The absence of images also references the spectacular, cinematic news footage of the twin towers on 9/11, which were repeatedly broadcast in the media, to numbing effect.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The film’s prologue is followed by a long, at times graphic, sequence in which American investigators torture the prisoner Amar. A caption informs us that the investigation takes place in a “Black Site, Undisclosed Location.” The word “black” connects this sequence with the black screen of the prologue, creating a parallel between the two situations of extreme violence. Whereas the prologue leaves us with no images of hurt bodies, neither of victims nor of perpetrators,[[29]](#footnote-29) the torture scenes are explicit, sometimes difficult to watch, focusing on the bruised and abused body. In opposite ways, the prologue and the torture sequence challenge the ability of the audience, and by association, of the nation overall, to gaze at suffering victims on both sides.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Amar, suspected of transferring money to terrorists, but not of having blood on his hands, is not entirely monstrous. The torture scenes alternate between rapid body and camera movements, and some pauses and longer shots that include dialogues between investigator and detainee. “You are a mid-level guy,” Omar says to investigator Dan, “and you’re a money man, a paper boy” Dan replies. With close-ups on the detainee and shots-reverse-shots of him and the investigator, the sequence creates a parallel between the American Self and the terrorist Other, who likewise has a face and a name.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The next section of the film follows Maya on her long, Sisyphean search for bin Laden. Neroni compares Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* to Carrie in *Homeland*, calling the first a “bio-detective” and the second a “detective of the real.”[[32]](#footnote-32) According to Neroni, Maya relies on biological methods deployed by the counterterrorism apparatus, notably investigation by torture – a method based on the assumption that the body is a vessel of secrets that are extractable because its final motivation is to survive. Carrie, on the other hand, concentrates on the psychoanalytical level, tuning into the desires and anxieties of the subjects of her investigation. In contrast to Neroni, I consider Maya and Carrie to be both “detectives of the real.” In fact, both start with technical and biological means, witnessing or inflicting torture and watching recorded or live video footage of their targets. Yet both soon come to realize the limits of these methods and eventually seek knowledge of the Other elsewhere. They go on to draw conclusions based on the insight that their targets are psychoanalytical subjects, driven by ideology and passions, not excluding the drive for self-destruction.[[33]](#footnote-33) In so doing, they distance themselves from their male colleagues, who disavow this level of knowledge. The investigators’ failure to identify the Other by watching video footage is an implicit criticism of both investigation methods and conventional representations of terrorists in the news media and in fiction. The terrorist Other remains enigmatic. It takes a transgression of conventional representation, such as a woman on the front lines, who relies on unconventional methods, to know and find the terrorist Other.

Maya’s unorthodox method is exemplified by her willingness to consider the motives behind suspects’ behaviour, a willingness she does not share with her bosses. The fact that all those tortured and investigated in connection with Abu Ahmed **refuse** to reveal his name, location, or current function tells her that he is important, and that he is indeed directly associated with bin Laden, possibly functioning as his personal messenger. “This is tradecraft,” Maya says about the inconsistent conduct of the suspected courier, who is doing, she says, just what she would have done in the same situation. When a suspicious house is discovered in Pakistan, everything about the compound tells her it is bin Laden’s hideout, even though, or precisely **because**, there is no positive proof of bin Laden’s presence there. However, since “the President is a thoughtful, analytical guy, he needs proof,” as a White House National Security Advisor (Stephen Dillane) says, permission for the attack on the compound is postponed until biological evidence, such as bin Laden’s DNA in the sewage, is found. Her willingness to rely on lack of evidence, the gender aspect of which I will discuss below, distinguishes Maya from her male colleagues and gives her an advantage in the search for the terrorist.

For much of the film, it is indeed Maya who moves the investigation forward. Up until the night raid on bin Laden’s compound, the film presents no knowledge that Maya does not herself possess. Close-ups of her face ensure that the audience identifies with her intense emotions. The audience supports her efforts as she moves the plot forward.[[34]](#footnote-34) Nevertheless, Maya is constantly held back by male colleagues, especially her superiors in the hierarchic CIA.

Maya is restrained in space and time both within the diegesis and by the film itself. Her movements are restricted. On her first entrance to the US embassy in Pakistan, after a long clearance process, Mark Boal’s script says: “The guard opens the door... Not many females come through that door.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Time and again we see her in confined, claustrophobic spaces, such as torture chambers, her cubicle, or her dark apartment. Whenever she moves by car she is held back by checkpoints, inspections, demonstrations, and even an assassination attempt, all at the hands of men. When Maya and her friend Jessica go out socially, a bomb explodes in the Islamabad Marriott cafeteria. “Don’t eat out” says Maya to her colleague Debbie (Jessica Collins), “it’s not safe.” When the surveillance team wanders the streets, Maya stays behind, facing a map on the office wall. In a meeting at CIA headquarters, Maya is asked to sit on the sidelines while the men gather around a center table. These spatial restrictions follow gender conventions that disapprove of active women in the public sphere.

In terms of time, Maya is focused on the past. She is motivated by a desire to avenge 9/11 and Jessica’s death. As Daniel Hack explains, revenge, even when it involves future planning, is always focused on past events.[[36]](#footnote-36) Maya’s passionate, almost fanatical pursuit of bin Laden conflicts with her male commander’s demand that she focus on preventing **future** attacks. The temporal difference between Maya and men is further expressed through the use of technology. Throughout the film, Maya operates only simple technologies, such as a car, DVD players and monitors, paperwork, a wig, or a marker. She is completely dependent on her superiors and on male operators, who are slow to join her effort, for any access to advanced technology.

These differences in space and time culminate in the last section of the film. As the men, a well-coordinated band of fighters, depart for their night raid, Maya is left behind, alone, cast back into to the conventional gender role of the woman awaiting the warriors’ return. The night attack, from which Maya is excluded, is a spectacle of futuristic technologies. The combatants arrive at the target in undetectable helicopters that have never even been tested. With their gear and night vision apparatus, they look like aliens or cyborgs from an advanced civilization. By including green and grainy footage, shot using night vision, the film shares with the audience, but not with Maya, this enhanced gaze, as well as information that Maya does not possess in “real” time.

Maya is not only singled out from the men, but she is also similar in a number of ways to the terrorists. According to Hack, western culture has historically considered revenge to be a primitive, atavistic, and irrational, motive,[[37]](#footnote-37) qualities often associated with terrorists.[[38]](#footnote-38) Maya is obsessively dedicated to the task of revenge, entirely sacrificing her personal life. Like the terrorists, she has an almost messianic concept of her mission: “A lot of my friends died trying to do this. I believe I was spared so I could finish the job,” she says. In a sense, Maya has embarked on a jihad of her own.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the terrorists, like Maya, do not use advanced technology. Not a single electronic signal emanates from the suspected compound. “He has no internet access to the house, he makes no phone calls either in or out,” explains the CIA Chief of Afghanistan Pakistan Department to the White House National Security Advisor. Advanced technology is associated solely with the American men, never with Maya or the terrorists.

Thus, differentiated from the men in the system and similar in traits and motivation to the terrorists, Maya is the Other within. Yet, as a woman, she also symbolizes the nation. At CIA headquarters, when the men gather in the center of the room, it is Maya who stands next to the American flag on the wall, her profile reflected in its frame. In the final scene, Maya sits alone in a large, vacant space inside the transport aircraft sent to pick her up, red stripes on the wall behind her like a torn flag. “Where do you want to go?” asks the pilot. Maya has no answer. She is not sure where home is, because home has changed forever: it is now full of hatred and vengeance, facing ethical conflicts and a dubious future. As the camera draws in for a prolonged close-up, we see tears rolling down her cheeks, manifesting the toll, on herself and on the nation, of this struggle.[[40]](#footnote-40)

In her dual role, Maya represents the operational, political, and ethical “otherness” that has penetrated the nation’s heart in the struggle against terror. Maya is a scapegoat who keeps the men unsullied by this “otherness.”[[41]](#footnote-41) However, despite efforts to constrain her impact, by the men and by the film, her unconventional character and her unique understanding of the terrorists create a rupture that offers an alternative ethical approach to the terrorist Other, bringing him closer to the American Self.

**The Self and the Other in the womb: *Homeland***

As in *Zero Dark Thirty* (and unlike the Israeli original), in *Homeland* the main character is a woman. The seriesfocuses on the efforts of CIA operations officer Carrie Mathison to prevent terror attacks in the US or on US assets around the world. In the first three seasons, the enemy is Islamic fundamentalism, represented by the figure of Abu Nazir (Navid Negahban), an al-Qaeda commander who is suspected of having turned USMC Scout Sniper Sergeant Nick Brody against the US during the latter’s captivity in Syria. After his rescue by Delta Force commandos, Brody is welcomed home with much fanfare, and quickly ascends the American political ladder. However, Carrie suspects that the returning Marine is now a terrorist and a threat to American leaders and institutions.[[42]](#footnote-42) As viewers soon find out, she is correct: Brody is indeed an active terrorist.

The terrorist Other in *Homeland* is therefore much closer to home than in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The series goes to great lengths to show that an individual’s religious, racial, or ethnic background are useless in identifying terrorists. Almost everyone is “different” in one way or another. Saul (Mandy Patinkin), Carrie’s mentor in the CIA, is a Jew married to a woman from India. David Estes (David Harewood), Carrie’s boss, is black and his ex-wife and children are converts to Judaism. Fara Sherazi (Nazanin Boniadi), a CIA analyst of Iranian descent, is reprimanded by her colleagues for her traditional Muslim dress. At the same time, Roya Hammad (Zuleikha Robinson), a political journalist with access to top military and political personalities, hides her Palestinian origins, and her terrorist activities, behind a British accent and demeanor acquired during her student years in Oxford. Aileen Morgan (Marin Ireland), an American blonde, is an active terrorist, who is reluctantly joined by her Saudi husband.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Not only is it difficult to identify terrorists, but national loyalty itself is unstable. Two Marines, one white and one black, betray their country and become terrorists. Brody’s loyalty is unstable throughout the first three seasons, and remains so until just moments before his death. Carrie herself operates both within and outside the law, and later hinders CIA investigations for personal reasons. In this way, the series not only problematizes conventional representations of the terrorist Other, but also reflects the epistemological challenge of understanding that Other who lives among “us.”

In *Homeland,* then, the line between friend and foe, which, according to Foucault and Agamben, the state seeks to define, is difficult to draw. Through Carrie’s unconventional character – in many ways, she is herself an “other”– and through her relationship with the terrorist, the series denies the possibility of identifying such a line, and even its very existence.

Currently, western security agencies, in reality and in fiction, often base their efforts to draw this line and identify terrorists on technological and biological means, such as lie detectors, satellite imagery, video surveillance, and so on.[[44]](#footnote-44) Many of these are represented in *Homeland*. Carrie begins her investigation of Brody by planting surveillance cameras in his home, and endlessly watches him on screens installed in her own living room.[[45]](#footnote-45) Surveillance cameras have become commonplace in military and civilian security systems, as they have in film and television.[[46]](#footnote-46) Audiences have come to recognize the grainy images they produce, often from above, as conventional representations of authenticity. Their supposedly real time, automatic indexiality gives them extra credibility.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Some of the narratives that employ such devices present the surveyed body as a source of knowledge. Others, *Homeland* included, defy this fantasy.[[48]](#footnote-48) Carrie’s voyeuristic gaze is legally and ethically problematic. Viewers are uncomfortable accomplices in her ultimately fruitless act. Days and nights of watching Brody on screen provide Carrie with no proof and no clear understanding of her target. The useless screens call into question the methods used by national security agencies, as well as the notion that the series itself, and popular media in general, can provide an answer to the enigma of the terrorist Other.

Dissatisfied with the results of the electronic surveillance, Carrie initiates a meeting with Brody on more equal terms, in person, an attempt to overcome the hierarchy and distance between the Self and the Other embedded in security technology. In so doing, she becomes what Neroni calls a “detective of the real,” who is interested in the subject of her investigation as a body “entrenched within a subjectivity.”[[49]](#footnote-49) This decision, along with other unorthodox moves and the ensuing conflicts with her superiors, marks Carrie as an Other within the system.

More significantly, however, Carrie is marked as different because of her bipolar disorder. The show represents her hereditary manic depression dialectically. On the one hand, the mental illness weakens her and enables the CIA, and the show, to temporarily exclude her from the public sphere (the reason why she kept it secret in the first place). On the other hand, when in a manic state, Carrie has an advantage in understanding the terrorists (which is why she refuses medication in season five).[[50]](#footnote-50)

According to Mary Anne Doane, who analyses the mental pathologies of women in “women films” of the 1930s and 1940s, these films present two central narratives: first, an excessive, incoherent, and sometimes hallucinatory speech by the woman, and second, a coherent and therapeutic narrative delivered by an authoritative male, often a doctor or judge. Similarly, Carrie, hospitalized for a concussion, experiences a manic episode that causes her to babble rapidly and voluminously about imminent terror threats, so quickly that Saul finds it difficult to follow her.[[51]](#footnote-51) The nurse asks Saul to take Carrie to her room, indicating a doctor will soon come to calm her down. This exchange marks her conduct as pathological, a designation used by the security system, and the show, to confine her and silence her narrative.

While the show seems at first glance to preserve the traditional gender roles that underlie Doane’s analysis, a closer look at Carrie’s pathology proves otherwise. In her excitement, Carrie speaks in long chains of alliterative adjectives. For example, she describes one terrorist as “a part, a piece, a pixel, a pawn.” Chains of words linked by their sound, but not by their meaning, are known in psychiatry as “clang associations.” Pathological clang associations, and pathological loose associations in general, are essentially incoherent, requiring special effort on the part of a psychologist to decipher them.[[52]](#footnote-52) However, Carrie’s clang associations are connected not only phonetically but semantically as well. Viewers understand them perfectly, even if Saul does not. Her speaking may be excessive, but her language is enhanced, not lacking. Her manic revelation that a large attack is imminent draws in the viewer as it sharply increases the dramatic tension.

The show provides proof of her enhanced perception while in the manic state soon after, when Carrie returns home from the hospital. Having chaotically spread out documents all over her living room floor and ecstatically marking them in various colours, Carrie identifies a gap in Abu Nazir’s terrorist activities, a period he was silent and inactive. While Saul can only later recognize the pattern when he organizes the documents chronologically, Carrie does not need this linear order to see the gap. She is already focused on Abu Nazir’s lack of activity, rightly suspecting that it provides a clue to the source of his trauma and passion for revenge. Her mental disorder, her otherness, makes it easier for her to understand his motivation.

Like Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Carrie has an exceptional gift for making meaning out of lack. Following Kaja Silverman, this gift can be related to gender difference.[[53]](#footnote-53) According to Silverman, masculinity has been constructed phallocentrically as a denial of castration, a desire to repress all that evades knowledge and control. Women, not as centered on the phallus, are less threatened by the unknown, by the uncontrollable. Faced with the absence of knowledge of and control over the terrorist Other, both texts present women as the ones who attempt to grasp the unknown.

Carrie is not only different from her male superiors. She is also similar in a number of ways to Brody, the terrorist Other. Both Carrie and Brody have secrets and both struggle with internal demons: while Carrie copes with her bipolar disorder and the trauma of 9/11, in the wake of his captivity, Brody suffers from nightmares, hallucinations, and outbursts of anger.[[54]](#footnote-54) Both experienced personal traumas that were related to the national struggle. The interpenetration of the personal and the political and a deep sense of public duty disturb both their lives. As Anat Zanger argues, both serve as scapegoats: the woman and the Marine are punished for crossing borders and for their internal alterity. At the same time, both symbolize the nation and suffer for it.[[55]](#footnote-55)

In *Homeland*, the woman not only resembles the terrorist, but she further symbolizes the collapse of binary conceptions of “us” and “them” by forming a romantic bond with him, blurring the line between enemy and lover. The closer Carrie comes to the enemy, the more the series attempts to withdraw her from the public sphere. She assumes the conventional woman’s role in the national project when their relationship results in a pregnancy, and Carrie considers abandoning her career and starting a family with Brody. However, even here Carrie does not fulfil her gender role as guardian of the borders of the nation through “proper” reproduction. On the contrary, the nation’s most intimate, gendered space has been penetrated by the enemy.[[56]](#footnote-56) Carrie carries his DNA in her womb, ensuring the continuity of none other than the terrorist. But her withdrawal from the public sphere does not succeed. Carrie and Brody part ways and continue their struggles separately.

Carrie and Brody are both characterized by danger, vulnerability, and suffering. In this they reflect Butler’s insight that 9/11 revealed that the precariousness of life is universal, that all lives are exposed to suffering inflicted by others. Following in the footsteps of Emanuel Levinas’ ethics, Butler suggests that, after 9/11, we must be more attentive to the face of the Other, a face that beseeches us to ensure her safety and well-being. Yet the possibility of hearing the call of the Other is influenced by the nature of the encounter with that Other, or by the lack of such an encounter. Butler points to a line that has been drawn between grievable and ungrieveable lives, which remain outside the frame of representation in the overall struggle against terror, and specifically in the two wars that followed 9/11.[[57]](#footnote-57) She protests against the absence, dehumanization, or even demonization of certain others in media representations. In *Homeland,* in contrast, Brody, the terrorist Other, is a traumatic and complex character. Viewers identify with his suffering, as they do with Carrie’s. Through their relationship, the enemy becomes humanized, transformed from a surveilled object to a vulnerable subject. Thanks to Carrie, who cries out his name in agony at the moment of his execution, in the end his life is grievable.[[58]](#footnote-58)

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have examined the appearance, a decade after 9/11, of unconventional, active, and successful female protagonists in film and television representations of the struggle against terror. I have suggested that this gender reversal is related to the unique crisis brought on by the war on terror. This crisis revolves around the difficulty of distinguishing between “us” and “them,” between Self and Other, as the two draw closer geographically, tactically, and ethically. Both texts deploy women, who are at once symbols of the nation and of the Other within, to articulate the crisis and to contain it. In their similarities with terrorists, and, in *Homeland*, in the relationship with one, both Maya and Carrie represent the blurring of the line between the Self and the Other. They convey the Other’s penetration of the nation’s heart, while at the same time protecting men from this influence.

By means of their unconventional methods, Maya and Carrie elevate the Other from the status of inspected object to consider him as a subject. In the physical and emotional suffering that the heroines share with the terrorists, the film and the show reflect Butler’s recognition of the precariousness of all lives, of “us” and “them,” and open a door to alternative ethical approaches to Self and Other, even under the current political circumstances.

1. Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Indiana UP, 1989, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bell-Metereau, Rebecca. “The How-To Manual, the Prequel and the Sequel in Post-9/11 Cinema”. *Film and Television after 9/11*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon, Southern Illinois UP, 2004, 142-162, 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In *United 93* (Peter Markle, USA, 2006) roles are divided more evenly between men and women. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Butler, Judith. *Precarious life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso Books, 2006. Specific page xii [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Such films include *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1990), *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991), *Alien 3* (David Fincher, 1992) and more. Tasker, Yvonne. *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema*, Routledge, c1993. P. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tasker, Yvonne. *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*, Routledge, 1998, 89-115,especially p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mizejewski refers to *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1990) and *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demi. 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J. P. Alotte, qtd. in Mizejewski, Linda, “The Female Dick*: The Silence of the Lambs* and *Blue Steel*”. *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 45, no. 2/3, Summer-Fall 1993, pp. 6-23. Page 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Neroni, Hilary. *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*. SUNY Press, 2005. This point pages 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As was the case of the femme fatale in *film noir* films, against the backdrop of World War II (Neroni, 2005, note 8). This point pages 19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Neroni 2005, pp. 8-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tasker, Yvonne. *Soldiers Stories: Military Women in Cinema and Television since World War II*, Duke UP, 2011, pp. 4, , 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jeffords, see note 1, p 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See McClintock, Anne. “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family”. *Feminist Review*, vol. 44, 1993, pp. 61–80. P. 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See, for example, Kaldor, Mary. “Old Wars, Cold Wars, New Wars, and the War on Terror”. *International Politics*, vol. 42, no. 4, December 2005, pp. 491-498. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kaldor, 2013, p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Morag, Raya. “The living Body and the Corpse – Israeli Documentary Cinema and the Intifadah.” *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 60, no. 3-4, Fall/Winter 2008, 3-30. This is from page 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Agamben, Giorgio. *State of exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell, U of Chicago P, 2005, and *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford UP, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The USA PATRIOT ACT, signed into law by President Bush on October 26, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See President George W. Bush’s Military Order of November 13, 2001: Detention, Treatment, and Trial of Certain Non-Citizens in the War against Terrorism. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. “Unlawful combatants do not have any rights under the Geneva Convention,” said US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in an interview when the first detainees from Afghanistan arrived at Guantanamo (Reuters, January 11, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Memorandum to the President, of January 25, 2002, by White House Counsel Alberto R. Gonzales. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Foucault, Michel. Chapter Eleven. *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*, translated by David Macey, edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, Picador, 2003‏, pp. 239-263. Page 239-242 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Shane, Scott. "Drone Strikes Reveal Uncomfortable Truth: US is Often Unsure about Who Will Die." *The New York Times*, 24 April 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Duffy, Michael, Tim Mcgirk and Bobby Ghosh. “The Ghosts of Haditha.” *Time*, Vol. 167, no. 24, June 12, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Doherty, Thomas. “Movie Reviews: *Zero Dark Thirty*.” *Journal of American History*, vol. 100, no. 1, 2013, pp. 303-305, esp. p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. On the inaccessibility of trauma and the challenges of its representation, see Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. This point pages 4-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Žižek, Slavoi. “Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance.” *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, Verso, 2002, pp. 5-32. This point from page 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ann McClintock, ”paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.” Small Axe, vol. 13, no.1, March 2009, pp. 50-74, this p. 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The film sparked a debate over whether it justifies torture in the struggle against terror. I find that the film confirms that torture did happen but not that torture provided vital information in the search for bin Laden. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Judith Butler observes that, in the pictures leaked from Abu Ghraib, the faces of the detainees, hooded or not, are never seen, only those of their prisoners (Butler, Judith. *Frames of war: When is Life Grievable?* Verso Books, 2016). This point p 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Neroni, Hilary. *The Subject of Torture: Psychoanalysis & Biopolitics in Television & Film*, Columbia UP, 2015, pp. 115-138. Neroni borrows the term “the real” from Jacques Lacan, for whom the three realms of the Self are: “the symbolic,” “the imaginary,” and “the real,” which is the level of desire (Lacan, qtd. In Neroni, 2015 128-129). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Neroni 2015, p.25 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Some audiences, especially in the US, have prior knowledge from earlier news reports that bin Laden’s killing was made possible by a female CIA agent. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Source for the script [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hack, Daniel. “Revenge Stories of Modern Life.” *Victorian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, Winter 2006, pp. 277-286. This point from page 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Hack, Daniel, Earlier note, this point from page 278 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Treverton, Gregory F. “The Intelligence of Counterterrorism.” *The Long Shadow of 9/11: America's Response to Terrorism,* edited by Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges, RAND Corporation, 2011, pp.*‏* 161-168.or former note. This point also from page 162 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Or “crusade,” as one of her colleagues calls it. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Burgoyne, Robert. “The Violated Body: Affective Experience and Somatic Intensity in *Zero Dark Thirty*.” *The Philosophy of War Films*, edited by David LaRocca, UP of Kentucky, 2014, pp. 104-108.This point p 108 and Doherty, Thomas. p. 305 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Zanger, Anat. “Between *Homeland* and *Prisoners of War*: Remaking Terror.” *Continuum*, vol. 29, no. 5, 2015, pp. 731-742. This point pp 738-739 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. “Pilot”, Season 1, Episode 1, 2 October 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. James Castonguay points out that, although not all Muslims are terrorists in the first three seasons, all terrorists are Muslims. This changes in subsequent seasons. “Fictions of Terror: Complexity and Insecurity in *Homeland*.” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, Summer 2015, pp. 139-145. This point p. 143. Give up on this comment? [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Neroni, Hilary. 2015, note 29. this point from p. 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. “Pilot”, Season 1, Episode 1, 2 October 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Kammerer, Dietmar. “Video Surveillance in Hollywood Movies.” *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 2, no.2/3, 2004, pp. 464-473. This point from p 468. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Levin, Thomas Y. "Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of ‘Real Time’.” *CTRL: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, 2002, pp. 578-593.‏ this point in 578-580. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Neroni, 2015 note 29, 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Neroni, 2015, earlier note, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. “Super Powers”, Season 5, Episode 3, 18 October 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. “The Vest”, Season 1, Episode 11, 11 December 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Hoffman, Ralph E., Susan Stopek, and Nancy C. Andreasen. “A Comparative Study of Manic vs. Schizophrenic Speech Disorganization.” *Archives of General Psychiatry*, vol. 43, no .9, 1986, pp. 831-838. This point from page 831. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Silverman, Kaja. "Historical Trauma and Male Subjectivity."  *Cinema,* Routledge*,* 1990, pp. 110-127. This point 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Edgerton, Gary R., and Katherine C. Edgerton. “Pathologizing Post-9/11 America in Homeland: Private Paranoia, Public Psychosis.” *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 7, 2012, pp. 89-92.‏ this point page 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Zanger, Anat. Note 36. This from page 735, 739 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. On *Homeland*’s use of the woman’s body as a battlefield in a war that cannot be defined geographically, see Bevan, Alex. “The National Body, Women, and Mental Health in *Homeland,*” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2015, pp. 145-151.‏ this point p 148 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Butler, Judith*. Frames of war: When is Life Grievable?* Verso Books, 2016. Specific page 64-65‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. “The Star”, Season 3, Episode 12, 15 December 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)