Terror, Gender and Ethics in American Media after 9/11: *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland*

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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 women have appeared in leading roles in films and TV dramas dealing with terrorism and counterterrorism. 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. The following analysis of Kathryn Bigelow’s 2012 film *Zero Dark Thirty* and the TV show *Homeland* (2011–2020) will demonstrate how this crisis is both expressed and contained through the unconventional female protagonists on the front line of that national struggle. Furthermore, by means of this break with conventional gender representation, these dramas subversively offer an alternative approach to the enemy. Following Judith Butler’s notion of the universal precariousness of life, the article suggests that, through similarities between the heroines and the terrorists and their shared vulnerability, an ethical concept of the terrorist Other, as a subject, emerges.

Key words: terrorism, gender, ethics, 9/11, film, television

# 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 (1989, 49) in her study of gender and the Vietnam War. 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 (2004, 142) 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.” Part of the patriotic wave immediately following 9/11, Bell-Metereau (2004, 146) argues, films like Michael Bay’s *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and Phil Alden Robinson’s *The* *Sum of All Fears* (2002) cast women as nurses or doctors who wait out the fight and then serve as sexual prizes for the survivors. In Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* (2006), the first film dealing directly with 9/11, fire fighters are caught in the aftermath, while their clueless wives wait at home (Randell 2010, 146).[[1]](#endnote-2) When women do take an active part in the struggle against terror, their role is secondary. This can be seen, for example, in the TV series *24* (2001–2010), in which Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) confronts various terror threats, defending his spouse, daughter, and 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 fight at the forefront of battles in popular representations, active, resourceful, and successful women have also appeared in leading roles in films and TV dramas dealing with terrorism. In TV series such as *Covert Affairs* (2010–2015), *Homeland* (2011–2020), *Scandal* (2012–2018), *The Blacklist* (2013–), and *Quantico* (2015–2018) the lead character is a woman confronting terrorism and protecting others. In films as well, women are represented at the forefront of the battle. In Gavin Hood’s *Rendition* (2007) and *Eye in the Sky* (2015), Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren respectively portray the commanding officers. In Kathryn Bigelow’s film *Zero Dark Thirty* (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 female characters given such unconventional precedence in representations of the struggle against terror? I suggest that this reversal of gender roles should be understood in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism 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 Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) in the TV show *Homeland*. *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts actual events in the decade-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 “abductees,” named *Prisoners of War* in English, 2010–2012). Yet, it too relates, in various ways, 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 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 struggle 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. The following analysis of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland* will show how this crisis is both expressed and contained through the unconventional female protagonists on the front line of that struggle. 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 defense. 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 keeping the male collective at a safe distance from it.[[2]](#endnote-3)

As scapegoats for the proximity of the Other to the American Self, these women experience what Judith Butler calls “the precariousness of life” (2006, xii). Following Butler, I propose that these characters’ pain and vulnerability 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, including people that have remained outside the frame of representation and visibility in the media (2016, 1–12). Accordingly, I argue that in *Homeland* and *Zero Dark Thirty* the lead female characters bring to light 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 battle against 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 counterterrorism effort.

The appearance, a decade or so after 9/11, of a number of active, determined, and successful women in leading roles in films and TV shows dealing with terrorism is a break with traditional roles of women in national struggles and their conventional representations, in genres such as war, spy, action, or police. As Ann McClintock shows, these traditional roles have deep roots in the gendered construction of the national project (1993, 61–80). Theorizing on power and gender in nationalism, McClintock claims no nation has given equal access to its resources and to the possibility of influencing its future to men and women. “Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency” (62). Women often symbolize the nation, yet are excluded, in both space and time, from any active part in its history: “National ‘progress’ (conventionally the invented domain of male, public space) was figured as *familial*, while the family itself (conventionally the domain of private, female space) was figured as *beyond history*” (67, italics in the original).

The unconventional representation of women in leading roles in films and 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 thus indicate a crisis in the dominant ideology overall. In her discussion of action heroines of the 1980s and 1990s,[[3]](#endnote-4) Yvonne Tasker describes how the ambiguous gender identity of the heroines, as exemplified by their dress, actions, and accumulated power, challenges gendered binaries and elicits tension and instability (Tasker 1998, 67, 75). Discussing women investigators in films from the early 1990s,[[4]](#endnote-5) Tasker (1998, 89–114) argues that the female presence in the public, masculine domain creates or intensifies a crisis. Sexual desire or romance often interferes with the search for knowledge and disturbs social stability (103). Similarly, Linda Mizejewski (1993, 20), citing J. P. Alotte’s notion of *film noir*, argues that some films from the 1990s, with a female detective as their lead character, continue to perform a “deconstructive movement to problematize investigation itself as part of a larger cultural anxiety about ways of knowing.” Mizejewski directs our attention to the evolution of the female figures in the crime film genre. Unlike their predecessors in film noir, the women in films like Kathryn Bigelow’s *Blue Steel* (1990) and Jonathan Demme’s *The* *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) are legally armed and positioned on the other side of law enforcement. Yet even on the “right” side, their femininity still “complicates the status of heroism and knowledge” (6). In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland* the female investigators are also part of a government force, this time the security system, in a war film. Their gendered presence creates tension and instability, expressing, I claim, yet another epistemic and social crisis.

In the same vein, Hilary Neroni (2005, 8) observes that in numerous genres throughout film history, “on-screen violence has primarily been a masculine activity.” Yet in historical moments of ideological crisis, violent women emerge in similar roles.[[5]](#endnote-6) Films that portray violent women perform a dual mission. They express the crisis through this break with gender conventions; at the same time, the narrative contains this 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 Ridley Scott’s *Thema and Louise* [1992]), or presenting a split between her professional involvement in violence and private expressions of femininity (as in Ridley Scott’s *G. I. Jane* [1997]) are some of the means employed to restrain the trauma caused by the violent woman (Neroni 2005, 8–9).

The female soldier is a relevant example. As “a boundary crossing figure – not really a woman and not really a soldier,” Tasker (2011, 4) finds her to be “a contradiction in terms” (287). As a liminal, unstable category, the female soldier threatens the social order. In reality and “in popular imagery and narratives, the military woman represents a particular sort of gender trouble.” In many of the examples she studies, Tasker finds an “underlying anxiety that the military woman might escape . . . limits, tipping ordered military life into anarchic misrule” (2). Jeffords (1989, 59) shows how solidarity between combatants, which is vital for their survival, has typically been defined in Vietnam along gender lines. The masculine collective that was created in military units at the front succeeded in overcoming many differences among its members, such as race, religion, class, education, age and so on, with the exception of gender.. In this collective, women were the excluded Other, not unlike the enemy. An action heroine, a woman capable of violence, a female investigator or soldier – the representation of a woman who is active in the public sphere and influences the collective future is a deviation from gender conventions that feminist writers see as indicative of a crisis.

What then is the nature of the crisis underlying the frontline female protagonists in popular media representations of the struggle against terror created a decade after 9/11? Terrorism and counterterrorism are instances of what researchers have labelled “new war” (Kaldor 2013). 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, at least rhetorically, 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) (Kaldor 2013, 2). 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 no longer have a clear beginning or end, nor are they limited to a certain territory or location.

“New war” poses a double challenge, at once epistemological as well as ethical. As Raya Morag (2008, 5) 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, defense-offense, beginning-end, victory-defeat, war-peace, moral-immoral.” 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 (1998, 2005) discusses the ethical implications of the blurring of the line between “us” and “them” in a struggle that has no definite beginning or end. 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, 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 George W. Bush proclaimed a national emergency, and government agencies were consequently allowed to violate some constitutional rights of US citizens[[6]](#endnote-7) and rights granted by international law to detainees offshore. 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 enemy prisoners of war,[[7]](#endnote-8) and in fact, *any*legal protection.[[8]](#endnote-9)

Such an exceptional imbalance between the power of the sovereign and that of the law 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 (2003, 239–242) 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 “biopower.” 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.

A number of writers have discussed the efforts to draw this line within the American multicultural immigrant society in the battle against terror. A gendered and racial category was created by government and public disciplinary powers, a category including “‘Middle Eastern men,’ Muslims, and those who ‘look Middle Eastern or Muslim’” (Grewal 2003, 539). As Sunaina Maira (2009) shows, the challenge of identifying potential terrorists gave rise to the formation of and distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims. For the difficult task of differentiation between loyal and threatening subjects, Muslim and South Asian organizations and individuals were put under surveillance, covert informants were sent into communities, and preemptive detention and deportation policies (some with high public visibility) were used in what was “essentially the racial management of populations” (637–639). Arab and South Asian Muslim communities, organizations, and individuals, on their side, internalized the demands of this biopower and aligned themselves with national and international policies of the government, as was exemplified by widespread display of the American flag on institutions, businesses, and homes in the US (Grewal 2003, 548–549).

This difficulty in identifying the enemy within the population also resulted in ethical challenges overseas. In the years following 9/11, US personnel tortured and sexually abused detainees with no legal status or rights in the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo (Greenberg and Dratel, 2005). US drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere have resulted in civilian casualties and injuries (Scott 2015), and revenge killings by US soldiers occurred, for example, in Haditha, Iraq (Duffy, Mcgrik, and Ghosh 2006). The publication of these facts caused a heated public and political debate. During the decade following 9/11, it became clear 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 those of the terrorist Other. By presenting CIA analyst 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.

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 finally talks about another suspect, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti (Tushaar Mehra). Maya concentrates her investigation on Abu Ahmed, suspecting he is the courier of traffic between Abu Faraj al-Libbi (Yoav Levi) and bin Laden. In 2009, during the Camp Chapman attack in Afghanistan, Maya’s fellow analyst and friend Jessica (Jennifer Ehle) is killed by a suicide bomber. Maya vows to kill everyone involved in this attack. Overcoming objections by her superiors and colleagues, she 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 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 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 direct viewers’ attention to the representational crisis associated with the trauma.[[9]](#endnote-10) The absence of images also references the spectacular, cinematic news footage of the twin towers on 9/11, which was repeatedly broadcast in the media, to a numbing effect (Žižek 2002, 11).

The film’s prologue is followed by a long, at times graphic, sequence in which American investigators torture Ammar. 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 (McClintock 2009, 67), 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.[[10]](#endnote-11)

Ammar, 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 (00:05:30). 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.[[11]](#endnote-12) In this way, the film already implicitly reduces the distance between Self and Other, a move further developed by the heroine.

The next section of the film follows Maya on her long, Sisyphean search for bin Laden. Neroni (2015, 115–138) compares Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* to Carrie in *Homeland*, calling the first a “bio-detective” and the second a “detective of the real.”[[12]](#endnote-13) 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 in to the desires and anxieties of the subjects of her investigation. In contrast to Neroni, I consider Maya and Carrie both to be “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 (Neroni 2015, 25). 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 popular media. 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, which she does not share with her bosses, to consider the motives behind suspects’ behavior. 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, directly associated with bin Laden. “This is tradecraft,” Maya says about the inconsistent conduct of the suspected courier, who is doing, she believes, 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 the 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 a 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, Maya propels 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 constantly pushes for action.[[13]](#endnote-14) Nevertheless, Maya is constantly held back by colleagues, especially her superiors in the hierarchical, predominantly male, 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, she is detained by male guards for a long clearance process. 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 seem to be gender distinctive.

Temporally, Maya is focused on the past. She is motivated by a desire to avenge 9/11 and Jessica’s death. As Daniel Hack (2006, 277) explains, revenge, even when it involves future planning, is always fixated on past events. 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 the 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, cast back into the more conventional gender role of the woman awaiting the warriors’ return. The night attack 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 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 (2006, 278), western culture has historically considered revenge to be a primitive, atavistic, and irrational motive, qualities often associated with terrorists (Treverton 2011, 162). Maya is completely and obsessively dedicated to revenge. 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.[[14]](#endnote-15)

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,” (01:44:40) explains George, a Senior CIA Supervisor (Mark Strong) to the White House National Security Advisor (Stephen Dillane). 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 (02:29:01). 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 continuous struggle (Doherty 2013, 305).

In her dual role, symbolizing both the nation and the Other within, Maya represents the operational, political, and ethical “otherness” that has penetrated the nation’s heart in the struggle against terror. She is a scapegoat who keeps the men unsullied by this “otherness.” However, despite efforts to constrain her impact, by the men and by the film, her unconventional character, along with her unique understanding of the enemy, represents the American Self as closer to the terrorist Other.

# 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 suspected of having turned USMC Sergeant Nicholas Brody against the US during the latter’s captivity in Syria. After his rescue by Delta Force commandos, Brody is welcomed home with great fanfare, and quickly ascends the American political ladder. However, Carrie suspects that the returning Marine is now a threat to American leaders and institutions. 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*. In fact, the series goes to great lengths to show that an individual’s religious, racial, or ethnic background is 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 the 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.

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 in fact 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 identifying that Other who lives among “us.” In *Homeland,* the line between friend and foe that the state seeks to define, according to Foucault and Agamben, 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 (Neroni 2015, 117). 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 (season 1, episode 1). Surveillance cameras have become commonplace in military and civilian security systems, as they have in film and television (Kammerer 2004, 468). 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 (Levin 2002, 578–580).

Some of the narratives that employ such devices present the surveyed body as a source of knowledge. Others, *Homeland* included, defy this fantasy (Neroni 2015, 24). 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 ineffective 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, in an unauthorized 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 (2015, 25) calls a “detective of the real,” who is interested in the subject of her investigation as a body “entrenched within a subjectivity.” This decision, along with other unorthodox moves and the ensuing conflicts with her superiors, marks Carrie as an Other within the security system.

More significantly, however, Carrie is marked as different because of her bipolar disorder.[[15]](#endnote-16) 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 [season 5, episode 3]).

According to Mary Anne Doane (1985, 220), who analyzes 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 a 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 (season 1, episode 11, 00:06:09). 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 (Hoffman, Stopek, and Andreasen 1986, 831). 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 colors, Carrie identifies a gap in Abu Nazir’s terrorist activities, a period when 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 (1990, 111), this gift can be related to gender difference. 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 centered on the phallus, are less threatened by lack, by the unknown, or by the uncontrollable. Faced with the absence of knowledge of and control over the terrorist Other, both texts assign women the task of grasping the unknown.

Carrie is not only different from her male colleagues. She is also similar in a number of ways to Brody, the terrorist Other. Both Carrie and Brody have secrets and both struggle with inner 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 (Edgerton and Edgerton 2012, 91). 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 (2015, 735–739) 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.

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. As a response, 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 reproductive role in the national project (McClintock 1993, 62) when their relationship results in a pregnancy, and Carrie considers abandoning her career and starting a family with Brody. However, Carrie does not fulfill 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.[[16]](#endnote-17) Carrie carries his DNA in her womb, ensuring the continuity of none other than the terrorist.

Carrie’s pregnancy by the Other invokes historical notions of white womanhood and old anxieties related to the preservation of national identity. As Shawn Michelle Smith shows, in the early days of the nation, white women were posed as bearers of white America’s future generations, with their reproductive role perceived as essential to the stability of the nation, in its white domination. White women’s sexuality had to be scrutinized and controlled, and consequently pure white womanhood was invoked as a symbol of racial and national virtue (Smith 2006, 77). Smith discusses the relationship between white womanhood and the lynching of black men in the American South. These black men were often accused of raping white women, and their lynching expressed white supremacy’s anxiety about racial purity (78). When Carrie, an all-American blonde of Irish descent, becomes pregnant by the terrorist Other, the series calls upon the body of the white woman to articulate the current national anxiety and trauma. Yet the penetrating Other here is not black, nor is he the more recent conventional racial Other, the “brown” Arab or Muslim terrorist (Grewal 2003, 536). In portraying the enemy as a white, red-haired former Marine, the series moves away from racial expectations and clichés about that Other.[[17]](#endnote-19) Moreover, the penetration of the national heroine by that white Other exemplifies his existence *within* its identity, an internal locus of closeness and similarity. White as he is, Brody finds his death by hanging in a crowded square in Tehran (season 3, episode 12), in a scene not unlike that of a black person being lynched by an American mob.

Carrie and Brody are both characterized by danger, vulnerability, and suffering. In this they reflect Butler’s insight that the precariousness of life, as revealed in 9/11, is universal, that all lives are exposed to suffering inflicted by others. In fact, from birth and throughout our lives, our very existence depends on others, and not necessarily others that we select or even know. This universal reciprocity inevitably binds the Self and the Other. 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 (2006, xi-xiii). 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 (2016, 64–65) points to a line that has been drawn between grievable and ungrievable lives, which remain outside the frame of representation in the overall struggle against terror. 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 (season 3, episode 12, 00:38:05).

# 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 struggle against 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 in the wake of 9/11, even under the current political circumstances.

1. In Peter Markle’s *United 93* (2006) roles are divided more evenly between men and women. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. The heroines of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland* have been paired before. See Irene Shih (2013) and Hilary Neroni (2015). While commending the appearance of these new female heroines, Shih finds that they are portrayed as limited in their professional and private lives and serve as narrative devices in stories in which evil is conventionally portrayed as opposing “all that we stand for” (103). In my analysis I hope to show how these female figures, *specifically* in their Otherness as women, complicate the relationship between Self and Other in the struggle against terror. I will further discuss Neroni’s comparison of these two female detectives here below. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Such as Captain Ripley (Sigourney Weaver in Ridley Scott’s 1979 film *Alien* and in its sequels) and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton in James Cameron’s 1984 film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Such films include Kathryn Bigelow’s *Blue Steel* (1990), Sondra Locke’s *Impulse* (1990), Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and James Lemmo’s *Bodily Harm* (1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. As was the case of the femme fatale in *film noir* films, against the backdrop of World War II (Mizejewski 1993, 20; Neroni 2005, 19–20). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. See the USA PATRIOT ACT, signed into law by President Bush on October 26, 2001. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. “Unlawful combatants do not have any rights under the Geneva Convention,” said US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (*Reuters*, January 11, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. See Memorandum to the President, of January 25, 2002, by White House Counsel Alberto R. Gonzales. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. On the inaccessibility of trauma and the challenges of its representation, see Caruth (1996, 4–5). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Judith Butler (2016, 65) observes that, in the pictures leaked from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the faces of the detainees, hooded or not, are never seen, only those of their prisoners. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Neroni (2015, 128–129) borrows the term “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. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Some audiences have prior knowledge from news reports that bin Laden’s killing was made possible by a female CIA agent. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Or “crusade,” as one of her colleagues calls it. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. For Gary and Katherine Edgerton, Carrie’s “bipolar disorder emerges as an apt synecdoche for the current state of post 9/11 American psyche, oscillating between aggressive offensive actions abroad and fear-filled defence at home” (91). Irene Shih also regards the bipolar disorder as an expression of current doubts and ambiguities, “as heroes and villains blend and blur” (100), yet considers it to be a conventional trope used to weaken and control the female protagonist and reduce her position as a woman in power. In the following close analysis of one manic episode (season 1, episode 11), I suggest that the show concentrates on the manic state more than on the depressive side of the disorder, and uses it as an expression of the woman’s otherness that gives her unique, enhanced understanding of events and intentions. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. For Bevan, the use of the female body in *Homeland* is related to the elusive nature and unrepresentability of twenty-first-century warfare and also to the tension between private selfhood and state power in the struggle against terror (2015, 146–148). This article suggests that Carrie’s body, and particularly her pathology and her pregnancy, are related also to a crisis in the distinction between Self and Other and to the ethical issues this crisis raises. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Shih points out that while Brody, a white terrorist, is a complex character, Abu Nazir, the racially Other, “remains a diabolic cartoon,” and asks: “Is this [Brody’s complex character as a terrorist] brave storytelling, or is it feeding us only what we can digest?” (102). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)