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 continuous 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 – and in *Homeland*, even proximity – 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 popular 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*.[[2]](#endnote-3) *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts actual events in the decade-long search 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 Self and Other – 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 similarity 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.

As scapegoats for the similarity to the Other that was revealed in the American Self, these women are put in danger and suffer physically and mentally. They seem to experience what Judith Butler (2006, xii) calls “the precariousness of life.” The main lesson Butler draws from 9/11 is that all lives are precarious and dependent on others, sometimes others whom we do not choose or even know. For Butler, 9/11 is an opportunity to consider who else might be exposed to unexpected violence and suffering. Our own trauma at this sudden attack on us is an opportunity to realize that the precariousness of life is relevant to all people, including people who have remained outside the frame of representation and visibility in the battle against terror, to people whose suffering and lost life remained ungrievable in the two wars that followed (Butler 2016, 1–12). The precariousness of life, physical or emotional, is a universal state that unites the Self and Other, on both the personal and national levels. Accordingly, I argue that in *Homeland* and *Zero Dark Thirty* the lead female characters give visibility to the terrorist Other, not only in their mutual traits, passions, and even relationships, but also in the vulnerability and pain that they share with Others in the diegesis. Through similarities between the heroines and terrorists and through their shared precariousness, the terrorist Other is included in the frame, and an ethical concept of this 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. Theorizing on power and gender in nationalism, McClintock (1993, 61–80) claims no nation has given equal access 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). In the national public space, the woman is both a metaphor for the nation and an excluded Other.

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 (1998, 67, 75) describes how the ambiguous gender identity of these heroines, as exemplified by their dress, actions, or accumulated power, challenges gendered binaries in a general state of tension and instability. 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 figure 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 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 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 (Kaldor 2013). 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.

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. “New war” poses a double challenge, at once epistemological as well as ethical.

Writers have discussed the efforts to draw the line between friend and foe both within the American multicultural society and internationally. As Sunaina Maira (2009, 637–639) shows, the challenge of identifying potential terrorists gave rise to a distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims inside the United States. 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” (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).

The difficulty in identifying combatants within the civilian population also resulted in ethical challenges overseas. 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. People of multiple nationalities, suspected of aiding the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other organizations, were all classed, without any legal procedure, under the new 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) In the years following 9/11, US personnel tortured and sexually abused detainees with no legal identity 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 of civilians by US soldiers occurred, for example, in Haditha, Iraq (Duffy, Mcgirk, 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, as having certain similarities with the terrorists, as uniquely understanding the enemy as a subject, and as suffering in similar ways, the film narrows 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 aircraft 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,” Ammar 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 implicit parallel between the prologue and the torture sequence, between the trauma of the 9/11 victim and that of the tortured detainee, reflects Butler’s observation that the precariousness of life, as revealed in 9/11, is universal (2006, xi–xiii). What 9/11 revealed is 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. For Butler 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. 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. As I hope to show, the parallel between investigator and suspected terrorist predicts similarities between Maya and the terrorists and brings the Other back into the frame.

The next section of the film follows Maya, a talented and tenacious CIA analyst, in her prolonged, Sisyphean search for bin Laden. The unconventional female security subject naturally gave rise to a debate about her meaning from a feminist point of view. Opinions vary, with her representation alternately characterized as feminist, postfeminist, anti-feminist, or gender neutral (van Raalte 2017, 99). While commending the appearance of new female heroines in the security arena, Irene Shih (2013, writing about Maya and Carrie) finds that they are both portrayed as limited in their professional and private lives and only serve as narrative devices in stories in which evil is conventionally portrayed as opposing “all that we stand for” (103). Marouf Hasian (2013) claims that “celebrating Maya’s protagonist role as evidence that women in the CIA are . . . treated as fellow ‘warriors’ . . . comes at the cost of ‘feminism undone’” (325) and that “all of this supposed liberation is contingent on accepting certain military ways” (333). “*Zero Dark Thirty* is a post-feminist production that has done little to add the cause of feminism” (337), Hasian concludes. For Christa van Raalte (2017), the presence of the female protagonist in *Zero Dark Thirty* enables the film to express action as watching and war as “logistics of perception” (Paul Virilio, quoted in van Raalte, 92), which is the main topic of the film, and not so much the gender conflict. Shirin Deylami (2019) does see a gendered conflict at the center of these dramas: both female protagonists, associated with emotion because they are women, challenge the rational masculine capacities required and preferred in the battle against terror. When Maya gives up on any emotional relationships expected of a woman (“So no boyfriend . . . any friends at all?” Jessica asks [00:48:47]), and when Carrie’s “romantic love is . . . marked here as . . . destructive to the protection of the nation” (769), their femininity is represented as an “antithesis to the rational subject of state power” (766). In representing “masculine capacities versus feminized limitations” (767), these dramas “changes nothing” (772). I agree with Deylami that the presence of female protagonists in both these texts is more than an incidental detail or a postfeminist “taken for granted” position, but not that it “changes nothing.” I would like to draw attention to the relative *success* of the female protagonists as compared with that of the men around them. After all, it is Maya who finds bin Laden, and it is Carrie who discovers Brody’s true motivation. In the following analysis I hope to show that in both texts the significant difference between the female protagonists and their male colleagues, a difference that allows their relative success, lies not in emotion versus rationality but in the way they relate to the Other. These two female figures, *specifically* in their Otherness as women, complicate the relationship between Self and Other in the struggle against terror.

Neroni (2015, 115–138) compares Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* to Carrie in *Homeland.* She defines Maya as a “biodetective” and Carrie as a “detective of the real.” The two types differ in the way they search for the truth. The more common type today, in reality and in representation, is the biodetective, who bases her investigation on biological causes and biological markers: “For the biodetective, methods such as fingerprinting, DNA samples, surveillance, body scans, lie detectors, and retina scans are authentic and generally infallible.” This is frequently reflected in film and television as well. “Depicting authenticity through biometrics has become an integral part of televised and film form,” Neroni (117) writes. A challenge to this concentration on the body is present in the detective of the real, who centers her investigation on the desire of the subject rather than on marks and effects of the body.[[12]](#endnote-13) Neroni asserts that “the detective of the real, unlike the biodetective, believes in the subject, and believes that truth can be revealed through subjectivity” (128). I would argue that the detective of the real gives more ethical presence to the Other, as a subject.

According to Neroni, Maya, a biodetective, 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. I consider Neroni’s distinction between investigation methods and her analysis of the ideology behind them fruitful to my current discussion, yet I disagree with her analysis of Maya in this respect. 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. Where Neroni draws the line between Maya and Carrie, I draw it between both female protagonists and the masculine security system they work for. The investigators’ failure to identify the Other by watching video footage is an implicit criticism of both investigation methods employed by the system 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 the terrorist Other as a subject, and thus to find him.

In *Zero Dark Thirty* the failure of biological methods in revealing the truth is exemplified in a number of ways. As early as the first torture sequence, information is obtained from the prisoner not by force inflicted on his body, but by a ruse initiated by Maya, based on his ignorance of the fact that the Saudi attack has already happened. Moreover, the film does not confirm that the name of the courier first became known as a result of torture. Endless hours of watching recorded investigations by torture and even conducting such investigations lead Maya to nothing but the already known nom de guerre of the courier. Maya’s frustration is evident. Setbacks in the investigation, due to misinterpretations of images and video recordings, occur more than once in the film, including, with fatal results, the video depicting the informant who later kills Jessica.

Success is achieved by a different, unorthodox approach. It is exemplified by Maya’s willingness, which she does not share with her bosses, to consider the motives behind suspects’ behavior. In this she becomes a detective of the real, tuning into the desires and anxieties of the Other. For example, 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. Maya’s 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.

Maya’s unique understanding of the terrorists’ desires and motivations is evident in the dispute she has with her colleague Jessica over the odds of bribing an al-Qaeda informant. “With 25 mil on the table I think he gives up the big man . . . everyone wants money,” says Jessica. Maya disagrees: “You’re assuming that al-Qaeda members are motivated by financial rewards. They are radicals” (00:30:54). Jessica pays with her life for misinterpreting the motivation of an Other who does not share American capitalistic ideology, but Maya can relate to the dedication of that Other to the cause.

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 identifies with her passion to find bin Laden and believes her efforts are in the right direction.[[13]](#endnote-14) Nevertheless, Maya is constantly held back by colleagues, especially her superiors in the hierarchical, predominantly male, CIA, with whom she constantly clashes.

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. 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.

In *Zero Dark Thirty* physical danger and suffering are the fate of people on both sides. In addition to seeing the tortured and kidnapped terrorists, we see Maya and Jessica in the Islamabad Marriott explosion, Maya attacked by demonstrators and by gunmen, and Jessica and others killed by a suicide bomber. There are also references to actual terror attacks, for example in London. In keeping with Butler’s assessment, vulnerability and precarity are universal.

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 (01:17:00). In a sense, Maya has embarked on a jihad of her own.[[14]](#endnote-15) Agnieszka Piotrowska (2014) compares Maya’s absolute commitment to the goal of finding bin Laden to the commitment of Sophocles’s Antigone, who is determined to bury her brother at all costs, including her own death. Piotrowska views this ultimate commitment “through the Lacanian notion of the ethical act consisting of ‘not giving up on one’s desire’ . . . [of being] faithful to it ‘beyond the limit’” (Lacan, quoted in Piotrowska, 143). For Piotrowska Maya is not “good” in the Levinas’s sense of loving one’s neighbor, but her dedication is based not on lack of empathy but on a passion to return some kind of equilibrium to the world, very much like Antigone’s. What is meaningful here is that Maya’s total commitment, out of a sense of destiny (“I was spared”) and mission, her willingness to give up any private life, to suffer, to be in constant danger, is not unlike that of the terrorists, or of the suicide bomber who killed Jessica. Maya may not form a bond with a terrorist as Carrie does, but in this profound similarity she can relate to the Other, allowing him into the picture, as a subject of passion.

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: the nation 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), perhaps even doubts about the mission she has dedicated her life to, which clearly has not brought an end to the struggle.

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 as a subject, 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 – CIA operations officer Carrie Mathison. In this series not only is the female protagonist similar to the terrorist in traits and in suffering, exhibiting a unique understanding of his traumas and desires, but she also develops a romantic bond with him, getting ever closer to the terrorist Other.

The seriesfocuses on the efforts of Carrie 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 leader suspected of having turned USMC Sergeant Nicholas Brody against the US during the Marine’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,[[15]](#endnote-16) and remains so until just moments before his death. Carrie herself operates both within and outside the law and the system (Zanger 2015, 735), 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, in the struggle against terror, is difficult to draw. I will argue that through Carrie’s unconventional character – in many ways, she is herself an “other” – and through her similarity to and relationship with the terrorist, the series denies the possibility of identifying such a line, and even its very existence.

Many of the technological and biological means currently used by western security agencies in the effort to draw the line between friend and foe, such as lie detectors, satellite imagery, video surveillance, and so on (Neroni 2015, 117), are represented in *Homeland*. Carrie herself 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 unauthorized, 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 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.[[16]](#endnote-17) 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 the terrorist Other as a psychological subject.

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.

In addition to being different from her male colleagues, Carrie is 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.

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.[[17]](#endnote-18) On the contrary, the nation’s most intimate, gendered space has been penetrated by the enemy.[[18]](#endnote-19) 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 thus 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.[[19]](#endnote-20) Moreover, the penetration of the national heroine by that white Other exemplifies his existence *within* her, and the nation’s, identity, an internal locus of intimate connection. 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 trauma, vulnerability, and suffering. As Zanger (2015, 731) argues, Carrie and Brody 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 its conflicts. “A traumatic excess is inscribed on both male and female bodies,” Zanger writes (738). While I agree with Zanger that “the bleeding scarred, beaten up male body repeatedly appears alongside the scandalous female body” (731), it must be noted that Carrie is also physically hurt a number of times during the series. She suffers from a severe concussion after a bomb explodes in the street (season 1, episode 10), she is kidnapped (season 2, episode 10), and she is shot at and wounded by friendly fire (season 3, episode 8).The mutual physical and emotional vulnerability and suffering of the female security subject and the terrorist Other reflect Butler’s insight that the precariousness of life is universal, that all lives are exposed to the danger of suffering inflicted by others. This universal precariousness inevitably binds the Self and the Other (Butler 2006, xi–xiii). Butler laments the loss of lives that have remained outside the frame of representation in the overall struggle against terror, and thus became ungrievable (2016, 64–65). In *Homeland*,viewers identify with the suffering of both Carrie and Brody. Through Carrie’s and Brody’s complex characters and their relationship, the enemy becomes humanized, transformed from a surveilled object to a vulnerable subject, for Carrie and for the audience. 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 its public space, 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, for example, Irene Shih (2013), Hilary Neroni (2015), and Shirin Deylami (2019). I will refer to some of their ideas 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 (00:12:37). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. A television series is more apt to represent such instability as the series develops in episodes and seasons, more so than a film of two hours. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. For Gary and Katherine Edgerton (2016, 91), 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”. Irene Shih (2013, 100) also regards the bipolar disorder as an expression of current doubts and ambiguities, “as heroes and villains blend and blur”, 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-17)
17. On the national role of women through reproduction see Yuval Davis (1997, 26–37). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. 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). For Zanger it is an expression of public anxiety as it symbolizes the penetration of the national homeland body by a foreign one (2015, 732) .This article suggests that Carrie’s pregnancy is relevant to a crisis in the distinction between Self and Other in this national struggle. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. 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).

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