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“Pledge Allegiance”: Gendered Surveillance, Crime Television, and *Homeland*

by LINDSAY STEENBERG and YVONNE TASKER

Although there are numerous intertexts for the series, here we situate *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–) in the generic context of American crime television. *Homeland* draws on and develops two of this genre’s most highly visible tropes: constant vigilance regarding national borders (for which the phrase “homeland security” comes to serve as cultural shorthand) and the vital yet precariously placed female investigator. In the immediate context of post-9/11 crime television (in programs such as *24* [Fox, 2001–2010] and *24: Live Another Day* [Fox, 2014]) the overarching message was that good people (i.e., trustworthy figures of authority) are watching. Thus, the surveillance of civil society was effectively legitimized as both responsibly managed and absolutely necessary. Moreover, the good people who both watch and respond are themselves suffering—whether conflicted over their actions and/or damaged through a personal history of violence and loss. These watchers’ honorable trauma serves to assure audiences that surveillance is not undertaken lightly. Agents of homeland security suffer on behalf of average citizens, those who seemingly do not have the psychological or physical fortitude to bear the responsibility of surveillance.

Premiering ten years after the events of 2001, *Homeland* develops these themes in new directions, moving beyond the Manichaeian opposition of right and wrong that characterized earlier representations. *Homeland* atypically dramatizes watchers who fail in their task and thus lack the absolute authority of earlier action-based intelligence thrillers. In a show that foregrounds multiple themes and resonances of fidelity, these failures take into account (and play with) the crime genre’s established history of featuring damaged investigators who are doubted but ultimately triumph. (Fidelity here refers both to personal and professional loyalties within the fictional world and to the actual failures of intelligence agencies to which *Homeland* alludes).

A second key feature of American crime television, one that has been seamlessly absorbed by intelligence-focused programs like *Homeland*, is the centrality of a female investigator who is herself damaged

and overinvested in her work.¹ Once again, *Homeland* acknowledges and develops this familiar construction of a professional woman whose personal trauma underpins her role as truth seeker and law enforcer. Particularly notable, we suggest, is the rich relationship explored in the show between these tropes of the female investigator and of legitimized surveillance.

The title *Homeland* of course refers to an America focused on the threat of terrorist activity at home as much as abroad and to the concessions in civil liberties that political violence is widely felt to require. From its initial broadcast, *Homeland* intervenes in a representational landscape in which the moral legitimacy of (political) violence is debated with intensity and regularity. Crime television has proved a fruitful site in which to rehearse ethical concerns over the extent of state surveillance, concerns of expediency over law, and the rights of suspected terrorists.

Unfolding in the aftermath of violence, crime television narrates processes of investigation and understanding, on the one hand, and pursuit and narrative resolution (if not always justice), on the other. The two are bound together, with the investigators seeking to understand a crime (scene), identify those responsible (and their motivations), and prevent further violence. The balance of investigation and pursuit in a crime show is one factor that determines its tone: Is it primarily a battle of wits, a chase, or a puzzle? Is the crime a pretext to explore the relationships within a work team (*Bones* [Fox, 2005–], *Numb3rs* [CBS, 2005–2010]), a character study (*Dexter* [Showtime, 2006–2013], *Elementary* [CBS, 2012–]), or a vehicle to elaborate concerns over contemporary politics (*The Wire* [HBO, 2002–2008], *24* [Fox, 2001–2010])? The narrative complexity deployed in *Homeland* is not novel in this larger generic context. Indeed, the plot twists of *24*, with its themes of loyalty and legitimacy, demonstrate the established character of these elements. Television narratives of homeland security in many ways require the shifts in allegiance, suspenseful revelations, and plot twists that the medium is particularly able to deliver.

As they have developed, the conventions of homeland security—at least on network television—have come to rely on particular models of heroism, as well as themes of terrorism, trauma, and violence. All of these elements are present in *Homeland*: Brody's status as damaged veteran, the traumatic explosion that provides the climax to season 2, Carrie's investment in her work, and Brody's conflicted commitment to home and homeland.

The interest of *Homeland* lies in part in its ability to renew and refresh what had become well-established conventions for representing the dangers of terrorism to Americans and the particular character—driven, intense, creative—of those who investigate and seek to prevent such violence. If narrative complexity (even at times incoherence) is a feature of many homeland security narratives, the psychological

1 For further studies of the female investigator, see Linda Mizejewski, "Dressed to Kill: Postfeminist Noir," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 121–127; Lindsay Steenberg, *Forensic Science in Contemporary American Popular Culture: Gender, Crime, Science* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004); Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998); Deborah Jermy, *Prime Suspect* (London: BFI, 2010).

complexity evident in *Homeland*—not only Carrie’s obsession with Brody but also the suggestion of an emotional and/or sexual tension between her and mentor Saul (Mandy Patinkin)—stretches the formulas it reproduces. In a way different from but related to the swearing and sexually explicit content so characteristic of “quality television,” the psychological complexity marks the Showtime series as “adult” (both challenging and titillating) drama. Thus viewers understand relatively early that Carrie is right to be suspicious of Brody, but the show withholds diegetic recognition; indeed, her interest in and pursuit of Brody, which merges personal obsession and professional responsibility, begin to undermine her status as trustworthy cop protagonist.

Like other crime programs, *Homeland* centralizes surveillance as its key information-gathering tool, yet surveillance here does not yield knowledge, or rather, the knowledge it yields is partial. There are both literal and metaphorical blind spots in the CIA’s surveillance apparatus. An example of the former is the Brodys’ garage—the space where Brody goes to pray in secret and hides his Qur’an and his gun. The garage, traditionally a space for masculine retreat, is pivotal in revealing to the audience that Brody’s national loyalties may have shifted with his religion. Themes of disguise and passing are explored with regularity in crime television shows concerned with political violence, encapsulated in the figure of an individual who passes as patriotic. Brody calls on the trope of the sleeper, a white American convert to Islam who is himself prepared to die in order to avenge Issa’s (Rohan Chand) death and America’s misdeeds abroad.² Venerated by the media and nation and encouraged to seek political office, Brody is readily able to penetrate the inner circles of US political power.

The literal blind spot of Brody’s garage points to the metaphorical blind spots of surveillance that lie in Brody’s motivation and his past. Because the show offers no reliable place or person, Brody’s motivations, and the extent to which they are informed by his captivity, are hidden from all who watch him—on-screen and off. The more we, and Carrie, watch and become involved with Brody, the less certain we are as to the limits of his trauma and the possibility that what has been repressed (his military experiences, his love of Abu Nazir and Issa, his faith, his injuries) will violently return. In a conversation with his wife, Brody insists that not even he knows the extent of his trauma: “There was nothing anyone could have done. Even me. Because I tried too, to deal with everything that happened but that was beyond *me*. I was fucked the moment I left for Iraq. We all were.” Thus, Brody himself cannot penetrate the blind spots in his own motivations or predict his own capacity for eruptive violence.

Michel Foucault has famously argued that “our society is one not of the spectacle, but of surveillance.”³ But it is a long-standing feature of crime television and cinema that surveillance provides a visual language for presenting violent spectacle, from *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) to reality crime programming. In the third episode of the series, Carrie expresses frustration with the blind spots in the Brody surveillance footage: “I have three weeks left and we’re sitting around watching this . . . whatever

2 Yvonne Tasker, “Television Crime Drama and Homeland Security: From *Law & Order* to “Terror TV,”” *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 4 (2012): 44–65.

3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 217.

this is . . . this reality show.” This moment expresses both the feminizing of surveillance and the acknowledgment of surveillance as voyeurism; after all, the Brody footage reveals no useful intelligence data, only spectacles of dysfunctional sexuality and enactments of deep trauma.

Homeland's surveillance spectacles are both high and low tech—coupling well-worn crime techniques, such as the stakeout or going undercover, with the hypermodern multiscreen aesthetic inspired by video games and other crime shows, such as the *CSI* (CBS, 2000–) franchise. This allows the series to exploit both the authenticity associated with older models of detection and the sophistication and (transnational) mobility of newer information technologies. Surveillance-based visuals are all filtered through the bodies and emotions of the CIA watchers, who themselves are core to the series' spectacle. If crime television typically seeks to reassure audiences that good people are watching, *Homeland*'s spectacles question the morality as well as the efficacy of the watchers. Here the show reinforces the centrality of Carrie Mathison as the linchpin of the series' spectacles, morality, and expertise.

Homeland couples its refinement of thematics of homeland security with an equally ambiguous development of another televisual trope, the postfeminist female investigator. Like the female investigators who predate her (from Dana Scully to Temperance Brennan), Carrie Mathison is brilliant, dedicated, and deeply troubled. She is also characterized by a post-*CSI* fascination with, and generic dependence on, investigative expertise: “As with [Dana] Scully and [Clarice] Starling, this scientific expertise goes against traditional views of women as intuitive and emotive rather than logical and deductive. Simultaneously, however, the expertise of the female investigator incorporates more traditionally feminine forms of knowledge, such as intuition, to form a hybrid forensic intuition.”⁴ Perhaps even more than earlier female investigators, Carrie embodies a hybrid investigative expertise. She couples her proficiency as a CIA intelligence analyst with emotionally based interpretations of information (e.g., she knows that Brody has seen through her charade to get close to him because she sees it in his eyes). What marks Carrie as different from Scully, Brennan, or even a character like *CSI*'s Catherine Willows is her repeated performance of overwhelming emotion. Unlike the stoic and implacable women of crime television, Carrie frequently cries, swears, and becomes angry.

Mental Illness. Carrie's characterization as both acknowledged expert and perpetually at the brink of breakdown acknowledges and simultaneously complicates the female investigator's typical (even clichéd) coupling of professional toughness and emotional vulnerability. The most significant of these variations lies in Carrie's depiction as mentally ill. Established conventions see the female expert unable to maintain a healthy work-life balance because she is intensely dedicated to her job—calling into question the emotional stability of professional women more widely. Carrie's situation is, of course, different. Her bipolar disorder is not a generalized feature of post-feminist culture (like the discourse of work-life balance) but a specific condition: one that informs her actions and contributes to her persona. Initially, the program uses

4 Steenberg, *Forensic Science*, 63.

Carrie's illness to question her reliability—to her family, her profession, and even to herself, as she explains to Saul in the opening of the show's second season: "It fucked me up, Saul. Being wrong about Brody. It really fucked me up because I have never been so sure and so wrong. . . . [T]he way I am now, I wouldn't trust me either." The combination of being certain and then "proven" wrong is what drives Carrie to seek electroshock therapy, as the closing sequence of season 1 dramatizes. In a compelling exercise in restricted narration, the audience knows the truth: Carrie is not wrong. Thus, the device of using mental illness to question her reliability is ultimately revealed to be false.

In many ways the program frames Carrie's abilities as an analyst as contingent on her mental illness. In this fashion it taps into the crime genre trope of the tortured investigative genius, the questionable emotional intelligence of literary detective Sherlock Holmes being a primary example. Her obsession with Brody thus becomes a symptom of her mental ill health and a sign of her professional expertise and/or intuitive understanding. In several instances she exploits her own trauma and illness to forge a connection with Brody over their shared status as veterans and victims (at the veteran support group in the first season and again to turn him in season 2). As is characteristic of the conflicted nature of Carrie's character and the complexity of the series as a whole, sexual and emotional involvement with Brody is presented as both a job well done and a failure of duty.

It is certainly problematic to frame mental illness as a professional asset. Yet it does reveal larger patterns within *Homeland*—re-presenting familiar post-9/11 crime television conventions in such a way as to draw attention to them, and in this case recalibrating the pathological dedication to work that defined so many earlier female investigators.

Carrie's characterization hybridizes the troubled female investigator with the moral ambiguity and irreverent toughness of the hard-boiled *noir* hero. Like the hard-boiled hero, hard-drinking jazz aficionado Carrie must move through multiple social sites—from the back alleys of Beirut to the back rooms of political corruption. Infinitely quotable author Raymond Chandler describes the seasoned hero as the "the best man in his world."⁵ Carrie Mathison is likewise the outsider (even from *inside* the CIA) who stands against all others to pursue threats to America.

This hard-boiled aspect of her professional persona is a strong feature of her character's setup in the first few episodes of the series and frames, from the outset, her relationship with her primary terror suspect, Sergeant Nicholas Brody. That relationship is presented as paranoid and erotically charged, in keeping with the traditional pairing between hard-boiled hero and femme fatale. Brody is thus introduced as a kind of *homme fatal*—dangerous, alluring, and mysterious. Like Carrie and her *noir* antecedents, Brody is a damaged veteran attempting to reintegrate. But where the *noir* hero struggled to place himself within a peaceful society, Brody layers this with shifting allegiances to Abu Nazir's (Navid Negahban) cause, with his affection for Nazir's lost son Issa tempering loyalties to his own family. *Homeland*, as we have

5 Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in *The Second Chandler Omnibus* (London: Book Club Associates, 1979), 14.

established, transforms this archetypal partnership, rendering opaque or unreadable the emotional loyalties behind the central performances. Carrie's feelings are always on display, just as Brody's are always seen simmering just below the surface. Neither character's motivation is certain, whether to other characters or to the audience.

As elsewhere in crime television, Carrie and other female characters in *Homeland* conflate sex and work. This conflation, often in the service of the nation, recalls the enduring Mata Hari archetype of espionage stories. Sex as a patriotic duty is a device associated specifically with female spies and investigators, one drawn on in Carrie's pursuit of a sexual relationship with Brody and echoed in the first-season subplot involving CIA asset Lynne Reed (Brianna Brown), paid girlfriend to Prince Farid Bin Abbud (Amir Arison). Reed uses her position as sexual partner to obtain information for Carrie and is killed in the process. A woman who has placed herself at risk to serve her country, Reed comes to operate as a cautionary figure for Carrie, who is racked with guilt over her inability to protect an asset. The weaponization of sex in the service of country is thus both lucrative and dangerous in *Homeland*.

Despite her sexualized fascination with Brody, Carrie remains unwavering in her willingness to risk everything to do her job—and that job is founded on an intense patriotism, a commitment to protect the homeland of the program's title. Publicity posters for the show include a tagline that questions or demands "Pledge Allegiance." It is not surprising, then, that the show's thematics and characters circulate around one structuring concept: fidelity. While this is the preoccupation of many crime shows, particularly those with homeland and terror themes (e.g., *24*, *Person of Interest* [CBS, 2011–]), *Homeland* depends on singularly intense concerns over fidelity—to one's spouse, employer, mentor, family, and country—teasing out the questionable fidelity of surveillance footage with its blind spots and lacunae.

Fidelity in *Homeland* is seemingly impossible. A few, of many, examples include Jessica Brody's (Morena Baccarin) affair with Major Mike Faber (Diego Klattenhoff), Carrie's complex relationship with Brody, Brody's commitment to Abu Nazir, and CIA Counterterrorism Director David Estes's (David Harewood) alliance with Vice President Walden (Jamey Sheridan). Carrie's relationship to Saul seems to be the only space in which consistent fidelity might be sustained. This type of mentoring relationship is the foundation of many crime stories, many of which feature an older man inducting a younger woman into the procedures of criminal investigation. Yet

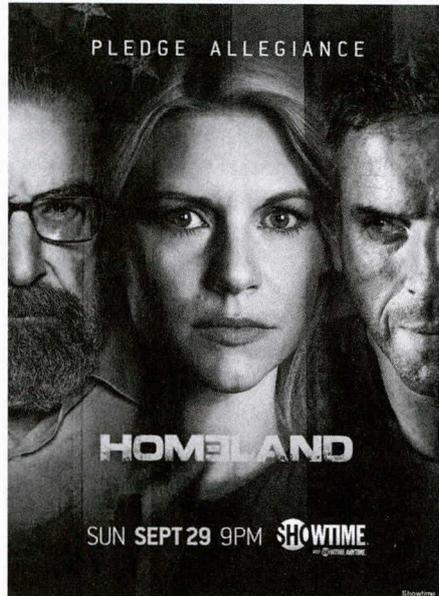


Figure 1. This promotional image, with its prescriptive tagline "Pledge Allegiance," highlights the centrality of fidelity to the show (Teakwood Lane Productions).

unlike other paternal role models of the genre, Saul Berenson is in many ways as broken as Carrie; a prime example of this is the disintegration of his marriage. *Homeland* also transgresses the conventions of the trusting paternal relationship, with Carrie exploiting her sexual appeal to ensure that Saul authorizes her initial surveillance of the Brody family. Thus, from the outset, the quasi-incestuous Saul-Carrie relationship resists being read as unshakable or fundamentally trusting.

Fidelity is foregrounded not only because of the narrative complexity of the show and its serial formatting, borrowed from television genres like the soap opera, but also because it is at the heart of how the show sells itself as unique—based as it is on faithful, authentic performances of complex emotional and psychological states such as Carrie's illness, Brody's trauma, and Saul's outrage.

Homeland's popular reception frequently implies a symbolic dichotomy between the Bush administration's *24* and Obama's *Homeland*.⁶ This juxtaposition, one that values the complexity of *Homeland's* narrative and the force of its performances, also acknowledges the profound changes in crime television since 9/11. *Homeland*, however, as we have argued, revivifies and reinterprets many long-established aspects of the crime genre, including the effective yet vulnerable female investigator and a complex form of narration that obscures motive and delays resolution. While *Homeland* atypically acknowledges a political landscape in which the use of surveillance technology, for example, is widely questioned, it works within (rather than against) the broader context of crime and espionage drama. After all, such generic retrofitting—looking backward to move forward—is a firmly established aspect of popular culture. In its blending of familiar and unexpected narrative and thematic elements, *Homeland* draws on and also troubles the conventions of American crime television, particularly in its post-9/11 form. *

6 Leslie Goffe, "The Homeland Phenomenon," *Middle East Magazine* 440 (2013): 54–56.

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