

Narrative pleasure in Homeland: the competing femininities of rogue agents and terror wives

Securitisation and everyday structures of feeling

Since the 2011 US assassination of Osama Bin Laden, there has been a change in register in the rhetoric surrounding the war on terror. The death of Bin Laden was presented – for the purposes of US electioneering – as a just conclusion to the nebulous war ignited by 9/11. However, despite this apparent endpoint, this phase of global conflict has led to an open use of many types of unpalatable practice (of illegal warfare, of extra-judicial process, of violence and repression) as allegedly necessary evils for the maintenance of state security (Meeropol, 2005). Here I want to explore the manner in which this shift in what is deemed acceptable and defensible in the conduct of ‘war’, and the accompanying adaptation in understandings of what constitutes ‘war’ (Bhatt, 2012), is supported and complemented by popular media representations, including those referencing versions of feminism (albeit for rhetorical ends).

I have written elsewhere about the open secret of violence in the war on terror (Bhattacharyya, 2008, 2009) – and tried to suggest that such an open secret constitutes a particular structure of feeling and governance that places audiences in the position of complicit witness. The war on terror has shifted popular narratives around torture, abuse and the killing of civilians so that we are constantly reminded that these are supposedly necessary evils (famously, see Alan Dershowitz, 2002). Such a project requires repeated reiteration of the logic of tolerating illegality in the pursuit of (our) safety,

In what follows I contrast the narrative workings of the first series of the immensely popular and influential television programme, *Homeland*, with the representation of women associated with UK terrorist suspects in order to argue that, in the name of the security state, we are witnessing a replaying of older mythologies of good and bad girls, and of domesticated and disorderly femininity, to recuperate some aspects of popular feminism for the purposes of securitisation.

The role of ‘feminism’, the role of media

I and others have written previously of the misuse of feminism in the pursuit of the war on terror (Bhattacharyya 2008, Puar 2007). In that earlier project I sought to identify the manner in which a version of feminist rhetoric was used both to justify military intervention and also came to inform the construction of the enemy and the practices of dehumanisation defended as necessary evils in the battle against terror. Now, despite the changing formulation of the global war against terrorism, I think that aspects of that misuse of feminism continue in the popular representation of security threats, including for the purposes of entertainment. My argument is that some narrative constructions can mobilise a kind of feminist consciousness on the part of the viewer – with such a consciousness becoming central to the narrative pleasures of the text – and through this pursuit of narrative pleasure engage viewers in the logic of

security. By the logic of security and securitisation, I mean the framework of reasoning that subsumes most or all other governmental goals to that of consolidating safety in the most aggressive of manners, including the unlawful, and the accompanying process that reframes most or all other state activity in terms of its ability to contribute to this goal (see Fekete, 2004). Such logics require a significant reworking of the relationship between citizen and state – and the repetition of particular structures of narrative could be seen as one aspect of this reworking of popular consciousness to create differently compliant citizens.

Visual and other pleasures in the service of the security state

In a lecture that revisits some aspects of her ground-breaking essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (Mulvey, 1975), Laura Mulvey outlines the ambiguity that characterises the central female figures in the work of Alfred Hitchcock, admitting that over the years she has come to the view that Hitchcock is not a misogynist. Instead, she suggests,

'he uses cinema to reflect on, even analyse the way certain alluring fascinating female iconographies encapsulated particularly by the blonde ... have a particular symbiosis with the male protagonist's sexual anxieties as well as their desires'. (Mulvey, 2010)

Whereas in her earlier work, Mulvey has sought to disrupt the pleasures of scopophilia and the illusion of narrative control, 'to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film' (Mulvey, 1975, 7), she revises her view in this more recent account. In dialogue with a now long discussion within feminist film analysis, Mulvey acknowledges that women on film may represent the beautiful objects of the male gaze, but simultaneously may suggest other meanings altogether, including acting as protagonists in narrative structures that unsettle patriarchal and other powers.

In the 1975 piece, Mulvey has been clear that narrative agency is a central aspect of (male) spectator's power and pleasure,

'As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.' (Mulvey, 1975, 11)

However, in her 2010 rereading, Mulvey argues that the explicit staging of feminine artifice brings another point of identification and potential disruption to the screen. Mulvey goes on to identify what she describes as the 'two main attributes to the Hitchcock blonde' – a combination of artifice and fragility. This, Mulvey suggests, gives a constant sense of 'an exterior, a masquerade'. We, the audience, take pleasure in the visual representation of this femininity of high artifice, but we are simultaneously ambivalent towards 'the domination of the male protagonist and of society more generally'. Mulvey's account of the manner in which audiences can at once take pleasure in formulaic representations of femininity and yet be critical of the social construction of

such gender norms suggests that audiences become engaged with the central female figure, despite her staged artifice, fragility and, perhaps, unreliability. The 'Hitchcock blonde' is a far from straightforward movie heroine – and yet audience pleasures may arise from ambivalence towards her. Here I argue that these practices of viewing – well-established in audiences familiar with US and UK mass cinema and television – have trained media audiences to recognise and accommodate particular incarnations of feminine fragility and masquerade and to absorb such characteristics into a larger pleasure in the critique of improper domination. This schooling in how to read the ambivalence of feminine display under patriarchy enables audiences to identify with the ambivalence of feminine display in the service of the security state. In the process, displays of improper femininity can become an element of the authentication of the narrative voice seeking to uncover terrorist conspiracies – because we know from other genres that the apparently unreliable woman may be the only one able to piece together the workings of dangerous powers.

Misunderstood hysterics in the service of the CIA

In his analysis of the 1887 painting by Andre Brouillet of the famous physician Charcot presenting the renowned 'hysteric', Blanche, Sander Gilman argues that Blanche models her performance of hysteria on the representation of the the hysteric created by the physician and artist – she performs a textbook display of hysteria in a room decorated with instructive images of textbook displays of hysteria (Gilman, 1993, 346). Gilman writes of these teaching charts that cover the walls of wards and treatment rooms, 'It is part of the world of the patient, a means through which to learn how to structure one's hysteria so as to make one an exemplary patient' (349). Embedded in Gilman's analysis is the understanding both that hysteria is a highly cultured and normative performance and that such performances can bring social recognition and reward, of a sort. The hysteric achieves a form of status and value, in part through participating in the process of being cured.

The society that creates the hysteric – and, importantly, the damaging conditions that cause hysteria – also rewards the proper performance of hysteria. Embodying the distressing faultlines of society can be a valued role, but, we learn from Gilman's account of Blanche, the display must be textbook perfect. The character of Carrie in *Homeland* is presented as just such a tolerated hysteric. Her erratic behaviour and mental health condition are accommodated (to an extent) because her hysterical insights are recuperated into the service of the (security) state. Yet when this same display pushes her to pursue meanings that cannot be spoken openly – because her analysis of the threat posed by Abu Naza also uncovers the complicity of US Vice-President and Head of the CIA in illegal drone strikes against children – she is relegated to the space of the outcast hysteric.

The final scene of the first series of *Homeland* focuses on the contorted face of central character rogue CIA agent, Carrie, as she submits to the electroshock therapy that she has decided is necessary if she is to manage her bipolar disorder. The image of the restrained woman receiving electro-

convulsive shock therapy is unsettlingly familiar, bringing together both our uncomfortably heightened knowledge of torture by electric shock and a mining of the well-established popular distaste towards such invasive treatments of mental health disorders (for a history of ECT, see Shorter and Healy, 2007).

Earlier accounts revealed the racialised narratives that accompanied these stories of women and madness, so that hysteria could be regarded as not only an eruption of disorderly femininity but also an outcome of racial degeneracy, an eruption of contaminated blood – the physical assault of shock therapy made more legitimate by the suggestion that these subjects were in danger of becoming less than human (Gilman, 2008). However, in the example of *Homeland* I think that the focus is on femininity – and the discomfort for the audience of seeing such a dehumanising submission chosen as a route for the unruly but insightful central character to become accepted as a reasonable human once more.

Reclaiming hysteria for a securitised age

The broad field of feminist media studies has established, among other things, a sophisticated apparatus through which to analyse representations of women as symptom. Carrie echoes some well-established traits of the hysteric on film. She is presented as the physical unease of attempting to achieve security.

We understand that it is the burden of feeling responsible for the nation's security that has broken her psyche in some way – something about what happened in Iraq that haunts her subsequent choices. Yet we also learn that Carrie's bipolar disorder predates Iraq, runs in her family and can be managed by medication if she chooses to take it. In fact, this unreason has its roots within the safe domesticity of the white family and nation, far away from the dangerous streets of Iraq.

Whereas a plethora of readings of the female hysteric have suggested that a symptomatic analysis of such displays can uncover the convoluted conspiracies of patriarchy (see for example Bernheimer and Kahane, 1990), Carrie's manic insight serves to reveal that the paranoid defences of the security state are justified. Here validating the hysteric blurs into accepting the varied abuses of the security state and reframing our understanding of the world through the eyes of the over-zealous CIA agent.

This is Carrie's own defence of her behaviour and of her inability to view the world except through the lens of agent. All those around her, and the audience, suspect that her approach is wrong. She receives repeated warnings at work – to maintain proper boundaries, to follow procedure, to stay within the law – and she displays some behaviour that seems designed to prove what an improper woman she is, not only single and childless, but dirty (she 'washes' her armpits with a babywipe before attending a big event in episode one), and drunken. She is also sexually manipulative, terrorises children, is unable to consider the implications of her actions for the safety of her colleagues or herself.

Yet the overall lesson is that, however unlikeable, such behaviour is necessary to maintain our collective safety. The unruly hysteric is an unexpected complement to the securitised state. The message from both is that dangerous enemies threaten us in our homes, and that if we wish to be defended against such threats, we must accept these various ugly behaviours carried out in our name.

Such a narrative continues one theme of the war on terror – that femininity and feminism – both female bodies and a discourse of women's rights – can become central elements of the project of securitisation. What appears to be a development is the use of familiar tropes of women's unreason to serve as an alternative justification of irrational actions by the state.

The femininity that serves the security state here is the unruly femininity of the hysteric. Against this the too orderly femininity of the Muslim woman, or of the revert, or of the white woman who marries a revert are all marked as dangers. In a worldview that considers Muslims as excessively domestic and familial, old-fashioned bad girls become the embodiment of a kind of heroic patriotism.

Narrative pleasures and ambivalence about domination

Carrie embodies key aspects of a pleurably displaced experience of narrative – she takes up the central space of screen and story, she is the one piecing together an understanding of events and therefore she is the guide to the developing plot for the audience. She is complicated and broken and seemingly unloveable and so both the most human reference point for the audience and a complicated point of identification. I want to argue that the manner in which the audience is encouraged to maintain an emotional and moral ambivalence towards the character of Carrie is an example of how the logic of the security state is propagated as the only available mode of being in our time. By this, I don't mean that there is no other way to think, but that the ideological push towards securitisation operates through this inhabiting of ambivalence and discomfort.

The denouement of series one brings together a number of elements of misbehaviour by Carrie – the manic assembly of the timeline that identifies the gap in their suspect's activities, the dangerous insight that interrogation works by finding what it is that makes the subject of interrogation human, the tiny linking clue that could only be learned by hearing the semi-conscious sleep-talk of a suspect. It is hard to avoid the suggestion that all misconduct is justified if the case is solved, if the threat is disarmed. This, in fact, is close to how Carrie herself justifies unorthodox behaviour. Without the theft and nocturnal ordering of stolen classified documents, there would be no revelatory insight into the pattern of Abu Naza's activity. Without the seduction of the returning prisoner, the unguarded cry in the night of the lost child's name would never be heard. Without the interrogator's mindset, a mindset that seeks to exploit the weak points of the subject of interrogation, the significance of this hidden attachment to a dead child could not be understood. Each element of Carrie's misbehaviour or dishonesty comes to be justified by the revelations of the plot. Yet she remains a markedly

dangerous character, unable to make herself comprehensible to the custodians of reason in her working life.

White widows and the refusal of narrative and other pleasures

Another incarnation of the white woman touched by terrorism is played out in one of the back stories of *Homeland*. The rich girl with the Arab boyfriend is a barely sketched character. In series one, what we 'know' of her emerges only in Saul's interrogation by suggestion – in which he tells a story about privilege, containment, escape and friendship in order to come the denouement that he too 'fell in love with a brown girl'. What we learn is why white girls might be considered a weak link in the national defence.

In 2012, seven years after the 7/7 London bombings on public transport that killed 52 people, sections of the British press sought to re-open debates about allegiance, identity and the source of terrorist threat through a series of pieces focusing on the wives of those suspected of the bombings. Such discussion served as a popular reference point to a larger and ongoing debate about the alleged 'failure' of multiculturalism (see Mitchell, 2004; Vertovec, 2010).

More interestingly, for my purposes, is the reappearance of the white wife as a figure in the drama of terrorist threat. After 7/7, debate centred on the question of how apparently normal and (most importantly) *integrated* young men do such a thing to other Britons? The figure of the white woman touched by terrorism was quite marginal in the outcry and speculation that followed 7/7. However, in 2012, at around the time that *Homeland* was being screened in Britain, a story about the mysterious white wife of a bomber appeared in the press. Samantha Lewthwaite represented a number of favoured reference points – daughter of a military family, badly affected by the break-up of her parents marriage, becomes a Muslim at fifteen, allegedly after learning about Islam in religious studies lessons at school, marries fellow revert Jermaine Lindsay after they meet in an Islamic chatroom. Although she had described the London bombings as 'abhorrent', in 2012 Lewthwaite's name became linked to investigations into planned bomb attacks in Kenya. While previously she may have represented familiar tropes, slightly updated to fit the preoccupations of our time - respectable woman who has fallen from grace, troubled outcome of a broken home, vulnerable victim of institutionalised multiculturalism, unsuspecting innocent groomed in an internet chatroom, transgressor of racial, and now also religious, boundaries – her new media incarnation seems to arise specifically from our time. In a piece entitled, 'The search for the white widow', the Telegraph outlines the new lines of speculation swirling around a woman who may or may not be Samantha Lewthwaite, while admitting that there is 'a vacuum of verifiable fact' surrounding the various accusations repeated in the article. Central among these was the rumour that Lewthwaite is an Al-Qaeda financier, using her education and status as a white woman to carry out plots undetected. Pflanz, for the Telegraph, acknowledges that Lewthwaite has become the object of the fantasies of various players,

'In fact, none of that is fact. Instead, it is part of the myth of Samantha Lewthwaite that seems to have taken hold, benefiting propagandists on both sides of East Africa's growing rift between security and terror' (Pflanz, 2012)

'She has been accused variously of being al-Qaeda's chief financier in the region, funding the recruitment and smuggling of Muslim youth to terror training camps in Somalia, and coaching her own all-women jihadist squad there. She has been linked with senior al-Qaeda commanders' alleged plots to attack Eton College and the Dorchester and Ritz hotels in London.' (Pflanz, 2012)

Whoever the white widow is, she is imagined to derive her influence as a result of the trappings of a kind of female empowerment. Whiteness gives her status and mobility. She has money and can pay in cash, including her rent. She has had access to higher education – and this contributes to the rumours. She is mobile and can associate with a wide range of people, including a variety of men. In fact, none of the British press seemed able to confirm that the woman under discussion was, in fact, Samantha Lewthwaite. The uncertainty surrounding the identity of the white widow is a central component of her mythology.

In an echo of earlier examples of racist agitation, the racially privileged woman is a site of considerable racist fantasy and anxiety. She embodies the permeable boundary of nation – because it is unruly and semi-civilised women who threaten to transgress the strictures against interracial contact, because they don't understand, because they are ruled by their bodies, because they are not themselves representative of the privileged group, because the second-class citizenship of women creates an opening for association and alliance with all sorts of lesser others. Women are attracted to exotic but lesser beings because they are soft-headed, lascivious and dangerously open to identifying with the less-than-human (for a discussion of these ideas in far-right organisations, see Daniels 1997).

In this instance, the contaminated/fallen white woman is somehow conspicuous yet invisible and made oddly glamorous, as if embracing Islam is a route to a version of jet-set celebrity lifestyle. Perhaps this recuperation into a kind of consumer feminism – an independent lady who pays her own way – is preferable to the apparently greater scandal that middle-class white girls might give up their previous lives to become hair-covering Muslim wives.

The agent who knew too much

In the context of globalised English-speaking reception, the character of Carrie can be seen to continue longstanding tropes in the representation of white femininity. Close-ups of her face framed significantly by a headscarf, anxiously looking upwards as she retreats from a threat that we cannot see, form one of the recurring images of the opening credits. Although Carrie is presented in a far more naturalistic and occasionally grotesque manner within the narrative episodes, this framing image echoes others from the history of cinema with the distressed face of the beautiful woman serving to indicate the

horror out of shot that remains beyond representation (for a discussion of the significance of the close-up, see Doane 2003).

This trope remains central to the series – the troubled and misunderstood woman who finds herself trapped in a horror that is invisible to others. From *Rebecca* to Hitchcock to *I know what you did last summer*, global audiences are familiar with this well-worn cinematic construction of (largely) white femininity (for a still gripping account, see Modleski, 1988). For Carrie, the monster that only she can see is the incursion of international terrorism into the formerly safe space of the western nation – and in common with other stories about apparently unstable heroines, the narrative tension arises from the audience's uncertainty about the reliability of this paranoid view.

Yet the denouement of series one consists, in part, of the realisation that Carrie's reading of the world is true. Here I go on to consider the implications of vindicating the hysterical voice for the purposes of security.

Stories teach us how to understand and feel?

I have been interested in the role of popular narrative in the creation of everyday securitisation. In this piece I have considered some examples of narratives from popular media – but my more longstanding interest has been in the narrative logics of security states and how we, as everyday citizens, come to insert ourselves into these narratives. I do think that there is an interplay between the stories of state practices and the stories of popular media, particularly in the construction of our shared investment in supporting security practices, including those that may appear unpalatable to our sense of our allegedly liberal democratic values.

Popular narratives, whether presented as fictional entertainments or factual accounts of our world, offer a range of triggers to audiences. We might learn that this or that representation tells us what a terrorist looks like, or a patriot, or a victim, or an innocent bystander. Within this pantheon of characters, of course, there are intersections with other conventions of representation relating to other powerful constructions such as gender, nation, race and class (see, for example, Poynting et al. 2004). In earlier times, we learned to identify the manner in which gender dissonance or class resistance could be coded as threats to the nation, including national security. In our time, new mythologies emerge so that the femininity that protects and perpetuates the nation might entail serial monogamy, prioritising paid employment as a central component of identity and engaging in consumer practices deemed necessary to a market-friendly liberal feminism (see McRobbie, 2008) or patriots may be those who prioritise the defence of the nation above pursuing class-based interests through industrial action (In 2012, members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, including staff from the UK Border Agency, pursuing industrial action in the run-up to the London Olympics were portrayed as unpatriotic and/or treacherous). These choices in relation to representing the characters of our imagined national and international drama remain important and, I think, continue to shape popular imagination even in these hyper-mediatised times.

However, I also think that the construction of narrative in popular media plays a particular and central role in positioning the audience as consenting to the logic and practices of the security state. This is not so simple a process as earlier depictions of propaganda where stories and pictures were designed to tell us what to think in the representational equivalent of a very loud voice or to construct clear character types to elicit sympathy or disgust as required, although plenty of these practices continue. My interest has been in the role of popular narrative in inculcating consent among audiences, not through an explicit set of choices but through the processes of narrative identification and understanding. Sometimes, as in the television series *Homeland*, following the plot demands that the viewer come to understand the constraints and imperatives motivating the agent of the security state – when each instance of bad behaviour then comes to yield the information that pieces together the next important plot point, the overall implication of following the story is that all such behaviour is justified. More than this, the ability to follow such narratives can rely on the audience learning to inhabit the logic of securitisation – this is a way of learning about the world of terrorist threat by learning to see through the eyes of the rogue agent, the hysteric in service to the security state. In part through reference to familiar film conventions that lead an initially sceptical audience to come to recognise over the course of the film that the apparently unstable heroine is, in fact, the only one able to comprehend what is happening around her. In an age of securitisation, this narrative structure can be redeployed to mobilise the audience's identification with the central character seeking to battle threats from terrorists that no-one else can see. If the identification is grudging and the character unappealing, so much the better, because that is an important part of the lesson for the general public. You may not like these people, but you must appreciate the sense of what they are doing.

The white widows remind us that the weaknesses of femininity – including the liberated femininity that has benefited from the cultural trappings of liberal democracy – can lead to a dangerous and contaminating association with the monstrous. Carrie, on the other hand, demonstrates the ability of the security state to accommodate the insights of some feminisms. Carrie can remain an exemplar of unruly femininity – no phallic woman here – yet her feminine disorder serves to confirm the logic of the security state. As we learn, slowly and sometimes painfully, to hear the messages of the hysteric voice and to allow this uncomfortable performativity into our conception of what and who can be human, we also learn to see the enemies in our midst and the need to violate norms of decency in the pursuit of safety. The final scene in series one of Carrie's electric shock grimace jolts the viewer into the realisation that without her, all knowledge of the plot disappears, invisible forever to those too steeped in the orthodoxies of accepted reason. When we long for her to be saved and vindicated, we are longing for the security state and, despite ourselves, all the horror that it entails.

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