

***Homeland's* Discourse**

El discurso en *Homeland*

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the discourse employed in *Homeland*, a television show produced in the United States. After a discourse analysis of three characters and the settings of the third season, it is easy to conclude that the show encourages and display stereotypical portrayals of not only the US and the government's secret-service agencies, but also of Iran and the Middle East in general. It foments an Orientalist image of the Middle-East (the near Orient) as both an exotic place (as explained by Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*) and a chaotic, underdeveloped one full of terrorists that must be saved and purged by the United States.

Keywords: *Homeland*, TV series, discourse analysis, Orientalism, Iran, United States

Resumen

Este artículo se concentra en el discurso empleado en la serie de televisión estadounidense *Homeland*. Después de un análisis discursivo de tres personajes y de los escenarios de la tercera temporada, se llega a la conclusión de que la serie fomenta y muestra no solo visiones estereotípicas de los EE. UU. y las agencias secretas del gobierno, sino también acerca de Irán y el Medio Oriente. De esta manera, se fomenta una imagen orientalista reflejando el Medio Oriente como un lugar exótico —como Said lo explica en su libro *Orientalismo* (1978)— caótico y subdesarrollado, que está repleto de terroristas y debe ser salvado y purgado por los EE. UU.

Palabras clave: *Homeland*, series de TV, análisis discursivo, orientalismo, Irán, EE. UU.

Throw away your television
 Take the noose off your ambition
 Reinvent your intuition now
 It's a repeat of a story told
 It's a repeat and it's getting old

*Red Hot Chili Peppers, Throw Away
 Your Television.*

Introduction

*H*omeland is a political-thriller show produced by Showtime and directed by Lesli Linka Glatter and Alex Graves; it has been airing on television in the United States for the past six years. It is based on the Israeli show called חִפּוּטִים (*Hatufim*, “Prisoners of War”), and has received critical acclaim¹ because of its intriguing plot, psychological descriptions, teenage angst and acting by Claire Danes and Damian Lewis.² The show follows the story of Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), a US Marine Corps Scout Sniper, who, after being captured and becoming a prisoner of war by al-Qaeda for eight years, is discovered and rescued by US forces and then returned to his “homeland”. However, CIA officer Carrie Mathison (played by Claire Danes), who has bipolar disorder, suspects Brody is not who he claims to be and that he is actually working for the enemy.

The series is currently in season 7. During its many seasons Mathison works for the CIA attempting to disrupt various terrorist plots that might occur within or outside of the US. This analysis concentrates on the third season of the show, which aired in 2013. In the third season, the plot moves from Al-Qaeda to what the show portrays as the

greatest enemy of the US: Iran. The season follows the actions of Iranian terrorist and government official Majid Javadi (played by Shaun Toub), who plans to attack the US one way or another.

The analysis carried out here focuses on the discursive aspects and narrative and social framing concerning Iran in the show’s third season, concentrating on the portrayals of the “Orient” in a geographic and character sense. It concentrates on three specific characters and the settings. Two of the characters, Saul Berenson and Majid Javadi, were analysed because of the duality of their nature: The former is the head of the CIA, the latter is Saul’s equivalent but as “the enemy of the United States”. The third character discussed in this paper is Farah Sherazi, chosen because she is the only Muslim character who works for the CIA. Afterwards, the researcher includes a brief criticism of how the settings are displayed on the show. This paper aims to prove that the show *Homeland* promotes and magnifies racial, cultural and social stereotypes of Iranians, whilst at the same time magnifying feelings of nationalism in the US.

Theoretical framework

Theun Van Dijk, one of the most prominent researchers in discourse analysis, explains that “crucial for CDA [Critical Discourse Analysis] is the explicit awareness of [its] role in society. Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a ‘value-free’ science, they argue that science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of and influenced by social structure, and produced in social

interaction” (2003, p. 352). Most importantly, CDA concentrates on the “specific ways that discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance” (Van Dijk, 2003, p. 354). These discourse structures can be related to gender, political, nationalist, or racial issues, to name but a few.

The show analysed here, *Homeland*, is a work of fiction. In this way, the show has its own narrative and values, which are in itself based on contemporary issues in the US. When analysing a discourse, narrative theory “assumes that the unit of analysis is ultimately an entire narrative, understood as a concrete story of some aspect of the world, complete with characters, settings, outcomes or projected outcomes and plot” (Baker, 2010, p. 349). There are also three types of narratives, which all appear in *Homeland*: personal narratives, public narratives and metanarratives. Personal narratives are “the narratives of individuals, who are normally located at the centre of narration; in other words, the individual is the subject of the narrative” (Baker, 2010, p. 350). Within *Homeland*, the main personal narratives—at least in the first three seasons—are those of Carrie and Brody, the former in her role as a CIA agent dealing with bipolar disorder, the latter as a US marine returning to the US after eight years of imprisonment by the Taliban. Both narratives intersect and interact with each other, as Carrie and Brody develop a romantic relationship. The “public” narratives “are elaborated by and circulate among social and institutional formations larger than the individual, such as the family, religious or educational institution, a political or activist group, the media,

the nation and larger entities” (Baker, 2010, p. 350). This type of narrative can be here seen from two points of view: out of the show, or within it. In the former, it could be said that the media portrays Iranians in a specific way so that they fit within a specific frame of “Iranians are evil” that the media wants to create. Within *Homeland*, the series has specific institutions (e.g. CIA, news channels) that create a specific framing of Iranians, which will be explained later in the article.

[The “meta” narratives] are particularly potent public narratives that persist over long periods of time and influence the lives of people across a wide range of settings. The boundary between public and meta-narratives is particularly difficult to draw, but good candidates for meta-narratives include the Cold War and the various religious narratives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, given their temporal and spatial reach (Baker, 2010, p. 351).

In the case of *Homeland*, the meta-narrative would be the “War on Terror” or “Terrorism”, a narrative taking hold after the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the United States.

These images and narratives are created from a “Western” mindset. As a matter of fact, the concepts of “east” and “west” are in themselves western, in what is called “Orientalism”, a concept introduced by French sociologist Edward Said. Said asserts that “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (1978, p. 7). This superiority goes to the point that the history of a nation, in this case Iran, can be written

entirely by the US, as Douglas Robinson (1997) explains: “the only ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ way to write [Persian] history is to write it (imaginatively) from Europe. To write [Persian] history is to write the history of [Persia] as a nation, and the very concept of a nation is European, grounded in the conceptual framework of European history” (p. 20). Meaning that the very action of Europeans or the US writing or talking about Iran and Persian history sets Iran within a specific historical narrative framework, all seeing from western eyes. Indeed, “the very possibility of a history of [Persia] thus implies a Eurocentric view of history that conceives [Persia] at its strongest and most independent as a mere distorted reflection of Europe” (Robinson, 1997, p. 20). Persian history, when written by “Western” authors, can hence become, or becomes, a mere extension of the West. *Homeland*, as will be shown below, does precisely this.

Indeed, the role of media is extremely important. Already in 1979, Todd Gitlin, a prominent sociologist and media scholar, is concerned by the role of the media in the forming of specific images in people’s mindset. Gitlin argues that “many of the formal conventions of American television entertainment are supports of a larger hegemonic structure” (1979, p. 251). Ergo, the image of “the foreign”, i.e. the “Middle East” created in *Homeland* not only has its own Orientalist narrative, but is, at the same time, part of a larger hegemonic structure that seeks to create a specific, stereotypical image of the people who hail from that land. Hence, in *Homeland*, three particular theoretical intersections can be found. That of (1) the narrative, (2) Orientalism, and (3)

the media. The following section concentrates on the analysis of how *Homeland* reflects the specific stereotypes mentioned before.

Analysis

Characters. Saul Berenson. Saul Berenson (played by Mandy Patinkin) is the head of the CIA, and hence “in control” of the situations when the US decides to strike its enemies or carry out undercover operations. He has medium height, and a thick beard, denoting a literary archetype of “the wise sage”, the wise person that the hero, along his (in this case, her) journey, must consult in order to know what to do next. It turns out that, since he has been the one most in contact with Iran, he is also the most biased towards the country. He states, throughout the season, that Iran is “this close to a nuclear weapon”, and therefore must be stopped. This is one of the reasons why he hunts Javadi (an Iranian man and the season’s main antagonist), a man he once knew and who was a partner agent in Iran when the country had diplomatic ties with the US. Berenson states that “I saw the man I knew become a monster, and so I must stop him”. He states that Javadi has become a monster, but the series fails to mention, for instance, what might have caused him to become a monster. In other words, the perspective the series shows is only from Saul (or the US), never from Javadi (or Iran).

Through Berenson’s personal narrative within the series, the show creates a specific public narrative outside of the show itself, permeating the negative image of Iranians as evil,

savage warmongers who somehow got their hands on a nuclear weapon. This relates to what Louis Althusser, a French Marxist, calls “interpellation or hailing, a term for the calling of a person into subjectivity/subjection. The idea is that by calling someone something, especially from a position of authority, you transform that person into the thing named” (Althusser in Robinson, 1997, p. 21). In *Homeland*, the interpellation that occurs is that the “West”, from a position of power, calls Iranians terrorists, and by naming them that converts them into terrorists, not something else. In this way, the narrative and stories related to Iran (and the Middle East) are normalised; this is what Baker calls “narrativity”, and “one of the effects of narrativity is that it normalizes the accounts it projects over a period of time, so that they come to be perceived as self-evident, benign, incontestable and non-controversial” (Baker, 2010, p. 11). Hence, within the show, a specific narrativity, that of Iranians as terrorists, exists.

Majid Javadi. Majid Javadi (played by Shaun Toub) as mentioned before, actually used to work for the CIA in the 1970s, but is now a threat to the interests and security of the United States. Javadi is the archetype of a “brutal” and “vicious” Iranian terrorist. In the first episode of season 3 (“Tin Man Is Down”), Saul mentions that

Javadi was in charge of bombing a Synagogue in Buenos Aires. In episode 6 of season 3 (“Still Positive”), Javadi goes to the US and violently kills his ex-wife by repeatedly stabbing her in the neck with a broken bottle. Javadi is hated by the other major Iranian character of the show, Farah Sherazi, who feels betrayed by the CIA when the latter, having the opportunity to place Javadi in a court case for all the terrorist acts he had committed both in Iran and the US, decides to instead use Javadi as an asset in Iran (Javadi had stolen money from Iranian bankers, something that might cost him his life, so the CIA uses this to bribe Javadi and place him as a US asset inside the Iranian government.) This is a classical example of a US-orchestrated coup, and the viewer can see this in two ways: as an admiration of US power, or as a criticism for the US’s “intromission” and invasion of other countries. Regarding these actions, Berenson himself states in the show: “It could change the entire geopolitical spectrum of the Middle East”.

Finally, a notable scene occurs before Javadi kills his ex-wife: Just as he is observing (stalking) her from a car, he is eating a hamburger. Here the show creates a framing stating that, no matter where you are from and what your culture or race is, you will still love “American” hamburgers. Here you can find an implicit cultural submission to “American” values and diet.



Figure 1. Javadi eating a hamburger.

Farah Sherazi. Farah Sherazi is an Iranian-American who lives in the US and works for the CIA. She is, quite bluntly, the archetype or “poster girl” of how an immigrant should behave. In the first episode of season three, she is shown entering the CIA whilst wearing a hijab. Everyone within the CIA stares and gaze at her, their judgemental eyes asking why she is there in the first place. They do not let her inside the building, until Saul comes to her rescue. Nonetheless, the first thing he does after letting her in, is to chide her for wearing the hijab: “What the hell are you thinking? We just suffered an attack here, and you come in wearing that thing!” recriminates Saul. It is clear that neither Saul nor the CIA is tolerant of the hijab, even if the agency’s own internal policies allow it. Finally, her father asks her why she works at the CIA, and scolds her for doing so,

as she has placed at risk “her family’s (in Iran) safety”. To this, Farah replies “Because I’m American!” Farah—even if she is not accepted in the US by many people and by its culture—still feels a need to defend the country. She is perhaps unconsciously hoping that, by doing so, she will be finally be accepted into the US and its culture, and earn her colleagues’ recognition.

Opening theme

The opening theme creates a specific framing of how the US has been engaging in a war against “terror” and “terrorism”. It shows specific images of not only the show’s characters, but also actual speeches, e.g. George W. Bush saying “Air and naval forces of the US launched a series of strikes against terrorist forces”; Bill Clinton expressing “This was a despicable act

of terrorism”; and Barack Obama exclaiming “We must, and we will, remain vigilant at home and abroad”. There is a very noteworthy juxtaposition of images, as the speeches by former president(s) are collocated with scenes and characters of the show. In this way, the two universes,

the fictional and the real one, collide, with the real one creating a specific setting of what the show is about. The opening theme creates a narrative framing about terrorists and Middle Eastern people by showing images of 9/11, an event normally related to terrorism and Al Qaeda.

Settings in the Middle East



Figure 2. *Homeland's* Beirut (actually Israel).

Figure 2 displays what Baker (2010, p 351) calls a meta-narrative, which is a public narrative that persists for a long period of time. In this, much like in the rest of *Homeland*, the meta-narrative is clear, and perfectly exemplifies Said's concept of *Orientalism: The Middle East*, in this case Lebanon, is an exotic place, full of street markets that try to sell local cuisine and clothes—even if they are influenced by the US, as seen in

the Coca Cola shirt—where women wear hijab and follow the strict rules of Islamic clothing. The walls are covered with graffiti and the buildings seem abandoned with many broken windows. It is an exotic, different and “uncivilised” place, dirty and chaotic. However, the reality is very different from what is portrayed in the show:



Figure 3. Actual Beirut in 2015.

The writers decided to portray Beirut as an exotic, uncivilised place, with the usual “positional superiority” that Said writes about: It is a fantastical image of the Middle East, created by and viewed through the standards of the US. As a matter of fact, the Lebanese ministry of tourism sued the show’s producers because of its unfair portrayal of the city.³

Other aspects

An unfair criticism that could be made of the show is that it is out of synch with recent events that have taken place in the “diplomatic” world. At the end of 2013, the US and Iran resumed diplomatic talks for the first time since 1979. But, as Baker explains, “narratives are characterised by their temporality, meaning that they are embedded in time and space

and derive much of their meaning from the temporal moment and physical site of the narration” (2010, p. 352). Of course, the show is actually completely out of synch with reality due to the racial, social stereotypes it shows, and now even more so because of the nuclear deal struck between the US and Iran. Still, even if the deal has been celebrated—and criticised—worldwide, and inside the US and Iran, the show continues demonstrating and permeating stereotypes that are aired to people who might not be (fully) aware of the deal. With an average of 1.7 million⁴ viewers per episode each week, the show could diminish the importance of the deals and permeate the stereotypes. Nonetheless, in the final episode of season 03, problems between the US and Iran are solved (because of the US orchestrated “coup” in the series); Iran opens its doors for nuclear inspection, just like what happened in real life.

Conclusion

Homeland portrays Iranian society, culture and people in a clear-cut fashion. Iranians are either “good” or “evil”. The show’s third season contrasts Javadi, the main antagonist who has “remained Iranian” and has not been assimilated by the US, with Farah, the “good” Iranian who is harassed for wearing a hijab by her boss and peers, but has been assimilated by the US and works for its government. The show presents Iran in an Orientalist manner by showing Iran not only as an “exotic place” (Said, 1979), but also an underdeveloped one that is an incubator of terrorists bent on destroying the US. Ultimately, the show portrays Iran not through the eyes of its characters, but in reality through the eyes—or biases—of the scriptwriters and directors who paint a conservative and uninformed view of Iran, resulting in the country’s Orientalisation. In this way, the scriptwriters support “a larger hegemonic discourse” (Gitlin, 1979, p. 251) of what Iran ought to be in the eyes of its viewers.

Notes

1. 2012 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series, and the 2011 and 2012 Golden Globe Award for Best Television Series – Drama [...].
2. As well as the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series and Lead Actress in a Drama Series for Damian Lewis and Claire Danes respectively”. (Wikipedia)
3. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2220040/Lebanese-government-sue-Homeland-producers-portrays-Beirut-terrorists.html>

4. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/homeland-season-2-dexter-ratings-375374>

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