An Examination of *Homeland*:

Structures of Power and the Influence of Popular Culture

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Introduction

For those who know me, it would come as no surprise that the topic of this paper has switched approximately 329 different times. At the start of the semester, I was going to write a paper arguing the need for a feminist perspective in international relations. My topic, shortly after, switched to an evaluation of humanitarian intervention in foreign policy. However, as I was scrolling through Instagram and Facebook the day after Halloween, exactly one week ago, I saw at least a dozen people dressed in culturally and racially insensitive costumes. While many say it is “all in good fun” to be dressed for Halloween as a Mexican Mariachi performer, a Native American tribal chief or Saudi Arabian oil Sheik, I argue otherwise. I started searching the Internet in an effort to see what others had to say. Unsurprisingly, many individuals had a variety of opinions to offer. However, it was a quote from *Slate* associate editor J. Bryan Lowder’s article, “The Reasonable Person’s Guide to Political Correctness on the Occasion of Halloween,” that struck me. He writes, “beyond all too easily [crossing] the line from funny to offensive,” these costumes “touch on issues of power, privilege, and basic human decency.”

Upon reading this quote, I knew that my paper topic had once again switched.

Lowder’s statement reminded me that, whether we are aware or not, issues of power are intertwined in our everyday lives. A majority of individuals do not recognize they are complicit in structures of power. Manifesting itself in different ways, power is masked throughout society. Popular culture exemplifies a means in which these structures are propagated. Fordham University Professor Susan Scafidi explains that culturally and racially insensitive costumes

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“reinforce current power structures in an offensive way.”^2 Capitalizing on cultural stereotypes, these costumes participate in reinforcing dominant societal narratives. As a result, these societal narratives, which are embedded in structures of power, construct our view of the world.

While this paper is not going to discuss the ethics of Halloween costumes, it is going to examine the dynamics of power within cultural products. Using the example of the television show, *Homeland* (one of my favorite programs), I will argue cultural products are not simply a reflection of culture, but participate as a site of production in a historical moment. I will explore how cultural products construct societal narratives, which shape our view of the world. I will argue cultural products, such as *Homeland*, are politically implicated entities embedded within structures of hegemonic power, which reinforce dominant societal narratives.

In order to explore the topic of power in cultural products, I am going to first outline Michael Foucault’s explanation of power, Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, and Edward Said’s description of orientalism. I intend on using these methodologies to frame my argument. Next, I am going to explain the significance of placing cultural products in their historical context and provide a brief history of *Homeland*. Finally, I will analyze examples from the television show and draw conclusions describing the wider implications of my argument.

**Methodology**

Michael Foucault claims “knowledge is power.” He argues, “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth.”^3 In the United States, “the regime of truth” for society is popular culture, which serves as the American people’s field of knowledge. A field of knowledge needs to produce and sustain the truth and is therefore communicated through representation and

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cultural codes. However, according to Foucault, a field of knowledge is operating within a certain system of power, at a particular historical moment, creating a discursive formation to provide an individual “a framework for understanding the world.” Thus, discursive formation, otherwise known as discourse, is a field of knowledge and American society’s field of knowledge stems from popular culture. As a result, popular culture serves as the “regime of truth” for American society.

Secondly, in addition to Foucault’s explanation of power, Antonio Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony is significant. He argues that through using the apparatus of coercion, the State is able to maintain economic and ideological control over society and in turn construct a hegemonic culture; this is because the moral and ethical values of the State become the foundation in which the rest of society bases their values. As a result, this produces an environment where both the ruling class and the intellectuals, who are the officers of the ruling class, start to define themselves through the standards of the State, which creates the status quo.

Gramsci argues that the way to have power over society is through having control over the hegemonic culture. Thus, through using the apparatus of cultural products, popular culture has economic and ideological control of society, which consequently creates the hegemonic culture. Significantly, hegemonic culture, established by the values of popular culture, is how society defines themself. Cultural products like Homeland are embedded in hegemonic power structures that maintain the status quo and reinforce dominant societal narratives.

Finally, theorist Edward Said argues the system of power American society is operating within is defined as “Orientalism.” In his 1978 publication, Said addresses the bias that occurs when the West constructs the East, most notably the Middle East. Orientalist discourse paints the

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Middle Eastern region as one that is backwards, exotic, uncivilized, traditional, and just blatantly different. As a result, *Introducing Cultural Studies* explains, “Orientalism is not simply a process of description, but a relation of power and domination whereby one groups gets to define the identities for all by defining the ‘Orient’ and ‘Orientals’ in certain ways.”\(^5\) Starting in the late eighteenth century, Orientalist discourse justified the European colonization of the Middle East and created the foundation of Western engagement with the region. Put simply, Orientalism can be understood as a “Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient.”\(^6\) Said argues that “as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.”\(^7\)

Over time, the Orientalist perspective of the East has sustained itself and continues to remain the dominant narrative in Western society and popular culture. Orientalism remains as the dominant societal discourse due to the cyclical nature of power. As Foucault explains, “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it.”\(^8\) Applying Foucault’s argument to Orientalism, he is stating that the Orientalist system of power produces the truth and Orientalist discourse sustains the truth. Further, popular culture carries out and distributes the truth and cultural products extend and circulate the truth. Accordingly, through its dichotomization of the East versus the West, *Homeland* produces an uneven dynamic of power in its representation of the Middle East as a result of having been developed within the Orientalist system of power.

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5 Ibid, 172.
7 Ibid, 5.
8 Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 43.
Background

To understand that all cultural products are politically implicated, the product must be placed in its historical context. Antonio Gramsci argues, “The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory… therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.”

Similarly, Said explains, “It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer.” Gramsci and Said are highlighting the necessity to understand the strategic formation of cultural products. These products are playing into other appropriations, which have built one on top of another to produce other forms. Cultural products like Homeland are conveying something larger and through placing them into a historical context, it is possible to unpack what is embedded in the product’s signs and representations.

To start, Homeland has achieved high acclaim in the United States and is one of the most watched TV shows in America. Diane Negra and Jorie Lagerwey, both from University College Dublin state, “Upon its debut, Homeland quickly moved to a position of cultural prominence, becoming the kind of program that anchors middle-class taste formations and cultural literacies while earning numerous accolades and drawing record-setting audiences for the cable network.” In 2012, the show won both an Emmy and Golden Globe for Best Television Series in Drama and President Barak Obama even said it was his favorite show on

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9 Said, Orientalism, 25.
10 Ibid, 11.
More recently, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson and Vice President Joe Biden announced they were fans of the show as well; Johnson even “admitted to binge-watching every season.”

The first season of Homeland aired on Showtime in 2011 placing the show in a post-9/11 context and into an American audience with heightened fears and suspicion of the Middle East and Islamic faith. Furthermore, Homeland was based on an Israeli television show, Prisoners of War. The show aired from 2009 until 2011 and became incredibly popular in Israel. Prisoner of War’s first season “became [Israel’s] highest-rated drama of all time” and the show was awarded Best Drama Series of 2010 by the Israeli Academy of Film and Television. The creator of Prisoners of War, Gideon Raff, is also the creator of Homeland and now serves as an executive producer of the show along with many other Israelis on the production team. Subsequently, the politics of the conflict between Israel and Arab nations are now implicit in the production of Homeland, in addition to having been created within the post-September 11 historical context.

Analysis

Edward Said states:

One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media’s resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the 19th century academic and imaginative demonology of “the mysterious Orient.” This is nowhere more true than in the ways by which the Near East is grasped.

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16 Said, Orientalism, 26.
Said’s statement points to the significant role popular culture plays in framing our view of the world, especially concerning the Middle East. The reinforcement of Orientalist stereotyping Said references is apparent after looking at *Homeland*’s promotional poster for the fourth season (fig. 1). Examining the image, an individual first sees Carrie Mathison, who is the blonde, white female featured, and among her is a homogenous sea of black, burqas. In opposition to Carrie, who has agency and the ability to be unveiled in this situation, these women do not have that power. While none of the faces of the women in the burqas can be seen, Carrie is highlighted front and center.

Some may question as to why Showtime would choose this image to promote the show. However, the reason being is the burqa, and the many other variations of the veil, is a visual symbol that immediately connotes difference. James Poniewozik of *The New York Times* argues, “This is the greater problem with *Homeland*’ and other American dramas set in the region: the tendency to use the signifiers of a culture—clothes, music, street urchins, unfamiliar writing—as a kind of spicy Orientalist soup of otherness.”17 Rooted in an Orientalist perspective, the dominant societal narrative in the West is that the veil is symbolic of female inferiority to men in the Middle East’s patriarchal society. The poster paints a firm dividing line between Islam and modernity; the women in burqas paint a clear symbol of what the United States is understood not to be. In turn, this reflects what the United States see themselves as by capitalizing on the constructed binary of East versus West, tradition versus modernity.

Visual symbols from the show’s fifth season also demonstrated Orientalist stereotyping. In one scene, Mathison, being escorted by a Hezbollah commander, is seen walking past a wall full of Arabic graffiti in a fictional Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon (fig. 2). However, when the

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episode aired, Arabic reading viewers knew something was not right; among the graffiti were messages that read: “Homeland is racist” and “Homeland is not a series.”18 “After being hired to add authenticity to the camp depicted in the episode,” three Egyptian artists took credit for the graffiti saying, “it was subtle protest of false and misleading stereotypes in the series.”19 Heba Y. Amin, one of the artists involved, told The Guardian:

The Arabic script was not checked by producers. The content of what was written on the walls … was of no concern. In their eyes, Arabic script is merely a supplementary visual that completes the horror-fantasy of the Middle East, a poster image dehumanizing an entire region to human-less figures in black burkas and moreover, this season, to refugees.20

In an interview with The Washington Post, Amin notes how these depictions “help form people's perceptions of an entire region, a huge region, which in turn affects foreign policy…,” only emphasize further how dangerous these stereotypes are.21

Another example of Orientalist stereotyping occurs in Homeland’s introduction to the fourth season. The 90-second clip repeatedly features people rioting and screaming, individuals speaking foreign languages, veiled women, and images of mosques and people praying. The clip specifically pauses on veiled women in front of an American flag with the Statue of Liberty and the face of the statue is a skeleton. These visuals aim to spark the same cultural codes used in the promotional poster in order to arrive at the same construction of the Middle East and Islam. By using these images, the show is implicating these scenes are very much a representation of the world we live in. Laura Durkay of The Washington Post argues:

21 Izadi, “Artists got ‘Homeland is racist’ Arabic graffiti into the latest episode.”
These same stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims are used politically to justify actions in the real world — U.S. wars, covert operations and drone strikes; CIA detention and torture; racist policing, domestic surveillance and militarized borders. In this context, “Homeland” is not just mindless entertainment, but a device that perpetuates racist ideas that have real consequences for ordinary people’s lives.22

In addition, the clip’s perspective from the lens of a drone is symbolic of the gaze the West reflects onto the Middle East. To be able to construct a concept about another is an act of power. The West has the upper hand in this power dynamic because they have the authority and agency to show who they believe they are not through their portrayal of the Middle East. Further, by showing news reports and images of Osama bin Laden along with a video of the Twin Towers falling on 9/11, the clip creates a justification for American intervention and presence in the Middle East. Moreover, the clip of Hilary Clinton stating, “You can’t keep snakes in your backyard and expect them to only bite your neighbors,” followed by a drone is suggesting this is the obvious solution to the problem at hand. James Castonguay, a professor of communication and media studies at Sacred Heart University, goes as far to say, “Homeland functions as a ‘quality’ propaganda arm for the Obama administration’s continued wage of ‘dirty wars’ around the globe, including the CIA-led assassination of US citizens” and “escalated drone warfare program.”23

Conclusion

While this paper only addresses three examples from Homeland, these examples showed that cultural products like Homeland are not just simply television shows that we watch for an hour each week; these products are shaped by the historical moment and influence our understandings of the world. Even U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Johnson stated, “It’s

22 Laura Durkay, “‘Homeland’ is the most bigoted show on television,” The Washington Post, October 2, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/02/homeland-is-the-most-bigoted-show-on-television/.
through movies and TV that social issues become norms... more people have learned about targeted lethal killing from Claire (the actress that plays Carrie Mathison) than me.”

Capitalizing on cultural stereotypes, Homeland participates in reinforcing dominant societal narratives. Castonguay agrees, stating:

Given that 60 percent of respondents claimed to not know any Arab Americans or Muslims, Homeland’s representations become especially important, since versions of the “real” or “truth” about these groups and individuals are not grounded in viewers’ actual experiences.

All in all, The Guardian writer Peter Beaumont states, “…Homeland portrays a peculiar view of the Islamic world… Popular culture both informs and echoes our prejudices... In other words, television drama such as Homeland not only reflects cultural and social anxieties at any given time, it reflects back those anxieties, reinforcing and shaping them.” Until there is a disruption in the embedded power of hegemonic stereotypes, cultural products such as Homeland will continue to contribute to this same production of the Middle East.

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25 Castonguay, “Fictions of Terror,” 144.
Appendix

Figure 1. Homeland’s promotional poster for the fourth season. 

Figure 2. Carrie Mathison walks past wall of subversive Arabic graffiti. 
Bibliography


