3. Why do long form television dramas from different countries offer different representations? In your answer you must:

• Consider the contexts in which long form television dramas are produced and consumed

• Explain how media contexts may have influenced representations in the set episodes of the two long form television dramas you have studied

• Make judgements and reach conclusions about the reasons for the differences in representation between the two episodes. [30]

In address of the question above I shall be comparing and discussing the U.S. long form television drama Homeland with the European long form television drama The Killing. In this comparison I hope to draw upon the different contexts in which long form television dramas are produced and consumed by audiences and offer explanation as to how such contexts may influence representations of gender and crime in the set episodes. In reaching conclusions for the differences and similarities in these television episodes I hope to illustrate how the key media concept of representation can be used as an analytical tool in a global media environment to aid an understanding of how messages are constructed within the conventions of long form television drama.

Homeland was produced on a high budget by the cable channel Showtime, a premium cable and satellite television network that is the flagship service of the Showtime Networks subsidiary of CBS Corporation. The original broadcast of the opening episode, ‘Pilot’, received just over one million viewers, becoming Showtime’s highest-rated drama premiere in eight years and drawing record-setting audiences for the cable network. It was produced for a cable and global internet audience, and demonstrates the opportunities for character development in authored programmes allowing for more complex, individualised three-dimensional characterisation rather than simple stereotyping.

In contrast, the long form TV drama The Killing (2007-12), shown on BBC 4 in the UK, attracted more viewers in the UK than its contemporary U.S. counterpart Mad Men, with a regular audience share in Denmark of 1.7 m viewers and in the UK of approximately 500,000 per episode. The Killing is one example of the popularity and success of Danish television drama which operates under a public service remit. It was not made for a global market, but spread throughout Europe, Australia then the UK, South America and Asia. The Killing proved particularly attractive to middle class viewers in the UK; it was such a popular subtitled TV drama that BBC 4 even developed a special Saturday slot for subtitled foreign programmes. The BBC picked up the show four years after the first episode for, in terms of TV deals, a small amount of money. The Killing was so successful as a global product that it inspired an American remake produced by Fox 21 Television Studios for the U.S domestic market, and Netflix globally distributed the drama in 2014. Here is an example of different economic contexts which will have an influence on the representations constructed in the programme.

The differences between production budgets for US television dramas and European television dramas can influence representations through allowing more or less choice to programme makers when constructing representations, for example with regard to mise-en-scène, filming, sound and editing technology. Homeland has a cast full of recognisable actors which audiences are familiar with, whereas The Killing, as a Danish drama, used little known stars and was shot in Copenhagen, using the city and its locations as a source of its drama. Both dramas are highly stylised. Homeland uses fast paced storytelling that is cinematic in its filming, whilst The Killing relies on lighting stylisation and the use of the camera for replicating crime drama conventions and is slow paced to develop emotional ties with the characters.

In long form TV drama the use of narrative arcs and complex central characters are important and at the heart of Homeland and The Killing this is evident. Homeland is an American spy thriller TV series with the storyline revolving around two central characters Carrie Mathison, a CIA officer, with bipolar disorder, and Nicholas Brody, an American sniper, a sergeant for the Marine Corps who is found at the start of the episode missing in action, presumed dead. Mathison had come to believe that Brody, who was held captive by al-Qaeda as a prisoner of war, has been turned whilst in captivity by the enemy and he poses a threat to the United States. The series focuses on a storyline that evolves from this premise, together with Mathison’s on-going covert work as an intelligence agent. Homeland also raises discussions of the moral legitimacy of political espionage, which is debated and communicated to its audience. The narrative complexity deployed in Homeland follows a narrative arc conventional of the long form TV drama, around the two characters, Mathison’s role as an intelligence officer and Brody’s return to the U.S as a war hero. The plot twists of Homeland are comparable to the successful cable TV series 24, with its themes of loyalty and legitimacy, demonstrating the established convention of these elements within the crime/political/espionage thriller genre which represents social anxieties and/or contested social values on television programmes, for example the perceived rupturing of the ‘American dream’ illustrated through allegorical representations of social anxieties such as domestic terrorism and surveillance, and also more broadly through wider western social values towards security and family and home.

The Killing also deals with a crime storyline. At the centre of The Killing is Detective Inspector Sarah Lund and a characteristic of the drama is that each episode of the three seasons represents a day in the police investigation of one murder – it is a ‘whodunit’ narrative. Such elongated storytelling allows for detailed exploration of the emotional reaction to a horrific killing by victims, families and friends – often not represented in crime TV dramas as the crime is solved within the programme as part of the narrative resolution. The Danish programme makers wanted to deal with a subject matter that was not often written about in western contemporary or Hollywood crime fiction. The narrative arc of episode 1 revolves around Detective Inspector Sarah Lund and is plotted around day 1 of a murder investigation themed on the search for a missing schoolgirl and then in the final scene the discovery of her body. The programme makers introduced three different narrative strands to tell the storyline – the crime, the introduction of the victim’s family and their emotional responses and a political mayoral election campaign, which subsequently is revealed to be caught up in the murder case. The use of established genre conventions in both Homeland and The Killing reflects Hesmondhalgh’s view that cultural industries rely on repetition to sell formats to audiences.

At the heart of Homeland and The Killing is the discussion of the representation of gender in relation to Carrie Mathison and Sarah Lund, whose characters are crucial to the narrative and who, on occasion, challenge and subvert those representations to try and instigate cultural change and domestic conversations on representations and identity. Both female leads share certain generic traits in their representations across westernised television culture. As in Van Zoonen’s argument about gender being performative, we see Jessica rehearsing being ‘the good wife’ and the army desperately trying to persuade Brody to perform as the masculine ‘hero’. The CIA management are male, reinforcing patriarchal power, but the narrative follows the agency of a female protagonist playing the central role of the maverick who is proved right. In The Killing the central female character, Sarah Lund, is represented as a single mother but career minded – a detective inspector who protects the innocent. Lund is calm, calculating and methodical in her police work, her professionalism is admirable and she is the problem solver and communicator.

Integral to these crime dramas is not only the discourse on crime, but the key functional unit of the family. Both crime dramas use melodrama as a subplot and a part of the narrative arc. This is intentional as conflict is worked out in society and traditionally the family is central to any culture. The use of melodrama is crucial in Homeland when Nick Brody returns as a war hero to meet his family – in the airport the melodramatic is played out as the family is reunited, but what the episode does is to also reveal how torn apart the family has been by the father’s absence – for example the daughter is caught experimenting with drugs. Carrie Mathison is without a sense of family; the CIA is her family but she is considered a ‘loose cannon’. Sarah Lund on the other hand is a single mother with a career with the Danish police force, but as a police officer and mother she is central to the narrative plot. She is also strong in the treatment of the victim and their families. Both dramas share a sense of the melodramatic albeit from different perspectives and this is an example of how long form TV drama is experimenting with the crime genre – using the family and family values so important to U.S. and Danish society. These readings of the text are offered to the audience in negotiation with the text; the melodramatic elements do not soften the issues but heighten the emotional realism of the victim’s/reunited family in each drama, offering an understanding of how families deal with conflict in society. The Killing is described as Nordic Noir as a way of defining stylistic and narrative elements and subsequently as a brand used for Danish drama abroad.

In conclusion, there are a number of reasons for the differences in representation between the two episodes of Homeland and The Killing. This is due in part to the different contexts of production being a mainstream cable TV drama and a Danish produced drama. These contexts clearly have had an effect on the representations of gender and the family. Additionally, there are differences in how the crimes are represented – one is a crime against homeland security, the other about a murdered schoolgirl. The complex narrative storytelling and representations of femininity which challenge traditional stereotypes, have resulted in readings by the audience of these representations not only as different but as sharing similarities in the drama. It can be argued that what brings these two very different dramas together is an understanding of the form and genre of long form TV drama, which is packaged and sold to a global audience which appreciates the variety of complex representations that these dramas offer.