

# Rendition: An open attack on the Bush administration's system of torture

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*Directed by Gavin Hood, screenplay by Kelley Sane*

South African director Gavin Hood gained international acclaim with his Academy Award-winning *Tsotsi* (2005), a compassionate but not entirely satisfying film about a young, impoverished gangster who inadvertently kidnaps an infant and is deeply affected—softened—by his time with the child. Where that film too often played up the personal at the expense of the social elements in its story, at times treating the two as separate things entirely, the director's latest work *Rendition* is much more effective on this score and in its best moments makes for a powerful indictment of the US government's policy of "extraordinary rendition."

The rendition program, which was first approved by the Clinton administration in the 1990s, has since the attacks of 9/11 become a prized tool of the Bush administration in its illegal "war on terror." Under this program, individuals detained by the US government are transferred to prisons in countries known to practice torture—Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and others—where they may be held indefinitely, interrogated and brutalized in secrecy.

The film's exploration of such horrors begins with a suicide bombing in a North African country that leaves an American intelligence agent dead. The head of US intelligence, Corrine Whitman (Meryl Streep), receives a phone call requesting her approval for the pursuit of a possible lead in the case. We overhear her as she gives authorization for "it."

The "it" in question is the abduction of Anwar El-Ibrahimi (Omar Metwally), an Egyptian-born chemical engineer now living in the US with his wife Isabella (Reese Witherspoon). Returning to America from a conference in South Africa, Anwar is snatched away by masked men upon his arrival at the airport, his head covered with a black hood like the kind seen in photos from Abu Ghraib. He is immediately taken to a secret location where he is interviewed by CIA agent Lee Mayer (J.K. Simmons). It seems a call to Anwar's cell phone may have come from a prominent terrorist named Rashid.

When Anwar passes a lie detector test and no solid evidence can be found to connect the man to terrorism, there are no more grounds on which to hold him legally. In response to this, Whitman tells Mayer to "put him on the plane." He is taken in secret to the very country where the suicide bombing took place and where he will be tortured by an official there named Abasi (Yigal Naor). A young and inexperienced CIA agent Douglas Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal) is ordered to observe the proceedings and provide Abasi with questions to ask the prisoner. Anwar is never permitted access to legal counsel or any other communication with the outside world.

Anwar's wife Isabella, distraught over her husband's disappearance, goes to Washington in an attempt to uncover his

whereabouts. Enlisting the help of an ex-boyfriend, Alan Smith (Peter Sarsgaard), who is now an aide to a Senator Hawkins (Alan Arkin), she runs up against one obstacle after another. Her friend proves totally ineffectual and ultimately unwilling to jeopardize himself or the Senator.

Reese Witherspoon's performance, which has been heavily criticized in the press, is quite good. She communicates a great deal about her character just in the way she walks. Her Isabella moves at a slow crawl, not just because she is pregnant, but because she is essentially at a stand-still, walking in place as it were, making no progress within the official avenues of complaint. She is mired in bureaucracy and government stonewalling.

Hood's camera frequently lingers on Witherspoon as she walks into the background of several shots. He gives us time to notice her, time to think. It's not necessary that he manipulate us with tight close-ups of Witherspoon sobbing uncontrollably in order to get his point across. At his best, Hood doesn't overplay his hand. Such subtlety, unfortunately, doesn't find a receptive audience with a great many critics today.

Jake Gyllenhaal also gives a fine performance in the film and has similarly been derided by critics. Both he and Witherspoon give quiet, understated performances. No one is chewing up the scenery with their overwrought method acting here and so most critics have not bothered—or been able—to notice their contributions.

Intercut with the primary story of Anwar is another involving Fatima, the daughter of Abasi. She has rejected the arranged marriage about to be forced upon her and run off with her true love who turns out to be preparing for a suicide bombing mission. This story, too, has its moving moments and Zineb Oukach as Fatima gives a memorable performance, but this strand of the story is not as well developed as the other involving Anwar.

A too-clever twist toward the conclusion reveals that the events we have witnessed have not occurred at the times or in the order we first expected. This seems an unnecessary attempt to impose drama from outside the story when it ought to have been better developed from within the story all along. These are weak points in the film which should not be ignored, and there are others, but they do not, in this reviewer's opinion, derail the work as a whole. There are circumstances when a work's significance transcends its artistic limitations.

*Rendition's* strength is that it does not turn away from the ugly truth of the rendition program. It does not mince words, so to speak, but depicts unflinchingly the simulated drowning technique now known to the entire world as "waterboarding," as well as the beating and electrocution of the torture victim. *Rendition* demolishes entirely the

Bush administration's oft-repeated lie, "The United States does not torture." Corrine Whitman parrots those very words to Agent Freeman long after we, the viewers, and Freeman himself have already witnessed the acts of torture performed on Anwar.

Both Streep and screenwriter Kelley Sane have shown they have an ear for the language of the Bush administration, right down to Streep's bureaucratic tone of voice. When Senator Hawkins' aide approaches her at a gala event to ask the whereabouts of Anwar, she responds with a softly-spoken tirade. If it were not for the actions of her agency and their ability to use the rendition program, she says, 7,000 Londoners "could have perished" in one attack not to mention all the other attacks they have thwarted. "And you are worried about one man," she adds.

This scene rings especially true and brings to mind in particular a recent speech by President Bush in which he listed a number of alleged terrorist plots his administration had supposedly stopped and then posed the question to his opponents: "Which of the attacks I have just described would they prefer we had not stopped?"

There are also a number of still smaller details in the film that give us a sense of life in certain of these elite circles in Washington. When Whitman asks Smith at one point how Senator Hawkins is, the aide responds with "Flush." In showing us an ordinary question like this, answered not with a testament to the Senator's health or happiness or lack thereof but with an accounting of the Senator's financial status, Hood and Sane have given us a glimpse of just how rotten things are in Washington.

The film also, and unusually, treats its Arab characters with respect and makes clear that terrorism is a response to US policies in the Middle East, particularly its propping up of corrupt and despotic regimes in the region.

*Rendition* concludes with the release of Anwar at the hands of Agent Freeman. But while Freeman is responsible for Anwar's release, the agent is not presented in a heroic light at any point in the film. It is clear from Gyllenhaal's performance that Freeman has paid a heavy moral price for his participation in the illegal torture program. He began the film shocked by the techniques of Abasi, but along the way has joined in the torture by choking the blindfolded and bound Anwar as the man reached out to him for help.

Unlike many of the very real cases of rendition, Anwar is ultimately reunited with his family, but even this is not a happy ending, properly speaking. One wonders as the film closes if the family will survive their experiences.

### A hostile reception from critics

*Rendition* is undoubtedly among the better American films released this year. Considering the current political and artistic climate, one must say there is something courageous about its unyielding and unapologetic attack on the rendition program and the government that employs it. But the film met with overwhelmingly poor reviews from a large number of critics.

*Newsweek's* David Ansen, speaking of director Gavin Hood and writer Kelley Sane, told his readers, "Their outrage is genuine, but their methods—whacking the audience with blunt instruments—are remarkably similar to those of their villains." Really? Is Ansen seriously making such a comparison? Or is he simply and

unpardonably light-minded? Either way ...

Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone*, who praises nearly every piece of drivel that emerges from Hollywood, called *Rendition* a "simplistic, skin-deep attempt" and "a bust as persuasive drama," but didn't bother to enlighten us as to why this was the case.

Richard Roeper, on his television show "Ebert & Roeper", commented "I don't fault *Rendition* for its liberal politics. I fault it for hammering home those politics in such pounding, slanted fashion."

Roger Ebert, to his credit, gave the film a favorable comment, terming it "terrifying" and "intelligent."

Dana Stevens with *Slate.com* said "*Rendition's* worst flaw is its political deck-stacking, with its willingness to win the viewer's sympathy by showcasing the least defensible instance of extraordinary rendition imaginable." Along the same lines, James Berardinelli at *reelviews.net* observed that "While I personally have reservations about this policy of extreme rendition, they are not going to cause me to be lenient on this sloppy production."

What the critics mean by "slanted" and "one-sided" and "deck-stacking" arguments is simply that the filmmakers have not equivocated in their condemnation of an abhorrent policy. Should the Nazi occupation of Europe now be treated in films in a more 'rounded,' 'three-dimensional' manner?

Kyle Smith, in Rupert Murdoch's right-wing tabloid the *New York Post*, fittingly wrote one of the filthiest pieces. His comment was not a 'review' in any objective sense of the word, but a crude and cynical attempt to denigrate any opposition to the Bush administration and its policies, aimed at pleasing a right-wing, quasi-fascistic audience.

It began: "*Rendition* makes an effort to convince us that the war on Islamist fanatics is really an attack on the Reese Witherspoons of the world. Good luck selling that one, guys."

Later Smith referred to the lead character getting "some CIA hospitality (shackles, water torture, electrocution, beating, etc.)" while Reese Witherspoon "runs around desperately" and Meryl Streep "does her Cruella de Vil sneer and her bad-bumpkin accent. Southern accents are La-Z-Script shorthand for evil; anytime someone who isn't on 'King of the Hill' or 'Friday Night Lights' says 'mmmokay' for 'OK,' you know you've got your culprit."

Smith went on: "*Rendition* has the depth of a bumper sticker without the brevity. You may agree that renegade forces are using 9/11 as an excuse to torture innocents, or you may think the movie is another case of Hollywood not only missing the forest for the trees but also missing the trees for the butterflies on the leaves."

*Rendition* has clearly offended the sensibilities of many of the reviewers. It is not a work that will find its way onto many of their "top ten" lists at year's end, and this is entirely to the film's credit.



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