

Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*: Hollywood embraces the “dark side”

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Zero Dark Thirty, Kathryn Bigelow's new film chronicling the CIA's hunt for Osama bin Laden, which opened in select theaters December 19, has largely received rave reviews and garnered a host of awards and nominations as the year's best movie. It is a shameful work, and this reception says far more about the state of the media and the popular culture industry in the US than it does about the film itself.

With an emotionally exploitative opening of a dark screen and a sound track of fire fighters' radio calls and frantic cries for help from the upper floors of the Twin Towers on 9/11, the film cuts to a CIA “black site,” where a detainee, his arms hung by ropes from the ceiling and his face cut and battered, confronts an American interrogator who promises “I will hurt you” if he fails to provide the information demanded.

The juxtaposition of the 9/11 soundtrack and the harrowing scenes of torture are presented as cause and effect, with one justifying the other.

Assisting the interrogator (Jason Clarke) are other individuals, their faces concealed by ski masks. With a break in the torture session, one of these assistants takes off her mask revealing Maya (Jessica Chastain), a rookie agent deployed “in the field” for the first time. Asked by the chief interrogator if she'd rather watch the brutality on a monitor outside the torture chamber, Maya instead insists that they go back in and resume their grisly work.

This introduces the main thread of the drama, using the term loosely, that is to follow, with Maya conducting a single-minded pursuit of clues leading to the whereabouts of bin Laden, while bravely battling resistance from the entire male-dominated leadership of the CIA until she finally prevails.

According to this improbable version of events, the junior female analyst single-handedly brought about the May 1, 2011 raid on the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan that ended in the assassination of bin Laden and the shooting of several other defenseless men, women and children.

Bigelow provides a thin feminist overlay—some reviewers have gone so far as to draw a parallel between the protagonist and Bigelow herself, the first woman to win an Oscar for best director—for a semi-fascistic cinematic embrace of the US military-intelligence apparatus and its crimes.

At nearly two hours, the film is long, dark and boring. Not a single character is developed, including Maya, about whom we know no more at the end than we did at the beginning. In an

interview with *Time* magazine, Bigelow defended her failure to give any of her characters depth, declaring, “It pierces the momentum.”

What “momentum” there is consists of the torture and frequent ear-piercing explosions. The film manages to include not only 9/11, but also the July 7, 2005 London bombings, the bomb attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in 2008, the December 2009 suicide bombing by a Jordanian double agent that killed seven CIA operatives at a base in Khost, Afghanistan and the 2010 abortive Times Square car-bombing attempt.

Virtually all of these acts were perpetrated by individuals who had no connection with bin Laden, but had been radicalized by the slaughter of civilians in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the abduction and torture of Muslims at Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and CIA “black sites.”

The controversy surrounding the film—no doubt welcomed by the director and her screenwriter Mark Boal—centers on its first 25 minutes and the scenes of a helpless detainee being waterboarded, beaten, sexually humiliated, dragged across the floor in a dog collar and chain, forced-fed and sealed into a box smaller than a coffin. According to CNN national security analyst Peter Bergen, Bigelow and Boal had to be persuaded to “tone down” the violence of the script, which in its original version had the prisoner beaten to a pulp.

The film clearly argues that the torture sessions produced the key initial intelligence that led eight years later to bin Laden, a claim made by some on the Republican right and within the CIA itself that has been thoroughly refuted, most recently in a 6,000-page report on the question approved last week by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Bigelow has denied that her film amounts to an apology for, if not glorification of, torture. She is noncommittal on the issue. “The film doesn't have an agenda, and it doesn't judge,” she told the *New Yorker*. “I wanted a boots-on-the-ground experience.”

In the same interview, she claimed that she and Boal had adopted “almost a journalistic approach to film.” In another comment illustrating how deeply she has wallowed in the culture of militarism, she proclaimed herself a “delivery system for Mark's content.”

Boal, who previously wrote for the *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone* and *Playboy* and was the screenwriter on Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008), worked in Iraq in 2004 as an “embedded” reporter with US troops. Bigelow, who was given unprecedented access to

CIA officials and members of Seal Team Six, has emerged as an “embedded director,” establishing the kind of symbiotic relationship with the military and intelligence apparatus that inevitably produces the kind of propaganda the latter requires.

The distortion regarding the role played by torture is a serious one, particularly given the claim at the beginning of the film that it is based upon facts and participants’ accounts. Boal has tried to gloss it over by saying it showed the detainee, who was tortured at the outset, giving information during a non-threatening session in which he eats lunch with his interrogators.

This is disingenuous at best. The information is won by Maya and the interrogator exploiting the detainee’s memory loss resulting from torture. The film includes multiple references to torture, with Maya surfing through DVDs depicting detainees hung from the ceiling, crouched in stress positions and recoiling in fear that give up bits of information that she pieces together. She interrogates one man by ordering a Pakistani aide to beat him, while another tells her he will talk because he doesn’t want to be tortured again.

Of course, the factual distortion and the debate over whether “torture works” hardly begins to plumb the depths of the fundamental issues surrounding CIA torture: above all, that it is a war crime ordered by top officials from the US president on down and sanctioned by leading members of both major political parties. Those who ordered and executed this crime have been protected unconditionally by the Obama administration.

The liberal indictment of the film on this score is pathetically weak. Representative is a review by *Slate* senior editor Emily Bazelon, who affirms that, while *Zero Dark Thirty* “isn’t the movie the left wanted about the death of Bin Laden... we can make the moral case against torture—and even the cost-benefit case that it’s not worth the trade-off in reputation, political capital and honor—without resorting to the claim that torture never accomplishes anything.”

And what of the film’s grand finale, the murder of bin Laden and several others with him? If Bigelow and Boal can claim that they are neutral on the question of torture, they make no bones about glorifying the exploits of Seal Team Six in what amounted to an extra-legal state killing—in short, an assassination.

It had been widely predicted that *Zero Dark Thirty* would be a vehicle for Barack Obama’s reelection campaign, given the access provided by the administration to Bigelow and Boal and the incumbent president’s political exploitation of the bin Laden killing to ward off any Republican attack on his record as “commander-in-chief.”

In the end, the film failed to appear before the election, and Obama is seen only briefly on a television set in a CIA facility in Pakistan. His remarks to an interviewer repudiating torture and vowing to “regain America’s moral stature in the world” get a nonplused reaction from the operatives in the room, who move on with their work, indifferent to the political blather.

But Obama aside, the glorification of a state assassination is itself of immense significance at a time when the practice has become a permanent feature of US policy, with the president arrogating to himself the right to order the killing of American citizens without charges or trials and presiding over “terror

Tuesday” sessions at the White House in which assassination victims are chosen.

Bigelow has described the killing of bin Laden as “epic” and the “story of a lifetime.” She told the *New Yorker*, “Events like this only come along once or twice in a millennium.”

Really? The most important event in 500 years? What precisely changed with this killing of a sickly old man who had been in hiding for a decade and by all accounts played little or no active role?

Under conditions in which Washington has supported and armed Al Qaeda elements in US-orchestrated wars for the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria, regimes that had previously collaborated with the CIA against the Islamist terrorist group, is the US public not entitled to ask what has this “story of a lifetime” been all about? It will find no answers in Bigelow’s film.

Just as the “boots on the ground” approach of her previous Oscar-winning film, *The Hurt Locker*, served as a justification for the Iraq war, with its rape of an entire society and the loss of a million lives, so her latest work serves to vindicate a policy of international criminality and the repudiation of core constitutional principles and democratic rights that pervades the US state and its ruling establishment.

A year ago, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City exhibited one of Bigelow’s earliest film projects entitled *Psychological Operations in Support of Unconventional War*, made in 1975, which involved a critique of US counterinsurgency methods and the use of death squads. Thirty-seven years later, she is glorifying death squads and given full access to their members by the US government.

Even at the time of her early film, she was being schooled in postmodernism at Columbia University, imbibing a misanthropic outlook deeply hostile to socialism and the working class.

This ideology became cemented in class interests as Hollywood turned Bigelow into a multi-millionaire. She is representative of a whole social layer of ex-“lefts” and liberals who have accommodated themselves to imperialism, implicitly recognizing that their wealth and privilege are bound up with and dependent upon a strong state, capable of waging predatory wars abroad and suppressing social discontent at home.

Some of them take comfort in the fact that the horrendous crimes carried out in the process can be ordered by a black president and implemented by female CIA operatives.

These are the class dynamics and ugly political currents that give rise to a grotesque film like *Zero Dark Thirty*.



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