

# A comment from a reader in Uruguay on *Lincoln*, *Django Unchained* and *Zero Dark Thirty*

25 February 2013

I wanted to congratulate David Walsh for his article entitled “The intellectually bankrupt defenders of *Django Unchained* and *Zero Dark Thirty*,” for his previous negative notes about those films and also for his praise of *Lincoln*. In South America, particularly in my country (Uruguay) and in Argentina, several commentators have been kind to Bigelow and Tarantino and critical of Spielberg. *Lincoln* explores with dignity the public and private life of the Republican president in the last months of his government and his existence. Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner did not create a hagiographic portrait or a bronze statue, but a human, ambiguous character. They show the hero yelling at his wife, slapping his eldest son and lobbying to get the votes needed to pass the amendment which abolished slavery. But, at the same time, they knew how to pay tribute to the legacy of this great historical figure.

Daniel Day-Lewis’s performance combines the statesman with the pragmatic man, the great orator with the narrator of amusing anecdotes and witty metaphors, the firm politician with the folksy and accessible president, the leader of a nation with the tormented parent. Spielberg does not do enough to develop Lincoln’s black servants, and also falls into a celebration of corruption. He privileges the *real politik* in Washington and minimizes the role of the masses. At times, his work is overly solemn and rhetorical, and lacks narrative fluidity in its first half.

But as Walsh suggests, its greatest merit is that it describes the historical and social context of slavery, establishes that this was the result of a certain political and economic system, and that its abolition was achieved thanks to the conviction and will of a great leader, a sector of the political establishment and, above

all, the struggle of hundreds of thousands of black and white citizens in the streets and on the battlefield.

As Walsh pointed out in his review of *Django Unchained*, for Tarantino, on the other hand, slavery was not the consequence of the development of capitalism, but the result of the racism inherent in America’s Southern population, miserable human beings more stereotypes than creatures of flesh and bone. And the solution to slavery was not the American Civil War, but revenge, a theme so beloved by Tarantino.

His characters are poorly developed, and the situations are unlikely and pushed until they reach the final bloodbath, which is what really interests the director. Tarantino plays around with history once more with a sophomoric lack of thinking, as he did with the Second World War and the fight against Nazism in *Inglourious Basterds*. For him, slavery is nothing more than an excuse to assemble another post-modern pastiche of recycled genres, with superficial and repugnant violence, so loved by his fans and the majority of international critics.

Nor do I understand the critical community’s praise for *Zero Dark Thirty*, a politically reductionist, historically dishonest, ideologically reprehensible and aesthetically conventional piece of work. As Walsh says, “Its central assumption—that the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the ‘war on terror’ were honest and patriotic responses to the events of 9/11—is a lie and inevitably and fatally skews every aspect of the work.”

Just as she avoided all criticism of the American invasion of Iraq in her previous film, the Oscar-winning *The Hurt Locker*, Bigelow does not say anything about the long-term relationship of the US government with

Osama bin Laden, in particular under the Reagan administration during the war between Afghanistan and the former Soviet Union. For Bigelow—as for George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld—the end justifies the means.

Apart from some gestures of initial disapproval, Maya, Jessica Chastain’s character, does not question the use of torture to obtain information. Instead of a character worthy of Howard Hawks’ gallery of strong and intelligent women, Maya looks and acts like a robot, a bureaucrat addicted to work with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Bigelow does not enrich her with psychological nuance or details about her private life. Therefore, *Zero Dark Thirty* is not even interesting as a thriller: the protagonist cannot sustain a two-and-a-half hour story, which is dull for its first two hours and barely attains a level of intensity in its final half-hour.

Many critics praise the last scene, in which Maya boards an empty military plane that will take her back to her country. The pilot asks her “Where do you want to go?” and she begins to cry. For some, it is touching that the protagonist seems to discover she no longer has a home, work or homeland. Others suggest that it says something about the uncertain future of her country after the execution of the former leader of Al Qaeda (their interpretation seems to be: “Where does American society go from here?”)

But that sequence actually reflects the mere solitude and relief of an obsessed agent at the end of a mission that has consumed nearly a decade of her life. My problem in connecting emotionally with this is that I know almost nothing about Maya. The director has told me so little about her that it is difficult to be affected by her tears.

Ultimately, those who do deserve my empathy and compassion are the victims—civilians and soldiers alike—of the US invasion of Afghanistan. Several critics have suggested that Maya is the alter ego of the director, a woman who has gained a privileged place in Hollywood, and the first female filmmaker to win an Oscar. They argue that for Bigelow, Maya is not just another example of a woman being as strong as a man, but also the vehicle through which to display the director’s craft as an artist, her ethics based on aesthetic brilliance, commitment and the absence of concessions. From my point of view, Bigelow has shown that the best way to be recognized by the film

industry is through compromise, complacency and adherence to the rules of the game.

Ironically, it is Steven Spielberg, previously known as “Mr. Industry,” who reveals himself again as the most humane and valuable face of the system. After 9/11 and throughout his career, Spielberg has impressed me as one of the few Hollywood directors not interested in the subject of revenge (furthermore, he was capable of criticizing it as a tool of justice and political struggle in *Munich* ).

While much of the American cinema and pop culture seems fascinated with vendetta (i.e., *Django Unchained* and *Zero Dark Thirty* ) and makes apologies for the US intelligence services (i.e., *Argo*, *Zero Dark Thirty* ), *Lincoln*, on the other hand, a serious and mature exploration of one of the most dramatic and important moments in the history of that country, is an effort that must be appreciated. It is a pity that many critics all over the world have preferred certain reactionary and mediocre works.

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MAS

Uruguay



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