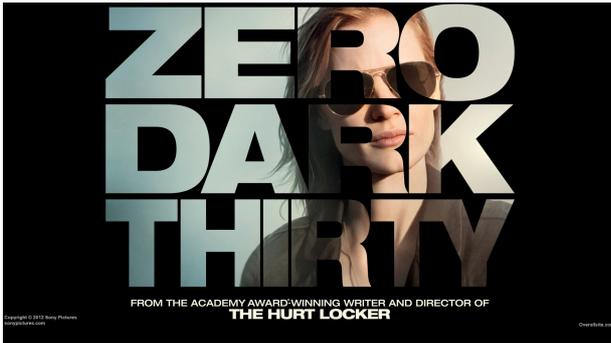


Brian McClinton

# Torturing the Truth



**K**ATHRYN Bigelow is at it again, playing silly cinematic war games while claiming to be ‘neutral’ or even anti-war. *Zero Dark Thirty* follows in the wake of her Oscar winning movie *The Hurt Locker*, a hollow apology for American imperialism that reduces film to a clichéd collection of cheap thrills and set pieces.

*The Hurt Locker* is about three members of a US army bomb disposal unit operating to disarm improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq in 2004, a year after the invasion. The three are presented as brave heroes doing their duty to save the world and the human race. One in particular, Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), is reckless and puts himself and his colleagues in constant danger, but it is stressed that he is not psychotic because he loves his family and is kind to children, including Iraqis. The Iraqis themselves are stripped of all humanity and shown as feckless, shifty, menacing men (they even put bombs in dead bodies) or screaming and hysterical women.

The setting is a real and ongoing conflict, yet we are meant to regard it as ‘neutral’, despite the fact that the perspective is entirely one-sided and there is no attempt to question the presence of U.S. forces as an army of occupation. It is also difficult to regard it as anti-war when its hero finds war so seductive that he prefers it to civilian life, and when violence is glamorised as a kind of heightened emotional response. The result is a film that is all cheap suspense, bad politics, and no plot.

Anyone who thinks that *The Hurt Locker* is anti-war is now shown to be totally mistaken because in *Zero Dark Thirty* Bigelow has directed another gungo-ho paean to American courage, dedication and rectitude, this time about the ten-year hunt for and death of Osama bin Laden. If *The Hurt Locker* can be seen as a recruiting vehicle for the U.S. army, then *Zero Dark Thirty* is a vindication of the use of ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ and extrajudicial executions in the so-called ‘war against terror’, even though both are war crimes in international law.

The film opens with real voices recorded during the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, including a heartrending phone call by a woman trapped in one of the Twin Towers as she feels the heat rising up. Then it cuts to a CIA ‘black site’ two years later, where suspected money-launderer Ammar is being tortured by agent Dan (Jason Clarke), while intelligence analyst Maya (Jessica Chastain), looks on as they try to extract information about the whereabouts of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Ammar is slapped and punched in the face; hung spread-eagled from the ceiling in wrist stirrups; shackled in a dog collar and pressed to the ground on all fours; waterboarded almost to the point of unconsciousness; stripped naked and exposed to Maya – “you don’t mind if my female colleague sees your junk”; deprived of sleep; and locked away in a ‘confinement’ box the size of a coffin.

Maya, the heroine of the story, is initially shocked by the brutality, but before long she is playing the game herself, torturing other detainees or threatening them. “You can help yourself by being truthful”, she tells Ammar later. She is an obsessive CIA agent who has devoted her whole career to finding bin Laden and is not likely to be overcome by moral qualms. Torture may be ugly, but if it works then the end justifies the means. Ammar eventually reveals the key name of bin Laden’s courier after he has been threatened with more suffering.

There is no irony or ambiguity here. This is no *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon*. Instead, it poses as a docudrama, opening with the claim that it is ‘based on first-hand accounts actual events’, and real footage is interspersed throughout. It implies that torture is both effective and – by juxtaposing it with the 9/11 attacks – legitimate. Bigelow herself has protested that depiction is not endorsement and that “if it was, no artist would be able to paint inhumane practices, no author could write about them, and no filmmaker could delve into the thorny subjects of our time”. This is either disingenuous or naive.

Even former CIA director Leon Panetta has now stated that the name of bin Laden’s courier did not come from any tortured CIA detainee, yet the film suggests that it was a crucial element in the search. It is not just Ammar who divulges the courier’s name. Later, Maya threatens another tortured detainee that he will be sent to Israel, where he will presumably face more torture or even worse, and he then confirms Ammar’s evidence. And in the final part of the film, after Obama has come to power, a CIA official bemoans the fact that they cannot find a vital piece of information about bin Laden’s location because they are no longer allowed to torture detainees.

So why does Bigelow distort the facts? Was she duped by initial CIA lies? Or, perhaps more likely, is it her own lie? She clearly set out to make a macho feminist movie which can’t show torture being ineffective because that would be to denigrate her heroine who never makes mistakes or is bothered by any self-doubt. In this respect, she contrasts with the Claire Danes character in *Homeland* who is much more troubled and conflicting.

Then again, why does *ZD30* dwell on the torture for so long, taking up the first 45 minutes of the movie? Bigelow has actually fooled some critics and filmmakers, including Michael Moore, into believing that she has made an *anti* torture movie and intends the viewer to be repulsed by it, even though she has explicitly stated in the January *Art Forum* magazine that “there is no political agenda in the movie whatsoever”. In truth, *ZD30* is tantamount to torture porn in much the same way that

---

---

*The Hurt Locker* is explosives porn (*ZD30* also has its quota of deafening bangs to relieve the tedium). In other words, she is making yet another contribution to America's deadly love affair with violence and the notion that it provides a solution to human problems. The average American 18 year-old has seen 200,000 violent acts on TV alone. Add video games and movies to that tally and it is a formidable deluge of mass media destructiveness.

True, artistic violence is as old as art itself. Francis Bacon refers to man's liking for knowledges that are 'drenched in flesh and blood', and Shakespeare pours it on in *King Lear*. But in the best art violence is a drawing-in device for more profound concerns, whereas in Bigelow's last two films it becomes an end in itself as visceral excitement engendering adrenaline highs and power kicks in the audience, and probably in the director as well. The irony here is that the woman who is obsessed with creating aggression in her movies is a professed pacifist.

Whatever Bigelow's motives, and obviously making a lot of money ranks high among them, *ZD30* proves that truth was the first casualty of the 'war on terror', which was in reality a war of revenge for 9/11. The Bush administration publicly denied that it employed torture but secretly approved it, and this film offers moral support for this deception. Significantly, when Maya's colleague Jessica sees Barack Obama in a TV interview announcing that the country will no longer countenance torture and that banning it is "part and parcel of an effort to regain America's moral stature in the world", she shakes her head at Maya in disgust as if to say that the new President is a bit of a wimp who is detached from the real world.

Torture rarely works and is counterproductive in that it leads to the creation of more enemies and lying confessions. Some of these 'disclosures' made the false connection between bin Laden and Saddam Hussein and claimed that the latter had weapons of mass destruction, thus forming part of Colin Powell's presentation to the UN on the need to invade Iraq. Some of the disinformation led to false trails which delayed the finding of bin Laden.

Nowhere in *ZD30* is the efficacy or morality of torture questioned, and the CIA operatives are totally unaffected by their own brutality. The detainees are dehumanised: even Ammar, despite his prolonged suffering, is not shown as a sympathetic character. We are given continual visual reminders of why the torture is considered necessary, including the London bombings in 2005 that killed 56 and the Marriott Hotel bombing in 2008 in Islamabad that killed at least 54. It doesn't actually state that they are linked to bin Laden (and indeed there is no evidence that they were), but it suggests that they were all somehow part of the same war. The implication clearly is that it was right to use brutal tactics when America and other nations were being attacked by an enemy that had no compulsion to abide by international law or human decency. If they refused to play by the rules, then we too were justified in breaking the rules and using any means to defeat a dangerous and threatening enemy.

Yet, from an ethical humanist perspective, torture is wrong on both consequentialist and deontological grounds. It is not only ineffective but also wrong in itself because deliberately inflicting extreme pain on another human being is barbaric and inhuman. It is a violation of the rule of law and a crime against human rights, human autonomy and human dignity. To use a quasi-religious metaphor, torture destroys the soul of the torturer even as it destroys the body of its victim.

Central as it is to any discussion of this morally vacuous movie, torture is not the only illegality on display. The final

act of *Zero Dark Thirty*, military jargon for 12 30 am, is the Abbottabad raid in May 2011 by a U.S. Navy Seals team and the killing of bin Laden. This assault on the compound, lasting about 40 minutes, is played as a curiously downbeat video game – a pale version of *The Dam Busters*, with Maya in the Barnes Wallis role. Nevertheless, we see soldiers shooting unarmed wounded men to make sure they are dead and shooting women and leaving them to die. If this is a correct recreation of the real attack, then there was no attempt to bring back bin Laden alive.

This assault also raises a number of moral issues. Was it right to infringe Pakistan's sovereignty and shoot the unarmed Bin Laden and others? It was certainly an extra-judicial killing without due process of law. Summary execution is not the way a democracy obeying the rule of law should normally conduct affairs, especially as the man apparently posed no threat. Wild West vigilantism of this kind arguably makes a mockery of international law. After all, how would Americans react if a team of Iraqi commandos, seeking justice for US 'shock and awe' terrorism on Iraqi civilians in 2003, landed in George Bush's ranch, assassinated him and dumped his body into the Atlantic?

A contrast can be made with the Nuremberg Trials after World War Two when Nazi leaders were brought to justice in a court before being punished as war criminals. A similar judicial process has begun at the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague after the recent capture of General Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb military commander accused of being responsible for the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of 8,000 Muslim men and boys, the largest mass murder in Europe since 1945, and far worse in terms of the number of deaths than 9/11.

We also have strong evidence for Mladic's involvement in the atrocity, whereas we do not know what connection, if any, Bin Laden had with 9/11. Initially he denied any, but in taped messages in 2004 and 2006 he claimed responsibility by saying that the attacks were his idea and that he had personally directed the nineteen hijackers. But why should we take him at his word? According to the FBI, there is actually no hard evidence connecting him with the attacks, and Dick Cheney, Bush's Vice-President, has said that the American government has never argued the case for his involvement. Is this not all the more reason for having brought him to trial in a court of law where the opportunity to present evidence would have been given and the truth discovered and justice seen to be done?

Meanwhile, American illegality continues. No one will be prosecuted for the tortures or the fact that over 100 detainees have died while in U.S. custody. American drone attacks, which continue to usurp the sovereignty of foreign states, have killed thousands of innocent civilians, including as many as 176 children in Pakistan during the past eight years. The Iraq War, led by the United States, resulted in the deaths of perhaps a million Iraqis. This is only a sample of the litany of U.S. destructiveness since 2001.

Instead of speaking truth to power as great art does, *Zero Dark Thirty*, like *The Hurt Locker* before it, reeks of the malodorous myth of American niceness – "we are the good guys on the world stage, and if we behave less than perfectly, it is because other people force us to be this way". John Pilger in the *New Statesman* sees Kathryn Bigelow as 'the Leni Reifenstahl of our time, promoting her master's voice as did the Führer's pet filmmaker'. A harsh judgment, perhaps, but not far off the mark.