

# THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF EMBEDDED JOURNALISM

## Fiction versus Depiction in *Zero Dark Thirty*

K. L. EVANS

*Zero Dark Thirty*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal, takes its title from a military term for half-past midnight—that still, nocturnal hour in which Osama bin Laden’s Pakistan compound was raided and robbed of its prize. To civilians, the term also implies that some people are awake while the rest of us sleep, that we are safeguarded by their sharp-eyed vigilance, and in Bigelow’s film these silent soldiers get their day in the sun. “I was interested in putting the audience into the shoes of the men and women in the thick of this hunt,” noted Bigelow, after she and Boal, a former freelance journalist, began investigating how bin Laden was finally tracked down. She wanted to “giv[e] people a glimpse at the dedication and courage and sacrifice they made.”<sup>1</sup>

Already there is something of a puzzle, though, in Bigelow’s description, since she aims to provide a truthful view of CIA field agents *and* convincingly simulate the view from where they stand, to offer at-home audiences an accurate account of what these agents undergo. And what happens when a film switches back and forth between two radically different representational modes? Can it throw light on matters of moral, social, and political concern, as *Zero Dark Thirty* hopes to, when it brings together in one continuous narrative that method of representation associated with feature films (the work of art, an effort of the imagination) and the quasi-journalistic approach Bigelow uses to reconstruct a topical incident, a kind of aesthetic articulation of the film’s opening promise that it has been “based on first-hand accounts of actual events”? How distorted is the “glimpse” *Zero Dark Thirty* presents when the film’s expressive possibilities are not only located

in its verisimilitude, but anchored onto the background of an actual, recent event? or when instead of looking *at* something, we are invited (by the real soundtrack of 9/11 panic that opens the film, for example, or by the view through night-vision lenses of the raid in Pakistan) to go through it?

These are questions made more germane in relation to mounting criticism that *Zero* misrepresents an issue central to it: the CIA's use of what, in a chilling euphemism, it called "enhanced interrogation." In response to the charge from many quarters that *Zero Dark Thirty* misleadingly promotes the efficacy of torture (in that it encourages viewers to associate torture with the capture of Osama bin Laden), Bigelow and Boal insist that rather than come to any conclusion about what Bigelow calls "a part of the story we couldn't ignore," their film unsparingly portrays reality. "Depiction is not endorsement," Bigelow has quite fairly noted.<sup>2</sup> She also says, "What we were attempting is almost a journalistic approach to film," and that she wishes torture were "not part of our history. But it was."<sup>3</sup> However if Bigelow's view of herself as reluctant truth-teller has been largely accepted by film critics (the movie "is a cool, outwardly nonpartisan intelligence procedural," writes Manohla Dargis),<sup>4</sup> it has infuriated a cross-section of politicians, public officials, and newsmen, many of whom maintain that the filmmakers' commitment to just-the-facts journalism only highlights how far their film strays from real life.<sup>5</sup>

There is, in other words, an additional dimension to the rather significant business, given the film's success, the magnitude of its audience, of deciding whether *Zero Dark Thirty* excuses or excoriates torture; whether it champions the covert operations of the CIA or offers an unparalleled view of America's most celebrated display of force, the illegal invasion of Pakistan and the execution of an unarmed man. For while this film fully intends to operate at the level of reality, it is also determined to tell the truth, and for the makers of *Zero Dark Thirty*, we get closer to the truth as we increase our experiential limits. For screenwriter-producer Boal, "the real power of filmmaking is found at the intersection of investigation and imagination," where the combination of reporting and creativity "reaches further and pushes harder than traditional reporting or purely fictional storytelling on their own."<sup>6</sup> For director Bigelow, a film's truthfulness lies in its attention to visual and atmospheric detail and is earned by way of a filmmaker's heuristic use of her tools. As she puts it, "I've spent a fair amount of time thinking about what my aptitude is and I really think it's to explore and push the medium."<sup>7</sup> "Pushing the medium," for both Boal and Bigelow, means using

innovative technology and a mixture of fiction and reportage to transform firsthand accounts into a firsthand experience for viewers—to “make the news behind the news more accessible, more visceral, more real.”<sup>8</sup> By “more real,” these filmmakers tacitly mean “more true.” In this essay, then, I consider where *Zero Dark Thirty* alights in our oldest (and, increasingly, most misunderstood) philosophical dispute: does knowledge derived from experience make it *more* or *less* possible to see rightly? The point is worth brooding over because the fact that this film locates itself firmly on one side of *this* dispute in effect decides the outcome of the other, however well each side assembles its arguments.

### Virtual Experience

For *Zero Dark Thirty*, Kathryn Bigelow has explained, she “wanted a boots-on-the-ground experience.”<sup>9</sup> To Bigelow this phrase describes what she wants viewers to feel in the way of direct and immediate participation—as if, if the events in the film are to be understood, they must be lived through. But Bigelow has also employed this phrase to fend off criticism about her film’s fairness and historical accuracy, which suggests that for her it denotes more than her audience’s heightened sense of involvement. Having “boots on the ground” also implies a different kind of access to reality—and in particular, a more varied, nuanced view, since it follows that where there are feet there are eyes, and where eyes, perspective more fluid and wide-ranging than a camera’s limited scope. Wanting to put “boots on the ground” means offering audiences a chance to see naturalistically, that is to say, which is the basis for the audiences’ feeling of complete involvement. For Bigelow the phrase is shorthand for the technical sophistication indispensable to her films’ trademark verisimilitude (particularly since 2008’s *The Hurt Locker*, for which she won an Oscar), a style of shooting that can involve running four camera crews simultaneously and editing hundreds of hours of footage in order to accommodate the multiple perspectives required by Bigelow’s sophisticated approach to composition and montage. Offering multiple perspectives is important to Bigelow because “that’s how we experience reality,” she says, “by looking at the microcosm and the macrocosm simultaneously. The eye sees differently than the lens, but with multiple focal lengths and a muscular editorial style, the lens can give you that microcosm/macrocosm perspective, and that contributes to the feeling of total immersion.”<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, as an opportunity to experience something—to feel immersed

in the work of the CIA unit charged with finding bin Laden—*Zero Dark Thirty* resoundingly succeeds. Thanks largely to her shooting and editing approach, Bigelow is able to marshal a largely fruitless and fragmentary manhunt dragging out over a decade into a gripping psychological thriller. “It’s all hurry up and wait, hurry up and wait,” writes an enamored David Edelstein, naming it the best film of 2012.<sup>11</sup> And while “with ample reason, we often dismiss what comes out of the commercially minded dream factory of Hollywood as simplistic, candied, trivial,” writes Frank Bruni, *Zero Dark Thirty* (like *Lincoln*, another contender in 2012’s Oscar race) is “dedicated to the ethical ambiguities and messy compromises of governing—to the muck and stink that sometimes go into keeping this mighty country of ours intact and safe.”<sup>12</sup> Few other celebrated critics have failed to admire what David Denby calls *Zero Dark Thirty*’s “radical realism,” a phrase that simultaneously captures Bigelow’s passion for plunging audiences into events in a way that feels “raw, immediate, and visceral,” as Bigelow said about her celebrated work on *The Hurt Locker*, and her flair for assembling lifelike renderings of objectionable acts, unlikable people, and unkempt, uninspiring spaces.

“The virtue of *Zero Dark Thirty*,” writes Denby, “is that it pays close attention to the way that life does work”—which for Denby means that “it combines ruthlessness and humanity in a manner that is paradoxical and disconcerting and yet satisfying as art.”<sup>13</sup> Denby’s juxtaposition of “ruthlessness” and “humanity” presumably conveys the idea that what viewers see in this film isn’t pretty; the CIA unit charged with finding bin Laden is not simply trying to prevent further attacks but is openly seeking revenge, and their methods for intelligence-gathering involve acts any viewer can recognize as immoral and even unlawful.<sup>14</sup> But the fact that we *do* see these acts—that we experience what CIA field agents chose or were required to experience, and that in addition to becoming onlookers at the torment and degradation American field agents inflict upon their captives, we are made privy to “the anger and the desperation; the terse, anxious exchanges among agents; the breathless chase through crowded Pakistani streets”—turns the film into a frank look at the fact or condition of being human.

On this point we should concentrate, then, since it constitutes in essence the defense Bigelow and Boal assemble in response to their critics: that rather than take sides over the question of what part “enhanced interrogation” played in the hunt to find bin Laden, the film takes a candid look at the lives of what Bigelow calls “ordinary Americans who fought bravely even as they *sometimes* crossed moral lines.”<sup>15</sup> Though prior to the film’s release

some right-wing pundits thought it would bolster Obama's image in time for reelection, and following its release many left-leaning politicians and reporters have called the film dangerous and morally reprehensible, the filmmakers insist that *Zero Dark Thirty* "doesn't have an agenda, and it doesn't judge," as Bigelow told the *New Yorker's* Dexter Filkins.<sup>16</sup> Or that if it does have an agenda, "it isn't a partisan agenda," as Mark Boal has said. "It's an agenda of trying to look behind the scenes at what went down."<sup>17</sup>

Even so, partly because "what went down" includes an unvarnished look inside the CIA's largely frustrating search for bin Laden, including what went on in the early years of the hunt at "black sites" (where the CIA's treatment of terror suspects has now been declared "torture" by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg—the first time this has happened), and partly because the filmmakers got considerable cooperation from the CIA in the making of the film, the hope Boal once expressed for staying "above the political fray" has been unsuccessful.<sup>18</sup> The accusation to which Bigelow and Boal have, with reluctance, been compelled to respond, is that without flinching from the brutality or inhumanity of the CIA's use of torture, *Zero Dark Thirty* nevertheless portrays torture as something of a necessary option—as repellent but, on occasion, fruitful.

Enthusiasts of the film have generally agreed with Boal that on the subject of torture, "what the film does over the course of two hours is show the complexity of the debate."<sup>19</sup> Some have even pointed out that in the film, only misinformation is attained by torture, or that *Zero Dark Thirty* "does not present torture as the silver bullet that led to bin Laden," as Spencer Ackerman writes. Instead, "it presents torture as the ignorant alternative to that silver bullet."<sup>20</sup> Viewers suffer through a scene in which detained al-Qaeda operative Ammar (Reda Kateb) is subjected to emotional distress, naked humiliation, and waterboarding, but Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* writes that "it is only later," *after* Ammar is tortured, when CIA agents Dan (Jason Clarke) and Maya (Jessica Chastain) "lie to Ammar, sit across from him at a table, talk to him like a human being and give him food and a cigarette, that he offers them a potential lead."<sup>21</sup>

And yet despite the film's many ambiguities, critics' impression of what the film sanctions is worth taking seriously if only because the narrative engine of Boal's detective story is kick-started by torture, as filmmaker Alex Gibney sagely points out, and because the film's viewers first hear the nickname of bin Laden's courier, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, from the lips of a CIA detainee, the composite character "Ammar." These rather mundane

facts are significant because even viewers who agree with Dargis that the film actually questions the efficacies of torture still understand that there is *some* connection between CIA's detention program and the discovery of the leading clue in the race to find bin Laden, some causative connection between torture and actionable intelligence, even if it is an unpredictable connection. Though what stays in the mind of a viewer like Dargis is the *fraught* connection between coercive interrogation methods and actionable intelligence, the fact is, a connection, however unreliable, has been established. In other words, even a careful viewer of the film (as opposed to a careless viewer like Joe Scarborough, the conservative host of MSNBC's show *Morning Joe*, who, as Jane Mayer points out, argued that the film's narrative, "whether you find it repugnant or not," shows that the CIA program was effective and "led to the couriers, that led, eventually, years later, to the killing of Osama bin Laden") is left with the feeling that torture was not just a part of the story of our interrogation program, but part of the story of bin Laden's capture; that torture played a vital if unpredictable part in the capture of the world's most wanted man.<sup>22</sup>

This is a considerable point because of what it makes incontestable: that in its narrative logic this dramatization of events contradicts the findings of the Senate Intelligence Committee's study of the CIA's Detention and Interrogation Program, which, following the examination of more than 6 million pages of records from the Intelligence Community, concludes that the CIA did *not* obtain its first clues about the identity of bin Laden's courier from CIA detainees subjected to coercive interrogation techniques. That is, we do not need to decide how this film tells its story visually and tonally—we do not need to give it the close, careful reading it deserves—in order to say that the film accepts without question that the CIA's "enhanced interrogation techniques" played a role in enabling the agency to identify the courier who unwittingly led them to bin Laden. In this regard the filmmakers' vision goes against the information offered by dependable sources, for instance, the letter Leon Panetta, then director of the CIA, sent to Arizona senator John McCain shortly after bin Laden was killed, clearly stating, "We first learned about 'the facilitator/courier's nom de guerre' from a detainee not in the CIA's custody."<sup>23</sup>

It is for this reason that the film's sharpest critics don't object to the fact that the film *depicts* torture; rather they object to the *inadequacy* of its depiction. Jane Mayer, author of *The Dark Side*, argues that the film airbrushes the inexcusability of torture when Maya, the key CIA investigator into bin

Laden's whereabouts, "is shown standing mutely by when the detainee is strung up by ropes, stripped naked, and forced to crawl in a dog collar." Mayer points out, "In reality, when the CIA first subjected a detainee to incarceration in a coffin-size 'confinement box,' as is shown in the movie, an F.B.I agent present at the scene threw a fit, warned the C.I.A. contractor proposing the plan that it was illegal, counterproductive, and reprehensible. The fight went all the way to the top of the Bush Administration."<sup>24</sup>

Then again, since *Zero Dark Thirty* really isn't about the crisis of conscience that rocked the top ranks of the U.S. government but about those whom Bigelow calls the ordinary Americans who sometimes cross moral lines, film director Alex Gibney's confusion over Maya's seeming unassailability seems more apposite: "Kathryn Bigelow must have been delighted when she discovered a female C.I.A. agent was at the heart of the hunt for bin Laden," Gibney writes.

But compare Maya's infallibility in the film with the case of another female C.I.A. agent—a redhead, like Jessica Chastain—who . . . supervised the kidnapping and torture of a man named Khaled el-Masri in the C.I.A.'s 'Salt Pit,' a black site in Afghanistan. Despite a valid German passport, the agent insisted on his continued torment and incarceration (despite the protests of Condoleezza Rice) until it was finally revealed that the agent had mixed him up with another man named al-Masri. (Whoops, we tortured a man over a spelling mistake!) Without apology, he was then dropped on a lonely road in Albania to try to pick up the pieces of his life.<sup>25</sup>

Gibney then asks judiciously, "Where did we see this kind of cruel incompetence treated in *Zero Dark Thirty*?"<sup>26</sup> What Gibney's comparison highlights is not only the reprehensibility of the CIA's "detainee program," but its illogicality and confusedness. We might put it this way: given *Zero's* journalistic approach, shouldn't the general senselessness of the program compete, visually, with its general repulsiveness?

The answer to this question, I think, returns us to the problem Bigelow runs into, logically and technically, when she tries simultaneously to construct a view of one of these largely anonymous agents and the view from where she stands. For as Bigelow reports, "I was thrilled" to discover that one of the key CIA agents was a young woman, "and it wasn't just the gender aspect, though it was kind of extraordinary to me to learn that there were

women pivotal in this operation. But it was the opportunity to tell this story through somebody at the ground level, to put the audience in the shoes of somebody like that. The story is inherently dramatic.”<sup>27</sup> Underlying Bigelow’s notion that a story told from an individual’s point of view is more dramatic is her assumption that the story’s central character or medium for communication should be a person with whom a largely civilian audience can have a connection—and that in trying to imagine oneself living the life of a CIA operative, a female character (particularly one who can be played by an appealing actress like Jessica Chastain, whom David Denby describes as having “a slightly distraught look, a sudden smile, a warm-spirited responsiveness”) feels more relatable than a male. Bigelow’s interest in ordinary people doing extraordinary things is evidenced, at least, by her assertion that “Bin Laden wasn’t defeated by superheroes zooming down from the sky; he was defeated by ordinary Americans who fought bravely even as they *sometimes* crossed moral lines, who labored greatly and intently, who gave all of themselves in both victory and defeat, in life and in death, for the defense of this nation.”<sup>28</sup>

But if the connection the audience has with Maya is so crucial—if the particular function of this character is to let viewers into this story “at the ground level,” or allow us to put ourselves in the shoes of someone facing these obstacles and responsibilities, then *as a good film critic*, and not just as a man of conscience, Alex Gibney is right to worry about the fact that Maya is never wrong and her unerring certainty is never questioned. Conflating the criticism of Mayer and Gibney, we might say that Maya’s lack of objection to the use of waterboarding, for example, lends a stomach-turning quality to the scene in which Maya persuades representatives from the Defense Department to green-light the raid on the Abbottabad compound she believes is bin Laden’s. Not that the filmmakers offer any sign that viewers ought to question Maya, who in this scene is positioned as the fail-safe champion of truth, daringly fighting bureaucratic number-crunchers. Maya’s response to a query regarding her credentials or her relevance—the “Who are you?” that becomes the final expression of doubt about Maya’s value, begun with her assignment to a dusty, unused desk in a dilapidated office and held like a high, painful note throughout the film—is meant to be triumphant: “I’m the motherfucker who brought you the house.” Lurking behind Gibney’s legitimate question about Maya’s worrying infallibility, that is to say, is some concern that the source of this film’s strength, the feeling of immersion it gives viewers, is also its greatest liability. That is because the world into which

*Zero Dark Thirty*'s viewers are immersed in, largely, *Maya*'s world—and by extension the world of CIA operatives—which is perhaps why there is no way to inject the (now legendary) failures of the CIA's "detainee program" into this drama.

### Girl, Implanted

Filmmaker Alex Gibney's answer to the question of why, with so much evidence of so many failures—practical, legal, moral—of the CIA's "detainee program," there is so little evidence of it in the film, is that "Boal and Bigelow were seduced by their sources."<sup>29</sup> This is a common problem, he says, since those who are given extraordinary access are inclined to believe the persons granting the access. In this way Gibney contextualizes the worry some viewers have expressed about a screenplay based largely on the firsthand accounts of CIA operatives. As Peter Maass of the *Atlantic* most pointedly argues, "*Zero Dark Thirty* represents a new genre of embedded filmmaking that is the problematic offspring of the worrisome endeavor known as embedded journalism."<sup>30</sup>

Maass explains, "Embeds, officially begun during the invasion of Iraq, are deeply troubling because not every journalist or filmmaker can get these coveted invitations . . . and once you get one, you face the quandary of keeping a critical distance from sympathetic people whom you get to know and who are probably quite convincing. That's the reason the embed or special invitation exists; the government does its best to keep journalists, even friendly ones, away from disgruntled officials who have unflattering stories to tell." Maass doesn't fault Bigelow and Boal, since he "can't imagine any filmmaker or journalist saying 'no' to the kind of access they apparently received," nor can he "imagine many filmmakers or journalists, having gotten that access, writing a story or making a movie that would be less favorable to the CIA than *Zero Dark Thirty*." That is the nature of embedding, he writes: "It primes its targets (I mean, journalists and filmmakers) to create stories that are skewed in the government's favor. That is one reason, I think, the film presents torture as effective—the C.I.A. is ground zero of that unholy belief. If Boal and Bigelow had embedded at the FBI, whose agents have been critical of torture, their film would probably have a different message about waterboarding, sleep deprivation, and cramming a prisoner into a sealed box that's no bigger than an oven." Nevertheless, as a journalist who has on several occasions benefited from embedded or invitation-only reporting (and

who would like to think that the stories he produced on those occasions were critical and worthwhile), Maass is less worried about the problems attached to getting special access (“let’s be honest—similar omissions are committed every day by journalists, pundits, politicians and filmmakers, and we don’t get terribly upset”) than by what he calls “the government’s skill, time and time again, for getting its story told so uncritically.”<sup>31</sup> In a variation on this theme, Gibney writes that “there is nothing wrong with access per se,” but that “what is concerning is the way that the C.I.A.—and other military agencies—grant selective access.”<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, “access” is by nature selective, and it seems as though there is more to be gained by questioning these filmmakers’ faith in what access *achieves*, their confidence that imagination combined with reporting “reaches further and pushes harder than traditional reporting or purely fictional storytelling on their own,” than in discussing the problems inherent in selective access.

In her stoutly favorable review of the film for the *New York Times*, Manohla Dargis calls *Zero Dark Thirty* “a seamless weave of truth and drama.”<sup>33</sup> But isn’t it the case that so long as the film’s audience is positioned to see through these agents’ eyes, or feel ourselves in their shoes (to feel their frustration as al-Qaeda pulled off attacks in Saudi Arabia, Britain, and Pakistan; also to see “what went down” in agency-run “Black sites,” or have a green-tinged night-vision of what it is like to move stealthily into the airless, cramped rooms of a family compound and shoot whoever is seen), our view of these agents—all that is encompassed by what Boal dismissively calls “purely fictional storytelling”—will necessarily be obscured? What Bigelow and Boal clearly believe is that the more closely we approximate what Maya sees, the better we will see Maya. However this idea is the source of much confusion in the film.

For one thing, what makes Maya so convincing—what allows her to be the point person in the film’s fabrication of Operation Neptune’s Spear, the May 1, 2011, Navy SEALs siege of bin Laden’s hideout in Abbottabad, or what makes her the “motherfucker” who can tell the Defense Department when to strike—is, as one character says, “her conviction.” Conviction about something as important as whom to detain and interrogate, or whose house to raid, ought to be based on the actionable intelligence garnered from what acting director of the CIA Michael J. Morell describes as information gathered from “the selfless commitment of hundreds” of analysts and officers.<sup>34</sup> And yet as an individual soldier, someone working at the ground level,

Maya's conviction is the product of what she sees and feels, the immediate knowledge that comes from her senses. About one detainee Maya notes that she has to see him with her own eyes in order to tell whether he is lying or not, and the message everywhere in the film is that Maya has authority precisely because she's done her *own* looking. We see her watching countless hours of taped "interviews" with detainees, torture sessions we know she can stand to see because the first and most important piece of information the film's audience has about Maya is that she is willing to watch Ammar being tortured. And it's because of all she has seen that viewers are supposed to trust her instincts: when Maya's fellow agent Dan accuses her of pushing a theory about Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti because she *feels* it to be true, Maya emphatically agrees, as if it were a point of pride.

Of course, if we ever saw Maya be wrong about something—saw her torture the wrong person, perhaps—the foundation for her conviction could be subject to some examination, and the crudity of her experiential approach could be exposed. (In that case viewers might find themselves watching an ordinary American fighting bravely even as she sometimes crossed moral lines.) And yet because we do not see Maya guessing wrongly—in sum, because it *is* bin Laden's house that she eventually targets—the audience forgets that her methods never achieved more than her own personal certainty and that she might well have encountered a contradiction that would have brought the whole edifice of her thinking down in ruins. In the equation "CIA agent with ordinary powers of observation + superhuman dedication = bin Laden," that is to say, it must still be borne in mind that the rigor of the proof remains an illusion, so long as the premise is justified by the conclusion, or so long as the ends justify the means.

And yet I digress, since what matters to me is not really where Maya goes wrong but where filmmaking does, and I think this film goes off the rails when Bigelow and Boal carry out their belief that putting audiences in a scene helps them to understand something about it. What is interesting to me is how completely that notion falls apart in *Zero Dark Thirty*, despite the fact that the film is a stylistic masterwork. For what the film tries to bring into view in a truthful way is the existence of someone like Maya, the filmmakers' chosen representative for the small army of hard-to-see field agents whose sacrifices were perhaps more tangible than their accomplishments; yet the irony is that whatever truthful glimpse of Maya's life these filmmakers can contrive is constrained and ultimately *falsified* by what Bigelow calls her "responsibility to be faithful to the material," her hope of cleaving so

closely to a field agent's experience that at-home viewers virtually undergo the same. Consequently, even as *Zero Dark Thirty* tries to provide a true account of what Steve Coll names "the most undigested trauma in American National life," all it in fact reveals is the vast difference between faithful accounts of experience—truths of the "I have been there and seen it" strain—and those glimpses of something we call reality for the reason that they are *not* limited to any particular perspective, no matter how close to the action. If a glimpse of reality is what we're after, I'm going to argue, we must go looking for it in fiction.<sup>35</sup>

Should we need proof that seeing what Maya sees doesn't help us see *her*, in any case, we have it. That is because catching a truthful glimpse of Maya's life ought to offer a truthful glimpse of the CIA's "detainee program," as the film's critics have intuited, and that this film does *not* do—and not because it fails to show the repulsiveness of "enhanced interrogation" (David Denby describes the film's most difficult scenes as "expertly done, without flinching from the horror of the acts and without exploitation") but because it fails to show what Alex Gibney calls the "lunacy" of it.<sup>36</sup>

In his review of the film for the *New York Times Review of Books*, Steve Coll describes that aspect of the program that did not surface in the film: namely, the way the agency enfolded "enhanced interrogation" into its ordinary bureaucratic or administrative activities. Coll recalls how "a partially declassified report prepared by the C.I.A.'s former inspector general, John Helgeson, indicates that physicians from the C.I.A.'s Office of Medical Services attended interrogation sessions and took prisoners' vital signs to assure they were healthy enough for the torture to continue. Agency officers typed out numbingly detailed cables and memos about the enhanced interrogation sessions, as the available outline of the Senate Intelligence Committee's classified investigation makes clear. Videotapes were recorded and logged." This, more than anything else, reveals the extent of the madness of the CIA's "detainee program," which is perhaps the reason the filmmakers chose to exclude it. As Coll notes, "This C.I.A. office routine might have been more shocking on screen than the clichéd physical abuse of prisoners that the filmmakers prefer."<sup>37</sup>

To this criticism we can imagine Mark Boal responding that one can't put in everything, as he did when he joked to an interviewer that some people seem to think a film "based on firsthand accounts" should resemble "a videotaped transcription of a six volume Senate report."<sup>38</sup> And yet there is something very shrewd about Coll's suggestion that witnessing Ameri-

can agents make brutalizing use of torture (as we have come to expect from watching television shows like *24* or *Homeland*) is finally less alarming than seeing “what the record shows about how regulated, lawyerly, and bureaucratized—how banal—torture apparently became at some of the C.I.A. black sites,”<sup>39</sup> and thus that this film exorcises from the narrative that which would *really* surprise and upset its viewers. For while the film’s audience can observe Maya witnessing and even making use of torture in a way that is appalling (that is meant to appall, or to inspire us to question her choices, as we might question our own), we cannot see anything that would disrupt *this* narrative, this story about what Frank Bruni called “the muck and stink that sometimes go into the effort of keeping this mighty country of ours intact and safe.” What Coll’s point brings to light is that the audience for *Zero Dark Thirty* can’t see something that *someone treated or acted upon in the film* can’t see—which, of course, is precisely the trouble with a film wherein the audience’s view of the world on-screen is identical to that of a subject in a scene.

For that reason it is not enough to make plain, as many excellent critics have done, why *Zero Dark Thirty*’s depiction of events is not a truthful one. Because the film’s reviewers must finally decide whether this film is “satisfying as art,” in Denby’s phrase, we should also explicitly tie the film’s limited or inadequate outlook to the filmmakers’ choice of *narrative mode*—tie it, as I will now argue, to the fact that the preponderance of the film has been conceived from a special perspective, the view from the ground that is also the film’s defining or driving force.

Rather than suggest that this film doesn’t replicate reality, that is to say, to which criticism any filmmaker has only to shrug, and win the point, we should argue that ultimately it is Bigelow and Boal’s underlying aesthetic, their championing of a “see for yourself” perspective, that makes inevitable the film’s moral complacency. My argument is simply that this film’s employment of a privileged point of view (which according to literary convention requires some complicity between the film’s creators and its audience) extinguishes the imaginative viewpoint from which this film’s subject matter can be fairly seen.

This is in effect a quarrel with the film’s psychological realism, a mode of narration that is designed to “let the events talk,” or in which a sophisticated creative apparatus (writer, director, multiple cameras, crew) works to remove without trace all signs of that creative apparatus in order to generate in viewers the sense that we are becoming acquainted with real people

and real events. So, recalling that the criterion for “realness” in *Zero Dark Thirty* is whether people and events materialize convincingly as our focus shifts back and forth between minutiae and an overall view, or between what Bigelow calls “the microcosm and the macrocosm,” what happens when filmmakers assume that so long as cameras can be made to function like eyes, filmgoers can confront the events of the film just as we would reality? Because this technique works well, as most viewers of *Zero Dark Thirty* will attest. However, when cameras are turned into eyes, the world viewed is governed or determined by the erection of a limit beyond which filmgoers cannot see *and which we also cannot feel*. That is because the viewing subject can’t be conscious of itself as providing a limit. As Wittgenstein (abbreviating Schopenhauer) has noted, “the subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world.”<sup>40</sup> Just as “nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye,” as Wittgenstein explains, since the form of the visual field does not include awareness of the eye (“for the form of the visual field is surely not like this [in the text Wittgenstein includes an illustration—an eye-as-point-of-view with a loop extending outward from that position suggesting the range of its visual field, with the eye’s status, as it were, inside the field]”) to the viewing subject, the I/eye or solipsistic self “shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality coordinated with it.”<sup>41</sup>

With Wittgenstein’s help we can better understand what is deceptive about a “boots on the ground view” and thus what is deceptive about this film’s realism. As we might now put it, realism is always realism *relative to the perspective* from which things appear, since as Bigelow explains, what makes objects appear visually real are cameras positioned to bring them in and out of focus. Technically, in order to give the impression of being real, the view must be circumscribed. Yet this distinctive or limited view must *feel* as if it exists independently from any individual mind, since from it an audience must have the impression that they may arrive at a proper grasp of the facts. Hence the significance to *Zero Dark Thirty* of cinematographer Grieg Fraser’s “fluid but firm use of a handheld camera,” as David Denby notes, “so that you feel pitched into the middle of things but also see clearly what you need to see.”<sup>42</sup> The view in *Zero Dark Thirty* is from *somewhere*, in other words, since any realistic view has to have a source. And yet this source must be rubbed out since it is its effacement that allows audiences to feel like the view is impartial. That in sum is what this film teaches us about having special access or a privileged perspective. For in order to come off,

the film must employ a particular point of view, even though the effectiveness or power of the film rests on the assumption that this view is disinterested and for that reason valid.

The filmmakers' choice of narrative point of view thus occasions a logical problem that can't be solved with tricky camera work. They have constructed a privileged viewpoint (the boots-on-the-ground view from which this story is shot and told) from which they can steal away, as it were, leaving viewers to confront the events of the film just as we would a slice of real life, only, of course, with the unshakable certainty of the adequacy of the vision of reality afforded us by this fictional point of view, one that is sadly lacking in *real* real life!

This point about the contradiction a privileged viewpoint creates is made by the philosopher Bernard Harrison, who in his earliest book of literary criticism points out that the "privileged viewpoint is, of course, merely the other side of the coin of authorial omniscience," or that for works of fiction that employ this viewpoint, "the reader knows 'the facts,' and knows that they are all relevant facts, and all the facts that *are* relevant, because they are the facts the author has chosen to lay before him."<sup>43</sup> Of interest to Harrison, accordingly, is the difference between works of fiction that employ a privileged viewpoint (and in this way count on a reader's complicity, or count on a reader to look the other way over the matter of the author's necessary self-effacement) and their opposite: fictional works that subvert this complicity between author and reader or in which it is essential that the reader does *not* enjoy any viewpoint guaranteed in advance to be the one from which everything can be revealed.

What Harrison's discussion calls to mind is that there are fiction writers who painstakingly avoid psychological realism and the privileged viewpoint on which it depends, not because they think there is no such thing as reality, but because they think reality can only ever be glimpsed by two or more points of view at once. About *reality* we should say that no one viewpoint ever feels wholly adequate as a basis from which to grasp what's going on. That is why fiction that hopes to offer glimpses of it usually employs the technique of ironically juxtaposing *contrasting* points of view, of "exposing actions simultaneously to being morally and psychologically construed from more than one direction." In this way whatever the reader manages to learn, about himself or others, he learns by having his preconceptions unsettled. He "must be kept off balance," writes Harrison, "so that, missing his footing in one viewpoint he will regain it again momentarily in another and so

learn that perpetual motion of the imagination from which dispassionate moral judgment and understanding of others both grow.”<sup>44</sup>

We might say, consequently, that only when *Zero Dark Thirty* does *not* strive to create in viewers the sense that we are becoming acquainted with real people and real events as we would in real life can it offer viewers this chance, since seeing something from more than one direction or in more than one moral register—looking at something from two or more points of view at once—is only possible in *fiction*. Only when the viewer is encouraged to look *at* what is happening on-screen and by an effort of imagination project herself into several viewpoints can we say she transcends the view she most comfortably occupies and in this way has the chance to glimpse (what Plato would call) reality and what Mark Boal means by “what went down.”

Now, finally, we can begin to answer the question of whether *Zero Dark Thirty* is satisfying as art, and not simply find fault with the narrow bandwidth of facts it chooses to report. For as Alex Gibney has argued, what is most pernicious about *Zero Dark Thirty* is the way it conveys the views of a particular group of characters—Maya; Dan; the CIA counterterrorism’s chief, nicknamed “the Wolf” (Fredric Lehne), who describes how his efforts have been undermined by the sissies in Congress; the Islamabad station chief (Kyle Chandler), who’s a Bush administration functionary; an ambitious operative (Jennifer Ehle) who gets killed during an attack—as if they “exist in a vacuum,” or as if, “for the tough-minded folks who had “boots on the ground,” “there was no other point of view.” That’s wrong, of course, but “by immersing us only in the world of the C.I.A.,” writes Gibney, “Boal and Bigelow don’t show us the perspective we need as viewers to see the lunacy of the C.I.A.’s ‘detainee program.’” Gibney then points out something fundamental about film, which is that

if you want to reveal how tall a man is, you don’t shoot him in limbo; you must show him in relation to others. Likewise, how can viewers of *Zero Dark Thirty* judge the CIA’s record if they can’t see how others were shocked by the cruelty, cowardice and stupidity of EITs [enhanced interrogation techniques]. In the film, long after the torture of “Ammar,” an agent hands Maya a file folder with the real name of al-Kuwaiti. “If only I had this years ago,” says Maya. Because Maya is the glamorous heroine of the film, we identify with her and wonder about the inefficiency of her colleagues. But where is the character who wonders if Maya has spent less time slapping

detainees around and more time scanning actual evidence—as the FBI did—she might have got to bin Laden’s courier much sooner.<sup>45</sup>

Here Gibney is not suggesting that Bigelow and Boal should have somehow put into the film everything that happened in life, but that they should have put in something that creates a perspective richer or more multidimensional than what Bigelow likes to think of as the “multiple perspective” created by that organ of vision, the human eye. In a film, or in something one has to look *at* in order to understand, perspective is achieved in the way Gibney describes: by contriving to show what someone does or says *in the context in which she does or says it*. If anyone in the scene in which Maya is handed the crucial file, for instance—another overlooked woman from another overlooked corner of the office, say—had offered a rueful smile at Maya’s expression of annoyance, and Maya, by chance catching it, had looked momentarily mortified, then viewers of the film would be able to consider the consequences of human error in such situations without the pedestrian interruption of a blank screen with the caption “Human Error” printed on it. The filmmakers’ decision to insert this weirdly depersonified signboard between this scene and the next leaves Maya’s perfect record intact but the viewer’s suspension of disbelief shaken. The very moment in which Bigelow and Boal want “what went down” to be indisputable or self-evident, that is to say, the moment when they want the “facts” they have assembled to “speak for themselves,” as it were, is the moment in which the *filmmakers* must make an announcement.

In this kind of film, that kind of authorial interruption only highlights some shortcoming or shows that the filmmakers have not done their work properly. But more importantly, it further illustrates why these filmmakers’ immersive techniques—their attempt to offer audiences the chance to virtually experience certain events for themselves—fail to accomplish what much “purely fictional storytelling” accomplishes just fine: the *ironically juxtaposed* points of view that continually unsettle viewers and mock our preconceptions.

### Disruptive Filmmaking

If disrupting the viewer’s moral complacency is the goal, we should conclude, immersion is not the means. But perhaps some of this film’s supporters will object that the creators of *Zero Dark Thirty* do not attempt to

encourage moral reflection. After all, in an oft-cited remark, Boal has called the film a “Rorschach test,” by which he presumably means to suggest that he and Bigelow have not tried to force viewers to reflect upon what we are doing so much as measure our underlying emotional responses, particularly over issues about which we are reluctant to describe our thinking process openly. And yet given that these filmmakers have called “preposterous” the idea that their dark, intense portrayal of the killing of Osama bin Laden contains an argument for torture, noting that such criticisms amount to a gross misreading of the film, this suggestion about the film’s neutral stance seems disingenuous.<sup>46</sup> It is out of keeping, at least, with what feels like Bigelow and Boal’s more sincerely felt justification for the film: that it will help those who view it become good citizens. To encourage the opinion that these filmmakers *are* hoping to increase their audience’s capacity for moral reflection, then, let’s turn briefly to Mark Boal’s description of *Zero Dark Thirty* as an example of “disruptive filmmaking,” the topic of his keynote address at Loyola Marymount University’s 2012 First Amendment Week.

“People talk about “disruptive technology,” Boal tells the audience of recent graduates, which “sounds like a bad thing, but disruptive technology isn’t good or bad; it’s what our society and our culture makes of it that matters. And from the wheel to the automobile, the signal fire to the iPhone, society has generally, if often slowly, found a way to bend disruptive innovation toward the greater good.”<sup>47</sup> This was “really what we hoped to do with the disruptive filmmaking of *Zero Dark Thirty*,” notes Boal. “To use this relatively new blend of current events and creativity to make the news behind the news more accessible, more visceral, more real.” Careful not to forget the reason for his invitation, Boal then notes that “unlike newspaper reports or books or paintings, movies have a special power to put audiences right there—in the scene, in the center of the action, in interrogation cells, in the Pakistani hills. And by giving people a chance to virtually experience these events for themselves, we have a chance to do exactly what the First Amendment creates the space to do: to challenge people to be citizens, to understand and to confront the issues of our day, in our hearts and in our minds.”<sup>48</sup>

Because Boal thinks of the film as disruptive and so in the long run illuminating, it is perhaps worth noting that precisely as more Americans virtually experience events like waterboarding, fewer Americans seem willing to denounce the practice. As Steve Coll writes, in the 2012 election campaign “Mitt Romney declared that he would revive the use of enhanced interroga-

tion techniques.” Coll also points out that “in public opinion polling, a bare majority of Americans opposes torturing prisoners in the struggle against terrorism” and that “public support for torture has risen significantly during the last several years, a change that the Stanford University intelligence scholar Amy Zegart has attributed in part to the influence of ‘spy-themed entertainment.’”<sup>49</sup>

But never mind for now the discomfiting fact that realistically witnessing the brutality of torture seems to be making us feel more complacent, rather than more ashamed. What we must grapple with is the intuition that the radical realism of *Zero Dark Thirty*, its amplified ability to put audiences “in the scene,” will produce citizens better able to understand and to confront the issues of our day; citizens better able to wisely tackle what Bigelow calls “the thorny subjects of our time.”<sup>50</sup> For it is by pulling a viewer into the film—and through it to reality—that Bigelow and Boal think they draw him, as spectator and judge, into a complex imagined world in which he must actually exercise moral judgment. And yet as the work of Bernard Harrison has made clear, it is because the viewer is forced into active moral judgments *through being drawn into an elaborate fiction* that this method of pulling in a viewer may yield philosophical enlightenment.<sup>51</sup>

We can say with some certainty, at least, that what makes viewers more self-conscious *is not* the feeling that we’re experiencing certain events for ourselves. We know that realistically witnessing the brutality of torture, for instance, doesn’t make us more vocal as a nation about the necessity of more humane methods of interrogation. This is likely because watching one character torture another “means no more than deciding, on the basis of whatever subjective moral preferences you yourself happen to subscribe to, whether you like or dislike the way he carries on,” writes Harrison, and when moral judgment is as arbitrary and subjective as this, a work of art “can be no more than, at most, a useful instrument for inculcating or reinforcing the moral prejudices” of those who encounter it.<sup>52</sup>

If that, finally, is what Boal means by calling *Zero Dark Thirty* a kind of Rorschach test, then he would not be too unhappy with the idea that his film does no more than impress on a viewer’s mind what that viewer already believes. However, I do not think he would be satisfied with this conclusion. Nor do I think we should forget those scenes in the film that give credence to Bigelow’s sense of herself as an artist trying to “shine a light on dark deeds,” as she says, a task made harder “when those deeds are cloaked in layers of secrecy and government obfuscation.” Because Bigelow is “very proud to

be part of a Hollywood community that has made searing war films part of its cinematic tradition,” as she says, I want to separate out my criticism of the film’s narrative mode, its use of psychological realism (which in a truth-telling film ought to be avoided since it rests on the assumption that the viewer’s viewpoint is valid), from what Bigelow rightly defends as an important history of filmmakers who have not “shied away from depicting the harsh realities of combat.”<sup>53</sup>

For of course there is much in *Zero Dark Thirty* that indicates that these filmmakers *do* wish to subvert the complicity between the film’s audience and any particular perspective, or which suggests that they do not think a viewer ought to enjoy the luxury of trusting her own view, and thus must be encouraged to entertain some misgivings about the viewpoint she is most naturally disposed to fall into. English professor Lennard Davis has, for example, found ample textual evidence supporting the interpretation that Maya (a name, as he points out, which means “illusion” in the Hindu religion) has all along been “caught in an illusion of her own making—whether it is the false hope that bin Laden’s capture will change the world or whether it is that the procedures of the C.I.A. work well.” As the film’s ending makes clear, Davis notes, the mission was never to take bin Laden captive, as the White House claimed, but to kill him, “and the invasion of the cramped house filled with women and children is nothing short of depressing, including the wailing and begging of the women and crying children and the wanton slaughter of any male who comes into sight.” Davis calls the final moment when bin Laden is shot “a non-moment, cinematically. We don’t see what happens and there is no ‘money-shot’ of triumph. Rather the death is anti-climactic, mundane, and banal. Bin Laden ends with a bang without so much as a whimper, and since we’ve already been told that he is no longer in control of al Queda, the moment is so deflated as to be almost absurd.” Moreover, when Maya enters the SEALs base tent, Davis notes, SEALs whooping it up in the background and bin Laden’s body bag on the table,

Bigelow eschews any sense of glorification and heroism by marking Maya’s entrance as the somber chord that chastens the SEALs. She walks over to the body bag, unzips it, looks down, and closes it up. We don’t see Bin Laden’s face as we are held at a middle-distance by the camera. The whole moment that the film has built up to is crafted as an ironic and deflationary shot. The film ends with Maya boarding a huge and empty transport plane, sitting alone and then

sobbing. What heroic film do you know of that ends with the female protagonist weeping uncontrollably?<sup>54</sup>

However while Davis's reading of the film's ending is a fine one, it highlights the fact that the kind of scene that makes *Zero Dark Thirty* searing or affecting is precisely the kind of scene in which we are not in "the shoes of the men and women in the thick of this hunt" but in which we look at these men and women in a way (i.e., from *more than one direction*) that compels us to recognize that what we are confronting is not reality but fiction. Because rather than virtually experiencing what these characters are experiencing, an audience watching this scene is able to consider these characters as the planes and mirrors of transposed points of view turn and shift about them. In other words we learn something about bin Laden's death—what Americans hoped for from it, what we lost in our attempt to get it—by looking at the difference between the SEALs' reactions and Maya's when she gazes down onto her dead target.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, in thinking about where *Zero Dark Thirty* goes right, when it veers in the direction of "pure storytelling," I am inclined to suggest that what film captures best isn't "feeling," the way our earliest directors seemed to believe, and it isn't "thought," as Orson Wells astutely noted. It is in fact "character," since what filmmakers almost can't help but understand is that certain kinds of knowledge about characters—for example who Maya is, what her actions reveal about her, and so forth—are easier to convey through the juxtaposition of contradictory viewpoints than by creating an illusion of direct knowledge of a character's inner life. This naturally returns us to what the concept of character means in fiction, since, as Bernard Harrison points out, the concept is founded on the notion of the coherence of someone's speech and action *when seen from different viewpoints*.<sup>56</sup> Unless we are watching the kind of film in which viewers are let into the inner workings of a character's mind, that is to say—something that is usually done by means of a voice-over, and usually done badly—someone's character isn't something we discover by knowing what someone is thinking (who can tell?) but by the way other characters react to that person. It's by the way certain characters look and sound to *other characters* (whose opinions we learn to value or discount on the basis of the way, in relation, they look and sound, and so on), that viewers discover how to see them.

Consequently, it is all very well to find Maya weeping in *Zero Dark Thirty*'s closing moments, but part of what makes this scene frustrating, as

well as intriguing, is how little viewers know about Maya by the film's final scene, and thus how many interpretations her crying allows. That, I would argue, is because the meticulous detail with which Bigelow puts her shots together does not generally extend to the relations between characters. Not until the film's final scenes does Bigelow spend any time trying to shift her audience's attention between *concordant and opposed viewpoints*, which is a shame not only because we consequently lack the materials to properly assess these characters but because this is the only means by which a film's audience can come to engage in self-reflection. The existence of multiple viewpoints is what breaks the spell in which a viewer's preconceptions are confirmed or reinforced, in other words, since the effort of projecting oneself imaginatively in several different directions makes it impossible to relax into the role of passive observer.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, in my view, one of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s most intellectually interesting moments occurs when, in Black Hawk helicopters, Navy SEALs journey across the mountains from the base in Afghanistan. For the scene, Bigelow's meticulous sound editor Paul Ottosson created what he calls the "stealth sound" that accompanies the helicopters, the cut-cut-cut noise Ottosson describes as "a cross between a cat purring and a quiet lawn mower,"<sup>58</sup> and David Denby notes that the journey "is conducted in darkness and quiet, like a sacred ritual."<sup>59</sup> And yet what sticks in my mind is the casual chatter of the Navy SEALs on the way to the raid. The scene centers on a young man who is listening to headphones.

"Hey Justin," another SEAL asks, "What you listening to?"

"Tony Robbins."

"Tony Robbins, really?"

"You should listen to it. I've got plans for after this. Big time. I want to talk to all you about it."

Some of the other SEALs then laugh amiably, perhaps at Justin's earnestness; his faith in the power of motivational speaking; his sweet, sad goals.

It is possible that this edifying bit of dialogue exists in the scene because somebody told Mark Boal that this is what the SEALs were talking about on the way to the raid—more proof that this movie's strength lies in its truthfulness, the key to which is authenticity. And yet what feels truthful about this scene is the juxtaposition between what a man like Justin is about to undertake—end lives because he has received that instruction, the basis for

which will remain unknown to him—and his own trifling aspirations, his young man's desire to make his life and the lives of his friends better, somehow, coupled with his having selected for this transformation a pitiable or inadequate vehicle. What I mean to suggest is that we understand something about the scene that follows this one, in which the man shot might be the man sought, and might not, because of the way it plays against this scene, just as what we understand about Justin is made possible by the looks on his friends' faces when he speaks.

It is finally for this reason that I have tried to say why Bigelow and Boal are mistaken in their belief that fiction is enhanced by fact, or that if we want to see what went down we need a view from the ground. Because being in the story means seeing it only from one point of view, the real lesson is *how much further* “purely fictional storytelling” can go when it is not weighed down by a privileged point of view. For while David Denby has very usefully questioned the filmmakers' desire to simultaneously “claim the authority of fact and the freedom of fiction,”<sup>60</sup> as it turns out, what fiction offers isn't “freedom” but *perspective*. It's only by playing off one viewpoint against another that filmmakers can ever depict reality—including, naturally, the harsh realities of combat.

## Notes

1. Brook Barnes, “As Enigmatic as Her Picture,” an Interview with Kathryn Bigelow, *New York Times*, December 27, 2012, nytimes.com.

2. Kathryn Bigelow, “Kathryn Bigelow Addresses *Zero Dark Thirty* Torture Criticism,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2013, latimes.com.

Those of us who work in the arts know that depiction is not endorsement. If it was, no artist would be able to paint inhuman practices, no author could write about them, and no filmmaker could delve into the thorny subjects of our time. This is an important principle to stand up for, and it bears repeating. For confusing depiction with endorsement is the first step toward chilling any American artist's ability and right to shine a light on dark deeds, especially when those deeds are cloaked in layers of secrecy and government obfuscation. Indeed, I'm very proud to be part of a Hollywood community that has made searing war films part of its cinematic tradition. Clearly, none of those films would have been possible if directors from other eras had shied away from depicting the harsh realities of combat.

3. Dexter Filkins, “Bin Laden, the Movie,” *New Yorker*, December 17, 2012, newyorker.com; and Steve Pond, “Kathryn Bigelow Denies *Zero Dark Thirty* Apologizes for Torture,” *The Wrap*, December 16, 2012, thewrap.com.

4. Manohla Dargis, "By Any Means Necessary," *New York Times*, December 17, 2012, nytimes.com.

5. See, for example, Jane Mayer's eviscerating critique, "Zero Conscience in *Zero Dark Thirty*," *New Yorker*, December 14, 2012, newyorker.com, in which she argues that "by the time millions of Americans have seen this movie, they will believe that, as Frank Bruni put it . . . 'No waterboarding, no bin Laden.'" Or see acting CIA chief Michael Morell's unusual outspoken criticism of the film as reported in an article by Scott Shane, "Acting C.I.A. Chief Critical of Film *Zero Dark Thirty*," *New York Times*, December 22, 2012, nytimes.com.

6. For Mark Boal's remarks on "disruptive filmmaking," see Anthony Breznican, "*Zero Dark Thirty* Writer Mark Boal Says U.S. Torture Was 'Dead Wrong,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, February 7, 2013, insidemovies.ew.com.

7. Andrew Anthony, "Kathryn Bigelow: Drama Queen Who Captured Osama," *Guardian/Observer*, December 29, 2012, guardian.co.uk/theobserver.

8. See Breznican, *Entertainment Weekly*, February 7, 2013, including an excerpt from Mark Boal's remarks as keynote speaker at the First Amendment Week at Loyola Marymount University.

9. Filkins, *New Yorker*, December 17, 2012.

10. Nick Dager, "Shooting *The Hurt Locker*," *Digital Cinema Report*, February 12, 2010, digitalcinemareport.com.

11. David Edelstein, "The Year in Culture: Movies," *New York*, December 10, 2012, 50. The New York Film Critics Circle named the film best picture of 2012, and it was nominated for five Academy Awards, including one for the best picture of the year.

12. Frank Bruni, "Bin Laden, Torture, and Hollywood," *New York Times*, December 9, 2012, 3.

13. David Denby, "Dead Reckoning," *New Yorker*, December 24/31, 2012, 130.

14. As Jane Mayer has pointed out, practices regularly employed by America's brutal detention program—waterboarding, for example—are not just questioned by human-rights activists and civil-liberties lawyers but by many individuals "inside the F.B.I., the military, the Justice Department, and the C.I.A. itself, which eventually abandoned waterboarding because it feared, correctly, that the act constituted a war-crime." Mayer, *New Yorker*, December 14, 2012.

15. Barnes, *New York Times*, December 27, 2012.

16. Filkins, *New Yorker*, December 17, 2012.

17. Pond, *The Wrap*, December 16, 2012.

18. Boal notes, "Hopefully art or cinema can present a point of view that's a little above the political fray, but that doesn't mean the political narrative doesn't try to assert itself and pull you back in." Ibid.

19. Mayer, *New Yorker*, December 14, 2012.

20. Spencer Ackerman, *Wired*, quoted in Pond, *The Wrap*, December 16, 2012.

21. Manohla Dargis, *New York Times*, December 17, 2012, nytimes.com. On the

other hand, some careful critics find this argument misleading, since even on those occasions in the film in which actionable intelligence is obtained without torture, the threat of torture is ever present. Film director Alex Gibney writes, “Mark Boal has responded to critics by saying that, in the film, the actionable intelligence from Ammar was obtained ‘over the civilized setting of a lunch.’ But that’s disingenuous. Because the conversation occurs after brutal torture, the implication is that Ammar provides information because he doesn’t want to trade his hummus for a wet washcloth and a sojourn in a plywood box.” Alex Gibney, “*Zero Dark Thirty’s* Wrong and Dangerous Conclusion,” *Huffington Post*, May 3, 2013.

22. Mayer, *New Yorker*, December 14, 2012.

23. *Ibid.* As the *Washington Post’s* Greg Sargent first reported, Leon Panetta told John McCain that “no detainee in C.I.A. custody revealed the facilitator/courier’s full true name or specific whereabouts.” Senators Dianne Feinstein, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, have further undermined the film’s version of events by noting in their own letter that “the original lead information had no connection to C.I.A. detainees.” Sargent, *Washington Post*, May 16, 2011.

24. Mayer *New Yorker*, December 14, 2012.

25. Gibney, *Huffington Post*, May 3, 2013.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Pond, *The Wrap*, December 16, 2012.

28. Denby, *New Yorker*, December 24/31; Bigelow, *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2013.

29. Gibney, *Huffington Post*, May 3, 2013.

30. Peter Maass, “Don’t Trust *Zero Dark Thirty*,” *Atlantic*, December 13, 2012, theatlantic.com.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Gibney, *Huffington Post*, May 3, 2013.

33. Dargis, *New York Times*, December 17, 2012.

34. Shane, *New York Times*, December 22, 2012.

35. Steve Coll, “Disturbing and Misleading,” *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2013, nybooks.com.

36. Denby, *New Yorker*, December 24/31.

37. Coll, *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2013.

38. Breznican, *Entertainment Weekly*, February 7, 2013.

39. Coll, *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2013.

40. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1953), 5.632.

41. See Wittgenstein’s discussion of how solipsism coincides with pure realism or how it is not within the range of someone’s experience to *feel the limits* of her experience. *Tractatus*, 5.5563–5.641.

42. Denby, *New Yorker*, December 24/31.

43. Bernard Harrison, *Henry Fielding's Tom Jones: The Novelist as Moral Philosopher* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975), 47, 46. Harrison's extraordinary insightfulness as a literary critic coupled with his history of having made highly original contributions to moral philosophy (from this first work through his recent book on anti-Semitism in the British press, *The Resurgence of Anti-Semitism: Jews, Israel, and Liberal Opinion* [2006]) makes him feel like the right critical voice to give this essay some intellectual backing.

44. Harrison, *Henry Fielding's Tom Jones*, 48.

45. Gibney, *Huffington Post*, May 3, 2013.

46. Then again, the analogy may be apt, for in fact many researchers have raised questions about the validity of the Rorschach technique. Under dispute are, for example, the objectivity of testers, the limited number of psychological conditions that it accurately diagnoses, the inability to replicate the test's norms, and the proliferation of the ten ink-blot images, potentially invalidating the test for those who have been exposed to them.

47. "Disruptive technology" is a term coined by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen to describe a new technology that unexpectedly displaces an established technology. In his 1997 best-selling book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Christensen categorizes new technology as either sustaining or disruptive. Sustaining technology relies on incremental improvements to an already established technology. Disruptive technology lacks refinement, often has performance problems because it is new, appeals to a limited audience, and may not yet have a proven practical application, but because it inspires waves of innovation can make or break companies and markets.

48. Breznican, *Entertainment Weekly*, February 7, 2013.

49. See Coll, *New York Review of Books*, February 7, 2013. (Here lurks another entire essay on the important differences in the world of "spy-themed entertainment," for instance the difference between the pro-CIA vehicle *Zero Dark Thirty* and the anti-CIA vehicle the *Bourne* series.)

50. Bigelow, *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2013.

51. Harrison, *Henry Fielding's Tom Jones*, 56–57.

52. *Ibid.*, 52.

53. Bigelow, *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2013.

54. Lennard Davis, "Zero Dark Thirty: The Politics of Art or Why All the Critics Are Wrong," *Huffington Post*, May 10, 2013.

55. This last sentence has been paraphrased from a point Harrison makes in *Henry Fielding's Tom Jones*, 45.

56. *Ibid.*

57. In this essay I had originally planned to compare the professed "fact and fiction" of *Zero Dark Thirty* with the "pure storytelling" of the 2009 film *District 9*, directed by Neill Blomkamp. Because of the limitations of space, I've had to leave out my discussion of the second film. This is a shame, since for reasons I don't understand, *District 9* has received inadequate critical attention: of well-known American critics, only Anthony

Lane offered a fair summary of the film when, on its release, he noted that for an action-packed sci-fi thriller, “you don’t feel bamboozled, fooled, or patronized by *District 9*, as you did by most of the summer blockbusters. You feel, winded, shaken, and shamed.” “Only Human,” *New Yorker*, September 14, 2009. Because I believe *District 9* offers an almost perfect example of the way a filmmaker might help an audience engage in self-reflection by shifting our attention between concordant and opposed viewpoints, I hope interested viewers will turn immediately to *District 9* for many fine examples of how audiences might come to know the worthlessness or merits of a character—like the film’s protagonist, a nebishy civil servant named Wikus van der Merwe (Sharlto Copley)—by detailed reference to what he says and does in the context in which he says and does it. See, for example, the scene in which Wikus, newly appointed by his father-in-law to the position of Head Officer for the Department of Alien Affairs, travels by armed convoy into a township of segregated aliens (given the epithet “prawns”) for the purpose of forcibly evicting them and interning them to even less hospitable environs. (For though *District 9* is both an alien film and a war film, it is also instinctively alive to the history of segregation in Blomkamp’s native home of South Africa.) News cameras follow Wikus and his team, so it is to this imagined audience that Wikus spouts company propaganda (“What we try to do is engage with the prawn on behalf of MNU and on behalf of the humans”) and assembles xenophobic accounts of the aliens’ stupidity and uselessness. Thus *District 9*’s audience watches as Wikus straps on an armored vest and brags to his imagined news audience of the danger of his mission, even while he assures a black colleague accompanying him that there is really no need for this man to wear a vest, since he has not been brought one. The casuistical precision with which the scene is put together—Wikus’s ingratiating comments to the news cameras; his falsely reassuring speech to his colleague; our view of the man’s worried face—makes us doubt Wikus’s scruples and leadership abilities as much as we doubt that the alien eviction is undertaken for humanitarian reasons. The comparison between *Zero Dark Thirty* and *District 9* is of particular interest since, as Anthony Lane notes, the audiences that have continued to gather for the film have been “lured by rumors of a hybrid—a writhing, snapping chunk of science fiction that looks and smells like fact.” *District 9* looks and feels like a documentary, in other words, and this is what enhances its power as fiction and truth-telling.

58. Barnes, *New York Times*, December 27, 2012.

59. Denby, *New Yorker*, December 24/31.

60. *Ibid.*

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL