

The American Woman Warrior: A Transnational Feminist Look at War, Imperialism, and Gender

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the issue of torture and spectatorship in the film *Zero Dark Thirty* through the question of how it deploys gender ideologically and rhetorically to mediate and frame the violence it represents. It begins with the controversy the film provoked but focuses specifically on the movie's representational and aesthetic techniques, especially its self-awareness about being a film about watching torture, and how it positions its audience in relation to these scenes. Issues of spectator identification, sympathy, interpellation, affect (for example, shame) and genre are explored. The fact that the main protagonist of the film is a woman is a key dimension of the cultural work of the film. I argue that the use of a female protagonist in this film is part of a larger trend in which the discourse of feminism is appropriated for politically conservative and antifeminist ends, here the tacit justification of the legally murky world of black sites and 'enhanced interrogation techniques.'

KEYWORDS: gender; women's studies; torture; war on terror; Abu Ghraib; spectatorship; neoliberalism; Angela McRobbie;

Some of you will recognize my title as alluding to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975), a fictionalized autobiography in which she evokes the fifth-century Chinese legend of a girl who disguises herself as a man in order to go to war in the place of her frail old father. Kingston's use of this legend is credited with having popularized the story in the United States and paved the way for the 1998 Disney adaptation. Although Mulan in the Chinese legend is recognized as a successful warrior and hero even when she changes back to her female clothes, hers is also a sad story that ends in many versions with her suicide upon discovering that her father has passed away while she was gone. In this way, the legend folds this unconventional character safely back into the confines of filial piety and patriarchal norms and forestalls the possibility that other girls might be tempted to similar breaches of female behavior.

The fact of the matter is that warfare remains closely associated with masculinity—in the contemporary United States as much as medieval China—and as a result, women who fight

often have to disguise themselves as men—at least figuratively, by adopting attitudes, speech, and values conventionally considered male. More troubling still, we have seen with the recent Marine Facebook scandal (in which male Marines posted nude photos of their female colleagues) that women's place in the military remains contested, resented, and unresolved. Yet, given the fact that women now make up 15% of the American military, and given the fact that America's prosecution of war or even many wars is not likely to wane with the huge budget increases President Trump plans for the military, the role of women in what looks like a future of endless (and probably unwinnable) warfare is a subject that needs more attention.

Transnational feminism is an important tool in this investigation because it is uniquely concerned with and capable of addressing issues of race and imperialism within a global framework. Ella Shohat has cautioned against a "submerged American nationalism" (39) in some feminist writings, and Leela Fernandez observes that "nation-centered narratives and visions of the world" (2) creep into even the best-intentioned feminist scholarship. As a result, transnational feminism is based on the insight that issues of race, ethnicity, and national identity can splinter identifications around shared gender constructions in unpredictable ways. Strongly influenced by postcolonial studies, transnational feminism is interested in the ways in which colonial history and legacies, as well as global capitalism more generally, have shaped and continue to shape gender structures and subjectivities across the globe. It is thus uniquely positioned to examine the racially-inflected wars that have marked American history since the Mexican American war of 1848. Indeed, one could argue, and scholars such as Richard Slotkin *have* argued, that the master narrative of war for America is that of the Indian wars, which were basically wars of extermination against an enemy defined as racially other, savage, cruel, implacable, irredeemable, and unassimilable. In this paradigmatic trope, the role attributed to the Indians has been played historically by many others, including Mexicans, Spaniards, Haitians, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Iraqis, and now anyone dark-skinned and Muslim and suspected of terrorism.

My specific claim in this essay will be that a new type of American warrior has emerged in popular culture in order to combat this new—though also very old—enemy. This new

warrior is a weaponized white female whose single-mindedness and fierceness masquerade as a form of feminism, but whose sole purpose is to further American national hegemony and global military power. We can see this figure in the popular TV series *Homeland* (2011-), especially the first three seasons, NBC's series *State of Affairs* (2014-2015), and the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013), which I will focus on in this essay. The film stars Jessica Chastain as a CIA intelligence analyst who tracks down Osama bin Laden's whereabouts and instructs the SEAL team which assassinates him. The protagonist is not a soldier in the conventional sense, but she is no less a warrior in the new virtual world of proliferating secret service agencies and shadowy covert ops.

First, let me provide a little bit of background on America's war culture: although the United States likes to think of itself as a peaceful nation, it has never actually been one. Instead, America has been almost constantly at war since it was founded in the early 1600s, first with the Native American population, then with the British, then Mexico, Spain, Native Americans again and again and throughout the nineteenth century, Germans (imagined as ape-like 'Huns'), Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and so on. Mary Dzubziak has shown that in the twentieth century the United States has been involved in military actions somewhere almost without respite, and David Bacevitch has argued that the Middle East has been a 4th world war for the United States (after WWI, WWII, and the Cold War).

The history of American militarism generally focuses on men. Certainly, during the Revolutionary War, manhood, citizenship, and military preparedness became closely linked in the political imagination (Kerber 90). And yet, although women have not served in the infantry until very recently, American armies have always depended on women for their labor, including as seamstresses, cooks, nurses, laundresses, prostitutes, suppliers of sons and husbands, and their labor at home shoring up the absences left by their enlisted men. Women have also served in various capacities—sometimes in disguise, like Mulan—or as nurses, starting with the Civil War. In the Korean war, 120,000 women served in the mobile hospitals known as 'MASH' units (as we know them from the TV show). In 1991, with the first Iraq war, women soldiers entered the public eye in an important way: the media highlighted the 40,000 women serving at the time in terms of a melodramatic emphasis on

soldiers of both genders as family members (wives, husbands, mothers, fathers), clearly a means of laying to rest the 'crazy vet' image from the Vietnam war.

Women in the military have continued to rise in numbers and, as of 2016, they can serve in every branch including infantry and special forces, the last bastions of male exclusivity (Johnson and Stamp n. pag.). Nevertheless, they have not managed to change the equation of warrior identity with masculinity. Their place in the military is often questioned and occasionally spotlighted through events such as the 1991 Tailhook scandal (a series of incidents where Navy and Marine Corps officers assaulted female colleagues) and the recent Marine photo leak mentioned earlier (in which male Marines hacked compromising photos of their female colleagues and posted them on social media), in which sexuality is always used as a means of keeping women subordinate.

Nevertheless, as feminists, we need to ask ourselves even larger questions about the desirability of women in the military in the first place. The appeal of military service is based on several main factors: for many women, like their male counterparts, it is the best way to escape a small town or a life of poverty. For others, it appears as a means of serving one's country, making a contribution to a greater good. For others, it is a way to access full citizenship, which is at least theoretically linked to laying one's life on the line for one's country. In practice, however, the privileges sought through military service are not always forthcoming, nor is the recognition and inclusion. The issue of female military service cannot be dissociated from the broader questions raised by American imperialism, including the fact that most US military actions are not defensive but rather in the service of protecting American businesses interests and access to energy resources (see Bacevitch).

As a result of these motives and the fact that the military has been professionalized since the 1970s, being an American soldier has become tantamount to being a kind of professional adventurer, not a dutiful grunt so much as a kind of mercenary (someone who has enlisted mainly for the material advantages, the opportunity to travel or to test their mettle). It is therefore not surprising that the image of military masculinity that is currently idealized is that of the special forces operative or the irregular soldier. Media fascination with these

figures mirrors their expanding role in American operations abroad (see Scahill). The rise of the cult of the special forces operative is no doubt linked to the increased integration of women in the regular forces and a need to maintain an image of the American warrior as exclusively male. As mentioned earlier, the woman soldier remains a kind of outlier in American culture. This marginalized status is reflected in the scarcity of popular media depictions of women soldiers. Besides the comic *Private Benjamin* (1980), the earnest but now dated *G.I. Jane* (1997), and *Courage Under Fire* (1996), there are simply very few films about women in the military. In keeping with the disappearance of women from the media in the aftermath of 9/11 documented by Susan Faludi, there has been almost no commercial films, and only a handful of independent ones, about women soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan (21-45).

As of 2010, however, a new phenomenon has emerged: the CIA intelligence analyst, a new kind of woman warrior in an age of digitalized warfare. Twenty-first century war is arguably going to see more shadowy wars of special operations and surveillance and secret services; these are still male-dominated institutions, but it is easier for people to imagine women playing an important role in them. Women have often been more readily seen as spies than as soldiers. The trend started with *Fair Game* in 2010, an independent film with Naomi Watts playing Valerie Plame, the diplomat who publically dissented from the 'weapons of mass destruction' narrative the White House was promoting, and whose identity was compromised by the Bush administration in retaliation.

Following this independent and fairly nuanced foray into the female spy genre, *Homeland* (2011-) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2014)—which I will discuss more fully below—are the big commercial ventures that developed the white woman CIA analyst as warrior. The hugely successful blockbuster by Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal (who also did the 2009 film *The Hurt Locker* together) tacitly revisited the issue of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs in its story of how one female CIA analyst singlehandedly finds Osama bin Laden's hideout. I will also focus on *Zero Dark Thirty* because it is part of another larger cultural trend, i.e. the banalization of torture, and the way the film does this is through the strategic deployment—I'd say even *weaponization*—of the female character's femaleness.

Zero Dark Thirty was released in 2012 to great acclaim, earning five Academy Award nominations, appearing on many top ten lists, and reaping large profits. Its release also rekindled the debate about torture that had begun when the Abu Ghraib photos first emerged. In the rest of this article, I will examine how the film engages with these debates and how it sparked fierce new ones—especially about its own depiction of torture—but my specific focus is how gender is used in the film. In this respect, the character of Maya (Jessica Chastain) is the central character and semiotic nucleus of the film, while Dan (Jason Clarke) is her most important and immediate foil, model, and finally, double, as she moves from being a spectator to being a perpetrator of torture herself. In addition, I am interested in how the film stages spectatorship, specifically in relation to the problem of watching torture, and how spectatorship comes to be harder and harder to distinguish from participation. As Maya's watching of torture is ultimately part of her education in learning to torture, the film's audience is also implicated in this pedagogical scene. The larger stakes of this issue can be linked to what Amy Zegart calls "torture creep," or the increasing acceptance of torture by Americans in the last few years, which presents a significant shift from 2004, when the Abu Ghraib photos first emerged.

Two issues in particular stood out at the time of the appearance of these images. One was the existence of the photographs themselves, which seemed to shock almost as much as the abuse depicted. By this I mean the fact that the pictures were taken at all seemed surprising, or terribly foolish, and somehow part of the abuse itself (Sontag, "On the Torture of Others" 274). In any case, what they revealed by the fact that the torturers posed freely in them was that abuse was so routine and accepted at Abu Ghraib that none of the military personnel in the photographs seemed aware that they were committing wrongful and possibly criminal acts. While some of the photographers later claimed that they were documenting things that seemed possibly improper (e.g. Sabrina Harman), other photographers, such as Charles Graner, clearly regarded the photos as extensions of their power at the scene and offered them to others as entertainment. Thus, they revealed not only abuse but a culture of abuse and dehumanization that was completely normalized.

The other issue that struck a chord with the press and the public was the presence of women in the photos. Their prominence, both in front and behind the camera, was endlessly emphasized, as was their appearance and femininity. Lynndie England drew the largest share of this hostile scrutiny and judgment, and no pictures were discussed more than the one where she is holding a dog leash attached to a detainee on the floor and the one in which she points to the genitals of a hooded detainee and smiles with a cigarette in her mouth like a parody of a character in a hard-boiled detective novel. For many, these images seemed to represent female power itself unleashed and gone wrong, a perversion of or an inevitable result of feminism, depending on whether the speaker was on the left or the right. England's identity as a woman was the subject of much attention, with two competing narratives usually at play: One rendered her a mannish, unnatural, and sexually promiscuous gender deviant, the other as a young girl blinded by love for an older man (i.e. the more senior Charles Graner, who appears in some of the photographs with her) and manipulated by him.

In either case, the salient aspect of these photos was their sexual nature. In most, detainees are naked and forced to perform or simulate sexual—often homosexual—acts.¹ The smiling faces of the torturers also suggest pleasure or even sadism, though at least one of the photographers, Harman, explained subsequently in several documentaries (cf. *Standard Operating Procedure; Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*) that smiling was simply a reflex for her and did not reflect pleasure or even approval of the situation. Besides the obvious immorality of sexually abusing detainees, the presence of sexuality also appeared to stain the honor of the military as an institution, which in theory at least prides itself on upholding certain moral standards. Again, the onus of this particular dishonor fell particularly hard on the women soldiers, and especially Lynndie England.

The release of these images provoked an almost unanimous reaction of outrage and revulsion.² Even President Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, who had personally approved many

¹ See Mirzoeff and Butler for discussions of the significance of simulated homosexuality.

² Notable exceptions include Rush Limbaugh, who claimed that the photos looked like “standard good old American pornography” (qtd. in Frost 136) or a harmless hazing ritual by the Skull and Bones fraternity at Yale (Mirzoeff 35).

of the enhanced interrogation techniques and a general climate of harsh treatment that created the conditions for this abuse, publically expressed dismay at the images (cf. “Rumsfeld”). The general consensus about the wrongness of the actions depicted in the photographs corroborates Elaine Scarry’s observation, expressed in *The Body in Pain* (1985), that torture generally appears morally reprehensible when viewed as the physical act of one person hurting another. Scarry’s argument is that “almost anyone looking at the *physical* act of torture would be immediately appalled and repulsed by the torturers” (35). “It is difficult to think of a human situation in which the lines of moral responsibility are more starkly or simply drawn,” she continues. “Yet as soon as the focus of attention shifts to the *verbal* aspect of torture,” Scarry proposes, “those lines have begun to waver and change in the direction of accommodating and crediting the torturers” (35). This undermining of the basic moral reflex to sympathize with the tortured and to condemn the torturer is introduced by the rhetorical dynamics of the interrogation, according to Scarry, which tends overwhelmingly to make the tortured appear responsible for their ordeal. That is the whole point of the interrogation, in fact, and the reason why it is the structuring principle of most torture situations—even when no information is actually needed or sought.

This verbal aspect is precisely what film brings to the torture scenario, and what makes all the difference between the universally shocking photos from Abu Ghraib and the far more complicit depiction of torture found in Bigelow’s film. *Zero Dark Thirty* is technically the story of the mission to find and kill Bin Laden by Navy SEALs (there is no real doubt that capturing him was ever an option, at least not in Mark Owen’s autobiography *No Easy Day*, on which the film is partly based). Written by Mark Boal and directed by Kathryn Bigelow, *Zero Dark Thirty* can be divided into roughly three parts. The first focuses on violent interrogations by Dan, a CIA interrogator, at various black sites across the globe, the second shows Maya’s own hunt for Bin Laden, including several interrogations she conducts herself, and finally, the last centers on the mission at Bin Laden’s compound, filmed almost in real time. When it was released, the film provoked a heated debate about its depiction of interrogation, and specifically the impression it creates—denied by CIA Director Michael Morrell at the time—that torture produced the crucial intelligence that led to Bin Laden’s location (qtd. in Coll).

Thus, the debate initially focused on the question of whether torture works as an intelligence-gathering method and only later moved to questions of whether torture is acceptable under any circumstances. Bigelow and Boal defended the film somewhat incoherently as both historically accurate and artistically free, vehemently denying that it endorsed torture. Both claimed that torture was in the film simply because it was “part of the story” of finding Bin Laden, and that they were not taking a position on it. Bigelow stated, in a widely circulated quote from an *Los Angeles Times* interview, that “depiction was not endorsement.” In a speech at Loyola Marymount University, Boal went so far as to claim that the film could serve as a necessary prop to good citizenship by giving people the virtual experience of being in the center of the action or in an interrogation cell so that they could understand “the issues of our day” and make up their minds about them better (qtd. in Breznican).

I would like to challenge these claims on a variety of levels and suggest that the film is far less neutral and ambiguous than its defenders claim. Instead, the film portrays torture as an unpleasant but necessary and valuable tool for the job of protecting America from terrorism. This is conveyed not only in the torture scenes themselves—and the interrogation scenarios that structure them—but also in the way they are framed and made meaningful in the larger narrative of the film. For example, the people interrogated are all known terrorists (in the world of the film), and the first prisoner, Ammar, is not only directly linked to 9/11, but he knows about more imminent attacks and thus fits the classical torture-ethics scenario of the ticking time bomb (that almost never exists in real life).³ In short, torturing him can prevent more people from dying. Secondly, the film shows him giving up valuable information after being tortured (in order to avert more torture), and this information leads Maya directly to Bin Laden, even if much later. The film also shows other suspects giving up valuable and correct information in order to avoid more torture. In other words, the film clearly depicts torture as effective. Finally, the film is punctuated by a series of ‘historical’ terrorist attacks, often shown through news footage. They occur regularly and unremittingly, suggesting that

³ For more on the ‘ticking time bomb scenario,’ see Sturken (4) and Luban.

the world is a dangerous place full of radical and motiveless evil scheming constantly to hurt Americans. In fact, Ammar is given a line stating that he and his associates “just wanted to kill Americans,” and his interrogators are satisfied with this statement of motive. In the light of such irrational and seemingly motiveless hatred, the film seems to suggest, extreme measures are justifiable.

The most important of these terrorist attacks, of course, and the one that opens *Zero Dark Thirty* and serves as the most important frame for it is 9/11 itself. In the opening sequence, against a black screen, the film-makers play real audio recordings of 9/11 victims calling loved ones and emergency services. The film then cuts from these desperate voices to the interrogation of Ammar, creating a direct causal relationship between the two scenes, which invites viewers to immediately be less inclined to sympathize with Ammar. This lack of sympathy is corroborated and heightened when we learn that he and his uncle funded one of the hijackers, making him directly responsible for the agony of the people we hear during the first minute of the film. In short, *Zero Dark Thirty* does not simply depict torture in some neutral and even-handed way, as Bigelow claimed (and which itself would be of dubious merit⁴). Instead, it situates torture in a narrative that makes it very difficult to view Ammar as anything except a bad man who deserves the rough justice he gets at the hands of the film's otherwise decent American interrogators.

This brings me back to Elaine Scarry's point about the importance of the interrogation scenario in undermining the otherwise clear moral structure of the torture relationship, which would normally make us sympathize with the victim and abhor the perpetrator. The verbal aspect of the interrogation blurs that clarity by giving the interrogator the ability to rhetorically attribute power to the victim, making him seem responsible for his own pain. In failing to produce the required answer, the victim seems to invite more abuse. In producing the required answer, the victim justifies the abuse. In refusing to answer, the victim appears uncooperative and guilty. Whatever the case, the torturer always depicts the torture as an

⁴ As Marita Sturken has argued, “[t]orture is a practice that actively and violently others its victims in its aim to destroy subjectivity” and therefore “demands a moral response” (424).

unavoidable result of the victim's failure to comply in some way. The scenes in *Zero Dark Thirty* correspond exactly to this description. In the first words of the film, the interrogator Dan lays down the ground rules of the torture: "if you lie to me, I hurt you. If you step off this mat, I hurt you. If you don't look at me when I talk to you, I hurt you." This first scene of slapping and yelling lasts only a minute and after this short introduction to torture we follow the interrogators out the door, where we learn that this is not abuse, but psychology. "He must learn how helpless he is," Dan explains reasonably to Maya. What looks like abuse is actually a lesson, a pedagogical strategy. Unlike the many real and innocent detainees tortured for months at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, in the film there is no danger that Ammar is innocent and wrongly tortured. We are told he is guilty, and we can be sure he is lying, and therefore he—not Dan—is responsible for the torture he undergoes.

This short scene between Maya and Dan before they continue the interrogation tells us other crucial and equally reassuring things about this situation besides Ammar's certain guilt. We also learn that the seemingly brutal interrogator Dan is a nice guy outside of the torture chamber, empathetic and protective of his female colleague. He notices her suit, suggests a coffee break, offers sympathy, and provides explanations about what he is doing. If Dan possesses a wide range of normally female-coded social skills, Maya is not a stereotypical woman either. Unsmiling, almost expressionless, cool, and unflustered by the interrogation—"I'm fine," she insists—she turns down the coffee and says, "We should go back in." Declining to wear the mask to shield her identity, she appears not only eager to continue the interrogation but also willing to show her face and assume her complicity with the interrogation, signaling thereby to the audience that she fully approves of it.⁵

This scene is typical of the complex and powerful ways that gender is used in the film. The staging of gender performance here is complex because it challenges gender orthodoxies on an individual level in order to appear fresh and progressive while tacitly reinforcing

⁵ In fact, in an earlier version of the script, Maya *does* participate in this interrogation. According to a declassified memo, the CIA asked to have this changed in order to reflect their policy that "substantive debriefers" did not participate in Enhanced Interrogation Techniques (Chen). Boal and Bigelow do still let Maya give the main interrogator water for the waterboarding, having her participate physically anyway.

traditional gender arrangements (after all, Dan is clearly in charge inside and outside the interrogation cell). It also uses the affective energy derived from this seeming subversion of gender heterodoxy to affirm the legitimacy of the torture sequences. In popular culture, quite often, it is men who resort to violence and women who question the need to do so. Here, the fact that Maya is an eager accomplice signals to the audience that the painful interrogation, though hard to watch, must be acceptable since even the woman accepts it. Thus, although Maya as a character struggles throughout the film to make her gender disappear as an issue, the film consistently foregrounds her gender to legitimate its ultra-violent narrative of enhanced interrogation and planned assassination. In short, it appropriates a semblance of feminism in order to consolidate a defense of violence against people deemed unworthy of constitutional protections or even of human rights. This is a powerful strategy and one that seems to have worked on Michael Moore, whose public defense of the film in the *Huffington Post* in March 2014 argued that the film makes you hate torture, that it shows good detective work is far more effective, and that it is a “21st century chick flick” (Moore).

However, *Zero Dark Thirty* is not a feminist film (nor are most ‘chick flicks’ for that matter), though it does fall into a larger pattern of neoliberal appropriation of a pseudo-feminist discourse, while simultaneously repudiating feminism’s main tenets. Feminism as a politics of female solidarity and equality is thus abandoned while Maya’s dogged pursuit of Bin Laden in the male-dominated world of the CIA is represented as proof that women do not need feminism if they are motivated and talented enough. Capable, ambitious, talented, and totally indifferent to everything outside of her job, she corresponds to the new neoliberal female subject that Angela McRobbie calls the “top girl,” the young woman in the neoliberal economy to whom doors are opened in exchange for feminism being left behind. For McRobbie, this phenomenon is part of a larger trend through which feminism is instrumentalized and appropriated: “brought forward and claimed by Western governments, as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a key part of what freedom now means” (1). Feminism is thereby appropriated by American imperialism in a process analogous to what McRobbie calls “double entanglement” when speaking of the intertwining of feminism with

conservative values. In the film, this politically reactionary logic works in a circular movement: Maya's commitment to the global US military presence fuels her aggressive individualism which is offered to audiences in lieu of feminism, while her status as woman within the male-dominated intelligence community is highlighted to give her a moral high ground which in turn tacitly justifies the US imperialist project that she operates within and for.

Maya's character operates within another logic as well, a logic that I would call religious and which is activated because the subject of the film ultimately is death and warfare. In this logic, Maya is highly admirable, represented in terms of her sexual purity and a zeal that is comparable to religious faith. She is 'virginal,' recruited from high school and shown to have no boyfriends and no interest in "fooling around," which she calls, interestingly, "un-becoming," invoking the language used to sanction military personnel for breach of conduct. She hunts for Osama bin Laden with a single-mindedness that makes it clear that this is no mere job for her but a mission. She is a true believer, a kind of righteous double of the terrorists she pursues, whom she considers fanatics (uninterested in money and unable to be bought). At one point in the film, she actually says that she believes she was "spared" from death in an explosion in order to be able to hunt down and kill Bin Laden. It is interesting to note that in all the heated debates about the film in early 2013 no one remarked on the fact that Maya is presented as a crusader in the most literal sense. On the contrary, instead of casting doubt on her professionalism and motivation, her extreme faith in her task and herself, as well as her sexual chastity, work to legitimize her character in the film and to tacitly cleanse some of the moral tarnish acquired by the American intelligence community after the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Maya's sexual purity is made into an issue in the film in at least two key ways. First, it is crucial to the way *Zero Dark Thirty* restages images from Abu Ghraib in order to restructure our response to them. If two of the most shocking photos were of Lynndie England holding a detainee on a leash and pointing to a detainee's genitals, the film revisits these iconic images in an early scene where Ammar is naked and being walked like a dog by Dan in front of Maya. She is even left alone with Ammar at one point after Dan has pulled Ammar's pants

down and asked, "Do you mind if my female colleague checks out your junk?" As if in direct refutation of the evidence of prurient pleasure offered by the real Abu Ghraib photographs, the film shows Maya as uncomfortable during these first scenes, squirming and looking away. However, when the naked and strung up Ammar asks her for help, she says to him with great self-righteousness, "You can help yourself by being truthful," thus invoking the verbal framework of the interrogation, in which the victim is always the one guilty of causing his own pain. In this way, the scene superimposes on our memory of the Abu Ghraib photo a new scene in which what looks like sexual humiliation is simply a legitimate form of encouraging truthfulness. And since we know from the narrative that Ammar is lying and refusing to give up the information that would indeed save lives, our reading of the scene—and perhaps of the original photograph—is irrevocably altered.

Maya's purity is highlighted in *Zero Dark Thirty* in yet another way: through the character of Jessica (Jennifer Ehle), who serves principally as foil to Maya. Jessica is the other most prominent female character and initially a testy rival for attention and expertise, later becoming Maya's only friend. In stark contrast to Maya, Jessica appears emotional, flirtatious, willing to engage in "fooling around," including with colleagues, and absurdly naive. If Maya is spared (or says she feels she was) in order to complete the mission, Jessica seems to die—according to the same logic—because she is unworthy of completing it. She is tainted by sexuality (she is the one who tells Maya she should have sex) and also, interestingly, by her investment in cupidity, her belief that anyone can be bought. She thus plays the classic 'whore' to Maya's virginal Madonna. As a result, she fails to suspect that the Al Qaida insider that she believes she is buying is really a true believer who is willing to sacrifice himself in order to take a few CIA operatives with him. She arrives at their encounter with a cake she has baked herself—in a silly gesture that renders her character even more ridiculously feminine—while the operative she has hoped to turn arrives with a bomb which kills her and six other agents. The fact that her death is the direct result of her willingness to trust her Arab contact highlights the fact that she fails as a result of a female-coded social trait, while the solitary, aggressive, and mistrustful Maya succeeds.

In addition to being chaste, uncorrupted, and righteous—a female white knight—Maya is coded male in one other important way: verbally. She is a woman of few words in most circumstances, but she is capable of aggressive verbal attacks on other characters, usually her male bosses. The one scene that most stands out for her use of male-coded language is the startling moment when she refers to herself as “the motherfucker who found the place” where Bin Laden is probably hiding. This short scene is arguably a kind of turning point in the film. Michael Moore singled it out for comment, crediting it with being responsible for Maya being taken seriously by her male hierarchical superiors. It certainly has great rhetorical effect. But let us unpack it for a moment. What is Maya doing when she calls herself a “motherfucker”? First of all, she is displaying her mastery of the profane language of male institutional insiders. She is also claiming a male subject-position in the rhetorical structure of that insider network (it is very rare to apply the term “motherfucker” to women). In short, she is claiming a place at the table, literally, in these boardroom conference scenes where her socially stigmatized gender can be overlooked on the grounds of her ability to operate verbally as a man. Naturally, since this is a Hollywood movie and not a real boardroom, it works. It works not only because she tries so hard to act like a man but without going the dangerous extra step of actually looking like one (as Lynndie England did). It works also because most of the men in *Zero Dark Thirty* are represented as so inadequate to the task of protecting the country that it becomes necessary for her to assume that role.

While not represented explicitly in a negative way, most male characters could be described with that old Cold War term of opprobrium from the 1950s: ‘soft’ (see Cuordileone vii). Maya’s male colleagues on the whole seem less motivated, less determined, more easily distracted, tired, and intimidated than her or just lazy. At the very least, they lack a quality that Maya has in abundance: drive. One boss sits around on the phone with his feet on the desk. Another allows Maya to bully and threaten him. Most seem more interested in their careers and themselves than anything else. Even the relatively sympathetic Dan, Maya’s mentor and ally, wearies of his job and goes back to Washington. In one scene, midway through the film, he tells her he has seen “too many naked guys,” plus the prison authorities have killed his pet monkeys. We had seen him feeding these monkeys in an earlier scene,

reinforcing his “good guy” image in classic sentimental visual coding, where ‘kind to animals’ is a clearly legible sign of the moral goodness of a character, one more way in which *Zero Dark Thirty* reassures us that Dan’s torturing is restrained and morally unproblematic.

Dan’s weariness of torture is meant to contrast with Maya’s determination and also incidentally reinforce the premise that torture is more emotionally trying for the decent American interrogators than the guilty terrorists that file through the film’s black site scenes. The only men who live up to Maya’s standards of effective performance are the Navy SEALs who become her instruments of death. “He’s there,” she assures one Navy SEAL, possibly meant to be Mark Owen, “and you’re going to kill him for me.” These SEALs become extensions of her will in the film: they act out her commands just as seamlessly as the man in the interrogation room who slaps and waterboards detainees at her signal.

Though Mark Owen’s memoir informs the film for the last sequence, *Zero Dark Thirty* also departs from it in important ways, especially in regard to Maya’s final scenes. First of all, in the book, the SEALs are far from certain that they have killed Osama bin Laden. The man they have killed looks different than what they expected, and his face is distorted by gunshot wounds. They are not sure they have eliminated the target—nicknamed “Geronimo”—until a woman and a child in the compound corroborate that it is really Bin Laden. In contrast to this real-life uncertainty about the visual evidence, Maya is able to identify the dead body in the body bag instantly and without hesitation. In short, her certainty about his presence in the compound is rewarded in the film with a certainty about his identity as the corpse brought back by the SEALs. In the book, Owen reports that Jen (Maya’s real-life counterpart) weeps when she sees Bin Laden’s body, though he is not sure why. He assumes it is the shock of seeing a dead body for the first time.

The film displaces the weeping to the final scene, when Maya climbs onto the transport plane, alone, and is asked where she wants to go. Her tears at this moment can be read as one of those paradoxical post-anxiety, post-victory reactions, her life’s entire objective up to this point being achieved, and she has no idea yet what she will do next. Her tears also perform important narrative and ideological work at this moment. First of all, they normalize

Maya and return her to the safety of female normativity after her near total lack of emotions throughout the film. They also serve to channel our sympathy towards her so that we finish the film thoroughly on her side. As throughout the entire narrative, our empathy is ruthlessly displaced from any non-Americans, such as the detainees and torture victims, or the men and women in the compound who are killed during the raid, or even the corpse of Bin Laden (which seems to trigger the meltdown in the book). Instead we are invited to weep with Maya for herself.

Returning to the issue of “regarding the pain of others,” it is clear that the gaze’s relationship to suffering is foregrounded in *Zero Dark Thirty* from the very beginning, when we are shown a black screen while listening to historical audio recordings of 9/11 victims. The scene is moving and powerful as an opening gambit since it subverts a cinema audience’s primary expectation, namely that they will be shown something on screen. It also promises that the rest of the film will be equally close to historical truth, which turns out to be misleading. Finally, it sets up the action of the film to be a direct response to these agonized cries, which is indeed the case insofar as Maya’s focus remains squarely on a revenge killing of Bin Laden. Even if officials have claimed that the SEALs were on a capture *or* kill mission, the film makes plain—as does Mark Owen’s book—that they were never going to do anything except assassinate him and anyone who got in the way.

The opening of *Zero Dark Thirty* is thus particularly effective on an emotional level because we do not expect to be ‘kept in the dark’ in a movie theater; the effect is to invite us to imagine what it might have been like to be in the collapsing and burning tower with the victims for a moment. The scene hence provides an ideologically powerful preface to the torture that follows, as I have already discussed, in terms of the narrative logic. But it also provides an important contrast in terms of the visual economy of the film. If the suffering of 9/11 victims is visually unrepresentable, and it surely is, the suffering of the interrogation victims necessarily seems far less important because it is shown to be quite presentable in the film. Thus, the film sets up a clear opposition between the unrepresentability of American suffering, turning it into something sacred, and the visibility and increasing banality of the suffering of non-American detainees. Their suffering, *Zero Dark Thirty*

suggests, belongs to the profane world and therefore does not require our respect or even attention after a while.

In short, one of the objectives of the film seems to be to teach us that we can watch the pain of others without flinching if we want to. Like Maya, who serves as our guide into the world of the film, we are uncomfortable at first and may wish to look away, but, like her, we steel ourselves to watch. Most likely, we do not leave the theater or turn off the television, and indeed, we do get used to the scenes. The first words of the narrative are Dan's instructions to Ammar to look at him, and the camera, with our captive gaze, obeys him. We, too, learn to look at him, and to look at Ammar, and to get used to watching the former hurt the latter. In this first scene, Maya has a mask so that she can watch without being seen, and this remains our position throughout the rest of the film, watching through the invisible fourth wall that protects us from feeling complicit. This is one reason why Mark Boal's claim that the film gives us the experience of being in the interrogation cell and Bigelow's claim that the film gives an audience a "boots on the ground" experience are both cynically false and yet inadvertently revealing: while watching through a monitor is not remotely the same thing as being inside the room with a real human body that is being tortured, it is not innocent either. To be inside the room is to be part of the torture (as Maya discovers as she finds herself bringing the water for the waterboarding). It is also to be directly or indirectly responsible for what happens and how long it lasts and, most importantly, to be in direct physical proximity to a body in pain. To compare that experience with the experience of watching a movie is to cynically abandon any ethical distinctions between the real world and commercial entertainment altogether.

Yet, at the same time, the statement is revealing because it suggests that watching is not opposed to acting but on a continuum with it. In other words, being able to stomach the sight of torture is a step on the way to being able to perform it. As Maya learns—first to watch, then to do—so the audience learns to watch and to approve. This corresponds to the conclusions of numerous experts (Gronnvoll; Takacs; Zegart) who assert that Americans are far more tolerant of torture techniques now than in 2004. According to polls, more Americans believe that torture may be sometimes necessary and they accept more severe

techniques within that range. This increased approval of torture is certainly due at least in part to the high number of popular TV shows and films that depict torture as necessary and acceptable to the protagonists we identify with. These shows include *La Femme Nikita*, *Alias*, *Sleeper Cell*, *The Unit*, and especially *24*. According to Stacy Takacs, the nonprofit group Human Rights First ascribed a “twenty-five fold increase in depictions of torture on U.S. television since 9/11 largely to *24*” (85). The group also noticed that more ‘good guys’ are doing the torture now than the ‘bad guys,’ drastically changing the meaning of torture (once a clear narrative code for villainy). Just like television programs, Hollywood films also routinely depict scenes of torture, and the very fact of representing torture serves to habituate viewers to the idea. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the lesson is explicit and the teacher is a woman, a fact that is deployed in subtle and insidious ways to justify and normalize the torture depicted. In the current political landscape, where the so-called War on Terror continues and Muslim misogyny is routinely cited as one of the stakes in the struggle, transnational feminism is needed more than ever to understand and decode the complex gender politics of how the war is packaged and sold to the American public.

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