

Zero Dark Thirty, Dr. Kathleen Bigelow

*How do you make a genuine trauma entertaining **and** cathartic?*

You develop a plot that a) is punctuated, documentary style, with things that really happened, presented, for the most part in a style that is accurate, but, cinematically, sustains the feel of an action adventure film; b) have a protagonist, Myia, who experiences terror first as we all do (on TV), but also in person (Hyatt, attack on her home); c) however, the action does NOT make the protagonist someone who, Rambo style, becomes a pulsating explosive sower of the avenging violence. In other words, although action will finally deliver the cathartic payoff of the revenge fiction, it must do so in such a way that the moral superiority of the victim is not lost.

Media coverage focused at first and almost exclusively on the tendentious character of the interrogation scenes, as they strongly imply that torture was indispensable for gaining the clues that gets them to OBL's courier. But this political complaint ignores the one function of those scenes for the viewer: that we get first-hand pleasure of making the perpetrators suffer. But, it also offers the first evidence that beneath of the sentimental heroine's sensitive and vulnerability, there is a will, a determination, and also a righteous anger, that will express itself in her unique persistence in hunting for OBL.

Point of View: the way into the narrative for the viewer is the protagonist. Through the director and cinematographer's alchemy, Myia, the beautiful, sensitive, vulnerable woman is a sentimental heroine because her expressions and body transmit every mood, event and feeling more fully than any others--e.g. the first 2 interrogations. But Myia is also the revenge hero, the anti-bureaucratic iconoclastic independently thinking hero, the canny Odysseus, the most creative and thoughtful tactician, and the one who cares so much that she will not be deterred, when those around her are losing focus. Her single-mindedness is more than simple stubbornness. She develops a theory about al Qaida's development after 9/11 of a new 'tradecraft' that provides the conceptual framework for interpreting evidence. Now the places where suspects are withholding information suggest the evidence trail to pursue. Myia must then persuade the bureaucracy to support her surmises about how her suspected courier is behaving.

Throughout the film, the global war on terrorism is not seen as a 'global-political reality' but as something that is deeply *personal*. The quest is punctuated with a series of terrorist attacks: the Saudi hotel attack, the London bus attack, the Marriott hotel attack in Islamabad Pakistan, the Camp Chapman attack, the NY City attack, and the assassination attempt on Myia. In each case, the attack is suffered upon Myia's body—either directly or in solitary vigils before TV reports. Finally, Myia's has the single-mindedness typical of all revenge heroes (e.g. John Wayne in the Searchers): no sex and no real friendships (pals to hang out with; she turns down overtures that are friendly--to go back to Washington with Dan; to go to "the meeting" with the Jennifer Erle

character); what she wins from all is not just respect but admiration and belief. By the end of the film, the CIA operatives want to catch OBL *for* her (but also for us, the viewer who enters the scene of terrorism through her). Her only moments of giggling smiles and hugs: when Jack gives her a phone that rings when the target calls, and when the operative who tracks the courier gives her his photo. To give this single operative the credit of being "the mother-fucker" who found OBL means keeping her separated not just from her natural peers, (Dan, Jack, Jennifer Erle character), but also to keep credit for the "go" decision from President Obama, the head of CIA (Tony Soprano character), and the CIA operative. [A more objective account might have features Obama revising a moribund and exhausted search--like the failed search for WMD--so as to support operatives like Myia, and create an agency context that allowed her vehement demands for support to the station chief in Pakistan to carry weight and succeed.] In fact, what separates Myia from all others: she never really makes a conscious decision. She just waits around impatiently for others to accept her interpretation. This points to a final irony: Myia's single-mindedness, austerity, discipline are the traits that are shared by the terrorists. Only she is pure enough to capture the purist of all the terrorists, OBL himself.

Myia's signal traits—her sentimental vulnerability, her isolation, and her austere determination—all make sense at a formal level of film spectatorship. She is not just 'an agent', but 'our agent,' the surrogate for each vulnerable, isolated but hopeful viewer in the audience. She does not keep the spectator at a distance. Instead she serves as our surrogate in (real) scenes from the war on terror. Throughout the movie, in scene after scene, horrible events (from torture to bombing attacks to shouting matches) are shown as the camera cuts between these disturbing events to Myia's beautiful face and delicate body reacting to those events. In this way, the film does use Myia to bring us into a personal distance with these disturbing events; she is our way into them. In addition, she models a response to them that is attentive but vulnerable, focused but still humanly caring. So, for example, after the climactic raid that kills OBL, and after the mission members have returned with OBL's body and hard-drives, Myia does not share their noisy exuberance with high fives or smiles. Instead she makes her way through the crowd like an anxious and uneasy stranger... eager for her 'present', but evidently worried that it just might be the wrong gift. She opens the body bag; lingers; nods in an understated fashion (while the mission boss waits, with bated breath, for her nod of success). After her nod, she zips OBL up—as if to end the trauma.

In the final scene, as she climbs into the huge transport for a ride home, against the red and white stripes of the cargo bay, there are few words ('where do you want to go?' you must be important... she never answers). Myia is, and we through her are also, utterly alone. There is no party or award ceremony, but instead a close up of her face, with tears coming from her eyes, she turns slightly away, vulnerable and finally able to indulge in a solitary cathartic cry. Her tears let us weep.