

## **Zero Dark Thirty, a propaganda film!**

Just as any other immeasurable power-wise human construction, so in cinematography, the danger of employing the Seventh Art – this message-generating-power of subconsciously functioning interaction – for “immoral” ends cannot be controlled, yet allow me to clarify that neither I believe that it should – any attempt to “control” art, would be paradoxical by definition.

However, ideally art is a medium of human expression, which according to certain trends, like for example, the one originating in the classic ancient Greek era, has the ultimate intention to come-out, representing beauty in its ideal unearthly form. However, it is not in my intentions to defend or dictate the role of art, as being mono-dimensional constrained from rules of human expression, since in modern times, and through the unprecedented explosion of post-modern art, all these principles have been eventually – and thankfully – demolished, making the creation process and “products” a more personal experience both for the artist and the spectator, while deconstructing in a brutal way the ‘aesthetic distance’, otherwise imposed on the viewer as a guardian of the mystic ambiance enhanced in artworks.

It seems to me, that the freedom of expression within the terrain of the art-world, should be treasured as a sacred gift, however, I am compelled from unknown forces to use my freedom, and express my critic on a specific film, since I cannot seem to get over, the shocking celebrating receipt of the film ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ by the world of cinematography.

Zero Dark Thirty is a 2012 American historical drama film directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal. Billed as ‘the story of history's greatest manhunt for the world's most dangerous man’, the film is a dramatization of the American operation that killed Osama bin Laden. It was produced by Boal, Bigelow, and Megan Ellison, and stars Jessica Chastain, Jason Clarke, Joel Edgerton, Chris Pratt amongst many others; while it was independently financed by Ellison's Annapurna Pictures. The film had its premiere in Los Angeles on December 18, 2012 and had its wide release early 2013. It was released

## Critic of Cinematography

to wide critical acclaim, won an Oscar and was nominated for five Academy Awards at the 85th Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Actress (Jessica Chastain) and Best Original Screenplay. Zero Dark Thirty also earned four Golden Globe Award nominations including Best Picture – Drama, Best Director, and Best Actress – Drama for Chastain, which she won. It has attracted praise as well as controversy and strong criticism for its allegedly pro-torture stance and for allegedly obtaining improper access to classified materials.

This is a film, which advocates for the use of torture as a necessary method of the justice process. This is not “rocket science” is evident throughout the whole movie. This will be made clear to anyone that may choose to watch it. It is notable that the same year of the film’s production – in 2012 – the president of the United States, have repeatedly differentiate his government’s policies from any sort of practice that may relate to the previous government’s illegal tactics, as well as the use of torture. However, is interesting to consider that in the same country, the receipt of the film has been marked by celebrating numerous awards and praises.

Yet, the propaganda of this film is so evident, that it drives the audience into concluding and realizing that torture is an inevitable method and necessary tool in the pursuit of justice, without which, the investigations on the elimination and prevention of terrorism would stand sterile, an implied statement which is evident throughout the whole film. Even human rights experts and activists, with knowledge on the inderogable nature of the right not to be tortured and the weight that this prohibition of torture carries, have been led by the end of watching the film with me, to believe that we should do everything no matter what to catch these ‘devils’ and eliminate them, having their emotional state grow slowly, into a sense of satisfaction by the end of the film and the killing of the so-called head of Al-Qaida. The direction of this film is so well premeditated, that the viewer is driven into identifying herself with the protagonist, a young cute lady, making her way up to the man-dominated world of the CIA, and successfully earning their respect, having such a cool and together personality, and so on and so forth, in a reproduction of the American dream’s route, and build upon the old-western cowboy films recipe – of the one hero saving the world, the American way of life, civilization, and so on and so forth.

## Critic of Cinematography

The protagonist's adorability and apparent innocence, leads the viewer in assuming that she is driven by idealistic motives, for the welfare of the globe, protection of humankind, human rights, and safety of our homes. Yet, she is also using force, and directs her interrogating buddy to hit repeatedly the suspect she is interrogating, another detail, that goes unnoticed. These practices are illegal and under no circumstances allowed. They have been rendered illegal by international law. There is no point in opening the debates of torture never again. The right not to be tortured, is an inderogable right, which means that under no means it can be negotiated, waived, trumped or cancelled. That is a given.

Yet, American cinema comes, and stirs the discussion over issues like that, reaching the wider public population possible, and manages to manipulate their opinion by offering a case so well crafted, that anyone would conclude by the end of watching this film in the simplification, that torture is OK under these special circumstances. The directing team of the film, has managed to touch upon the basic emotional structures of the viewer, and just one viewing of this action American film, filled with guns, blood, anxiety, revenge disguised as justice and fairness, with a young girl trying to make it in this wild world dominated by men, under the shadows of the most sinister phenomenon of our times that terrorism is considered to be; so in combination all these, form the net and trap for sculpting the public opinion in favor of the use of torture.

Congratulations to the film for its five (5) Oscar nominations, 56 award wins and 59 more award nominations. Yes, lets promote films like that, and maybe even the piece of art that Nazi propaganda films have been for the craft of cinematography. (Allow me the sarcasm).

Many thinkers advanced into condemning the pro-torture stand this part-documentary part-fiction project brings forward. Naomi Klein, compared Bigelow with Leni Riefenstahl and said that although she was also a great artist, she will always be remembered as the propagandize of the Nazi crimes against humanity just like Bigelow as a pro-torture handmaiden, while on the other hand Michael Moore in defending the film and its extraordinary craft of filmmaking argued that it is actually against torture, since it leaves the audience with the impression that things progressed into a successful

## Critic of Cinematography

mission, only when torture was prohibited and dismissed as an official practice and consequently when the CIA started using their own brains.

Is only fair to mention that the filmmakers argued that they are not pro-torture, but any avoidance to depict the facts would be actually immoral, and this is why they included scenes of torture, while they have decreased the scenes to the minimum possible time length in the film, contrary to the original intentions. However, allow me to emphasize, that like any commentator reporting the news in the TV, it is one thing to simply report the truth, and another to report by implying condemnation or approval, for example either by face expression or voice tone. However no one can accuse a news reporter, for doing so, we always have the choice to change a channel or boycott these journalistic groups. The same applies with film-making, although the film-makers stated that, all they did was to report the truth about the use of torture by USA and CIA – they might have done so by implying that this is what the good guys did. The main characters that were depicted using this unjustified, barbaric, and illegal method, were sympathetically portrayed in the whole film, contrary to the victims which according to the director, were the manifestation of the evil and the roots of terrorism. It is probably beyond the knowledge of the film-makers that the due process of law has to be respected, the rule of law, or the basic legal principle that everyone is innocent until the opposite is proven. However it is true that terrorism is a controversial phenomenon, with many unsolved legal, political, philosophical and so on and so forth issues, but allowing, directing, or even cultivating a pro-torture stance through the otherwise grand art of cinema, is at least condemnable.

Maybe it would be reasonable to ask whether I am being biased in my review, and whether I am emphasizing only in certain issues present in this film. Well, I should mention then that this is a great piece of filmmaking, as far as methods, tools, and cinematic experience is concerned. However, what this film brings into this world, is another pro-torture stance viewing of the counter-terrorism struggles, and is praising the armed conflict resolution through the irregular, out-lawed employment of an ‘ends justify the means’ special military groups of the US under-trained and over-financed army. This is the legacy that this film is bringing into this world, and whether the film-makers argue that they had different intentions through the production of this work, is a different matter

## Critic of Cinematography

all together, since the burden of proof is on them, and allow me to highlight that the evidence indicates differently.

Cinema beyond of being an art-form, a unique language of expression and a powerful form of statement, in America has been upgraded into a science, taught in universities, through a multidisciplinary curriculum involving technology, politics, sociology, psychology amongst many other. Undeniably, the right amount of money can get you a production beyond expectations; yet, the intentions or possible effect of a propagandistic creation should not be left unnoticed.

While in my view this is cinema in its worst, spreading hate, intolerance, injustice and racism. Although the freedom of expression is a principle I respect, however, it seems to me that the spreading of hate, racism, violence or injustice, do not seem to go well with art as it should be. On the other hand, the manipulation of the methods of art is a phenomenon as old as art it-self, and one should always hold a critical standpoint when facing with messages of that nature.

Freedom of speech and expression exists for all, and the dangers of being used for motives other than Justice and Fairness, cannot be tackled just yet. However, the spreading of ready-made opinions on matters of Justice, by offering injustice as the answer to achieving the former, should not be tolerated by critical thinkers.

The aesthetic distance of the viewer with the artwork is there for many reasons, one might be to retain the ability to filter the income information for the protection of wise conclusions, and not absurd ideological structures built upon the patriotic sentiment.

So by concluding, I have one advise for anyone wishes to view this film, and the viewers of Hollywood's cinema, please watch critically.

Thank you,  
Zoi Aliozi\*

\*[Dr. Zoi Aliozi is a human rights expert and activist, engaging amongst other topics with the critic of film. She organizes and participates in international film and art festivals.]