- Chapter 1 -

Interrogational torture and female protagonists in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*

Introduction

In 1991, Oliver Stone's film *JFK* received much criticism from journalists, historians, and politicians for his depiction of president John F. Kennedy's assassination. The director was accused of distorting events and fostering paranoia by suggesting that Kennedy's assassination was the result of a conspiracy that involved high-ranking officials in the US government (White 68). More importantly, the film was said to blur the distinction between fact and fiction, as Hayden White notes, by

> treating a historical event as if there were no limits on what could legitimately be said about it, and thereby bringing under question the very principle of objectivity on the basis of which one might discriminate between truth, on the one side, myth, ideology, illusion, and lie, on the other (68).

White's quote sums up the nature of the criticism that *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) also encountered twenty years later. Like *JFK* then, reviews of *Zero Dark Thirty* voiced the fear that people might take the fictional account, based on real events, as literal truth (e.g. Wolf; Kumar). In the case of *Zero Dark Thirty*, it was not the suggestion of conspiracy in the US government which stirred up debates, but rather the film's depiction of the CIA's use of interrogational torture; it was argued that torture was ostensibly successfully employed by the CIA in their hunt on Osama bin Laden, to the extent that the film had come to endorse torture methods (e.g. Žižek 2013; Greenwald; Mayer 2014).

The discussion concerning the blurring of fact and fiction is interesting but also problematic in light of cinema's role in appropriating historical events into fiction: it easily raises the

normative question of how this can or should be done.[16] Secondly, the discussion directs our attention to cinema's position and role as form of art and entertainment in our hyper-mediated society, in which the news, film, and social media permeate our daily existence (Hassler-Forest 2015). As an audio-visual representation, cinema employs an illusory form of realism that becomes a form of reality in its own right (Elsaesser 167): although the spectator realizes that the fictional world of the film is not the real world, she engages in a game of make-believe, based on a similarity, not on mimesis, with this fictional world (Hallam and Marchment 122). The film in turn uses various techniques and strategies to present a realistic a world as possible (ibid. xv). *JFK* and *Zero Dark Thirty* uphold this game with the spectator, yet the politically sensitive topics – Kennedy's assassination in the former and of political torture in the latter – preclude a completely passive acceptance of what is shown, as the viewer takes her own political and moral frames of reference into account. A film like *JFK* or *Zero Dark Thirty* thus becomes controversial when its audience suddenly becomes or is made aware of the ideological mechanisms behind the film's realism.

This chapter starts with this controversy in mind. In order to explain how *Zero Dark Thirty* evokes the overall sense that the film is a pro-torture narrative by 'mis-presenting' reality, it will investigate the techniques used to construct the film's fictional world and the impression created that this world borders on *the* reality. The focus will be on two particular aspects: firstly, the way in which torture is depicted and presented to the viewer by close-reading the torture scenes and secondly, the scenes' position within the narrative. It will be argued that a key reason for the film's political difficulty resides in the narrative's ambivalent and often contradictory messages concerning

[16] This discussion concerning narrative formats to 'tell' or 're-present' a historical episode is not new. In particular art works, literature, and films depicting aspects of the Holocaust have often been the subject of controversy and accused of distorting historical events and betraying the memory of those who perished by using offensive narrative formats and techniques. For two of such discussions see both Gruber and Visser on Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (*La Vita è Bella*, 1997) and Elsaesser on *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993).

the justification and effectiveness of torture, and in the characters' opaque moral agenda.

Apart from the criticism about the film's construction of realism, the debate about its endorsement of torture partially concerns the prominent position taken up by the film's protagonist Maya, a CIA agent associated with the torture carried out (Hasian; Cornell; Piotrowska). Discussed and evaluated predominantly in terms of her gender, the criticism regarding her character suggests an underlying issue with female protagonists in relation to political torture. The relations between Maya's character, position, and stance towards the use of torture will be explored through close-reading, in addition to the criticism directed towards her character.

In order to illustrate how the film's realism, an unequivocal political context, the framing of torture, and the intricate position of female characters therein are connected, comparisons will be made between *Zero Dark Thirty* and the film *Unthinkable* (Gregor Jordan, 2010), in which an exaggerated – and to the spectator, obvious – 'ticking bomb situation' is presented. Lastly, the ways in which the spectator is addressed and positioned by both films, and the extent to which the films inspire a critical spectatorship will be analysed.

1. *Zero Dark Torture* and the nature of interrogations

Zero Dark Thirty's plot centralizes the ten-year manhunt on Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and is set two years after the attacks on the Twin Towers. The first part of the narrative depicts the interrogation and torture of detainee Ammar (Reda Kateb), a follower of Osama bin Laden, by CIA agent Dan (Jason Clarke). The scenes are witnessed by CIA agent Maya (Jessica Chastain). The torture comprises three lengthy scenes, while the remainder of the plot is dominated by Maya's search for bin Laden. The scene starts *in medias res*. Ill-informed, the spectator learns in this early stage that detainee Ammar functioned as a messenger for crucial suspects and for the 9/11 hijackers.

The first shot frames a dark room, suddenly brightly lit as metal doors open and footsteps approach. A man (Dan) enters and walks into

the barely lit space of what looks like a silo or a spacious prison compartment. The camera shifts position to show that the man walks towards detainee Ammar, who focalised this first shot. Ammar stands on a blue mat, wears filthy white clothes, and is accompanied by three men. Behind Dan another figure (Maya) approaches in dark clothes with a dark bandit hat that obscures the face entirely. Dan halts close near Ammar's face and says, "I own you Ammar. You belong to me". A close-up of Ammar's face shows that he is heavily beaten and bloodied, and his eyes are averted to the ground. Dan continues, "Look at me", and Ammar reluctantly looks up. Suddenly Dan shouts and the three men next to Ammar start kicking him. Dan continues, "You don't look at me when I talk to you, I hurt you. When you step off this mat, I hurt you. When you lie to me, I hurt you. You don't look at me, I hurt you". Signalling Maya to come with him, Dan walks away from Ammar towards the door. The three men tie Ammar's hands up to ropes that hang down from the ceiling.

Learning that Ammar will never leave his prison again, Maya decides to leave her bandit hat off. Dan and Maya re-enter and the heavy metal door behind them closes. Ammar is still tied with the ropes in the middle of the silo. Again, Dan faces Ammar who, in close-up, averts his eyes. Dan tells him, "It is you and me bro. I want you to understand that I know you. That I have been studying and following you for a very long time. I could have had you killed in Kharadji, but I didn't, I let you live, so that you and I could talk". Ammar responds that when his hands are tied, he will not talk. Dan asks him, "Did you really think that when I got you I would be a nice fucking guy?" To which Ammar angrily replies, "You are a mid-level guy, you are a garbage man in the corporation, why should I respect you?" Dan responds facing him, "You are a moneyman, a paperboy, a disgrace to humanity. You and your uncle murdered three thousand innocent people". As the camera oscillates between close-ups of Dan and Ammar, Dan tells Ammar he has his name on a money transfer to a 9/11 hijacker, and that Ammar was caught with 150 kilograms of high explosives in his house. He therefore has no right to contest Dan.

Instead, Dan explains that he holds Ammar captive because he wants to interrogate him about the Saudi group's plans and whereabouts. Ammar is framed frontally to show his facial expressions and his body tied up with the ropes, and when Dan shows him a picture its content is obscured from the spectator's sight. Then in a side shot the two men face each in profile and Dan continues, "Ammar, I know you know this dude, just give me his e-mail and I will give you a blanket and some solid food". Ammar responds, "I have told you before, I won't talk to you". Dan eyes him for a few seconds, contemplating, then proclaims, "Have it your way". While walking away from Ammar to the back of the silo, Dan starts shouting and repeating, "If you lie to me, I hurt you" again, and grabs the blue mat behind Ammar. In the next shot Ammar vigorously tries to look over his shoulder, anticipating what will come next. Dan approaches with the mat, takes a wet towel from the side of the silo, moves quickly to Ammar, and suddenly pushes him down onto the mat. In close-up Dan and the men guarding in the silo struggle to hold Ammar down, who is shouting loudly and defending himself.

A close-up of Maya shows that she holds her hand close to her eyes, to hide her aversion to the situation. Dan tells her to grab a bucket with water but she does not initially hear him. Maya walks to the other side of the silo to get the bucket, and gives it to Dan. Because Ammar refuses to speak, Dan 'waterboards' him while shouting that he wants the e-mail addresses of the Saudi group. He asks Ammar when he has last seen bin Laden, but Ammar is unable to speak because his mouth is full of water. The camera cuts quickly between shots, alternating between Dan sitting on top of Ammar, and the perspective of Maya, who is barely able to look at the scene. Dan takes away the towel and tells Ammar, "This is what defeat looks like bro. Your Jihad is over". He gets off Ammar and tells the men to get Ammar, breathing heavily, up on his feet. Dan faces Ammar in close-up again and calmly tells him, "I think it's cool that you are strong and I respect it, I do. But in the end everybody breaks, bro. It's biology". He distances himself from Ammar towards the entrance and another shot shows Maya and Dan walking out.

The third scene of Ammar's interrogation takes place some time after the first two scenes. The door of the silo opens and as Dan and Maya walk in, loud heavy metal music permeates the space. Ammar is framed from behind, and when the heavy door opens Ammar bathes in sunlight. He is tied with the ropes, a dark figure with his arms up and hanging down, bending at his knees, like a crucified martyr. Two men with their faces obscured by bandit hats stand guard again. Dan walks to the left, switches on a light and switches off the loud music. A close-up of Ammar's face reveals it is more beaten and bloodied than last time. This shows Ammar's anticipating facial expressions, which are un-witnessed by Dan and Maya. In the meantime, Dan collects two chairs and positions them opposite each other and helps Ammar into a chair. In another shot Maya, again from her peripheral place, clutches her nose, presumably because of the stench released by Ammar's flighty body. As he takes a seat opposite Ammar, Dan hands him a bottle of orange juice and a brown paper bag with food in it that Ammar devours gratefully. His hands are still tied with the loosened ropes and a tear rolls down his cheek as he clutches the bottle tightly. Maya observes Ammar from the side.

Dan starts interrogating Ammar again and Dan and Ammar face each other in alternating close-ups. This time Ammar acknowledges that he knows the man Dan mentioned previously. Dan continues by asking who else is in his Saudi group and Ammar responds that he only handed them some money in cash, he does not know who they are. Maya rolls her eyes in disbelief and Dan slowly repeats his familiar phrase, "When you lie to me, I hurt you". He puts pressure on Ammar by asking, "Do you want the water again, or something else?" Ammar starts crying and begs Dan to stop his interrogations. When Dan asks him to give a name and Ammar responds he does not know, Dan suddenly stands up and kicks Ammar's chair out from under him. A re-establishing shot oversees the silo from the back. Dan stands behind Ammar and asks whether Ammar wants him to take off his pants for his female colleague to see. Dan takes Ammar's filthy white pants down in close-up Maya, seeing that Ammar has dirtied his pants, averts her eyes in disgust. A shot from behind shows Ammar in his crucified position

again, this time naked from the waist down. Dan walks out and tells Maya to stay behind.

Ammar looks at Maya and says, “Your friend is an animal. Please help me”. She approaches him from the side and coldly responds, “You can help yourself by being truthful”. Dan returns with a dog collar and attaches the collar to Ammar’s neck, who struggles to free himself. Dan says to Ammar, “There you go, you determine how I treat you”. He unties the exhausted Ammar, who collapses against him. Barely able to walk, Ammar falls down on his knees. Dan urges him to start crawling and walks beside him as if he is taking his dog for a walk. After a couple of meters Dan makes Ammar stop and shows him a big wooden box to the right against the wall, near Maya. He makes Ammar face the box and threatens to put him inside if he does not answer Dan’s question about the Saudi group’s plans. Ammar responds by whispering a day of the week. Dan urges him to speak up, but Ammar then starts whispering different days of the week. Irritated, Dan violently drags Ammar into the box, assisted by the two guards in the room. Ammar struggles and keeps on mentioning different days, this time shouting them in resistance. The men manage to put Ammar, who has no energy left, in the box that is barely big enough for him to fit. Dan’s face in close-up looks at Ammar. He gives Ammar another chance to give the right time and location. Ammar continues mentioning different days, now whispering again. The next shot moves from a close-up of Dan to one of Ammar: he is exhausted and can barely keep his eyes open. Dan closes the box and, as seen from Ammar’s point of view, the frame turns black. After this last ‘session’ with Ammar, Maya tricks Ammar into thinking he has given them information. Severely sleep-deprived, he cannot remember if this is the case, and complies instead.

The ‘urgency’ of Dan’s torture and extra-legal space

Dan’s main motivation for torturing Ammar is to get insight into the future plans of the Saudi group, connected to Osama bin Laden. Ammar proves valuable as a source of information, and in order to prevent further attacks by his organisation, he is abused and gradually broken in a series of carefully orchestrated torture. While Ammar refuses to

speak, attacks and suicide bombings (based on real events) occur between the torture scenes. This way of editing implies that Ammar's refusal to speak is causally connected to these attacks. Dan thus needs to out-smart and break Ammar before the Saudi group strikes again and this leads to a trial of strength between him and Ammar.

In the opening credits the film shows a black screen with audio recordings of people inside United Airlines Flight 93. This harrowing first shot refreshes the spectator's memory and suggests that America's trauma of 9/11, together with the Saudi group's specific whereabouts and activities, provide the motivation for Ammar's interrogational torture. These features suggest that the CIA deems a few casualties or violated bodies on the side of the terrorists as morally justifiable to help prevent further attacks. Whether Dan deems torture as legally or morally justifiable, however, remains unclear, since the film starts *in medias res*. Yet precisely because torture's justifiability is not further considered or reconsidered, Dan's interrogation seems a routine job within an operation that justifies its abusive interrogations in Arendtian terms,[17] within the parameters of the 'ticking bomb situation' in which an overall sense of urgency is ingrained (Marks 3; Farrell 82).

The infliction of torture is facilitated by moving it from moral and personal considerations to an amoral and extra-legal discursive space, in which legal exceptionalism is operative. Apart from the 'urgency' of determining the Saudi group's next move, the 'black site', an undisclosed location (Hopkins), endows Dan with the sheer ability to incarcerate Ammar and 'allows' for torture: the undisclosed space of the silo somewhere in Pakistan becomes an extra-legal 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005, 23), in which the threat for terrorist attacks

[17] As Hannah Arendt contends, under some conditions, violence, inspired by a short-term goal, such as a revolution or as self-defence, or in the face of an immanent threat, can never be legitimate, but it can be justified. The use of violence can thus be justifiable (related to an end that lies in the future) in moral, not necessarily in legal terms. Her analysis illustrates what motivates people to use brutal violence, while most theories on violence and torture stress its legal and moral parameters. Although *On Violence* can and should be situated within a historical framework and violence is not the same as political torture, Arendt's lucid distinction is not paradigmatically typical and provides a potent strategy for theorizing the motivation of, conditions surrounding, and implications of the use of political torture (44-49, 52).

renders jurisdiction and Ammar's civil and human rights obsolete.[18] Dan holds Ammar literally in the dark about his status, which is further underscored by Ammar's focalisation in the first few shots. When Dan enters, the room bathes in sunlight, but before this moment Ammar's focalisation presented his perspective as incarcerated in the blinded silo, which adds to the claustrophobic nature of the place. Dan's actions are carefully orchestrated and planned and the silo is equipped exactly for the purpose of holding and disorienting Ammar (of which the ropes and the wooden box are examples). Dan creates a situation in which Ammar is put into a position of "complete vulnerability and exposure" with Dan "in one of perfect control and inscrutability" (Sussman 7).

The 'role-play' structuring Dan's torture

Due to these characteristics of planning and orchestration, space not only becomes the facilitator of Ammar's torture, but also the stage for Dan's abusive role-play. 'Role-play' sounds an improperly theatrical way to describe such torture, yet as Jon McKenzie argues, torture can be analysed as having a plot, a dramatic unfolding, and even character development, or rather, "the decomposition of character and identity" (342-343).[19] The demarcated space lends itself well for 'performing' the scene of torture that sets the abuser and abused in antagonistic positions, in which Dan has 'scripted' the role-play and has assigned agencies and constraints.[20] Ammar is given the space to respond to

[18] For Giorgio Agamben (2005), the state of exception is often not an actual state, but 'illocalizable' or a 'threshold zone' that is neither internal nor external to the juridical order. Structured through exceptional jurisdiction rather than through space, his conceptualisation of this extra-juridical space of anomie is much theorized in relation to Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and similar spaces.

[19] Elaine Scarry has similarly argued that repeated acts of torture on display in rooms transform torture into "grotesque pieces of compensatory drama" (28). In a play, however, all parties involved know the script, yet in torture, in which the element of surprise is an important component (Rejali 2007, 360, 556), as Dan's torture also shows, the tortured does not.

[20] Although the role of the black site has been acknowledged in many studies that analyse the extra-legal aspects of torture, the function of this space as a 'stage' for torture in cinematic depictions has been somewhat overlooked. Recognising the importance of the use of space as extra-legal space as well as a stage adds to an understanding of the cinematic depiction of torture as an extra-legal, as well as an orchestrated or scripted, method.

Dan's questions and accusations and they engage in several dialogues in which they accuse each other of being the more loathsome. Ammar, however, has no chance of winning this role-play or dramatic unfolding; in order to break him, Dan conjoins and performs the characteristic roles of good cop/bad cop and rapidly switches from kindness to abuse. He gives Ammar food and water after starving him. He makes a claim to Ammar's rationality by arguing, "You determine how I treat you", and by saying, "I think it's cool that you are strong and I respect it, I do", only to exploit this dialogue and Ammar's responses in an effort to break him.

By calling Ammar a terrorist and murderer whose "Jihad is over" Ammar is positioned as inferior and the difference between Dan and Ammar is productively affirmed and repeatedly re-affirmed. Arjun Appadurai has argued that the logic of excessive violence is often motivated by the abuser's belief that the other's intrinsic inferiority has to be made visible and affirmed through torture. This suggests that those who are tortured are deemed inferior *prior* to their torture, and that, despite the motivation of interrogation, torture further ratifies this assumption (2006, 89; also see McKenzie 345). In this cinematic representation of torture Dan similarly makes Ammar's inferiority visible and consequently re-affirms his inferiority through torture, as if this makes his inferiority *more* visible to all parties present in the room. First appealing to Ammar's rationality and personality traits, these are consequently disavowed to show Ammar is not only inferior (which still implies inferior human), but subhuman: he is an animal. The torture not only proves Ammar's implied animality (he is held on a leash and attacks his food like an animal because he is being starved) but it simultaneously produces Ammar *as* an animal (a technique also used during the Abu Ghraib torture, see Olson 2014, 129). As such, affirmation of inferiority lays bare the explicit as well as implicit motivations for Ammar's torture; although interrogated for terrorist activities, Ammar's body becomes the site where signs of 'animal' are

made visible and re-affirmed, and his animality is in turn employed as a self-justifying strategy to torture.[21]

Although aimed at extracting information, Dan's interrogation thus increasingly gives rise to a punitive role-play.[22] Dan often brings his face close to Ammar to create a misleading sense of intimacy, which is stylistically established and reinforced through several medium close-ups of Dan and Ammar as they face each other in standing or sitting positions. Dan alternates this fake sense of confidentiality with circling around Ammar as he interrogates, like a predator on the verge of attacking his prey. More tangibly, Dan embarrasses Ammar when he pulls down Ammar's pants for his "female colleague" to see. By revealing Ammar's nudity to Maya, who covers her eyes in embarrassment and disgust, Dan stresses Ammar's position as a debased man by explicating the taboo to visible sexuality and nudity in Islamic culture and religion (McKenzie 344-347).

In three scenes or 'acts', Dan undoes Ammar's agency, by violently breaching his bodily integrity and by inflicting mental abuse by forcing him into confession, shame, and guilt.[23] More importantly, Dan forces Ammar to actively, yet involuntarily, cooperate in his *own* dehumanization, which is, as David Sussman has argued, a crucial element in the psychology of torture (4). The alternative use of kindness, rational dialogue and torture illustrates how he breaks Ammar with Ammar's involuntary yet active coercion.

---

[21] Kelly Oliver argues that the distinction between the Western philosophical concepts of man, humanity, and inhumanity on the one hand, and animal and animality on the other, have frequently been used to justify torture (2010, 271, 274-175).

[22] As Jeremy Wisnewski argues, interrogational torture is only one type and particular kind of torture, but often overlaps with other types of torture, such as punitive torture, which Dan's torture also shows (7). In addition, Scarry has noted that information is often credited as a just motivation for torture, but that it is hardly ever the only motivation (28). These theories are not about filmic torture, but, as Dan's method fuses interrogational with punitive torture, they prove a useful angle to analyze the representation of torture with.

[23] As Wisnewski (65) and Scarry (37) have argued, the undoing of agency is a crucial component of torture. Appadurai stresses in addition that the breaching of bodily integrity is inherent in every form of bodily abuse (1998, 917). In addition to Scarry's and Wisnewski's work, Appadurai's analysis of ethnic violence is useful in approaching cinematic torture.

In the light of the Abu Ghraib torture photos, Greta Olson pointed to the gendered nature of torture: not only are male victims animalized, they are feminized through sexual abuse, which positions 'animal-like' and 'feminine' on par (2009,136-139). Ammar's animalisation can also be seen as an enforced feminization: he is made 'prey' or a 'bitch' on Dan's leash (and less than a man) and is forced to undress himself in front of Maya (implicitly making him even less than a woman), which ratifies the disparity between the powerful and the weak (Olson 2014, 136). Maya's role in this is crucial as well as ambivalent: her gender helps effectuate Ammar's debasement, but her peripheral and witnessing position give the spectator an important clue in how to read these scenes of torture. I will argue, it is precisely her perspective and interaction with Ammar that emphasizes Dan's harsh character and methods.

Performing for an audience

This detailed analysis of the performative 'role-play' between Dan and Ammar is necessary to the spectator's perspective on Ammar's interrogation. Dan's torture is performed in front of Maya as a witnessing third party and as Dan's "female colleague". Maya's position as audience reaffirms the silo as a stage on which the torture is performed. The aspect of gender again becomes interesting; not only does Dan's role-play give rise to male empowerment and subordination, but Maya's current passive position also reaffirms a normative gender division of active males and passive females.

However, although Maya seems positioned as passive onlooker, her position in these scenes actively undermines Dan's self-evident dominance and the methods he uses for interrogating Ammar. Moreover, as I will explain shortly, Maya will move from witness to interrogator herself. In these scenes with Ammar, she refrains from touching Ammar or from intervening and holds herself aloof. Dan's role-play is dovetailed with medium close-ups of Maya's facial expressions and shot/reverse shots in which she displays disgust over the abuse. She frequently closes or covers her eyes and is barely able to hide her aversion. Aligned with Maya as a focalising third party and

'reader' of this scene, the spectator witnesses the debasing performance of torture through Maya's eyes. Close-ups, point of view shots and reaction shots are seen as important indicators of the character's 'psyche' and interiority (Dyer 1994, 133-136; Verstraten 2009, 90-92). Maya's focalisation encourages the spectator to identify with her standpoint and to subsequently also find the scene of torture embarrassing. Ammar is thus first debased by Dan's method and his embarrassment is then reinforced in the eyes of Maya.

This ratification of Ammar's inferior status by means of Maya's gaze paradoxically depicts Ammar as more human than the relentless and abusive Dan, despite Ammar's proven complicity in terrorist crimes. Through Maya's gaze, Ammar's abuse becomes unnecessarily outrageous and inhumane. Yet not only does her gaze revert the obvious logic of dominance and subordination, Ammar himself reverts this logic when he notices and recognises Maya's emotional response. He appeals to her by pleading, "Your friend is an animal. Please help me". To hide her emotional turbulence, Maya coldly responds, "You can help yourself by being truthful." Ammar's claim nonetheless recasts Dan's previously established logic of superior/dominance and inferior/subordination by asking which party is actually 'the animal'. In the first half of the film, Maya and Dan are the plot's two prominent characters (after which Dan leaves and Maya takes over), and so Ammar's remark does not only pertain to Dan, but questions the CIA's moral dominance as expressed through Dan. The remark, as well as Maya's perception of the abuse as harsh, establishes that the scene suddenly becomes humiliating and uncomfortable. Although the spectator was coerced to deem the terrorists of 9/11 and their accomplices, like Ammar, as dangerous and inferior animals, Ammar's remark allows Dan's moral superiority to be destabilized by his interrogational torture in the eyes of the spectator.

In addition to Ammar's plea, he is often aesthetically accentuated when the camera is located behind him. Ammar subsequently catches the sunlight coming from the opposite side each time Dan opens the door. Although filthy, his clothes are white, which contrasts with the dark clothes of Dan, Maya, and the guards. Tied down by the ropes, his

'crucified' position becomes central in the frame. Further, he is often framed in extreme close-up that pronounces his bloodied and swollen face and his facial expressions, ranging from anger, to exhaustion, to despair. Although in a disadvantaged position, through *mise-en-scene* (his position, clothing, the use of light) and cinematography (framing, close-up, focalisation) Ammar's situation is emphasized and inspires sympathy, while Dan's actions become increasingly disturbing.

Ammar's interrogation as 'torture lite'?

Zero Dark Thirty only seems to screen a limited amount of torture sessions: although Ammar's face is bloodied and beaten, we do not *see* Dan kick or punch him. These beatings presumably occur between the scenes that are presented, which means that either there are more scenes of Ammar's abuse than those that are screened, or that Ammar's beatings are carried out by someone other than Dan. The latter option is less likely, since Dan is the main interrogator. It seems an odd decision to not show beatings, but to instead accentuate waterboarding, the dog chain, Ammar's exposure to loud metal music, and food and sleep deprivation. These activities could be regarded as psychological torture, which is no less cruel or no less torture, as Wisnewski explains (4-5), but is often represented as being so. This decision can be explained in several ways.

Dan's torture could be seen as a form of 'torture lite', framed to accentuate the CIA's mild and humane methods, by making the torture seem more bearable and tolerable. Waterboarding is then presented as less harsh than actually kicking someone, because no blood flows or visible physical damage occurs. The impression of the CIA as humane is then used to stress the idea that a few casualties or violated bodies on the side of the terrorists is morally justifiable to help prevent further attacks. In this interpretation, Dan's psychological abuse seems an attempt to displace (and dispel) the moral weight of the torture from the torturer to the victim: he holds Ammar responsible for his own situation and current condition. Moreover, the effects of torture are not lasting; Ammar is broken, not necessarily or only by torturing him but by tricking him. Maya makes him believe he has provided information

while sleep-deprived, which is still torture but presented as 'torture lite'. Afterwards, the three are seated outside. Ammar is allowed to eat and smoke because he "earned it". By mistake, he gives them several other names and the nature of his previous whereabouts. He seems in good health, as the effects of torture on him are hardly perceptible.[24]

I want to pose two very practical reasons behind the framing of this ambivalent 'torture lite': Firstly, it allows Ammar to speak and walk despite gruelling torture, and his miraculously rapid recovery has narrative purposes. Secondly, omitting excessive beatings upholds the film's entertainment and commodity value.

Despite this way of framing torture, through Maya's gaze, the spectator is compelled to grasp the nature, extent, and gravity of Dan's torture. His method exceeds the Arendtian justifiability of torture to avert the next attack in a ticking bomb situation, because it is undercut by a punitive, dehumanizing component. Although motivated by necessity, the overruling harshness neutralizes the justifiability. These scenes already show the ambivalent messages emitted concerning the motivation, process of, and justification for torture, and, as I will explain shortly, its consequences in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Moving (along) with Maya: Interrogations

Zero Dark Thirty starts with Ammar's torture, but these scenes are only one segment in the narrative that constitutes the film's ambiguous messages in relation to the use of torture by the CIA. Maya functions as a female witness with whom the spectator's point of view is aligned and, with her, is subsequently coerced into considering Dan's torture methods as outrageous. When Dan decides to leave Pakistan to do "something normal for a change" – an abrupt decision – Maya replaces him as interrogator and role-player. Her perspective on torture becomes more ambivalent as she moves from abhorrence towards discovery that torture could be useful in finding terrorists. In short,

[24] Scarry argues that torture is language and voice destroying, during and for some time after the torture occurs (19, 33, 45-46, 50-51, 54). Taking into account the way in which Dan has tortured Ammar and the duration of his imprisonment, Ammar's rapid recovery is very unlikely.

Maya's personality and position in relation to torture becomes ambivalent, which, I will argue, mitigates the impression that she is actively involved in torture methods.

From Dan we learn that Maya "just came down the plane from Washington" and already "gets this guy" (Ammar). Initially unacquainted with the procedure of torture, Maya is forced to replace Dan as the interrogator of their CIA unit. The spectator witnesses how she grows increasingly vexed in her search for bin Laden, scrutinizing every lead she gathers. She obsessively examines film footage of hooded and cuffed detainees subjected to torture and their answers to questions posed. In addition, shots of interrogations of several individuals suggest that plenty of detainees were interrogated and abused in Maya's ten-year search for bin Laden. Affected by the death of several colleagues during the hunt for bin Laden, she consequently believes that she was "spared to finish the job".

In this way, Maya gradually transforms from someone who winces at the sight of abuse into a determined, autonomous interrogator and self-proclaimed "motherfucker" who is increasingly tempted to make the detainees speak at a certain cost. Her moral judgement seems to slide towards the conviction that torture is a necessary objective in finding bin Laden and other terrorists whom she, as she states, wants dead.

This conviction is suggested predominantly through Maya's actions, because her internal world remains largely opaque. Throughout the remainder of *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya's shot/reverse shots become less frequent and less intense, and her internal focalisation remains limited. The medium close-ups of her facial expressions shift from revealing abhorrence during Ammar's abuse, to annoyance and hostility. Whenever her colleagues and superiors think or act too slowly, she confronts them by marking daily on a glass wall the number of days they have refrained from acting upon a lead she provided. She gradually becomes a lonely and frustrated 'sleep-deprived fanatic' (Hasian 333) who keeps her colleagues, as well as the spectator, at arm's length.

Throughout the film, Maya's personality remains underexposed. The informational void regarding her character traits, background, and personal life is predominantly the effect of the compressed representation of the decade-long hunt for bin Laden and the plot's emphasis on action and intelligence gathering. Despite the occasional tough comment (Pakistan as "fucked up" and remarks about people she would like to kill), the spectator hardly knows anything about her. With only a few tools, the spectator has to distil Maya's subjective view of the situation.

Maya's new role as interrogator marks a transformation in her function as female witness into a protagonist whose braininess and wit are emphasized above her gender. This representation of her gender is one of crucial criticisms directed towards the film; although some take issue with the film's particular rendition of torture, a substantial part of this criticism pertains to Maya's problematically feminist character. What lies behind both this *filmic* depiction of Maya, as well as the *criticism* pertaining to her character, is, as I will argue, essentially a problematic association with a female agent in relation to torture methods.

Maya's problematic gender expression

Initially positioned as Dan's female colleague during the torture scenes, during her own interrogational and research activities her intelligence, rather than her gender, is emphasized. Although Maya has a feminine 'sculpted beauty' (Burgoyne, quoted in Piotrowska 153), the aspects of her character presented to the viewer accentuate her braininess, autonomy, and dogged purposefulness. She refuses sexual relations (she has no boyfriends and denies to her only female colleague Jessica that she would ever sleep with their male co-workers), and further makes herself as indistinct a woman as possible by giving up most of her feminine traits: she wears wigs and headscarves to cover her striking ginger hair when interrogating. These props are not appropriated for religious or cultural reasons, as she often enters public space without a headscarf. Her appearance in dark suits or bland

clothes distracts attention away from her body and erases any remarkable physical, feminine traits. In addition, only once or twice does Maya show signs of emotions: after an interrogation she takes off her wig and grasps for air in the lavatory.

The accent on wit and autonomy while neutralizing features associated with femininity (emotionality and dress) has led to praise as well as criticism. Michael Moore praised the film (in a dubious way) by calling it a "21st century chick flick", arguing that *Zero Dark Thirty* "is really about how an agency of mostly men are dismissive of a woman who is on the right path to finding bin Laden". It has similarly been argued that Maya becomes "gender neutral" (Kang) – neither explicitly male nor female. Others have stressed that this expression of Maya's gender is a dubious form of feminism, as the emphasis on her brain instead of her body suggests that she cannot have both in tandem. Marouf Hasian Jr., for instance, has argued that Maya's character combines the politics of radical feminism and liberal individualism to create a 'postfeminist' protagonist (323), which, as Rosalind Gill has argued, combines feminist as well as anti-feminist themes (152-154).[25] Hasian Jr. claims that this postfeminist depiction of Maya, with the accent on her braininess, is used to create the allusion of gendered equality in the CIA and to direct attention away from the fact that structural barriers are still in play in male-dominated organisations like the CIA; *Zero Dark Thirty*'s gendered narrative is thus only superficial.

Both these arguments, seeing Maya as the epitome of feminism and as incorporating strong anti-feminist features, hold weight. She is

[25] There is little agreement about what postfeminism entails and how it precisely relates to third-wave feminism. Rosalind Gill has contributed considerably to the discussion by arguing postfeminism is a 'sensibility', as a contemporary articulation of, or cultural mood regarding, gender in the media. Her definition hinges on the following features: "the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with and are structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to 'race' and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability – as well as gender" (149). As such, she argues, postfeminism constructs a suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, effectuated through a grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with neoliberalism (162).

not necessarily feminist, as the accent on braininess and wit assumes these traits cannot or are not supposed to occur alongside the expression of physical and mental traits deemed female, such as empathy, distress, and bodily curves.[26] This assumes braininess and wit are characteristically male traits. In Hollywood terms, however, the film presents an unconventional female lead, who, for once, is not the centre of attention for her female qualities and feminine physical appearance. Operative in the CIA, Maya predominantly encounters male colleagues and male detainees (Burgoyne 2014, 249). Covering her head and body seem a survival strategy that makes her less exposed and accessible to her male colleagues and detainees, thus allowing her to focus on her job. Either way, her gender expression is reduced to bare minimum while at work, which assumes there is no place for traits deemed female.

Furthermore, part of the criticism directed towards Maya relates to how her character garners support for torture methods. It is argued that her postfeminist character directs attention away from American exceptionalist torture policies (e.g. Hasian 323; Žižek 2013). By accentuating her feminist features, the spectator might almost forget that she becomes co-responsible for the violation of several human rights along the way. This argument does not thus claim that women as such cannot be brutes or be immoral, but it claims that a depiction of an ostensibly feminist character directs attention from her immoral practices by means of her feminism. This argument, however, overlooks its own share in the debate about postfeminism, for one could wonder why Dan's character was not attacked for his masculinity and, additionally, his association with torture.

In order to see how Maya's character is problematic for many viewers, I will draw a parallel between Maya and the female protagonist of *Homeland*, a series for which resemblance to the real operations of the CIA is also constantly explored and discussed by media critics and

[26] William Brown has argued that Maya lacks empathy, the result of a form of 'war autism'. Ironically, when a man like Dan displays a similar 'lack of empathy', he would not be described as being a war autist, but as a brute. Women, on the other hand, who display a similar lack of empathy, are for mysterious reasons deemed 'autistic'. See Brown's blog, http://wjrcbrown.wordpress.com/ (accessed 12 April 2015).

reviewers (e.g. Cogan and MacGaffin). *Homeland*'s moral grey zone with regards political decisions made to catch terrorists is embodied in the character of Carrie Mathison. Praised for her unapologetic hands-on attitude (e.g. Saner), the discussions surrounding Carrie's character are not related to her association with torture, but to her emotional instability (Rosenberg; Ryan). Her bipolar disorder is emphasized, and she is presented as a promiscuous, emotional, non-compliant yet honest and clever agent, which prove to be successful characteristics in the first two seasons. Although Carrie is also associated with torture (predominantly in the first season) and deadly drone attacks (in the fourth season),[27] her expressive face and sexual relations with colleagues (and suspects) construct her as a more conventional female protagonist with recognisable traits and actions the audience can relate to.

Whereas *Homeland* revolves around Carrie's intelligence work as well as her complex character, the underexposure of Maya's background, personality traits, and internal world position her as an impervious character. This informational void concerning her character can be seen to serve a function. Accentuating the traits of wittiness and toughness acquires support for her character and makes her more attractive to a broader audience. The move away from body and towards brain, and the fusion of feminist and anti-feminist themes, confronts both the normative eroticized female lead and the unstable and emotional intelligence agent (like *Homeland*'s Carrie).[28] Maya is

[27] In fact, torture rarely occurs in the first three seasons of *Homeland*. The CIA instigates two series of abuse; one of which is the interrogation of Nicholas Brody, the other of which is witnessed (but certainly not objected to) by Carrie on a recording. There is a series of flashbacks in which we see Nicholas Brody being tortured by Abu Nazir's men, and in the third season Brody is publically hanged by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. In comparison, *24*, with 67 torture scenes during the first 5 seasons, presents significantly more torture scenes (Mayer 2007).

[28] In her discussion of postfeminism as a sensibility, Gill notes that girls and women are addressed and regarded as the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships, responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects while simultaneously defending their own sexual reputations and men's self-esteem. This tendency is the result of a resurgence of the idea of natural sexual difference (151, 158). *Homeland*'s Carrie is not as such an entirely normative female lead, but her expressive emotional and sexual life make her more recognisable as a woman adhering to the norm than does Maya.

neither a tomboy nor a GI Jane (see Ridley Scott's film by the same name, 1997), who appropriates masculine traits and physical features such as shouting, swearing, short hair, or men's clothes. If normative female characters are expressive of their emotions and are sexual and desirable objects, Maya's gender-opaque character is more attractive to a broader – female as well as male – audience. She directs the spectator's attention towards plot and action, rather than to sex and psychological baggage or depth.

Against the denunciation of Maya's feminist role as garnering support for torture, Agnieszka Piotrowska has proposed that Maya is a contemporary Antigone. Maya's "inflexibility", her "monstrous" unfeminine and "raw" stubbornness, her sense of destiny ("I was spared to do the job") in relation to her mission resemble Sophocles' heroine. Piotrowska reads Maya through Lacan's view on Antigone and contends that Maya's actions are the constituents of a Lacanian ethical act (144-145). A beautiful woman, she soon loses her civilised behaviour to 'raw' determination, motivated by the traumatic episode of 9/11 and her own personal losses (146, 148).[29] Her perseverance in finding bin Laden carry Maya's mission beyond her own limits, and both women, Piotrowska argues, see their 'task' through to the bitter end, regardless of personal costs (143).[30]

In terms of character, Maya's inflexible determination and sense of destiny, as analysed above, resemble that of Antigone. Yet in terms of her situation and the morality of her actions, Maya's involvement in torture is incomparable to Antigone's burial of her dead brother. By upholding her own principles, Antigone's actions and perseverance show how the others, in particular Creon, are unjust and cruel. Maya also keeps to her principles, but these are morally ambiguous. She is complicit in inhuman and cruel acts while simultaneously seeming to believe that these acts are justifiable.

---

[29] See also Hassler-Forest for discussion of the self-evidence with which 'trauma' has been naturally associated with post-9/11 Hollywood cinema and regarded as an essential element of post-9/11 discourse (11).

[30] In Lacanian terms, this means that one does not give way to one's desires, for desire has (unlike the drive) an element of calculation. Piotrowska builds on Lacan's *Seminar VII* (1992).

Moreover, where Piotrowska solely focuses on Maya's "ethical act", she pushes aside the ambiguous role of torture in the film. More importantly, there seems to be a correlation between Maya's increased involvement with interrogations in the search for bin Laden and her transition from female witness to expressing problematic gender characteristics. Piotrowska argues that Maya's bodily fragility and beauty are opposed to her male colleagues' physical strength and ineptness (150). The confusion of beauty with the "monstrous" is what challenges the spectator in the twenty-first century, as it certainly must have done to Ancient Greek spectators of Antigone (152). Maya indeed confuses the beautiful with the monstrous, but she seems to repress her femininity while at work. When bin Laden is finally caught and killed after her years of obsessive search and astute thinking and operating, Maya is sent home on a giant airplane that is ordered just for her transition. She breaks down, which suggests she presented herself as tougher than she was. She has given everything for her search and, now the job is done, regains a recognisable and normative gender expression by conveying her troubles and fatigue. As such, she moves from a female, appalled witness during Ammar's abuse, to an obsessed agent who represses her femininity when interrogating, to a familiar female protagonist when the job is done.

This repression of her femininity, however, assumes two things: firstly, that one has a gender that can be repressed upon demand. Secondly, it assumes Maya can only be successful in her search for bin Laden when she represses or withdraws traits and physical features deemed female while at work. Rather than seeing Maya repressing features deemed female, thereby appropriating feminist and anti-feminist traits, Maya, as Piotrowska notes, can be seen to use up all her libidinal energies to find bin Laden, sublimating them into her work with no space for anything else (152). This is a psychoanalytical formulation for saying that Maya uses up all her energies to the point of nearly becoming burned-out: Maya loses herself in the job up to the point of losing a part of herself. However, what all these theories about Maya tend to push aside is the impression created that she might just be, like Dan, a harsh CIA-operative involved in the torture of suspects.

The arguments about Maya's character, position and gender all remain, ultimately, debatable and depend on the side or angle one occupies. Her ambivalent gender and her involvement in torture methods nonetheless explain the issues critics have with Maya. Interestingly however, although Maya supervises all interrogations after Dan left, she never physically touches or harms the detainees herself, an observation that has remained under-exposed so far in my analysis, as well as in debates surrounding the film's depictions of torture.

Maya's dissociation from torture

Before Dan leaves the black site, he warns Maya to be careful in governing and supervising the detainee interrogations, as she does not "want to be the last one holding a dog collar when the Oversight Committee comes". After the scenes with Ammar, torture's occurrence and harshness is predominantly suggested and mediated by the presence of hooded detainees on site and the film footage of interrogations Maya obsessively scrutinizes. Yet again, this suggests that CIA agents inflict torture as a routine method.

In the first torture scenes, it is Maya's tactic of bluffing that prompts Ammar to give information concerning important figures. Ammar finally breaks due to sleep deprivation and Dan's torture. In her position as interrogator, Maya again uses her wit and rhetoric to persuade, but lets her male colleagues inflict abuse on her behalf. Her connection to the suspects' bodies is established not through touch, but through voice and gaze, emphasized by her obsessive scrutiny of interrogation video footage. Maya's abstention from torture can be analysed in several ways.

Her refrainment from touching anyone, whether abusively or sexually, has the effect that a potential association with the female torturers at Abu Ghraib prison, despite Maya's supervision of all the interrogations, is precluded. Maya's character is a composite, based on several real female CIA operatives (Gritten 2013), but might also resonate with the female torturers in the Abu Ghraib prison (Cornell).

Her physical dissociation now complicates an association with these torturers.

Maya obviously benefits from the successful 'enhanced interrogation technique'. Refraining from engaging in physical violence herself, however, leaves her with conveniently clean hands. It is left ambiguous whether she supports the use of torture, and, in addition, abstains from carrying it out herself because physically doing it crosses her personal moral or emotional boundaries, or abstains from it because she believes others are more physically suited to the task. Not necessarily against torture as a method, as it appears to be effective somehow, Maya cannot or simply does not torture herself. In any case, by having her colleagues punch detainees for her, her own physical separation from the torture itself, coupled with her simultaneous disgust for and condescending attitude towards the detainees' poor mental and physical condition create a morally ambiguous position. She seems to realise that this type of abuse moves beyond the morally acceptable, but that, as Piotrowska argues, it is a necessary method to achieve the ethically-just capture of bin Laden.

Despite her clean hands, however, Robert Burgoyne argues that the effects of the interrogations wear on Maya's body and personality (2014, 252). The occasional grasping for air in the washroom and her hostile attitude towards everyone around her suggest that the interrogations are not carried out easily. Not only does Maya's own blind determination backfire, but so too does the violence she is co-responsible for. Dan similarly sees the detrimental effects of inflicting violence in his own body and functioning. After interrogating Ammar, Dan announces to Maya that he is leaving Pakistan. He is "tired", he says, of interrogating over a hundred detainees and "seeing them naked". His abrupt decision to leave Pakistan thus seems inspired by the effects of his own brutal interrogations, and his fatigue reinstates some of the humanness he, in the eyes of the spectator, had compromised while torturing Ammar.

Although Maya's interrogations are only screened shortly or partially, they suggest rigorous interrogations that are mentally and physically damaging for all parties involved. The effects of torture

wearing on her and Dan's bodies, and the way in which the interrogations and search burn up all her energy seem to propose that the spectator feel sorry for her and Dan, but the effects simultaneously make explicit the gruesomeness of torture inflicted during their search for bin Laden.[31]

The criticism directed towards *Zero Dark Thirty* is part of the more general concern that torturers increasingly consist of Western female and male protagonists or the 'heroes' of the narratives (David Danzig, project director at Human Rights First, quoted in Mayer 2007). At the same time, critics have particularly condemned Kathryn Bigelow for misusing her reputation as a feminist director who usually gives centre stage to empowered female protagonists (Tasker 421-422), yet who in this case presented a woman associated with the torture of Muslim men. Both Maya's ambivalent character as well as the criticism directed towards her gender suggest that the political sensitivity underlying *Zero Dark Thirty* is not only that of depicting political torture, but of dovetailing a female protagonist with political torture. This aligns with the observation that both Carrie Mathison and Maya are evaluated in various discussions in terms of their personality and gender, while, for instance, Jack Bauer from *24* (another TV-series covering similar War on Terror themes) and *Zero Dark Thirty*'s Dan are discussed not in terms of their masculinity, but in terms of specific political situations and the torture they inflict (Green; Mayer 2007).

Maya's character, position, and perspective are not the only ambivalent aspects of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture. Several scenes indicate a division between official statements concerning the extra-legality of torture and the individual characters' seeming endorsement, which further explains why the film might come across as supporting torture.

[31] *Zero Dark Thirty*'s title refers to military slang to describe night time, or a time after darkness has fallen (Hopkins). This 'darkness' this term refers to, can also be translated as indicating the 'darkness' of the operations carried out to find bin Laden.

Ambivalent messages concerning efficacy and justifiability

Shortly after Ammar leaves Pakistan, Dan visits a CIA superior – whom he finds on a carpet in his office praying in Arabic – to ask for more subsidies for the operation. The superior, called The Wolf, confirms they need to find Osama bin Laden soon, and that people "want to see a body". He stresses that they have to negotiate between accelerating the operation and being careful in their interrogations of detainees, especially after the pubic denunciation of the Abu Ghraib torture episode and the inhumane treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. This scene illustrates that Dan and Maya torture without any governmental Oversight Committee being informed of the abuse occurring during detainee interrogations, and that the unit operates autonomously. It is suggested that all agents are aware that what is inflicted on the detainees exceeds juridical limits, although it remains ambiguous whether they personally find it morally and legally unjust.

In only one scene is the use of torture explicitly denounced. Maya and some of her colleagues watch a news broadcast in which President Barack Obama proclaims that the United States does not use torture in their interrogations of potential suspects of terrorism: "I have said repeatedly that America doesn't torture and I'm gonna make sure that we don't torture. Those are part and parcel of an effort to regain America's moral stature in the world". This contradiction between the real news footage of Obama on the one hand, and the CIA's deeds in the film on the other poses the question of whether the government is uninformed about the CIA's activities with regard to the 'detainee program', or whether this broadcast reveals the masquerade the government upholds in order to convince the world of America's justice and correctness. In either case, the contradiction reveals that practising torture is officially (discursively) and legally (constitutionally) objectionable, but inflicted nonetheless.

This divide seems to have been created to separate the juridical unjustifiability of torture as a violation of basic human rights from the protagonists' subjective perspective on the efficacy of torture. Many critics have attacked the film for precisely this: screening the harshness and brutality of the CIA's interrogation program, while nevertheless

depicting torture as a necessary and fruitful, albeit repellent, method (Evans 359). Although the characters seem to endorse extra-juridical torture (Kumar), *Zero Dark Thirty* as a film does not. As Piotrowska argues, "it is not that Bigelow condones torture. She shows us what the institutional procedures have allowed". Moreover, Bigelow shows the hypocrisy behind the official governmental message: the message that "we don't torture", as Obama proclaims on television, while the film simultaneously shows the types of activities that the CIA is suspected to have done while looking for bin Laden.[32]

The impression that the characters do not seem to morally object to torture is the result of precisely this showing and not endorsing, or, merely torturing without explicitly condemning or at least debating it (Mendelson 2013a). The film is not only confined to the perspective of one protagonist, but also excludes any comment or discussion from a supporting or lead character about the enhanced interrogation techniques. As such, the film does not make use of 'moral characters': characters that spell out particular ideas and feelings for the spectator.[33] As Scott Mendelson notes, "Bigelow and Boal didn't spoon-feed their opinions to the audience in a way that made for easy digestion" (2013b).[34] Instead the film emphasizes the complex and conflicting relationship between official legislation and moral values (torture, in principle, is bad) and personal convictions (torture is justified when the situation requires it, but gruesome to inflict).

These ambivalences are not the only reason why the film comes across as endorsing the use of torture. The last two lines of inquiry into criticism of the film's alleged pro-torture stance pertain to the

[32] In the film *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007) this denial is made explicit and staged to indicate the hypocrisy of this statement. CIA analyst Douglas (Jake Gyllenhaal) is on location to assist in his "first torture" but later when he confronts his superior and senator (Meryl Streep) who ordered the suspect's torture, she replies that "The United States does not torture."

[33] Jane Mayer claims the film has no moral context at all, with which I disagree; the separation between official statements and individual behaviour draws attention to the discrepancy between law and morality.

[34] Even *24*, much criticized for its depiction of torture, stages side characters that occasionally question the torture used by Bauer and the agency he works for, arguing that it backfires, it is often used as a last resort but does not always work, and that innocent people are also tortured.

impression that the narrative is a truthful, near-journalistic rendition of real events, and to the way the film employs editing to suggest causality.

Based on real events: *Zero Dark Thirty*'s realism

Like Oliver Stone's *JFK*, mentioned above, *Zero Dark Thirty* is constructed along the lines of classical narration that makes use of causality, plausibility, linearity, character motivation, psychological realism, and compositional unity to construct conventional cinematic realism (Hallam and Marshment 13; see also Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 2-3, 13).[35] In addition to the principles of cinematic realism, the film's plot is based on a real historical event – the hunt for and death of Osama bin Laden. As Asbjørn Grønstad argues, when moulding historic events into a fictive rendition films always distort these events somehow (2008, 17-19, 92). This might seem evident, but as the reactions to *Zero Dark Thirty* indicate, the 'amount' of realism the film pursues is confusing in relation to the politically sensitive issues, based on real events, that the film presents.

As Evans notes, *Zero Dark Thirty* confusingly combines classical narration to construct cinematic realism with a quasi-journalistic approach to reconstruct a topical incident based on, as the film claims, first-hand accounts (355-356). The suggestion of the journalistic approach offended many reviewers, politicians, public officials, and documentary makers, who blamed Bigelow for misusing the journalistic format for such ideological purposes (e.g. Wolf). In response to the criticism, Bigelow claimed that she used this approach to transform first-hand accounts into a first-rate viewing experience (quoted in Filkins). In addition, Bigelow admits she felt obligated to present the

[35] There are many different forms and uses of realism in film. In film studies, classical Hollywood narration, which makes use of plausibility, causality, linearity, character motivation, psychological realism, and compositional unity, is seen as standard (Hallam and Marchment 13). Bordwell argues that in today's cinema these principles still apply, but films often make use of 'intensified continuity' with fast-paced, rapid editing (2002, 16). From classical narration many forms of realism – such as Italian neo-realism, British 'kitchen sink', estranging modernist-realist film – have deviated. What comes across as realistic is locally and historically specific and is, ultimately, as Hallam and Marshment for film, and Jakobson for literature have argued, a matter of make-believe and perception (Hallam and Marshment 122; Jakobson 24-25).

occurrence of torture during the actual search for bin Laden. Assuming that successful and unsuccessful torture did happen in the search for bin Laden she and Boal consequently rendered these methods visible (Gritten 2013).

Bigelow's statement indicates that the film does not purport to 'just' present cinematic realism to make the film probable and to draw the spectator into the illusion of realism, but that it aims for a referential reality: it purports to refer to *the* reality in the sense that video or journalistic media footage aim to, and not *a* reality (Houwen 51-52). For Bigelow, this claim seems to mean the power of cinema lies in what it can achieve as a medium, which is how it helps create a dramatic understanding of particular events, national identities, and relationships to others (Dodds 1621). For the spectator, however, the references to reality (first-hand accounts, real audio footage) give the impression that *Zero Dark Thirty*'s world comes close to the real events leading up to Osama bin Laden's capture. Bigelow's near-referential, journalistic method suggests that her film was more authentic to reality than similar films that combine fact and fiction, but that do not pretend to be journalistic attempts to show something like 'the truth' (Wolf).[36]

Hence, assuming that a journalistic approach was employed suggests that Bigelow's depiction of torture was a one-for-one referential copy of the interrogations used in real life, and that her ostensible depiction of fruitful torture was a reproduction of the fruitful torture employed by the CIA in real life. The assumption of efficacy in both cases was what most infuriated these critics about *Zero Dark Thirty*; they took issue with the *way in which* torture was portrayed, shrouded in a fake aura of journalism to depict it as a productive method, not necessarily *that it was* portrayed. In short, not only did *Zero Dark Thirty* cause offense for its protagonist's ambivalent gender expression and moral agenda, but also for the film's misleading sense of

[36] Of course, the various standpoints and positions of those criticizing the film's distortion of events together construct various perspectives on and interests in the bin Laden situation, and so 'the truth' about 'enhanced interrogation techniques' while looking for bin Laden is not homogenous in itself.

having a close, near-referential relationship to reality, thereby assuming that torture in reality was as fruitful as in the film.[37]

Editing for causality

The problem underlying *Zero Dark Thirty*'s rendering of the hunt for bin Laden is thus that the film purports to not represent, but rather present, the search as it took place in real life. Editing plays a crucial, yet confusing role in how such realism is created. I will give two particular examples: time lapses and perspective.

On of the principles of classical narration is causality: a goal has to be achieved, and each action is performed in order to reach it. *Zero Dark Thirty* employs such causality, but, as the duration of ten years in 'real life' is compressed into 157 minutes of screen time, the plot makes use of big time-lapses. After being tricked to believe he has provided information while sleep-deprived, Ammar is cooperative and gives Dan and Maya more names, one of which is Abu Ahmed, a personal courier of bin Laden's. The next scene is part of a new chapter titled 'Abu Ahmed'. Maya is seen scrutinizing film footage of interrogations, while searching for meaningful leads in relation to Abu Ahmed. Later, she meets her colleague Jessica in the kitchen and they discuss the possible financial motivations of bin Laden's network. In the next scene Maya has travelled to a black site in Gdansk, Poland, where she further interrogates detainees about Abu Ahmed's position in the network. Nothing indicates how much time has passed between these scenes.

As the beginning of the film is set two years after 9/11 but the total amount of time it takes the CIA to find bin Laden is ten years, that means there is a time-gap of eight years between the scenes in which Ammar is tortured and the raid on bin Laden's house; although these early scenes are crucial for Maya's realisation that Abu Ahmed is high

[37] Ironically, in *The Guardian* of 30 January 2013, readers take issue with the denunciation of *Zero Dark Thirty* as pro-torture. One of the readers feels offended by the presumption that viewers are not smart enough to see that a film is not reality, and moreover, to understand the ambivalent and complex moral questions raised by *Zero Dark Thirty*. Hayden White has similarly noted about *JFK* that the reviews assume that spectators cannot distinguish between reality (or history) and cinematic reality (69).

up in bin Laden's network, the scenes are not directly causally related to finding bin Laden's hiding place. Torture's fruitful instrumental nature is nonetheless suggested by this method of editing that presents actions and follow-ups as causally connected, although they might not necessarily be (see also Evans 359-360). In retrospect, *Zero Dark Thirty* thus seems to suggest that all the abusive interrogations were fruitful. As the film kick-starts with credits about the film's bearing on real events, after which real audio recordings of the passengers of United Airlines Flight 93 are incorporated. After this footage the torture scenes are presented, and as the film ends with bin Laden's death, this impression of fruitfulness lingers once the film has ended.

Moreover, the plot is focalised through Maya's single perspective and shows her specific research activities, not those of her colleagues. By only presenting the narrative through the perspective of one protagonist, Maya as a woman with an inflexible, narrow vision and obsession with finding bin Laden, the film's structure precludes looking at the situation from multiple sides.[38] In addition, not only is Maya not a 'moral character', she also never seems to make a mistake and her intuition is always right. Although torture as such might not provide crucial leads and information, in the end, bin Laden's compound is found thanks to Maya's years of hard work. Scott Mendelson has identified this way of editing, which in the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* pertains to the suggestion of neat causality and a single perspective, as facilitating or stimulating 'selected memory' (2013b) on the part of the spectator.[39]

[38] See also Evans, who takes issue with the film's lack of perspectives, because, as he argues, what fiction provides is not (only) the freedom to appropriate a real event into a fictionalized account in a certain way, but perspective (261-262, 370, 377). I argue that this monolithic view is not necessarily a fault in the film's structure, but that it inspires a critical attitude on the part of the spectator.

[39] Evans notes that there is hardly any evidence of the "practical, legal, moral failures" of the CIA Detention and Interrogation Program traceable in *Zero Dark Thirty*. It is ironic that since the publication of the CIA's Detention and Interrogation Program we know that the CIA did not obtain first clues about bin Laden's couriers' identities through torture of detainees (360). For my analysis, however, this argument, which compares the actual events with the depicted ones, is beside the point.

Critical spectatorship

Taking all aspects into account – Maya's ambivalent personality, position and gender, the contradictory messages about the use and efficacy of torture, the lack of 'moral characters', the assumption of a near-referential reality, and ambivalent editing – the use of torture as an interrogation method seems to be depicted in an evasive manner. As Žižek has argued, presenting ambivalent messages concerning the use of torture while deliberately continuing to depict it serves to normalize torture's use and to lower the spectator's moral judgement in an ingenious way (2014). Seeing depictions of torture thus means gradually growing accustomed to it, while leaving the spectator unobligated to feel guilty about torture as a method (Žižek 2015).

Žižek's argument raises questions about the role of the spectator, but also about how torture, if depicted, *should* be depicted. Should it for instance always be depicted in tandem with 'moral characters', or with a specific denunciation of its use in order to elucidate the film's 'intentions'? Such a discussion veers towards a normative prescription of representing political torture, but also, as Evans has noted, towards censorship (377, note 2 and see Bigelow). It is not the intention of this chapter or of this thesis to formulate such a normative approach. My aim is to close-read the film in order to show what caused people to react to it with such "extraordinary fury" (Piotrowska 143).

I want to argue that this lack of "spoon-feeding" opinions, as Mendelson discusses, has a dual effect. On the one hand, the 'selective memory' inspired by the film's use of causality and the references to real events and people facilitates a passive viewing attitude: Maya's obsessiveness and the actions undertaken by her are easy to follow and to digest (too easily, according to the critics). *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture thus creates the illusion of an impartial rendering while being manipulative at the same time: it refrains from providing explicit ideas about torture, but steers a perspective on torture methods through the sole character of Maya. Žižek's argument, in which he contends that the spectator's ethical standards are lowered when

watching depictions of torture, builds on the idea of such a passive recipient.

On the other hand, the ambivalences ingrained in editing and in the characters' moral agenda potentially activate a critical viewing attitude. The film inspires active making sense of and reflecting on perspective, ambiguities, and conflicting messages at play, in tandem with the spectator's own frames and ideas. As Piotrowska notes: "[Bigelow] makes us look to confront our passive acceptance of the world we live in" (149). When realising how editing is employed, it becomes easier to see that *Zero Dark Thirty* is a subjective view on a topical event in recent history, and the depiction of the CIA and torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* is not an implementation or projection of all factual information about the CIA's real activities during this period. The film thus facilitates such passivity, but also coerces the spectator to decide for herself: what does the film say about the justifiability and effectiveness of torture?

The significance of the way in which the film constructs its realism, of the female protagonist in relation to torture, the lack of various perspectives created by 'moral characters', and the way in which the spectator is addressed will further be demonstrated by juxtaposing *Zero Dark Thirty* to the film *Unthinkable*.

2. Ticking bombs and vivisectionist torture in *Unthinkable*

Unthinkable is a literal 'ticking bomb situation' and makes use of torture in order to extract the location of three nuclear bombs in three US cities: Los Angeles, New York, and Dallas. The film opens with an American Muslim man, Yusuf (Michael Sheen), who records a videotape in which he announces the existence and detonation time of the bombs. After his capture, FBI agent Helen (Carrie-Ann Moss) is brought to an abandoned school building, converted into a 'black site', where Yusuf is held and interrogated by the military in a small office in the school's gymnasium. Together with Helen, an independent and 'freelance' interrogator who calls himself 'H' (Samuel L. Jackson) is brought in to force Yusuf into confession. What becomes apparent in the first interaction between Helen, H, and the military is that H is skilled in or

trained to interrogate and to use violent measures, and therefore is protected by Helen's employer, the FBI. Helen, conversely, detests the violence used in the interrogations, which immediately heightens the tension between all parties.

Similar to Ammar's situation, Yusuf's rights are revoked, and H tells him he "no longer exists". The situation and 'exceptional space' are deemed classified and extra-legal (Agamben 2011, 46-54). When Helen protests against the presence of the military, she is told that the army has now gained special authority, also known as the 'Defense Authorization Act', in which "the president has the authority to use the armed forces to suppress any insurrection, on-lawful combination, or conspiracy" on home soil. H, however, is hired to take over Yusuf's interrogation from the military.

When H and Helen enter the gymnasium, they see Yusuf hanging from the office's ceiling with his arms up, hooded and his shirt removed. The office, lit by blue TL-lights, seems positioned and furnished specifically for interrogating Yusuf. A soldier sprays cold water onto Yusuf who does not respond to this treatment. Officially, H is not allowed to hit or strike Yusuf, but he is allowed to keep him awake, make use of intense noise, bright lights, and threats of violence – all "within operational parameters". With these parameters in mind, H enters the office, but instead of taking over from the soldier, he suddenly starts to violently beat the man. The nature of this act is illogical – he cannot beat Yusuf so starts beating the soldier – and disturbing as it suggests that H is accustomed to violence, yet has a tactic no one foresees or understands.

This is emphasized when H quickly lets go of the 'operational parameter' that prevents hitting the detainee. Willing to go as far as it takes to retrieve information, H makes Yusuf undergo brutal, vivisectionist torture. Before he starts, he asks Helen if she wants to assist him and watch Yusuf's reactions. Unsure of her function but either unwilling or incapable of refusing, Helen is positioned by H as a 'good cop' who communicates with Yusuf while H gradually breaks him. Helen asks the man who hired H about H's procedures, to which he responds, "I never know that. And the really great thing is, he doesn't

either". This suggests that bringing H in is the last resort as well as a risk: H's methods are morally and legally obscure, but the urgent situation requires decisiveness and rigorous interrogations.

H asks for his "regular equipment", enters the office and unties Yusuf from the ceiling. In the background, Helen follows his moves on a monitor. H and his assistant attach Yusuf to a chair and place his right hand on a table. When Yusuf does not respond to H's inquiries into the bombs' locations, H cuts off the tops of two of Yusuf's fingers in an explicit shot. Ignoring the 'no touch' rule, H is interrupted and removed from the office while shouting, "It is only a finger! Not even a whole finger!" Soon after, H is allowed to continue with his torture activities, because the clock ticks on and the threat of the nuclear bombs becomes urgent and precarious.

Like Dan in *Zero Dark Thirty*, H alternates torture with appealing to Yusuf's rationale, and their dialogue reveals that H holds Yusuf responsible for his own condition by stating that he "wanted" this. Not necessarily, or not only, interrogating Yusuf about the bombs, H communicates with Yusuf as a strategy to find his weak spots. Moreover, H frequently creates expectations by telling Yusuf and Helen about what he is going to do, so that all parties are informed and mentally prepared, only to refute these expectations seconds later. As such, he not only plays with the expectations of his fellow characters, but also with those of the spectator.

Unlike Dan, however, H uses brutal, often vivisectionist torture. He uses a plastic bag to cover Yusuf's head and then when he almost suffocates, punctures a whole in it. He grabs a small knife and slowly drives the knife into Yusuf's stomach. Several constitutive shots of the monitor show that H ties Yusuf with his arms to the ceiling again while he gives him electric shocks, and he once uses a drill in Yusuf's mouth. While doing so, H readily makes use of his audience, in the embodiment of Helen, the FBI, the military, and Yusuf, of his violent role-play. The black site in *Zero Dark Thirty* and the school gymnasium in *Unthinkable* are both extra-legal spaces as well as stages, with the gymnasium office functioning like a *mise-en-abyme*: another, smaller stage on which the 'play' of torture is enacted. Helen, the FBI, and military watch H and

Yusuf through the office windows or on the monitor placed in front of the office. The monitor often functions as the screen on which Helen and the spectator watch H's, mediated but no less explicit, torture. Although it is suggested that H does not script his 'role-play' in advance and acts impulsively, the prolonged sessions, H's use of tools and equipment, and the macabre overexposure of the TL-lights that are switched off when H decides to take breaks emphasize the theatrical nature of H's torture. Further, they suggest H's familiarity with similar scenes of violence.

Both Dan and H seem trained or skilled to torture and alternate a form of emotional detachment with engagement by means of dialogue. The crucial difference between *Unthinkable* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, however, is that H's methods seem inspired by covert sadism. Dan's abuse was coated in a veneer of 'decent' 'torture lite' and, we assume, prescribed by the CIA's enhanced interrogation program. It focussed on the debasing aspect, where H's torture emphasizes the experience of intense pain as a power strategy. Dan's torture was embarrassing and 'effeminizing'; it reduced Ammar to a less-than-a-woman and animal. Yusuf is not animalized and effeminized by means of a psychological game; H does not embarrass Yusuf in moral or sexual terms, and female agent Helen is not 'used' by H to incite shame in Yusuf. She is used to communicate and work Yusuf's weak spots. Rather than being dehumanized, the mutilation of Yusuf's body establishes a form of what Agamben has termed 'bare life' (1998, 8-12), devoid of his political rights, included in sovereign law through its very exclusion from it (which marks those who are 'banned' from sovereign law). Ammar's situation is similarly bereft of state-recognition, but he is also dehumanized.[40]

[40] Those who are reduced to bare life maintain their human life and humanness, yet they lose their political recognition and protection. This is not to say that those who are excluded from political rights are never dehumanized. Agamben has conceptualized the 'Muselmann', a concentration camp prisoner on the verge of perishing, as bereft of political rights as humanness (1999, 41-86). Ammar is dehumanized in the process or being tortured, yet regains his humanness when Maya tricked him into thinking he cooperated.

Three reasons for the preservation of Yusuf's humanness can be detected: firstly, Helen explicitly considers the moral responsibility the FBI and the military have towards him. She points out that although Yusuf's juridical rights are revoked, they still have a moral responsibility towards him as a human being.[41] Moreover, although he disapproves of Yusuf's actions, nothing implies that H considers Yusuf to be an inferior being. H's extreme measures and sarcasm suggest that, besides being committed to the well-being of civilization, H seems to use Yusuf as an experiment to investigate what effectively works as a strategy, and to live out a covert desire for vivisection. His torture seems designed to shock and sadism often overrules the interrogational aspect of H's torture. However, this shock and horror effect is implemented to ultimately effectuate Yusuf's breakdown and retrieve information. Although H's torture is vehemently different from Dan's approach, H's motivation for torturing Yusuf – extracting information – is essentially not. H's torture of Yusuf is not supposed to be, or look, entirely orchestrated, let alone rational, so as to retain the element of sudden, intense pain and surprise.[42]

Lastly, Yusuf himself manages to retain a firm grip on his wits and as such preserves his humanness. He accepts his fate, and is not afraid to be tortured. In perfect control of his own body and mind, he reveals absolutely nothing that might be useful to the FBI. It soon turns out that he has planned his capture and is in control of the situation much more than H and Helen assume. I will return to Yusuf's calculated game shortly.

Framing torture: Helen's perspective and 'moral characters'

The way in which H's torture is framed is crucial for comprehending the characters' various perspectives on its use. The camera constantly alternates between framing Helen, H, and Yusuf, which suggests these

[41] Essentially, Helen points out Agamben's distinction between the juridical subject and the ethical subject, to whom we maintain a responsibility and those who are recognised in social terms (2011, 52-53).

[42] Scarry points to the dual move that is made when inflicting intense pain, which is language-destroying, while interrogating a person and forcing someone into confession. Interrogation thus interacts with pain (28-29, 35-36).

characters have equal importance in the narrative. The way in which H circles around Yusuf resembles Dan's predator-like movements, and Yusuf's pivotal position is emphasized by means of overexposure, created by the TL-lights in the office, which reflect on his naked torso and his sweaty forehead.

Although all characters gain more or less equal importance as objects of focalisation, *Unthinkable*'s plot is presented to the spectator predominantly through Helen's perspective. The spectator is attached to her point of view shots and anxious, disturbed, or disgusted facial expressions, and as such the spectator becomes the witness of H's method through her eyes. Disturbed and shocked, Helen frequently leaves the scene of abuse to collect herself while Yusuf's off-screen screams of pain are heard in the background. Like Maya, she becomes a witness to torture, while, however, being forced to cooperate as 'good cop' and friendly assistant. She refuses to use violent measures and decides to convince Yusuf to provide information by talking to him. She grows more desperate as H's measures grow more extreme. As such, Helen gains a particular but crucial position as an onlooker of the scene of violence, but also as mediator between the scene and the spectator. She is explicitly profiled as H's moral antipode, and is constantly torn between desperation and horror.

Meanwhile, she addresses the problems she has with H's torture with her superior. While pointing to the extra-legal nature of the situation, she stresses torture's inefficacy, unreliability, and immorality. These objections, and the conversations between H and Yusuf, between Helen and Yusuf, and between H and Helen, turn the characters into 'moral characters'; their dialogue functions as a clear indicator of their respective stakes, positions, and ideas concerning the situation, as well as their diverging stances towards the use of torture. *Unthinkable*'s plot, however, reaches a tipping point when it becomes apparent that Yusuf has planned his captivity all along to demonstrate the FBI's moral bankruptcy by allowing extra-legal torture. This twist reverts the logic of torture as displayed so far.

Shifting perspectives: The 'unthinkable'

In order to verify that the nuclear bombs are not a hoax, Helen demands proof that the bombs are real. Yusuf first denies the bombs' existence but after some pressure gives Helen the locations of the nuclear material. One of these locations is actually a booby trap that activates a bomb in a shopping centre, killing 53 people. Infuriated by Yusuf's game with the FBI, Helen demands an explanation from Yusuf, who suddenly transforms into a cold, intimidating role-player himself. Emotional, Helen grabs a knife and threatens to stab Yusuf if he does not tell her where the other bombs are. The knife, pressured on his chest, leaves a trail of blood. H tells her to stop, but Yusuf starts shouting and encourages Helen to "Do it!" He continues,

> I love my country, you people crap on it. I love my religion, you people spit on it! … I let myself be caught, because I'm not a coward. I chose to meet my oppressors face to face. You call me a barbarian? Then what are you? What, you expect me to weep over fifty civilians? You people kill that number every day!

Yusuf continues shouting at Helen, who, shocked by his words and her own desire to use violence, withdraws the knife, looks at the object, and slowly walks out of the room with it.

This booby-trap indicates that Yusuf knew he would most likely break, but it also shows that he planned his game with the FBI from the start, tricking them into thinking they dominated the situation. A specialist in explosives and formerly active in the military's Delta Force as a bomb disposer, Yusuf has converted to Islam. It is assumed that he witnessed the FBI and military's violence on foreign soil and their use of torture to interrogate. His action thus seems inspired by his newfound religion and by retaliation. Theatrically exploiting the extra-juridical situation, he appropriates the role of martyr to make a point about the FBI's operations and torture methods.[43] Unlike Ammar's active yet

[43] Yusuf performs his self-proclaimed martyrdom not for his own followers or leaders, but for the FBI. As Andy Blunden explains, the presence of an audience is a prerequisite: religious and even secular martyrs need an audience to become martyrs,

involuntarily cooperation, Yusuf voluntarily cooperates and regains his agency and control, with which he destabilizes the FBI's interrogational approach. Yusuf responds to H's intimidation with his own form of intimidation, and with his rapid shifts between anger, laughter, and stoicism he comes to resemble the character of the Joker.[44]

Although the FBI and the military disapprove of his methods, H is asked to continue. Fearing that Yusuf "might not crack", H amplifies his torture to make him break and decides to use Yusuf's wife Jehan, also captured by the FBI, as leverage. Jehan has to convince Yusuf into revealing where the bombs are, or they will keep her detained. She is brought into the office on the premise that H will interrogate them both. With several military personnel present, H positions her on a chair right in front of Yusuf, who is partially covered with a blanket to hide his severed fingers. Jehan cries and asks H and Helen what they have done to Yusuf, while Yusuf is surprised and angry to see his wife there. H replies that this is exactly what Yusuf wanted and threatens to "cut a piece of Jehan". Helen objects and, panicking, urges him to put down the knife. H responds by shouting at Helen that "This is not about you! This is war, this is sacrifice". Helen orders the military to release Jehan and they help her get up. H then suddenly and quickly moves forward and cuts Jehan's throat with a big stroke. Yusuf panics and screams and while Helen covers her eyes in despair, H shouts to Helen, "There is no time! There is no time!" A shot on the monitor shows Jehan in black and white as she lies on the floor, eyes open and blood streaming from her throat. H is removed from the office, and in the next shot, he washes his hands and face and softly cries.

In a private conversation following Jehan's death, H and Helen, again on speaking terms, realise that Jehan's death has not produced the desired effect. H is given free space by Helen to "do what [he has] to do". He in turn tells Helen, "If you tell me to stop, I will", foreboding the

---

as the audience interprets the martyr's message, and assigns him the role of martyr. Blunden uses a Marxist-poststructuralist approach to illustrate that the role of the audience emphasizes that the martyr is constituted in social discourse.

[44] In the Batman series (the comic books as well as film adaptions) the Joker is Batman's opponent, best known for his painted perpetual grimace and psychopathic behaviour.

rigorous methods he is about to employ next, but also leaving the final decision in Helen's hands. The previous scene suggests that he is capable of the 'unthinkable', and killing Jehan will prove to be a strategic yet penultimate piece in H's puzzle. In a final effort, H sets out to do the unthinkable: he orders Yusuf's two young children to be brought into the office and threatens to assassinate them. H assures Helen that he will not kill the children but that Yusuf has to *believe* that he will and that he is capable of doing anything; if she believes that he will, then so will Yusuf.

H places a hooded Yusuf in front of the office in which the children appear and he switches on the bright TL-lights. He removes Yusuf's hood, and as expected, the prospect of becoming the witness to his children's murder drives Yusuf insane and he provides the locations of bombs in New York, Los Angeles, and Dallas. After Yusuf's confession, however, H is not convinced that Yusuf told the truth. His previous game with him and Helen indicated that Yusuf could be withholding information. In addition, based on the amount of nuclear material Yusuf claimed he possessed in the video recording, H suspects there are more hidden bombs. H orders the children be returned to the office to put more pressure on Yusuf, but Helen this time believes H will truly harm them and refuses to cooperate. She would rather the bombs explode than facilitate the cold-blooded killing of Yusuf's children. H concedes to her ultimate decision, as he promised he would, and unties Yusuf. Disagreeing about how to proceed, an FBI superior, fearing a nuclear explosion, draws a gun, aims it at H and forces him to continue his interrogation. The situation becomes uncontrollable when Yusuf, untied from the chair, manages to obtain the gun. He asks Helen to look after his children, and shoots himself in the head.

In a final scene, Helen takes pity with Yusuf's children and hugs them while the FBI finds the three bombs. As H expected, Yusuf, anticipating his own breakdown, had indeed set up an elaborate plan: after the three bombs have been defused, the camera slowly tilts to the right where another bomb is hidden from sight. The camera zooms in

on the bomb that is ticking down from ten seconds, and as it reaches zero the shot cuts to a black screen.[45]

The hyperbole of 'the unthinkable'

Compared to *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*'s structure is more straightforward and employs a "rigorous chain of cause and effect" (Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 16); each motivation and action causally leads to the next within a short time-span and it is clear which actions are the results of which situations and vice versa. As 'moral characters', Yusuf, H, and Helen can be seen to wear different 'masks' in agreement with their explicit views – revealed through rhetoric and actions – on morality, law, and religion.[46] The FBI and military function as an audience for which the interplay between Helen, H, and Yusuf is performed, who frequently express their own take on the situation. The strict causality and moral characters make it easy to follow each action, deliberation and the twist in plot, effectuated by Yusuf, which subverts Helen and H's initial advantage and becomes crucial to their changing perspectives and actions.

More so than in *Zero Dark Thirty*, torture is the plot's central theme; although the principal instigator of events is the ticking bomb situation, H's torture steers action, debate, and emotion. Torture is not only intensified by H after Yusuf's motivations become apparent, but stylistically exaggerated to explicate the way in which these circumstances compromise, in particular Helen's, moral standpoints. The rigorous causality, the graphic, vivisectionist torture, the lengthy moral debates carried out in tandem with torture, the plot twist illustrating Yusuf's plan to be tortured to make a statement about torture methods, and the literal ticking bombs of the ticking bomb situation make the plot hyperbolic.

---

[45] This last scene is only in an extended version of the film. The regular cut omits this final scene and ends with Helen hugging the children.

[46] Agamben's use of the 'mask' is taken from classical theatre where a mask was used to make each player recognisable as a particular figure. Agamben appropriates this use to conceptualize how in modern society humans are recognised in social terms, as well as before the law (and the Geneva Convention) (2011, 46-54).

Further, unlike *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable* does not refer to real events or people. The film's setting is not the international stage in the Middle East, but the 'stage' of the abandoned school building on home soil. Apart from mentioning the cities in which Yusuf has planted the bombs, contextual information is hardly provided. Although *Unthinkable* evokes the post-9/11 fear and threat of terrorist attacks, the spectacle of the torture scenes and the exaggerated ticking bomb situation drive the film's plot beyond probable and credible. In this case, the audience realizes that the fictional world is not the real world, but is a constructed reality, and that the fictional world could only potentially exist in the real world.

Unthinkable couples suspense over whether civilization will be secured with the anxious atmosphere evoked by the three protagonists' mutual tensions. As such, torture is partially the result of the protagonists' psychological game, and not the instigator of it, as is Dan's abuse. The intensity of the torture scenes, I argue, incites the *necessity* of accompanying dialogue and argumentation, and stands in the service of the protagonists' psychological games. Conversely, the serious debate requires a conceptualisation of torture's conditions (an actual ticking bombs scenario) and a visualisation of what torture does to its victims. In this sense, the continuous debate 'allows' such brutal torture to be explicitly framed as it occurs alongside 'moral characters'. The 'moral characters' in turn comment on the use of torture to achieve the ultimate goal of finding the bombs.

H's graphic torture is therefore not, or not only, a form of 'torture porn', as some have argued (Jones 7). Although the film depicts excessive and graphic violence and bodily ecstasy – Yusuf's body in spasms and beside himself with pain (Williams 4) – there are several reasons why his torture is not torture porn, of which the most important one pertains to the fact that H's torture has a function:[47] the

[47] There is definitely something to say for *Unthinkable*'s 'torture porn' label. Steve Jones analyses torture porn as predominantly a) belonging to the horror genre, and b) staged where the victim is imprisoned in confined spaces (and in a limited diegetic space), and subjected to psychological and physical suffering. Additionally, there is cruelty and bloodshed, and the deliberate upsetting of viewers with graphic gore and the calculated infliction of pain (15-16). Jones analyses how the torture porn genre

instrumental nature of torture to deter an attack in the near future, as analysed in Arendtian terms, is emphasized as well as debated.

The characters take desperate measures, but a bomb goes off nonetheless. This does not mean, however, that torture itself was useless. Yusuf realized he might break and had taken precautionary measures by planting at least one extra bomb. By killing himself with the gun, he prevented H from extracting the information concerning the hidden nuclear material. In addition, Yusuf's detention and interrogation were not based on suspected involvement, but were the result of Yusuf's own video messages proclaiming his intentions. Although H's torture proved fruitful to a certain degree, Yusuf's game draws attention to what he sees as the FBI's hypocritical way of thinking: they are disturbed when fifty people are killed in a shopping centre, despite the fact that 'they', or the US military, kill that many people daily in the Middle East. Lives in the Middle East are not considered important, he argues, or are not considered as inherently valuable, as are those recognisable to 'us', or Westerners.[48]

In its brutality, explicitness, and exaggeration *Unthinkable* playfully and critically reflects on the use of torture as an extra-legal method, and on torture's logic and limits as a mode of extracting information. The film is reminiscent of films like *Das Experiment* (Olivier Hirschbiegel, 2001) and its American remake *The Experiment* (Paul Scheuring, 2010), which explore human behaviour in a precarious situation and illustrate how far people are willing to go to do an unthinkable violent act. Like *Das Experiment*/*The Experiment*, *Unthinkable* is unburdened by any direct reference to a political situation, which allows the film to experiment with the aesthetics, conditions, motivations, and logic of politically motivated torture. While *Zero Dark Thirty* was criticized for depicting 'torture lite' in order to

---

intersects with thrillers like *Unthinkable*. There is, however, a specific political context and a specific function underlying Yusuf's torture that exceeds the mere calculated infliction of pain and suffering. Further, in Linda Williams' analysis of horror and its pornographic violence, the victims are almost exclusively women, who are both victimized and sexualized (6). Yusuf, as analysed, is neither.

[48] Yusuf's comment is conceptually similar to Judith Butler analysis of 'frameable lives' (2004b, 19-49).

present justifiable torture methods, *Unthinkable* is, ironically, a sensitive topic in Hollywood for its graphic depiction of torture – rather than for its politically sensitive context and envisaged truthfulness to reality.

The dovetailing of graphic violence and 'moral characters' suggests a relation between an unequivocal political context and the type of torture that is screened in War on Terror films: the more referential and authentic the political context, like in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the less brutal the violence that is framed. For now, it is too early to jump to conclusions, and in the course of this study I will return to this premise.

Helen's gendered character and position

Although Helen, H, and Yusuf wear 'masks' that explicate their respective viewpoints, Yusuf's game inaugurates a change in H and Helen. Similar to Maya, Helen undergoes a transformation from witness to active and involved agent. Torn between H's uncompromising method and her anti-torture beliefs, Helen starts weighing Yusuf's wellbeing over that of millions of others. Drawn into the deadlock of the situation, she transforms from friendly interrogator to desperate, albeit reluctant, endorser of H's gruesome torture. Considering the assassination of Jehan and the children as beyond tolerable, she nonetheless encourages H to continue with his torture of Yusuf when the situation becomes critical. In the final scenes, Helen regains her role as moral compass when she refuses to cooperate in H's act with the children. When Yusuf kills himself, a shot frames Helen with his two children on either side, holding them close. She becomes a motherly figure, guarding the world from Yusuf's nuclear bombs and the children from H's torture.

Helen, however, never ceases to be a conventional female protagonist. Similar to Maya, little about Helen's character and personal background is revealed, yet Helen's explicit moral objections and her constant struggle between her own conscience and the reality of the situation nonetheless present her as a character the spectator can easily identify with. The only woman present, she is also the only one to

explicitly denounce torture, and also the only one who expresses her emotions and doubts. Neither of her male colleagues displays such turbulence, nor has a problem with torture *per se*, but rather disagrees with H's outrageous method. Although tempted to use the knife on Yusuf, Helen's own reaction frightens and shocks her, underscoring her role as moral compass.

Helen proves to be a more conventional female protagonist than *Homeland*'s Carrie. Carrie neither objects to torture, nor to collateral damage through the use of drones, and with her combination of emotional instability, harshness and shrewdness, she adopts not only unbalanced, but at times even immoral behaviour. This behaviour however, is more readily forgotten because Carrie's round and complex character makes her more relatable to the viewer. Moreover, *Homeland*, like *Unthinkable*, makes use of 'moral characters' that illustrate standpoints on both sides. These standpoints reveal the hypocrisy of the US government, and together construct a moral grey zone that is condensed in Carrie.

Where Carrie and, in the same vein, Helen allows for emotional engagement, Maya's impervious character and ambivalent position are harder to place and process. While Helen expresses her doubts about torture methods and steers the spectator into sharing a similar opinion, Maya's single perspective and obsessive behaviour underscore *Zero Dark Thirty*'s imperialist hunt for bin Laden in which torture is seemingly presented as a justified method. At the same time her opaque character leaves a moral assessment of the situation on the spectator's plate. The debates surrounding the film's depiction of torture indicate that both positions (the film as justifying torture and as problematizing its use) can be defended.

Interestingly, where Carrie (in terms of emotional complexity and unethical decisions) and Maya (in terms of her ambivalent gender and opaque morality) inspired criticism in relation to their personalities, Helen has not. This, I want to argue, is for three reasons: Helen's character, as explained, is a more normatively gendered one, which makes her classifiable. Secondly, the torture depicted is exaggerated yet substantiated with moral debates, which makes Helen's

stance regarding torture clear. Thirdly, due to the film's graphic content, *Unthinkable* was released only on DVD and therefore its circulation, and reviews, were limited.[49]

Zero Dark Thirty, *Unthinkable*, *Homeland* – and recently, the release of *Camp X-Ray* (Peter Sattler 2014), which follows on the torture controversies evoked by *24*, *Homeland* and *Zero Dark Thirty*[50] – illustrate that within the debate about depictions of torture in series and feature films, hides a more structural one concerning the place of female characters and the expression of their gender. The particular type of criticism directed towards female guards and agents depends on the connection between their association with torture, and the extent to which they clarify their position regarding its use through (emotional or rational) statements and clear facial expressions.

Why this preoccupation with the gender and feminism of these characters? John Belton (165-171) and Ralph Donald and Karen MacDonald's comprehensive study *Women in War Films: From Helpless Heroine to G.I. Jane* have pointed to the absence of female protagonists in war films. Unlike male protagonists as the instigators or subjects of brutal violence, the specific *absence* of women in war films, and in extension, in War on Terror films, makes their rare appearance in leading parts more likely to be the subject of criticism. When they do appear in Hollywood cinema and are given centre stage, women are seen as figureheads for a female audience and discussed in terms of their gender and feminism.[51] Or, when they appear as side characters,

[49] Apparently, due to its graphic content, no distributor dared to release this film in theatres. Nonetheless, the film seems to have gained something of a cult status (Eggert). For box office details see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0914863/business

[50] *Camp X-Ray* presents the blossoming friendship between a young guard (Kristen Stewart) and detainee Ali (Peyman Moaadi) in Guantanamo Bay's section Camp X-Ray. Although not based on real events, the film is set in a real prison, known for its extra-legal and inhuman treatment of detainees. Director Sattler, however, diminishes the role of torture to an absolute minimum and instead focuses on the daily activities of guards and detainees. The omission of torture leaves space to explore Amy's position as female guard in a male-dominated world.

[51] Gill points to a new, postfeminist sensibility in media culture, of surveillance of other women's bodies (but not of men's) and self-surveillance of one's own female body, which is also performed with comparison to other female bodies. Women's bodies are evaluated and scrutinized by women as well as men, and are always at risk of "failing" (149). This shift from an external, male, judging gaze to a narcissistic gaze

they are regarded as desirable, heterosexual objects, which makes them easy targets for criticism in terms of their gender (Berlatsky).[52] Like women, male characters react differently to witnessing or inflicting torture, but because they outnumber their female counterparts by far, these internal differences draw less attention. In the following chapters, I will explain how the predominantly male protagonists react differently to torturing and to being tortured.

H and Yusuf's 'masks'

Although *Unthinkable*'s plot is predominantly focalised through Helen's perspective, she is not, like Maya, the only identification figure. In order to convince Yusuf that he is capable of exercising extreme measures, H plays the role of an unrelenting and inhumane person. While Yusuf refrains from speaking, H gradually transforms from darkly funny into a human who reveals his emotions. His soft crying after killing Jehan and his growing desperation indicate that he seems to enjoy his job less than initially presented and his power slowly deflates. Moreover, in a private conversation with Helen he reveals that his job and his protection by the FBI render him a prisoner. He lives in a safe house with his wife, a survivor of Bosnian war crimes who lost her entire family. Once his dark humour subsides, a tragic figure becomes visible. Dressed in a sweater and reading glasses, torture has become a normal job, yet one that is all-consuming and holds him captive. It is suggested that this job will bring about his downfall, not necessarily through poor

---

that both self-polices and polices the bodies of other women, Gill argues, "represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification" (151-152).

[52] This status of women as desirable objects was investigated in psychoanalytical terms by Laura Mulvey in 1975. Although Hollywood cinema has since become female-oriented, as Gill notes in her study on postfeminism, this has not necessarily occurred in a feminist manner. In the male-dominated genres such as war film or action film, women, due to the small number of female leads, can still be seen to function as identification figures (and the object of scrutiny by women), or as sexual objects. This tendency is underscored by those discussing Maya and Carrie in terms of their gender, but also by Noah Berlatsky's recent article on the superhero genre: Berlatsky specifically points to both male actors, as well as the audience, tending to evaluate (or 'slut-shame') the rare female characters in action or superhero films predominantly in terms of their gender.

judgement or error, but because Yusuf's careful preparations are beyond his control.

The spectator might associate Samuel L. Jackson's character of H with the actor's performances in Quentin Tarantino films (including *Pulp Fiction*, *True Romance*, *Jackie Brown*, *Kill Bill, Inglourious Basterds*, *Django Unchained*), and in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* and *Shaft*. Having seen – any of – Jackson's other performances affects how the spectator views his character in *Unthinkable* (see Dyer 2004, 4, 7-8).[53] Jackson fuses his infamous dark humour, wittiness, and exaggerated understatements with the role of political torturer in a ticking bomb situation, and H's gruesome and often sadistic violence, with his sarcastic remarks, incite both horror and laughter (see also Gormley 11). Jackson's other on-screen appearances and the hyperbolic nature of the ticking bomb mitigate *Unthinkable*'s political seriousness.

Where H reverts the image of the stoic and unrelenting CIA-operative Dan in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Yusuf's conversion to Islam subverts the stereotypical image of the terrorist as an Arab. The fact that Yusuf is a American-born white man, and his torturer Afro-American, debunks the trope of the 'evil Muslim terrorist' and points to the hegemony of white protagonists in similar 'ticking bomb with terrorists' scenarios like that of *Zero Dark Thirty*. Not only is Yusuf white, he manages to acquire a certain amount of sympathy for his motivations as well as disgust for his calculated psychological game. As Scott Brooks formulates in his review of *Unthinkable*, Yusuf is "a maniacal psychopath one minute, and a loving family man the next. He is a sadistic animal and yet has a human side".

More importantly, although converted to Islam, Yusuf used to be one of 'us' Westerners.[54] Where *Zero Dark Thirty* presented the torturer as 'us', *Unthinkable* shows that both the torturer and the 'terrorist' are

[53] Carrie-Anne Moss, who had her breakthrough in *The Matrix* film series, has a less consistent screen image. Jackson has performed innumerable other roles, particularly in superhero films and the new *Star Wars* trilogy, but this body of (predominantly Tarantino) films defines the spectator's perception of his *Unthinkable* role, in which aspects of these other performances appear.

[54] Throughout this thesis, when I use the term 'Western audience' or 'Western viewer' I assume a non-Muslim, normatively white audience.

Western and that terrorism is inflicted by 'our' own people. Moreover, like Ammar, Yusuf reverts the question of who is the 'animal' by asking Helen, "You call me a barbarian. Then what are you?" With this question Yusuf recasts the connotation of the term 'barbarian' as foreigner and as wholly uncivilized (Boletsi 8-9).[55] The film thus self-reflexively confronts the spectator with 'the beast within' (Olson 2014, 139) and with our degradation to the level of the 'barbarians' we both deplore and torture.

Lastly, by stating that the FBI, Helen, H, their colleagues, and implicitly the United States, do not mourn fifty casualties in the Middle East, but find 'recognisable' casualties in their own shopping centre incomprehensible and distressing, Yusuf highlights the hypocrisy behind Americans being perceived in the West as more intelligible and grievable than non-Westerners. As such, *Unthinkable* not only, like *Zero Dark Thirty*, shows the voids in America's legal system, but also re-evaluates the connotations surrounding 'barbarian' and the self-evidence with which American narratives have appropriated a moralistic and patriotic attitude spurred by the aftermath of 9/11.

Horror and morality: The affected spectator

The debate surrounding the legality and effectiveness of torture in *Unthinkable* effectuates that the spectator is constantly lurched back and forth between the protagonists' rhetoric and violent interplay. The spectator has to decide which man is more evil: H as a seasoned, ostensibly inhuman torturer, or Yusuf who has resolved to extreme measures to make a point about the FBI's torture methods. Both acts are, in a sense, 'unthinkable'. *Unthinkable* explicates its moral messages through, especially, Helen's character and her perspective on H and Yusuf. The critical reflection by the spectator on all sides of the moral debate only lasts a short while. This critical reflection does not have many facets to it but is, in a sense, spelled out or 'spoon-fed' through

[55] Maria Boletsi inquires into the concept of barbarism and the figure of the barbarian in modern and contemporary works of literature, art, and theory. She argues that after 9/11 the term 'barbarism' was newly appropriated yet still opposed to 'civilized', but also shows how art and literature can recast the negative connotations surrounding these concepts of 'barbarian' and 'barbarism' (1-17).

Helen's decisions and actions. Moreover, the film extends its moral question – can we mutilate a person to save millions? – into a hyperbolic spectacle, which therefore makes it a hypothetical one that will most likely be forgotten by the viewer once the film has ended.

Although Helen's clear perspective on the case facilitates a judgement by the spectator, this does not mean the spectator is rendered completely passive. As Devin McKinney notes, strong violence itself works on the mind "by refusing it glib comfort and immediate resolutions" (100). More so than *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable* appeals to and affects the spectator physically and emotionally, and incites a form of emotional charge – shock, horror, laughter, and relief – several times throughout. Watching *Unthinkable* is often an unpleasant activity; confronted with a discomforting proximity to Yusuf's violated body and H's perverse mutilations, the viewer is frequently urged to look away or close her eyes. This emotional response and Helen's moral deadlock forge an awareness by the spectator of herself as a viewing subject.[56] This position does not, however, necessarily lead to critical reflection concerning one's own moral standpoint.

H's dark humour, the moral polemic, and the film's finale help the spectator digest its excessive brutality and alleviate some of the shock response. Moreover, a feeling of relief is incited by Yusuf's death (which means no more torture) and by the defusing of the bombs, although this effect does not last when it appears more bombs are hidden. Although *Zero Dark Thirty* has a more conclusive and satisfying finale when bin Laden is caught, *Unthinkable* is a less ambivalent (but not a less gruesome) viewing experience than *Zero Dark Thirty.*

[56] Catherine Wheatley argues that Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997, 2007) establishes a similar reaction: the film's unpleasant viewing experience incites both a self-reflective intellectual and an emotional response. She argues that through this combination the spectator becomes aware of herself as a scopophilic subject (87, 106). The intellectual response in *Unthinkable* is weak, however, because Helen spells out the film's moral agenda and the film, unlike *Funny Games*, makes use of classical Hollywood narration that absorbs the spectator more readily into the film.

Conclusion

This chapter departed from an inquiry into the nature of the offended and critical responses to *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture, concerning Maya's gender and position in relation to torture, and the film's techniques that were used to construct realism.

This chapter has shown that what causes offense is not necessarily the film's depiction of such interrogation methods, but how this is done. The film seems to give a near-referential account of the hunt for bin Laden by fusing cinematic realism with journalism, or in other words, by fusing a fictional, dramatic understanding of this hunt with real footage and explicit references to real events and people. In addition, the film's torture scenes and the plot's ambivalent, often contradictory messages concerning torture's use construct an ambiguous position in relation to the justifiability and effectiveness of torture methods.

The torture scene is performed in front of Maya as a witnessing third party and "female colleague". Maya's role therein is crucial: her peripheral status of female onlooker help effectuate detainee Ammar's debasement. Yet partially watching through Maya's point of view, the spectator is similarly spurred to think the torture is harsh and debasing, and as such, Maya's position actively undermines both Dan's (and the CIA's) moral dominance and torture as an interrogation method.

Maya's position, however, grows more ambivalent and her moral standpoint becomes more opaque. Her ambivalent position, together with the expression of her gender, which unites feminist and anti-feminist features, proved to be the subject of praise as well as criticism from the film's detractors. This can be explained by seeing both aspects as mutually related: Maya moves from being staged as a female, appalled witness of Ammar's torture, to an obsessed agent who represses features deemed feminine when interrogating up to the point of becoming almost 'gender neutral', to a conventional female protagonist when the job is done.

Both positions, of regarding Maya as feminist or anti-feminist, can eventually be substantiated depending on the angle of

investigation. In addition, I have argued that, rather than seeing Maya as repressing her gender or features deemed female (whether regarded as feminist or anti-feminist), she can be considered as someone using up all her energies to find bin Laden, to the extent that she loses a substantial part of herself.

In tandem with the way in which her gender is given shape, her facial expressions, opaque personality, and her refrainment from touching the detainees herself suggest a contradiction between her dislike for torture on the one hand, and a belief that torture is necessary on the other. She therefore upholds an ambivalent moral standpoint concerning the use of torture methods. Together with the problematic expression of her gender this illustrates that Maya is an unconventional, and therefore inaccessible and difficult, female protagonist.

Thus, Maya's opaque and ambivalent character, the lack of 'moral characters', the plot's contradictory, evasive messages about the use of torture, the suggestion of rigorous causality where this is not necessarily so, and the film's construction of realism serve as a foundation for the criticism directed towards *Zero Dark Thirty.* This chapter argues that this evasive standpoint concerning torture has two effects, which can be regarded as a strategy in its own right. Firstly, Maya's dissociation from and her mixed feelings concerning torture problematize an association with the female torturers of Abu Ghraib. Secondly, the film shows the paradox between the idea that practising torture is officially (discursively) and legally (constitutionally) objected to by the US government, while inflicted nonetheless by CIA operatives.

The film's classical narration facilitates a passive viewing attitude, as the characters' roles, motivations and actions are sufficiently expounded. At the same time, the characters' moral opaqueness, the ambivalent causality, and the use of the single perspective of a woman obsessed with her job leave a moral assessment of the film on the spectator's plate. These features might, as the criticism shows, inspire her to think critically about the themes presented and to engage more actively with the often incompatible messages put forward by the film's content and structure.

Unthinkable is a literal ticking bomb scenario that similarly presents the characteristic of 'urgency' as a stimulus for retrieving information through torture. The film, however, exaggerates the ticking bomb elements to playfully and critically show the legal and moral voids surrounding the use of torture by the FBI.

One of the ways in which this is done is through 'moral characters', especially through protagonist Helen, whose moral attitude, emotions, and doubts are clearly expressed. This makes her, compared to Maya, a normative female protagonist that poses less of a challenge to spectators. The second way in which the legal and moral voids are expressed is by showing what torture does to its victims. *Unthinkable* received criticism for its alleged depiction of 'torture porn', but this chapter argues that the brutal nature and composition of torture has a function: the film presents vivisectionist torture in tandem with 'moral characters' to experiment with and critically reflect on the conditions, motivations, and logic of politically motivated torture, as well as on the aesthetic means to depict such torture.

The film's graphic content together with Helen's lucid moral objections make the spectator aware of herself as a viewing subject. Yet while *Zero Dark Thirty* opens up to the possibility of critical spectatorship, *Unthinkable*'s 'spoon-feeding' of viewpoints and the exaggerated ticking bomb situation less potently urges the spectator to critically reflect on the film's content.

Extrapolating on *Unthinkable*'s suggestion that torture and barbarism are both traits of Western civilization, in the next chapter I will analyse whether torture inflicted by Muslim terrorists is presented as more brutal and 'unfair' in films, and which political motivations and conditions are brought up in this reversal of roles. Two films, *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, which are geopolitical action films rather than ticking bomb scenarios, seem to have a double edge: they confirm the stereotypical image of the barbaric terrorist, while simultaneously presenting criticism on US foreign policies and its share in fuelling terrorist activities. What will be explored is how these seemingly paradoxical features are dovetailed; to do this, differences between *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* on the one hand, and *Syriana* and

Body of Lies on the other will be discussed. In addition, all films will be positioned within a contextual timeframe so as to compare them mutually, and more broadly to a corpus of War on Terror films made in the past decade.