

CHASING TERROR

Worldwide manhunt for bin Laden seen through Bigelow's human-sized lens

ZERO DARK THIRTY: Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. Written by Mark Boal. Cinematography, Greig Fraser. Editing, William Goldenberg and Dylan Tichenor. Music, Alexandre Desplat. Starring Jessica Chastain, Jason Clarke, Jennifer Ehle, Mark Strong, Kyle Chandler and Joel Edgerton. Columbia Pictures, 2012. R. 157 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

Within a minute of *Zero Dark Thirty*, I was in tears. Director Kathryn Bigelow doesn't pull punches, and the film's dark-screen open is no exception: It leaves the images to your imagination as the audio gives you scared, horrified, frantic voices. I assume these are re-creations of audio from 9/11. If they're not, I don't want to know.

I've seen a similar tactic used before, to equally devastating and difficult effect, in Alejandro González Iñárritu's segment of the short film collection *11'09"01*. Iñárritu cut from a dark screen, with audio from or describing 9/11, to scenes of bodies falling from the towers. I saw that film in Australia, where I'd temporarily moved in 2002, and a year after I'd stood on a street corner in Manhattan trying to comprehend what was happening two miles away.

I tell you this not to play some sort of I-was-there card, but because I don't know that Bigelow's choices will have the same effect on everyone. I don't know where you were, how you felt, whom you knew. But I know that even as the tears started, I was aware that this was one hell of a play, a forceful reminder of what kick-started the story told in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal return, again and again, to devastation and pain, to London in 2005, to hotel bombings and cars exploding. And, controversially, to torture, which comes early and is shot plainly, with close-ups of a detainee's tired, helpless face contrasting horribly with Dan (Jason Clarke)'s mild expression.

Zero Dark Thirty is not a pro-torture movie, not anymore than it's a pro-war movie. It will be seen as such because we all see movies through our own filters, lenses built of experience and expectation. The story Bigelow and Boal tell is an ugly one, brutal, disconnected, horribly human, but what makes the film such an exceptional piece of work is the way they center it in the quietest moments: CIA analyst Maya (Jessica Chastain) half watches a mute monitor as a car stops sideways in front of two other vehicles, then explodes. Scenes with detainees aren't softened by musical cues from Alexandre Desplat's precise score. Maya and two colleagues silently watch TV as Obama says that America doesn't torture. Are they wondering what it is they've been doing? Is theirs a moral or practical conflict? How do these things — the president's ideals, and the reality on the ground — relate?

Maya is at the center of *Zero*, but she's the eye of the hurricane, not the heart. Coolly forceful and singularly focused, Maya zeroes in on one name as the key to finding Osama bin Laden. Not all her colleagues believe her; she doesn't care. She cares about her work, and about the slight friendship she builds with fellow analyst Jessica (Jennifer Ehle). By making the film about Maya — enigmatic, a problem-solver, driven but rarely passionate — Bigelow and Boal make it human-sized, not a worldwide tale about a manhunt but a consideration of the factors that lead to any success. Human error, obsession, intuition, instinct, horror, pragmatism: These are the things that led to bin Laden.

And then what? What happens when the hunt is over? Where I most forcefully depart from those who would use *Zero Dark Thirty* as a political tool is at the film's close, after the climactic operation and the stunning shots of black helicopters flying into Pakistan. No one triumphs. There's very little satisfaction. Everything still happened — the loss, the pain, the destruction. But one piece of it is done. ■

THU Jan 10	FRI Jan 11	SAT Jan 12	SUN Jan 13	MON Jan 14	TUE Jan 15	WED Jan 16	THU Jan 17
	2:45 5:15 7:30 9:30	12:30 2:45 5:15 7:30 9:30	12:30 2:45 5:15 7:30 9:30	CHASING ICE			
4:00 6:30 9:00	8:45	8:45	8:45	8:45	8:45	8:45	8:45
				HOLY MOTORS			
7:40	6:00	1:00 6:00	1:00 6:00	6:00	6:00	6:00	6:00
OLD GOATS							
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FRANKENWEENIE (3D) PG 12:20, 2:30, 7:45, 10:05	THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER PG-13 12:10, 2:40, 5:00, 7:40, 10:00
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