Watching the warriors: the female hero and the 'logistics of perception' in *Zero Dark Thirty*

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Zero Dark Thirty (Kathryn Bigelow 2012) has given rise to much critical debate, focused primarily on its questionable historical accuracy, apparent political perspective and the extent to which its narrative condones torture as an instrument of intelligence gathering. These are indisputably important issues, however they have tended to crowd out of the critical agenda alternative approaches to the film. In this chapter, I would like to address two such approaches which I believe are interconnected: the way in which the narrative and visual idiom of the film is inflected by the presence of a female protagonist, and the way in which the film articulates the highly mediated, hyper-real vision of modern warfare discussed by commentators such as Baudrillard and, in particular, Virilio.

From a feminist perspective, one of the most striking features of *Zero Dark Thirty* is the use of a female lead in such a consistently 'masculine' genre as the war film. The gender of the protagonist, I would argue, is much more than an incidental detail within the film, having profound implications for the structure and dynamics of the narrative. Without a female protagonist, the central dramatic device of surveillance-as-action and the effective exclusion of the hero from direct engagement in the climatic "battle" (the moment for which the film is named) would be problematic, if not impossible. In effect the re-conceptualisation of the hero as female coincides with a re-conceptualisation of what constitutes 'action' for the purposes of the film.

Another striking feature of this film is the extent to which it articulates the relationship between cinema and war proposed by Paul Virilio. The intra-diegetic use of surveillance technology exemplifies the 'logistics of perception' discussed in *The Vision Machine,* while the appropriation of the 'reality effect' of mediated images for the purposes of a Hollywood film speaks to Virilio's 'aesthetics of disappearance'[i]. I would argue that there is a relationship between these two perspectives , which intersect in the complex dynamics of the image and the gaze within the film.

Maya, in her role as professional watcher, is the bearer of a paradoxical gaze. Her gaze is constructed primarily as controlling, authoritative and the source of knowledge – bearing more than a passing resemblance to the role of the film director. However it is also the source of misinformation, frustration and the feelings of impotence associated with witnessing. This paradox points on the one hand to the problematic relationship between the woman and the gaze articulated throughout feminist film criticism and on the other towards the 'paradoxical logic'[ii] whereby the image comes to dominate reality – a concept, Virilio associates with precisely the moral relativism which, for many, constitutes an ideological and aesthetic problem at the heart of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Logistics of perception & aesthetics of disappearance

> " war that offers only an experience of deja-vu, with the same flooding of military forces, fantastic news, useless propaganda, deceitful and pathetic discourses and technological deployment…. a non-event, an event that did not happen."
>
> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Spirit of Terrorism' [iii]

> "once you can see the target, you can expect to destroy it."
>
> W.J Perry, former US Under-Secretary of State[iv]

Zero Dark Thirty (ZDT) is a generic oxymoron: a war film about a non-war, with a non-combatant protagonist and an invisible enemy. If, as Baudrillard has argued, the first 'Gulf War' was a misnomer, how much more so the endless, borderless series of military actions that followed the events of 9.11. The hunt for Bin Laden (unlike that, for example, for 'Private Ryan'[v]) doesn't involve much by way of battlefield action - nor even of the macho 'base camp ' scenarios associated with those films set in less 'heroic' wars. What it does involve is a great deal of emphasis on the technologies of surveillance and the imagery of mediated reality. Such imagery has become a generic convention of the contemporary war film, as exemplified by *The Hurt Locker* (2008), Bigelow's previous engagement with the genre. For *ZDT,* however, military surveillance is not just an aesthetic or narrative feature but the dramatic and thematic centre of the film. Action has been re-conceptualised as watching, and the military protagonist has been re-assigned accordingly to the role of observing and controlling the theatre of war at one remove.

Paul Virilio has demonstrated a close historical relationship between the development of cinema and that of modern warfare. This has operated on a number of levels, from the involvement of film directors in early surveillance photography, and cinema's appropriation of technologies originally developed for military purposes, to the use of film as propaganda, and the evolution of the war film genre. The connection is seen as fundamental to the natures of both war and cinema., In *War and Cinema*[vi], he argues that intelligence and vision are key technological and strategic military resources, coining the phrase 'logistics of perception' to encompass not only military surveillance, and the crucial ability to get the enemy 'in one's sights', but also the use of simulation in training, the use of the media propaganda, and the way in which war is experienced by modern media audiences. For Virilio, the "means of destruction and means of communicating destruction"[vii] are interwoven and interdependent. Military conquest is meaningful only in as much as it is effectively communicated to the conquered. "There is no war, then, without representation." [viii]

The primacy of the image, and 'the instrumental splitting of modes of perception and representation"[ix] that the technologies of vision bring, give rise to an "aesthetic of disappearance"[x] which is conceptualized along similar lines to Baudrillard's "hyper-reality". In *The Vision Machine,* Virilio expands on the idea of technically mediated, even automated vision producing images that function as a 'substitution' for reality,

rather than the 'simulation' that is the province of traditional art. The eponymous 'machine' is part philosophical conceit, allowing him to explore the processes and psychology of perception, and part prophesy, depicting a dystopian trajectory in which not only the gathering of visual information but its interpretation is automated. Both lines of reasoning raise the problem of the 'reality effect' and its ascendancy over the reality principle as the virtual and the factual become irretrievably confused.[xi]

Virilio draws a direct connection between the development of the photographic arts and post-modern sensibilities, as "in multiplying 'proofs' of reality, photography exhausted it."[xii] Ironically what was originally understood as a reliably indexical sign, ultimately drew attention to the functioning of point-of-view (echoing the theory of relativity which called into question the nature of 'reality' in the physical world). Although this is not Virilio's explicit argument, it is certainly the case that cinema itself, with its realist aesthetic, its phatic, 'real-time' images and its powerful exploitation of 'point-of-view' as it is understood in the contexts of both cinematography and narrative, meets his description of the 'vision machine'.

Patricia Pisters has argued that Virilio's 'vision of a waning reality…. needs to be revised in light of the latest developments in perceptual technology and urban warfare during the Second Gulf War"[xiii] She proposes a 'logistics of perception 2.0', reflecting what she sees as a more 'dynamic' relationship between war and the media. She argues for, on the one hand, a democratization of media production as exemplified by the video diaries of serving personnel and the multiplicity of viewpoints represented in what she calls a "battle of the screens", and on the other, a return of the real through the "subjective and affective intensity of many of the images."[xiv]

Although Pisters identifies several significant shifts in the media landscape, there are some contradictions inherent in her arguments. When, as she notes, "Video games look like war and war looks like a video game."[xv] the affective power of the image can serve to undermine the recognition of reality just as easily as it can reawaken the conscious, ethical response she looks for. Virilio attributes the power of the electronic media to a "false equation of sign-reading with knowledge",[xvi] fearing that the emphasis for modern audiences, regaled with high-definition, phatic imagery, is on seeing rather than understanding.[xvii]

 Meanwhile the access to, and proliferation of, both production and distribution of media texts, made possible by modern technologies, does not always result in the democratic ideal envisioned by McLuhan. While Pisters celebrates the way in which serving personnel "have appropriated Hollywood and MTV aesthetics"[xviii] it could equally be argued that this is a form of conformity, as the soldiers own perception of their situation is channelled through cultural constructions. While soldiers are, are she demonstrates, "no longer dependent on hierarchical structures for the distribution of their images"[xix] that does not prevent their work becoming assimilated into Virilio's global 'reality effect' as audiences are bombarded with images, the sources and status of which are not always easy to differentiate.

The war film, as a genre, could be said to specialize in blurring the boundaries between the factual and the virtual and exploiting what might be termed a 'reality

affect' . The "spectacle of authenticity" which Geoff King has identifies as a key feature of the serious war film[xx] sets out to reproduce precisely the "subjective and affective intensity" described by Pisters, often by exploiting the conventions – if not the raw materials – of recorded 'actuality' to elicit a powerful, even visceral response. Thus *ZDT* uses sound recorded by emergency services on 9.11 to set the narrative – and affective – scene in the opening frames[xxi]; Maya's investigation involves viewing CCTV footage, recorded interviews, broadcast TV and satellite image, while her experience of the raid on Bin Laden's strong-hold relies on the Seals' helmet cams. The paradoxical logic whereby these explicitly mediated images produce a powerful 'reality effect' is of a piece with Virilio's vision. By emphasising the point-of-view in an intra-textual, purely visual sense they serve to conceal the operation of point-of-view as a narrative function, suggesting both immediacy and objectivity and disavowing the role of the filmmaker even as the cinematic construct is at its most elaborate. The driving investigative narrative of the film produces a re-alignment of diverse points of view into one. Pisters argues that "in the face of the multiplication of ever increasing screens, reality does not disappear but returns with an affective vengeance."[xxii] *ZDT*, however, exemplifies the power of the mainstream media text to re-assimilate differentiated perspectives and to harness the affective power of the image to reinforce its own agenda.

The tension between Virilio's 'reality effect' and the return of the real as characterised by Pisters, is articulated at a number of levels in relation to *ZDT*: at the level of plot, at the level of structure and aesthetics, and at the level of the secondary texts that abound around the film.

Within the diegesis of the film, the CIA investigation depends almost entirely on media images that ought to provide indexical 'proof' of reality but in practice often prove to constitute inconclusive, or even misleading evidence. Thus Maya's search is thrown off track for years by a wrongly identified photograph, while Jessica is deceived by what purports to be secretly filmed footage from her supposed informer – with fatal consequences. The satellite imagery of Bin Laden's stronghold, meanwhile, proves so inconclusive that the raid is almost indefinitely postponed. Moreover diegetically 'authentic' material produces a distorted affect. Thus the repetitive imagery of interrogation becomes numbing, rather than shocking, for the protagonist (and, potentially, for the audience), while, her moment of victory elicits a response all but drained of emotion.

In terms of structural and aesthetic considerations, the style and pace of the film, along with the appropriation of factual codes and actuality, creates a sense of documentary realism such that a least one critic has described it as a 'drama documentary'. The narrative, in common with most 'detective' narratives, is explicitly structured around the protagonist's point of view, aligning the audience with her as they share in her journey of discovery; this alignment is lent particular emphasis in *ZDT*, however, by Maya's role as the viewer of media imagery. (Her intense, subjective engagement with the materials she scrutinises is contrasted with a radically limited personal life. It is in the context of her dogged, repetitive viewing that we are offered a degree of access to her emotional life, through a pattern of intense close-up reverse shots. In contrast, the only scene of any length that features Maya alone and "off duty" shows her all but hidden among the folds of in a burka.) The alignment of protagonist and audience is at its most explicit during the raid on Bin Laden's compound which is experienced by both as mediated reality, rendered in terms of the

"synthetic perception"[xxiii] provided by helmet cameras and night-vision goggles. The audience, then, is sutured into a position where the tension between authenticity and the 'hyper-real' is palpable.

The contested nature of 'reality' has also become a critical factor in the extra-textual narratives around, and critical responses to *ZDT*. The film's on-screen claims to be based on real events and people were underpinned by the claims to quasi-journalistic methods made by the film makers pre-release, giving rise to early press debates concerning their access to and use of security information. In the event this stance exacerbated the outcry around the apparent condoning of 'enhanced interrogation' in the film, and the causal link it implied between torture and the success of the CIA mission. The distinguishing, and the most disturbing feature of Virilio's 'vision machine' is the ability not only to observe but to *interpret* reality. It is significant, therefore, that by far the greatest opprobrium heaped upon the makers of *ZDT* was not for the depiction of torture *per se*, but for the film's *interpretation* of torture as a valid and effective military strategy.

Cinema, by its very nature, poses 'the problem of the paradoxically real nature of 'virtual' imagery".[xxiv] The 'problem' is only exacerbated by those genres, such as the war film, that draw on the codes of the 'real' to create fictional narratives. As representations of representations, moreover, footage that purports to come from helmet cameras, CCTV etc. raises the spectre of the infinitely deferred referent and the collapse of meaning into a pure representation which Virilio equates with moral relativism.[xxv] The 'serious' war film may set out to speak the 'truth' through the presentation of fictional (or re-presentation of 'factual') but by its nature is part of the vision machine: the more sincerely it engages with 'reality', more complicit in may become in the 'reality effect'

Gender Matters: Authorship, Narrative and the Gaze

> "…. never before has a stone-cold-serious American war drama featured a woman both behind the camera and at its center."
> Steven Zeitchik, *Los Angeles Times*[xxvi]

> "it matters whose desire is being figured in [the] text"
> Sue Thornham, *What if I had been the Hero?*[xxvii]

Reviewing the film in the *Los Angeles Times*, Steven Zeitchik, suggests that *ZDT* has redefined its genre, introducing "the viscerally human but post-feminist (and post-political) war film."[xxviii] Gender, it is clear, plays an essential part in this generic shift: both the gender of the filmmaker and that of the protagonist. Kathryn Bigelow, the woman 'behind the camera', has forged a career from re-working Hollywood genres, repeatedly disrupting gender-based assumptions and expectations in the process despite her refusal to identify as a 'female' let alone a 'feminist' filmmaker. Maya (Jessica Chastain), the woman 'at its centre' is a dominating and disturbing presence in the film, whose gender, youth and beauty are, as Robert Burgoyne has argued, "not easily accommodated by genre codes".[xxix]

Zeitchick is just one among a small army of journalists and cultural critics who have discussed *ZDT* in terms of its status as feminist, post-feminist, or anti-feminist text – a

debate that has been effectively encapsulated by Marouf Hasian in a rare academic article on the subject. Hasian himself acknowledges that "Maya's presence is a refreshing jolt, a transgressive move that reminds us of the ambivalences of the contemporary post-feminist conditions,"[xxx] but ultimately concludes that the film is misogynistic, because the protagonist's gender is used as a form of ideological camouflage for US militarism, ultimately reinforcing a patriarchal status quo.

This ill fated debate fails to recognise that feminist perspectives cut across other political paradigms, rather than being neatly aligned with them. It also presupposes that a text, as opposed to a reading, can be intrinsically 'feminist'. I would suggest, that to ask whether *ZDT* is a 'feminist' text, a post-feminist text or indeed a misogynist text may not be a particularly productive line of inquiry. Rather, I would like consider the extent to which it is a gendered text – to ask how both the particular sensibilities of the female director and the presence of the female hero impact upon the dynamic of the narrative and in particular upon the way in which the film articulates the themes and imagery of watching.

The signature of a woman: the female filmmaker and *Zero Dark Thirty*

> "we're a watched society and a society of watchers",
>
> Kathryn Bigelow[xxxi]

Kathryn Bigelow is a director who not only utilizes spectacle as an aesthetic strategy but explicitly addresses it as a theme in her work. For her, the act of looking is more than a simple function of film making and film viewing,: it is the subject matter and narrative driver of many of her films. Indeed Laura Rascaroli has described Bigelow's cinema as "essentially a discourse on vision."[xxxii]

Bigelow's fascination with the technologies of looking is evidenced in her film making practice: she has frequently designed and developed new pieces of camera kit in order to achieve specific effects, such as the rig famously created for the extended chase sequence in *Point Break* (1991). More critically, for this discussion, it is evidenced in the work itself, which returns over and over to themes of voyeurism, surveillance and the mediated image. Critical comparisons have inevitably been made between *ZDT* and *The Hurt Locker* (2008), Bigelow's first take on the war film. Here 'logistics of perception' furnish a visual *leitmotif* : the main activity of the soldiers is to watch – their paranoid gaze repeatedly mediated through helmet cameras, the viewfinders of their rifles and 'botcams' - while they themselves are constantly under hostile surveillance. Striking comparisons can also be made, however, with other films in Bigelow's *oevre* - particularly those films that present an explicitly gendered dimension to the cinematic gaze. Indeed, I would suggest that it is in these films - *Blue Steel* (1989), *Strange Days* (1995) and *The Weight of Water* (2000) - that Bigelow's 'discourse on vision' is at its most sophisticated, presaging the themes and tropes to be explored in *Zero Dark Thirty.*

The neo-noir police thriller *Blue Steel* stars Jamie-Lee Curtis as Megan, a young female cop who attracts the unwelcome attentions of a voyeuristic killer. The film sets up an uncomfortable but charateristic paradox, as it simultaneously exploits and deconstructs the image of woman as object of the cinematic gaze.

The narrative positions Megan by turns as investigator and *femme fatale*, hunter and prey. The gun, meanwhile, is aligned both with Megan/Curtis as fetishised object of desire, and with the gaze itself as the act of looking is explicitly associated with that of lining up a (gun)shot.

Despite their very different aesthetics, there are a number of parallels between *Blue Steel* and *Zero Dark Thirty*. Both films are about, and structured by the mechanics and meanings of the gaze. Both films feature scrappy heroines, who can deal quite aggressively with the low-level, casual sexism they encounter: Megan, expected to justify her career choices to every man she meets, likes to tell her inquisitors that she became a cop because she likes to shoot people; Maya bluntly tells the CIA chief who questions her right to join an otherwise all male planning group "I'm the motherfucker who found him…sir.". Most worthy of note, because so unusual in Hollywood properties, each film ends with an anticlimactic, down-beat final scene, whereby the heroine's success in her mission brings about no sense of triumph or fulfillment, but an empty, disconsolate, almost fugue state.

Strange Days, Bigelow's idiosyncratic science fiction film, further develops ideas of voyeurism, surveillance and the relationship between the two. The plot is centred around the SQUID - a technology developed as an instrument of police surveillance, but sold on the black market as a form of entertainment, offering the user the opportunity to indulge in vicarious, voyeuristic experiences. In an interview with Gavin Smith, the director describes *Strange Days* as a film about power structures, which she explicitly conceptualizes in terms of the dynamics of the gaze.[xxxiii]

Both sets of intertwined structures have a distinctly gendered dimension. The main 'genres' of content consumed on the SQUID appear to be violent action, pornography or a combination of the two, and the consumers appear to be almost exclusively male. The material we see through the eyes of the self-pitying anti-hero, Lenny (Ralph Fiennes) consists largely of self-conscious displays by his ex-girlfriend (Juliette Lewis), which he compulsively replays. The scenes in which he finds himself watching a woman raped, tortured and murdered, unable to look away, raises the same uncomfortable questions about the pleasures of the sadistic gaze that are explored in the seminal writing of Laura Mulvey[xxxiv] and Teresa de Lauretis.[xxxv] Lenny's gaze, however, is associated primarily with passivity and impotence rather than power or control; indeed he is addicted to the SQUID, and in thrall to the horrifying images which he feels compelled to watch. Meanwhile, his female bodyguard, Mace, who recognizes the destructive nature of the technology, reacts to the 'snuff' content with unadulterated un-pleasure. This complex relationship between control/ impotence and the gaze, together with the explicitly mediated gaze, epistemological unreliability of images and the blurring of the boundaries between surveillance and voyeurism are all revisited and developed in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

The Weight of Water is Bigelow's only foray into a traditional 'woman's' genre. Moving between a contemporary and a historical timeframe, the visual focus in both contexts is on the (potentially destructive) desiring gaze of the woman. Of particular interest to this discussion, however, is the construction of Jean (Catherine McCormack), the modern-day protagonist, as a professional photographer, whose desire is expressed through the lens of a stills camera, and the deliberate disjunction of reverse shots that initially mislead the viewer with regard to the object of her gaze. Sue Thornham has explored the way in which writer/ narrator protagonists often

operate "as textual doubles for the female maker" foregrounding notions of authorship and narrative construction.[xxxvi] The photographer heroine, who sets out to uncover a past crime and re-tell the story of the women involved, can be said to function as a 'textual double' of the film-maker. Maya, in *ZDT*, arguably as fulfils a similar function. She is a professional watcher, whose task is to build a narrative from images, effectively editing together material selected from the endless 'rushes' represented by the interrogation videos, and directing the acquisition of additional material through the activities of interrogators and field agents. The parallels with the role of the film director are striking. So, too, are those with Bigelow personally, who has expressed a feeling of being "without purpose all of a sudden" after completing the film – a feeling mirrored in Maya's final scene, where she cannot tell the pilot of the troop carrier where she wants to go.

Thornham has observed that "a melancholic subject and an unavowable loss which figure both in the narrative itself and in the desire which it traces"[xxxviii] haunt the work of many female film makers. Despite her atypical choice of genres, this is certainly true of Bigelow's work, evidenced in the all-pervasive melancholy atmosphere of *Near Dark* and *The Weight of Water,* in the oddly wistful, lyrical treatment of action sequences in *Point Break* and *The Hurt Locker*, and – perhaps most strikingly because so unusual in Hollywood movies – in the sense of emptiness that characterizes the anticlimactic final scenes of both *Blue Steel* and *Zero Day Thirty.* Bigelow herself is resistant to the notion that she looks at the world through a gendered lens; I would suggest that on the contrary *ZDT* (like other work) is clearly marked with what Nancy Miller has termed "the signature of a woman".[xxxix]

Gender and the gaze: the impact of the female protagonist

> "I'm not that girl that fucks"
>
> Maya, *Zero Dark Thirty*

Asked in interview about the significance of the female lead in *ZDT* Bigelow is typically dismissive: "It's extraordinary that women were pivotal, but it's also that those were the facts. That's the hand we were dealt. And that's how we chose to deal with the story".[xl] However the gender of its protagonist is, I would argue, crucial to the structure and tone of *ZDT*, and to the ways in which ideas of the gaze, spectacle, and the logistics of perception are articulated in the text.

Zero Dark Thirty is a war film structured as a quest narrative – a genre and a format traditionally dominated by male protagonists, often to the exclusion of any significant female characters at all. The gender reversal represented by the tough and embattled female agent single-mindedly pursuing the hero's quest is not straightforward or without textual and ideological repercussions. Sue Thornham, in her evocatively titled book *What if I had been the hero?*, argues that narrative structures marked by ideologically loaded oppositions such as "hero/heroine, activity/ passivity, subject/object" are "fundamental to our sense of identity" and that they cannot be transformed without "cultural, narrational, linguistic, subjective" implications.[xli] Maya's blunt response to her friend's attempt to broach the subject of her personal

life (above) perfectly illustrates Thornham's point: it is quite simply impossible to imagine an equivalent response from a male protagonist.

Hasian opines that Maya is used to propagate a myth "of gendered equality within the CIA, while erasing or obfuscating the structural barriers that are still in play."[xlii] I would argue that, on the contrary, the film does clearly mark incidents of casual and institutionalized sexism, albeit with some subtlety and indeed uses Maya's 'outsider' status to help propel the narrative. From the start of the film, when Maya is offered – and refuses - the opportunity to avoid the interrogation, she has to work harder, and assert herself more directly than her male colleagues. Out of her hearing, they question whether she is up to the job on more than one occasion, and repeatedly refer to her as a 'girl'. Maya's 'motherfucker' outburst at Langley can be read as a response to anyone who questions her right to a 'seat at the table' – not only the CIA chief who poses the question at that particular moment. Meanwhile her physical presence in this scene – small, youthful and possessed of a fragile, porcelain beauty – makes an unavoidable visual impact. Burgoyne's comment about her disturbing impact on the genre could equally be applied to the institutional context: her physical encroachment in itself posing a subtle challenge to the male bastion of power that is the CIA. In many ways gender, here, is utilized much as class, and occasionally race have been elsewhere in Hollywood texts, to reinforce the 'heroic' status of a protagonist by reinforcing the 'odds' against them. Thus it is one male colleague who remarks to another "its her against the world".

The "cultural, narrational, linguistic, subjective" implications of gender in the film, however, go far beyond explicit diegetic references to workplace gender politics. That Maya is 'not that girl that fucks' is not just a statement about the character's intra- diegetic sense of and/or presentation of herself. It also serves an extra-diegetic function, reinforcing the film's studied avoidance of any suggestion of objectification or sexualisation of the female protagonist. This approach, which informs both the structures and aesthetics of the film, is highlighted to the point of parody by the scenein which Maya watches the 'Canaries' (Navy Seals) await their cue to raid Bin Laden's stronghold – gleaming muscles on display as they relax in the sun. Maya, by way of contrast, is clothed from head to foot in black.

In fact Maya is a woman defined almost entirely in terms of the gaze - but as its subject, not its object. The re-definition of watching as action, which is key to the narrative construction of the film, is, I would suggest, contingent on a female protagonist, and the nuanced relationship between woman, narrative and the gaze.

 Burgoyne describes Maya's experience of violence, in the film, as "a direct, intimate witnessing,"[xliii] and indeed Maya's role as 'witness' frames the core narrative of the film, beginning with the torture scene she forces herself to sit though on her first day in the job, and ending with her identification of Bin Laden's body, marking the completion of her ten year assignment. The position of the witness, in Hollywood genres, is often constructed as a passive and inherently feminine position. The woman who dares to look, moreover, is often punished (notably, but not exclusively, in the horror genre) by being forced to witness the horrifying without recourse to action. Bigelow's film is informed by these tropes, yet constructs Maya's gaze with a very different inflection. Hers is never a passive

gaze. Burgoyne traces her trajectory, in relation to the "embodied violence" of torture, from reluctant witness at the start of the film, to increasingly complicit as she utilizes recorded interrogations in her investigation, to causal agency as she orders and oversees further interrogations. Even at the start of the film, however, when she is clearly represented as uncomfortable with the brutal scene before her, repeatedly averting her eyes and turning her head away, the film explicitly implicates her as an active participant. Given the choice to abstain, she refuses; her (specifically female) gaze, moreover is used as ammunition by her co-agent to humiliate the half naked prisoner.

Maya's gaze in subsequent scenes is coded as primarily active – investigative, monitoring, controlling – although never sadistic (in this respect her discomfort in the early torture scene sets the tone) and never scopophilic. On the contrary, in the successive scenes in which Maya ploughs through video footage in search of the information she needs, looking is clearly represented as labour - an exhausting and frustrating grind to be endured, and one which takes its emotional and physical toll on Maya as successive close-ups show.

Maya's agency is "riven by paradox"[xliv] however, in common with that of many female protagonists, whose agency and subjectivity retain a precarious foothold in the narrative, and whose gaze is haunted by the ghosts of victim heroines. The distinctions between the active and the passive gaze, between witnessing and controlling, power and powerlessness are frequently blurred. Her investigative gaze is misled by unreliable evidence (notably concerning the supposed death of her chief subject), her monitoring gaze is frustrated (by indistinct satellite images) and she is rendered an impotent bystander at the assassination of her friends and colleagues. It is significant, in this respect, that Maya's gaze throughout her quest is almost exclusively mediated. Hers is a war fought through the logistics of perception, and the paradoxes that mark her agency mirror those that characterize the 'reality effect'. I would suggest that it is the focus on mediated engagement that makes it possible for a female protagonist to take the central role in *ZDT* - and conversely that it is the gender of the protagonist that makes it possible to limit her involvement in the climactic scene of the film.

Maya's paradoxical agency - explicitly mediated and, I would suggest, implicitly gendered - is most clearly articulated in the thirty minute scene that gives the film its title: the raid on Bin Laden's residence. This scene is the nearest the film comes to the traditional action sequences of the war film, and represents the climax of Maya's quest – yet Maya herself, an intelligence officer not a soldier, cannot take an active part in the raid. The film utilizes a number of strategies, however, to maintain her central position within the narrative, and her function as the focus of audience identification. The critical nature of her role is emphasized by the 'canary' who makes it clear before the raid that he believes in the mission because of the power of Maya's conviction, and by the closing scene in which the commanding officer calls upon Maya to identify Bin Laden's body – clearly the only person qualified to do so. During the raid itself, however, the film employs a degree of cinematic sleight of hand in the use of cutaways to suggest that Maya – in reality a passive witness- is actively involved in, even directing events. Visually, moreover, there is no distinction between the action itself and mediated images of the action, since the entire scene is bathed in the artificial

greenish light of the night-vision technology which for Virilio constitutes a significant step in the evolution of the nightmarish 'vision machine'.[xlv] In effect, Maya is reduced to much the same position as the audience during this sequence, having the illusion of omniscience and control but no real agency.

Burgoyne remarks that Maya's act of witnessing "sutures her to the larger social and historical world the film portrays".[xlvi] Her gaze, central is it is to the narrative, also sutures the audience into the text and thus into its world – a world of ubiquitous threat, articulating Virilio's vision of 'total war'.[xlvii] Maya's gender serves to underline both this vision and the 'reality effect' produced when the monitoring of military action is retransmitted as public presentation[xlviii]. Her particular relationship to the mediated gaze articulates the idea that war is not confined to warriors; the rest of us participate (and are implicated) by watching the warriors.

Epilogue: Maya's 'victory'

> Maya cries because bin Laden's death is not an uncomplicated victory, since it leaves us with the national and global question of "Now what?"
>
> Kathryn Bigelow [xlix]

The unusually anticlimactic tone that characterizes the final scene of *ZDT* has already been mentioned as unusual within the Hollywood milieu. The scene also stands apart from the rest of the film as a kind of epilogue – distinguished in terms of tone, style and its representation of the protagonist. The melancholy lyricism that characterized *The Hurt Locker* is rediscovered in the prolonged close-up of a weeping Maya, evocatively described by Guy Westwell as "a pieta for the war on terror"[l]. She sits in an empty troop-carrier, framed by blood red webbing that produces a stark visual impact in contrast with the shades of sepia and night-vision green that dominate the rest of the film. Presented throughout as the subject of the gaze, suddenly Maya is unequivocally its object. There is no reverse shot, no suggestion of her point of view. It is as though there is simply nothing to see any more – only the ongoing non-event that is modern warfare.

ZDT is undoubtedly a politically problematic film, but commentators have sometimes overlooked aspects of tone. It is difficult to justify a reading of triumphant US militarism in relation to the mournful tone of the ending. Indeed Bigelow's original film project was a meditation on failure, telling the tale of the (at that time ongoing) unsuccessful search for Bin Laden, and there are moments when *ZDT* seems to be haunted by the spirit of its origins.

The paradox of the victorious hero, devoid of triumph and drained of agency offers an appropriate finale to a film beset by paradox. Zero Dark Thirty is a war film without a war, featuring a non-combatant hero and an invisible villain whose conquest brings no satisfaction. Its female protagonist at once disrupts and furnishes an alibi for a paternalist militarised hegemony, while her presence in the text makes it possible to recast watching as action. The film appropriates documentary codes to tell a fictional tale – amid extra-textual claims to truthfulness on the one hand and artistic license on the other – and articulates Virilio's inherently paradoxical

'reality effect' through its treatment and utilisation of the 'logistics of perception'. It is almost inevitable that the moral centre of the film slips from the critical grasp

Steven Shaviro has discussed the way the film foregrounds the banal proceduralism that characterises the US action and camouflages its excesses – remarking that the embodiment of this truth makes a political and aesthetic impact irrespective of any explicit critique or endorsement within the film. .[li] I would suggest that the embodiment of Virilio's vision is likewise significant, as is the gendering of the films narrative, irrespective of the intentions of the filmmaker.

[i] Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine,* trans. Julie Rose, London: BFI 1994

[ii] ibid. p63

[iii] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Spirit of Terrorism', in *Le Monde* 2nd November 2001, trans. Rachel Bloul, accessed at http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-baudrillard/articles/the-spirit-of-terrorism/

[iv] cited by Paul Virilio in *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans Patrick Camiller, London and New York: Verso, 1989, p4.

[v] *Saving Private Ryan,* dir. Steven Spielberg 1998

[vi] first published by Cahiers du Cinéma in 1984

[vii] *War and Cinema* p.32

[viii] *ibid* p.8

[ix] *The Vision Machine* p.49

[x] *ibid*

[xi] *ibid* p.60

[xii] *ibid* p.22

[xiii] Patricia Pisters, 'Logistics of Perception 2.0: Multiple Screen Aesthetics in Iraq War Films', in *Film-Philosophy,* Vol. 14 no.1, p232 -251 2010 , p.233.

[xiv] *ibid*

[xv] *ibid* p.243

[xvi] *War and Cinema* p.47

[xvii] In this he echoes Neil Postman's concerns over the privileging of the emotive over the thoughtful response

[xviii] Pisters *op cit* p.242

[xix] *ibid*

[xx] Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, London: IB Tauris, 2000, p118.

[xxi] The sound is played over a black screen without recourse to any of the now familiar imagery of the twin towers attack - as though to underline the inadequacy of the image (particularly the over-familiar image) to the task of representation at such a moment.

[xxii] Pisters *o.p cit.* p.250

[xxiii] *The Vision Machine* p.60.

[xxiv] *ibid* p.61

[xxv] *ibid* p.66

[xxvi] Steven Zeitchik, *'Zero Dark Thirty'* hunts for Bin Laden -- and more', *Los Angeles Times*, December 6th 2012.

[xxvii] Sue Thornham, *What if I had been the Hero?*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.28

[xxviii] Zeitchik *op.cit.*

[xxix] Robert Burgoyne, *Somatic War*, Lecture given at University of Leeds, October 30th 2013, accessed at http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/screeningeuropeanheritage/resources/presentations/

[xxx] Marouf Hasian Jr , '*Zero Dark Thirty* and the Critical Challenges posed by Populist Postfeminism During the Global War on Terrorism' in *Journal of Communication Inquiry* Vol. 37, No.4 322–343, 2013 p331

[xxxi]Gavin Smith, '"Momentum and Design": Interview with Kathryn Bigelow', in Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond (eds), *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow, Hollywood Transgressor,* London: Wallflower Press, 2003, p.30.

[xxxii] Laura Rascaroli, 'Steel in the Gaze', in *Screen*, vol. 38 no. 3, Autumn 1997, p232.

[xxxiii] Smith *op.cit.*

[xxxiv] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen,* vol 16 no 3, Autumn *1975*, pp 6-18

[xxxv] Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press

[xxxvi] Thornham 2012 p.5

[xxxvii] Emily Brockes, 'Kathryn Bigelow: Under Fire', *The Guardian,* Sat 12th Jan 2013

[xxxviii] Thornham 2012: p18

[xxxix] Nancy Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*, Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1988, p.68

[xl] Kathryn Bigelow, as quoted by Frank Digiacomo, 'The Mystery Of Maya: Jessica Chastain Never Met The Agent She Plays In 'Zero Dark Thirty', *Movieline,* 5th December 2012. Accessed at: http://movieline.com/2012/12/05/interview-jessica-chastain-zero-dark-thirty-maya/

[xli] Thornham 2012, p4

[xlii] Hasian 2013, p323

[xliii] Burgoyne op.cit.

[xliv] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender,* New York: Routledge, 2004, p.3.

[xlv] War and Cinema p4

[xlvi] Burgoyne op cit

[xlvii] War and Cinema p83

[xlviii] The Vision Machine p 65-66

[xlix] Lily Rothman,'*Zero Dark Thirty*, Declassified: Bigelow Dishes on Deeper Meaning of Closing Scene'; *Time Entertainment* 21 Jan 2013

[l] Guy Westwell, 'Zero Dark Thirty', in *Sight and Sound*, vol. 23 issue 2, Feb 2013, p87.

[li] Steven Shaviro, "A Brief Remark on Zero Dark Thirty", in *The Pinocchio Theory, blog posted at* http://www.shaviro.com/, 18th January 2013