

“Bigelow’s *Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*: Virtue Ethics and the War on Terror”

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The film *Zero Dark Thirty* begins only with a blank screen and audio, recordings of emergency responders and victims of the September 11 attacks. We are then immediately transported to a CIA black site where Dan, a CIA intelligence specialist, interrogates a visibly tortured detainee, Ammar al-Baluchi, while a hooded individual stands nearby. We soon learn that this individual is Maya Lambert, another CIA agent newly assigned to the U.S. embassy in Pakistan. Although at first shaken by what she sees, Maya insists on remaining present. Dan then proceeds to waterboard Ammar, with Maya herself providing the water. In a later session, Dan places a dog collar on Ammar and forces him to walk, naked, like a dog. He then confines him to a small box only large enough to contain a human being contorted uncomfortably. Maya is present throughout these proceedings, without objection. Notably, Ammar does not reveal any useful information during these sessions. He only reveals the identity of Abu Ahmed, the courier between Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s third in command, Abu Faraj al-Libi, when Dan and Maya clean him up and provide him with a decent meal, although, as Glenn Greenwald rightly notes, Ammar only reveals this information after Dan states, “I can always go eat with some other guy, and hang you back up to the ceiling.”¹ After the CIA captures Abu Faraj, Maya interrogates him herself, directing another agent to beat him; Abu Faraj refuses to give up information on Abu Ahmed, but Maya (rightly) interprets this reticence as support for her hunch about the central importance of Abu Ahmed to finding Bin Laden.

¹ Glenn Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty: CIA Hagiography, Pernicious Propaganda,” *Guardian* (Dec. 14, 2012), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/14/zero-dark-thirty-cia-propaganda>, accessed April 17, 2014.

So begins Maya's tireless quest for Abu Ahmed, and ultimately Osama Bin Laden. A key piece of information obtained through torture, or at least under the threat of torture, sets Maya down the path that ultimately leads to Bin Laden. *Zero Dark Thirty* portrays Maya as she single-mindedly sifts through video recordings of interrogations and intelligence files in pursuit of her target. She is hindered by the doubts of her CIA supervisors and the political considerations of officials in Washington, DC, but ultimately through keen insight and tenacity, Maya discovers Abu Ahmed's real identity and ultimately the location of Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The last half-hour of the film reenacts the raid on the compound by a unit of Navy SEALs.

Because of its portrayal of the role of torture in the pursuit of Bin Laden, *Zero Dark Thirty*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow with screenwriting by Mark Boal, has become one of the most controversial films of recent years. One of the earliest criticisms of the film came from Glenn Greenwald, writing in the United Kingdom's *Guardian*: ". . . the film's glorifying claims about torture are demonstrably, factually false. That waterboarding and other torture techniques were effective in finding bin Laden is a fabrication."² Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the political scientist Graham Allison criticizes the film not only for the direct link it draws between torture and the killing of Bin Laden, but for exaggerating the pervasiveness and effectiveness of torture in the war on terror.³ Critics of the film worried that, in the words of Peter Bergen writing at *Time.com*, "surely many millions of moviegoers would come out of the theatre under the impression that coercive interrogations had played a critical role in finding bin

² Glenn Greenwald, "Zero Dark Thirty: New Torture-Glorifying Film Wins Raves," *Guardian* (Dec. 10, 2012), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/10/zero-dark-thirty-torture-awards>, accessed April 17, 2014.

³ Graham Allison, "'Zero Dark Thirty' Has the Facts Wrong - And That's a Problem, Not Just for the Oscars," *Christian Science Monitor* (Jan. 22, 2013), <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2013/0222/Zero-Dark-Thirty-has-the-facts-wrong-and-that-s-a-problem-not-just-for-the-Oscars>, accessed April 16, 2014.

Laden,”⁴ and therefore that torture can be a legitimate and effective tool in the war on terror. These concerns rose to the highest levels, spurring Senators Dianne Feinstein, Carl Levin, and John McCain to write a letter to Michael Lynton, the chairman and CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment, requesting that he correct the false impression created by the film.⁵

The ambiguous relationship between journalism and artistry, fact and fiction, has also fueled the controversy over the film. While commenting on the controversy, Bergen claims that “the filmmakers set themselves up for this kind of scrutiny,” noting that at the beginning of the film we are told that it is based on “first hand accounts of actual events.”⁶ Boal describes his process of writing in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*:

I dove into it. I researched it and reported it much the way I would a magazine article. It was hard. I mean, this is a story that involves two of the most secretive agencies in the U.S. government [the CIA and the Defense Department]. But I just approached it as a journalist, talking to as many people as I could. And then as a dramatist -- to take that information and bring it to the screen in a way that's faithful to the homework but that puts the audience in the center of the action.⁷

He states in the same interview that torture is “part of the history, and we wanted to show the history,” the same way they would re-create the personal struggles of the CIA agents or a chase sequence. As Greenwald notes, however, when confronted with the factional inaccuracy of the film’s portrayal of torture, Boal has responded, “It’s a movie, not a documentary,” leading Greenwald to accuse Bigelow and Boal of “speaking out of both sides of their mouths.”⁸

Bigelow and Boal have defended the veracity of the film’s portrayal of torture, however, or at least have claimed that the facts are debated. According to Boal,

⁴ Peter Bergen, “Washington Is Overreacting to *Zero Dark Thirty*,” *Time.com* (Jan. 24, 2013), <http://ideas.time.com/2013/01/24/is-washington-overreacting-to-zero-dark-thirty/>, accessed April 16, 2014.

⁵ Sens. Dianne Feinstein, Carl Levin, and John McCain, “Letter to Michael Lynton,” (Dec. 19, 2012) http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve/?File_id=abcf714a-38fa-4c49-8abe-e06eed51e364, accessed April 16, 2014.

⁶ Bergen, “Washington is Overreacting.”

⁷ Rob Brunner, “Zero Dark Thirty and the Hunt for Bin Laden,” *Entertainment Weekly* (Nov. 30, 2012), <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20649930.00.html>. accessed April 16, 2014.

⁸ Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty: New Torture-Glorifying Film.”

Even simple factual questions are being debated and litigated at the highest levels of government, between, for example, the Senate and the CIA. . . . It's being debated among historians, among journalists, among politicians, even among those agencies. I've spoken to two people in the CIA who worked with the same prisoner, who had two totally different views of what got him to talk and of the value of a particular piece of intelligence in the overall puzzle.⁹

In a statement in defense of the film published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Bigelow echoes this sentiment: “Experts disagree sharply on the facts and particulars of the intelligence hunt, and doubtlessly that debate will continue.”¹⁰ Lending support to Bigelow and Boal’s views, Jessica Winter and Lily Rothman, writing in *Time*, note that former CIA director Leon Panetta has claimed that useful information on Bin Laden’s courier was obtained from detainees subject to “enhanced interrogation,” and that it is nearly impossible to know how crucial such techniques were for obtaining that information.¹¹

The film itself, however, does show a direct causal link between torture and the capture of Bin Laden. Does this link necessarily imply the moral approval of torture? As Bigelow argues, “depiction is not endorsement. If it was, no artist would be able to paint inhumane practices, no author could write about them, and no filmmaker could delve into the thorny subjects of our time.”¹² Many of the criticisms of the film do seem to make a facile equation between the effectiveness of torture and its moral acceptability. Greenwald is a notable exception to this impoverished moral calculus, stating that “Torture - like murder - is categorically wrong no matter what benefits it produces.”¹³ What Greenwald finds problematic about the film is not simply the portrayal of torture as effective, but the context in which that torture is placed, both in the narrative arc of the film and in American political culture. He notes that the assassination of

⁹ Quoted in Jessica Winter and Lily Rothman, “Art of Darkness,” *Time* (Feb. 4, 2013),

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2134499,00.html?iid=pw-ent>, accessed April 17, 2014.

¹⁰ Kathryn Bigelow, “Kathryn Bigelow Addresses ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Torture Criticism,” *Los Angeles Times* (Jan. 15, 2013), <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/15/entertainment/la-et-mn-0116-bigelow-zero-dark-thirty-20130116>, accessed April 16, 2014.

¹¹ Winter and Rothman, “Art of Darkness.”

¹² Bigelow, “Kathryn Bigelow Addresses Criticism.”

¹³ Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty: CIA Hagiography.”

Bin Laden “has obtained sacred status in American political lore. Nobody can speak ill of it, or even question it, without immediately prompting an avalanche of anger and resentment.” He goes on to say,

For that reason, to depict X as valuable in enabling the killing of bin Laden is - by definition - to glorify X. That formula will lead huge numbers of American viewers to regard X as justified and important. In this film: X = torture. That's why it glorifies torture: because it powerfully depicts it as a vital step - the first, indispensable step - in what enabled the US to hunt down and pump bullets into America's most hated public enemy.¹⁴

Others are critical of the film’s seemingly amoral stance toward torture, its failure to more explicitly condemn the practice or to encourage the audience to critically reflect on it.¹⁵

Greenwald laments that no real objections to torture or opposing views are ever raised in the film.¹⁶

Do the critics have the last word on *Zero Dark Thirty*? Although authorial intent does not determine a work’s meaning, it is worth noting that Bigelow has stated that she believes torture is “reprehensible”, and she considers the film “a deeply moral movie” that “questions the use of force” and “questions what was done in the name of finding bin Laden.”¹⁷ Perhaps critics of the film are asking the wrong questions. Perhaps the intention of the film is to challenge the “sacred status” of Bin Laden’s assassination by documenting its personal and moral toll? Greenwald is concerned that “huge numbers of American viewers” will view the film as justifying torture, but maybe the film serves as an indictment of a culture so ready to accept torture. *Zero Dark Thirty* raises questions different from those its critics expect it to answer. The film’s critics fault it for failing to give an answer to the moral quandary of torture, but the film is better interpreted as an exercise in virtue ethics, focused on questions of personal and community character.

¹⁴ Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty: CIA Hagiography.”

¹⁵ Peter Rainer, “Jessica Chastain Stars in the Troubling, Infuriating ‘Zero Dark Thirty,’” *Christian Science Monitor* (Dec. 14, 2012), <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2012/1214/Jessica-Chastain-stars-in-the-troubling-infuriating-Zero-Dark-Thirty-trailer>, accessed April 17, 2014; Susan L. Carruthers, “Zero Dark Thirty,” *Cineaste* (Spring 2013): 51.

¹⁶ Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty: CIA Hagiography.”

¹⁷ Winter and Rothman, “Art of Darkness.”

Virtue ethics provides a helpful interpretive lens for both *Zero Dark Thirty* and Bigelow and Boal's other collaborative effort, the 2010 Academy Award Best Picture *The Hurt Locker*. Virtue ethics, with its emphasis on character and narrative, seems better suited than more act-centered forms of ethics for interpreting film, and an analyses of these two films from this perspective demonstrates that, despite appearing to provide apolitical or amoral renditions of the war on terror and the war in Iraq, both films are deeply ethical and raise critical questions not only about controversial issues such as torture, but other important issues such as the quest for balance between military service and family, the tension between institutional maintenance and individual excellence, and the effects of the war on terror on the character of soldiers and our character as a society.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics emerged as a distinctive school of ethics in the second half of the twentieth century, as a reaction against more act-centered approaches to ethics. Virtue ethics has sought to recover ethical concepts prominent in the classical and medieval periods, while making them relevant for today's ethical discussions. In philosophical ethics, virtue ethics has challenged the dominant approaches of deontological ethics, which is focused on duties, and consequentialism, which is focused on the consequences of actions. Virtue ethics has also had a profound impact on Christian ethics. As Gilbert Meilander recognizes, the emergence of virtue ethics reflects "a widespread dissatisfaction with an understanding of the moral life which focuses primarily on duties, obligations, troubling moral dilemmas, and borderline cases."¹⁸ Virtue ethics tackles concerns that go beyond human acts and related concepts such as duties and moral norms; according to Jean Porter,

¹⁸ Gilbert C. Meilander, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 4-5.

If we are to live a humanly good life, we must maintain a course of activity of a certain sort over time, indeed, over the course of our whole lives. And while that course of activity will include discrete actions, and will also be characterized by the absence of other sorts of discrete actions, it will not be possible to describe it in those terms alone. Much less will we be able to carry out such a course of activity solely by setting ourselves to choose correct actions and to avoid incorrect actions, over and over again.¹⁹

What does virtue ethics bring to the table? As Meilander writes, “An ethic of virtue seeks to focus not only on such moments of great anxiety and uncertainty in life but also on the continuities, the habits of behavior which make us the persons we are.”²⁰ In particular, virtue ethics centers around three key themes: practice, virtue, and narrative.

The idea of a practice is central to virtue ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre defines a practice as:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.²¹

Two keys to MacIntyre’s definition of a practice are that it is an activity with goods internal to it, and that it demands a standard of excellence. He distinguishes between internal and external goods; using the example of a child taught to play chess with the reward of candy, MacIntyre explains that the candy is an external good while skill at the game is an internal good, specific to chess and known only to those with experience playing chess.²² All practices involve this latter sort of internal good. A practice also involves standards of excellence that place demands on their practitioners. These standards of excellence are the foundation of virtue, which MacIntyre defines as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.”²³ Notably, the virtues not only reflect skill in a practice, but

¹⁹ Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 100.

²⁰ Meilander, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 5.

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

²² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188-89.

²³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191.

also touch on our relationship with others who share in our practices, for example fair play in chess or fidelity in marriage. Both MacIntyre²⁴ and Meilander²⁵ point out that virtue is distinct from technical skill or technique; a virtue is distinguished from a technical skill by the intentional cultivation of the internal goods of the practice and the corresponding standard of excellence. This is the difference between being a good cook and following a recipe exactly.

We are necessarily engaged in a number of practices, but virtue demands that we somehow weave these diverse practices into a coherent whole. As MacIntyre explains, the life of virtue is not merely concerned with excellence in a variety of practices, but rather excellence in life as a whole.²⁶ We seek unity in our lives. Of course, virtue ethicists have long observed that one way we seek to achieve this unity is by focusing our energies on one particular practice, such as the accumulation of wealth or gaining power, at the expense of others, but hopefully we can easily perceive that such a life is impoverished.²⁷ Rather, we seek a balance among a number of different goals, united in a *telos*, or unified conception of our life and its purposes.²⁸ Therefore, the virtues are not just excellences in particular practices, but characteristics of this unified self, such that a person “spontaneously desires and seeks what is in accordance with the truly good life that he is trying to lead.”²⁹ This point leads MacIntyre to the important conclusion that, no matter how excellent one may be at it, certain practices can actually be unvirtuous if they detract from the unity of one’s life, for example someone who neglects their family in the pursuit of excellence in art.³⁰ He also warns that modern society makes virtue, the crafting of an integrated

²⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 193.

²⁵ Meilander, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 8-9.

²⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201.

²⁷ Porter, *Recovery of Virtue*, 77-78.

²⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 202.

²⁹ Porter, *Recovery of Virtue*, 103.

³⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 200-01.

self, difficult because of our tendency to compartmentalize the different areas of our life, such as public and private, work and family, religious and secular.³¹

We achieve unity and balance, and therefore virtue, through the crafting of a coherent narrative of our lives, one that has a beginning, middle, and end. As MacIntyre writes, “It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.”³² He provides the example of doing yard work; if I do it to keep up my home, then I interpret my action as part of the narrative of my ownership of the property, or even part of the longer history of the property before I set foot on it, while if I do it to please my wife, then I interpret my action as part of the narrative of my marriage. And so the narrative unity of our individual lives necessarily extends out to the broader narratives we share with others, not only marriage, for example, but to the wider communities to which we belong. We take on a certain character or role within these broader social narratives.³³ It is the stories we tell as communities that shape our understanding of character and virtue, of what is important in life.³⁴ As Meilander points out, the virtues not only help us respond to the world, but also help us to see the world in a certain way.³⁵

Given this important role of the broader community in communicating the stories that give our life meaning, virtue ethics, going back to Plato and Aristotle, has made the political community a central focus of its considerations. It is vital that we build a political community in which the virtues are valued and which fosters the flourishing of the virtues. MacIntyre explains that one important task of society is to establish institutions that can sustain the practices

³¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 204.

³² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 211-12.

³³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 218.

³⁴ Meilander, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 54-55.

³⁵ Meilander, *Theory and Practice of Virtue*, 10-11.

necessary for virtue. Institutions, in MacIntyre's way of thinking, generate and distribute the external goods, such as wealth and status, necessary for the maintenance of practices. For example, the practice of medicine is dependent on the institutions known as hospitals, which, besides nurturing medical practice, are also concerned with obtaining adequate funding and garnering a reputation for quality health care. Given this dual function of institutions, MacIntyre states that it is possible for an institution to become corrupted, when the pursuit of external goods overshadows the goods internal to the practice to which the institution is devoted. He continues: "In this context the essential function of the virtues is clear. Without them, . . . practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions."³⁶ In a society in which the virtues are not valued, practices risk being reduced to mere technical skills mastered for the sake of external goods such as wealth, power, and prestige.³⁷ Virtue ethics, therefore, provides a robust ethical perspective providing insight on a range of issues from personal character to political community. The key insights of virtue ethics also correlate quite closely with the major themes found in the films of Bigelow and Boal, *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*. I will first explore how *The Hurt Locker* portrays these themes, and then return to *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Virtue and *The Hurt Locker*

The Hurt Locker is the story of three soldiers in an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit of the U.S. Army: Sergeant First Class William James, Sergeant J.T. Sanborn, and Specialist Owen Eldridge. The film opens with the death of the team's previous leader, Staff Sergeant Matthew Thompson, who is killed by an improvised explosive device (IED). James arrives to replace Thompson as team leader. At first James alienates Sanborn and Eldridge through his seemingly reckless ways. On their first mission, James decides to defuse the explosive himself,

³⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 194-95.

³⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 193.

over the objections of Sanborn, rather than detonate it with a bot, and he releases a smoke canister to hide his activity, ostensibly to mask him from enemy observers, but more likely to avoid interference from his comrades. On their second mission, as James attempts to defuse a car bomb, he removes and tosses his headset to free himself from Sanborn's badgering. Sanborn later punches him in the face in retaliation. Still later, Sanborn and Eldridge contemplate killing James with a "misfired" detonator, fearing that his reckless ways will get them killed. Sanborn and Eldridge eventually come to respect James's skill, however, particularly after a shootout with Iraqi snipers in the desert. Things begin going wrong, however, when James becomes obsessed with tracking down the insurgents he believes are responsible for killing an Iraqi boy he has befriended, first journeying alone into the heart of Baghdad, and later leading his team in pursuit of the insurgents responsible for blowing up a tanker. This last misadventure leads to Eldridge getting shot and later airlifted out of Iraq. Later, when his tour is over, James returns home to his wife and son, but he finds life at home meaningless, and the film ends with James being redeployed to Iraq.

Like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *The Hurt Locker* has been criticized over its factual veracity, in this case concerning its portrayal of soldiers in Iraq. Although some criticisms have focused on relatively inconsequential details such as the color of uniforms or the soldiers' patches, others question the plausibility of the team's actions, such as James's lone excursion into Baghdad or the trio's search for insurgents down the alleys of the city.³⁸ Although at a certain level valid, these criticisms miss the point that the film is not intended as a documentary, it is not meant to

³⁸ Gregg Zoroya, "In 'The Hurt Locker,' War is Like a Drug," *USA Today* (Feb. 17, 2010), http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/LIFE/usaedition/2010-02-17-hurtlocker17_CV_U.htm, accessed April 17, 2014; Kate Hoit, "The Hurt Locker Doesn't Get This Vet's Vote," *Huffington Post* (Feb. 4, 2010), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kate-hoit/the-hurt-locker-doesnt-ge_b_449043.html, accessed April 17, 2014.

portray typical soldiers. James is the focus of the story precisely because he is exceptional, because he is out of the ordinary.

Although he appears reckless to his teammates, James demonstrates virtue, at least in relation to the specific practice of explosives disposal. Amy Taubin, writing in *Film Comment*, nails the dilemma: “Is he a cowboy, so addicted to his adrenaline rush that he’s heedless of danger to himself and the men in his unit? Or is he, by virtue of his experience and talents—he says he has disarmed 878 [*sic*] IEDs—simply better than Sanborn or Eldridge at estimating acceptable risk and getting the job done?”³⁹ Sanborn and Eldridge appear to evolve in their appraisal of James. During their first mission together, when James refuses to use the bot, Eldridge comments, “He’s a rowdy boy,” and Sanborn responds, “He’s reckless.” Much later, however, after successfully killing a group of Iraqi snipers in the desert, Eldridge says to James, “You’re not very good with people, are you, sir, but you’re good warrior.” A.O. Scott, writing in the *New York Times*, captures a crucial element of James’s character when he compares him to a “a jazz musician or an abstract expressionist painter”; James’s “inspired, improvisational zeal” illustrates what MacIntyre means by the appreciation for the internal goods of a practice, as opposed to mere technical skill.⁴⁰ As Scott continues,

Eldridge is a decent guy, dangerously out of his element but making the best of a bad situation. Sanborn is a professional, doing a job conscientiously and well. But James is something else, someone we recognize instantly even if we have never seen anyone quite like him before. He is a connoisseur, a genius, an artist.⁴¹

Richard Corliss, writing in *Time*, asks us to consider another side to James’s excellence, however: “James is a marvel to see in action. He has the cool aplomb, analytical acumen and attention to detail of a great athlete or a master serial killer--anyway, some gifted obsessive.”⁴²

³⁹ Amy Taubin, “Hard Wired,” *Film Comment* (May 1, 2009): 34.

⁴⁰ A.O. Scott, “Soldiers on a Live Wire Between Peril and Protocol,” *New York Times* (June 25, 2009), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/movies/26hurt.html>, accessed April 17, 2014.

⁴¹ Scott, “Soldiers on a Live Wire.”

⁴² Richard Corliss, “All Blown Up,” *Time* (July 6, 2009): 58.

By pairing “great athlete” with “master serial killer,” Corliss reminds us that excellence in a practice is not sufficient for virtue, but that more is required.

Arguably, a crucial dimension of James’s excellence is his respect for his adversaries, his recognition of their own excellence as warriors. This respect illustrates MacIntyre’s insistence that virtue in a practice demands a certain relationship with fellow practitioners. We see this respect for the adversary when James interacts with a bomb as if interacting with its maker, recognizing the craft that goes into its making. When showing his teammates a bomb component he has kept as a souvenir, James says, “This guy was good, I like him.” This respect is also revealed in an otherwise enigmatic scene. On his first mission with the team, James discovers the IED he has just defused is wired to a number of other IEDs, which he then proceeds to defuse. As he nears completion, we see an Iraqi man, who had been observing James, exit out of an apartment and begin walking down a flight of stairs. James shows the man the IED’s fuse and the man drops an object, perhaps the IED trigger, as he leaves up a different set of stairs. These gestures represent victory and defeat, respectively, in a duel of warriors that nevertheless requires respect by both parties. Not only does James’s respect for the adversary help explain his success, it sets him apart from others and also helps explain their failures. While James dismantles a car bomb at the United Nations headquarters, the commanding officer on the scene, even after being told that an insurgent had suffered a “survivable wound,” insists, “He’s not going to make it,” ensuring the insurgent’s death. This more brutal attitude toward the enemy contrasts with James’s almost chivalrous attitude. More significantly, in the desert the team encounters a group of British private contractors. After one of their number is killed by an Iraqi sniper, one of the British fires wildly at the Iraqis and ends up getting shot, while the British leader also gets killed by failing to take adequate cover as he adjusts his aim; both died because

they failed to adequately respect the skill of their adversaries. James, on the other hand, guides Sanborn and Eldridge in successfully killing the snipers precisely because he recognizes the Iraqis' skill and that defeating them will require patience.

Although James demonstrates excellence in the practice of explosives demolition, and perhaps soldiering in general, throughout the film we are also shown his fecklessness in other areas of his life, particularly family. We are introduced to James's family life with this dialogue, which takes place in the unit's barracks:

Sanborn: Who's that?

James: That's my son. He's a tough little bastard. Nothing like me.

Sanborn: You mean to tell me you're married?

James: Well, you know, I had a girlfriend, and she got pregnant, so we got married, we got divorced, or, you know, I thought we got divorced, I mean, she's still living in the house, and she says we're still together, so I don't know, what does that make her, I don't know?

Sanborn: Dumb, for still being with your ass.

James: Hey, she ain't fucking dumb, alright, she's just loyal, she's just loyal, that's all.

More poignantly, near the end of the film we are shown James's inability to return to life in the United States; he is bewildered by the task of picking out cereal at the grocery store, and he can't stop talking about Iraq while his wife wants to talk about anything else. James's speech to his baby son explains his predicament and clearly demonstrates the relevance of virtue ethics to the film:

Yeah you love playing with that. You love playing with all your stuffed animals. You love your mommy. Your daddy. You like your pajamas. You love everything, don't you? But you know what, buddy? As you get older, some of the things you love might not seem so special anymore. You know, like your jack in the box. Maybe you realize it's just a piece of tin and a stuffed animal. The older you get, the fewer things you really love. By the time you get to my age, maybe it's only one or two things. With me, I think it's one.

The one thing James loves is clearly war. In the terms of virtue ethics, he has crafted the unity of his life around a single, dominant practice, instead of integrating multiple goods, multiple practices, into a coherent personal narrative; or, perhaps, the practice of war demands so much of him that he cannot create that coherent narrative. Tara McKelvey, writing in the *American Prospect*, claims that by juxtaposing the adrenaline rush of war with the tedium of family life,

The Hurt Locker is “one of the most effective recruiting vehicles for the U.S. Army that I have seen.”⁴³ On the contrary, despite his excellence in the field, I believe it is clear that James is intended as a pathetic character, in the sense of evoking *pathos*, or pity, because he fails to live a truly fulfilling life. As Gregg Zoroya notes, soldiers who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq have identified with the film’s portrayal of the disconnect between military service and home life,⁴⁴ which they identify as one of the most difficult aspects of life as a soldier.

The film goes one step further, however, by suggesting that family life is actually a hindrance to the sort of excellence demonstrated by James. This is seen most clearly by contrasting James with his comrade, Sanborn. In the conversation between James and Sanborn cited earlier, Sanborn expresses his own hesitations about family:

Sanborn: My only problem is, the girl I do like, I can’t stop her from talking about babies, man.
James: Then give her your sperm, stud. Gone on, do it. Come on chicken, just give it to her.
Sanborn: No, hell no.
James: Make babies.
Sanborn: I’ll know when I’m ready. And I ain’t ready for that yet, I know that.

Sanborn expresses a reasonable hesitation about starting a family, given his commitments to the military. Near the end of the film, however, after Sanborn is nearly killed in an explosion, he and James have this conversation:

James: You alright?
Sanborn: No, man. I fucking hate this place.
James: Hey man, have a hit [of juice].
Sanborn: I’m not ready to die, James.
James: Well, you’re not going to die out here, bro.
Sanborn: Another two inches. Shrapnel zings by, slices my throat. I bleed out like a pig in the sand. Nobody’ll give a shit. I mean, my parents they care, but they don’t count, man. Who else? I don’t even have a son.
James: Well you’re going to have plenty of time for that, amigo.
Sanborn: No, man.
James: You know.
Sanborn: I’m done. I want a son. I want a little boy, Will. I mean, how do you do it, you know? Take the risk?
James: I don’t know, I just, uh, I guess I don’t think about it.

⁴³ Tara McKelvey, “The Hurt Locker as Propaganda,” *American Prospect* (July 17, 2009), <http://prospect.org/article/hurt-locker-propaganda>, accessed April 17, 2014.

⁴⁴ Zoroya, “In ‘The Hurt Locker.’”

Sanborn: Every time we go out, its life or death, you roll the dice. You recognize that, don't you?

James: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I do. But I don't know why. I don't know, J.T., you know why I am the way I am?

Sanborn: No, I don't.

Sanborn fears death because “nobody’ll give a shit,” or, to express it more philosophically, his death would lack a narrative context. In Sanborn’s mind, having a son provides that context, giving his life a coherence it lacked before, now meaning that the risks of being a soldier are irrational, incompatible with his goals for his life. This inability to give his full commitment to soldiering explains Sanborn’s inadequacy, compared to James. James had already perceived Sanborn’s lack of excellence; earlier, when Sanborn had asked him “you think I got what it takes to put on the suit?” James replies, “Hell, no.” Sanborn perceives that James is different, and while neither can answer why James is the way he is, it is because he has made the practice of war the central focus of his life, although with the consequence that his life lacks coherence.

We see this same conflict between family and soldiering in a more opaque way in James’s relationship to the Iraqi boy Beckham. As the film progresses, James becomes increasingly fond of Beckham, perhaps even seeing him somewhat like a son. It is precisely when James believes, falsely, that insurgents have killed Beckham and planted a bomb in his body that his behavior becomes increasingly erratic, by going into Baghdad alone in search of Beckham’s killers and by leading his team into the streets of Baghdad in search of phantom insurgents. Now arguably these decisions illustrate the same impulsiveness that in other situations serves James well, but I think a better interpretation is that a real change takes place in James. One small sign is Sanborn’s recognition that something is different. Referencing James’s odd habit of keeping components of bombs he has defused, Sanborn comments on James’s discovery of a bomb in the body of a boy he takes to be Beckham, “I bet you he won’t keep any

of these parts under his bed.” Another sign of this is James’s changed attitude toward his adversaries. As he and his team stand on the edge of the exploded tanker’s blast zone, he says:

What if there was no body [i.e., of a suicide bomber]? What if it was a remote det? A really good bad guy hides out in the dark, right? Right here. A perfect vantage point outside the blast radius to sit back and watch us clean up their mess. . . . You know there are guys watching us right now, they’re laughing at this, and I’m not okay with that.

The adversary is no longer a skilled opponent with which James must match wits, but a phantom, from whom James seeks revenge. Interestingly, as viewers, from this point on we no longer see the faces of the soldiers’ adversaries, as we have in past incidents. By lashing out in revenge, James has tarnished his excellence as a soldier, risking his own life and leading to the wounding of his friend, Eldridge. Tellingly, when James discovers that Beckham is still alive, he ignores him, perhaps realizing that his attachment to Beckham contributed to his unwise decisions. In his last mission before his return home, James is faced with a man unwillingly wearing a suicide vest. Despite the man’s insistent pleas, expressed through a translator, that he needs help because he is a family man, James once again recognizes the skill of his adversary, in this case meaning that he sees that he does not have time to defuse the bomb before its timer runs out. James wisely retreats, saving his life and Sanborn’s even as the bomb explodes, rather than letting the moral tragedy of the situation overcome his judgment. James again recognizes that mastery in his task requires setting aside the bonds of family.

Although James experiences a tension between his life as a soldier and his home life, the film also explores the tension between James’s excellence as a soldier and the institutional life of the military. Far from being a recruiting tool for the Army, in many cases the film portrays the Army in an unflattering way. The U.S. Army recognized this more perceptively than the critics, withholding support for the film for the vague reason of "elements that were not in line with

Army values.”⁴⁵ To refer back to virtue ethics, the film explores the tension between an institution’s dual functions of sustaining practices and pursuing the external goods necessary for that sustenance. This tension is somewhat humorously expressed in the film by the same commanding officer mentioned earlier, who had let the insurgent die. After James defuses the car bomb, this conversation ensues:

Officer: Well that’s just hot shit. You’re a wild man, you know that? He’s a wild man, you know that? I want to shake your hand.

James: Thank you, sir.

Officer: How many bombs have you disarmed?

James: Uh, I’m not quite sure.

Officer: Sergeant, I asked you a question.

James: Eight hundred and seventy three, sir.

Officer: Eight hundred and seventy three. Eight hundred and seventy three. That’s just hot shit. Eight hundred and seventy three.

James: Counting today’s, sir.

Officer: That’s got to be a record. What’s the best way to go about disarming one of these things?

James: The way you don’t die, sir.

Officer: That’s a good one. That’s spoken like a wild man. That’s good.

The officer recognizes James’s excellence and how it furthers the mission of the Army, while at the same time recognizing that he is a “wild man,” a risk to the Army’s institutional procedures. James is not a rebel, however; he faithfully serves the Army’s mission. At the end of the film, it is easy for him to redeploy to Iraq. As Corliss rightly points out, James needs the Army, and the Army needs James.⁴⁶

As portrayed in the film, the institutional function of the Army is to keep its soldiers alive and healthy. Not only does this institutional function exist in tension with excellence in soldiering, which as we have seen involves the acceptance of risk, but in several instances in the film we even see this institutional concern with well-being undermining itself. After all, Sanborn and Eldridge loved and were comfortable with Staff Sergeant Thompson, who was killed because of the failure of the ostensibly safer bot, whereas the reckless “wild man” James keeps

⁴⁵ Zoroya, “In ‘The Hurt Locker.’”

⁴⁶ Corliss, “All Blown Up.”

the whole team alive. This institutional paradox is best embodied in the character of Lieutenant Colonel John Cambridge, the camp psychiatrist, who has been counseling Eldridge since the death of Thompson. Cambridge's function is to see to the mental health of the soldiers, or, in other words, to promote the sort of wholeness described by virtue ethics. Cambridge is portrayed as ineffective, however, dispensing pabulum such as advising Eldridge that "this doesn't have to be a bad time in your life. Going to war is a once in a lifetime experience. It could be fun." Despite coming to him for advice, Eldridge holds him in contempt, calling him "Mr. Be All You Can Be" and insisting that, "You need to come out from behind the wire and see what we do," in order to truly understand what soldiers in the field go through. Eldridge exhibits a deep skepticism of the institutional wisdom of the Army, mockingly pointing out to Cambridge that "He's [i.e., James] going to get me killed. I almost died yesterday. But at least I'll die in the line of duty, proud and strong." When Cambridge does decide to go into the field with the team, he is completely inept and ends up getting accidentally killed by a detonating explosive, only deepening Eldridge's anxiety as he blames himself for the death. The point here seems to be that while the institution of the Army allows a soldier like James to flourish, and therefore to carry out the Army's purposes, its focus on preserving the life and well-being of its soldiers also contributes to procedures and characters so divorced from the skillful practice of soldiering that the Army's mission is made more difficult, if not undermined.

Aside from criticisms of the accuracy of its portrayals, *The Hurt Locker* has also been criticized for taking an apolitical stance toward the Iraq War. For example, Carla Seaquist, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, writes that, "For an artist to take an 'apolitical' stance in relation to such a war, a war that tramples all over the moral line, is to surrender the title

‘artist.’”⁴⁷ Given what has already been said, however, Steve Vineberg’s statement in the *Christian Century* that “Bigelow and Boal never raise political issues; nor do they seem to have any philosophical interest in war,” can only be true if one is limited to the concerns of act-centered ethics, such as whether the war in Iraq was just. Bigelow and Boal show a deep concern for the political and philosophical dimensions of war, just a concern better interpreted through the lens of virtue ethics. *The Hurt Locker* does not directly address the question of the wisdom of the Iraq War, but rather makes the question implicit. As we have seen, MacIntyre insists that the political community’s concern should be promoting the flourishing of the virtues. Can the United States’ decision to go to war in Iraq be considered wise if someone like James is the exemplary practitioner demanded by this decision? Is there some defect in American culture, perhaps the compartmentalization of life mentioned by MacIntyre, that makes it difficult for someone like James to carry out the task appointed to him while also maintaining a healthy balance in the rest of his life? Perhaps more darkly, do the very natural concerns for safety and family integral to life in society lead political societies to war, necessitating figures such as James? Perhaps James’s fantasy of enemies hiding in the dark, laughing in the aftermath of an attack, is a veiled explanation of how the U.S. wound up in Iraq less than two years after the September 11 attacks.

Virtue and *Zero Dark Thirty*

The quest for enemies hiding in the dark brings us back to *Zero Dark Thirty*, Bigelow and Boal’s rendition of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. In some ways *Zero Dark Thirty* is quite different from *The Hurt Locker*; for example, while the latter is episodic with little narrative arc, the former has a clear narrative trajectory, climax, and denouement. The two films, however,

⁴⁷ Carla Seaquist, “‘The Hurt Locker’: Hollywood’s Unsettling View of the Iraq War,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Mar. 29, 2010), <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2010/0329/The-Hurt-Locker-Hollywood-s-unsettling-view-of-the-Iraq-war>, accessed April 17, 2014. See also Robert Sklar, “The Hurt Locker,” *Cineaste* (Winter 2009): 55-56.

share many of the same thematic concerns. First, both films center on individuals who are highly skilled at a set of tasks that could easily be classified as practices: in *The Hurt Locker*, James, a specialist in dismantling explosives; in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya Lambert, a CIA agent in pursuit of Osama Bin Laden. Second, in both films, the central characters also struggle, or fail, to integrate this practice into a complete life. Third, and this has been little commented upon, in both films the main characters, precisely because of their excellence, chafe against the institutions to which they belong that ostensibly exist to sustain the practices in which they are engaged, the U.S. Army and the CIA, respectively. And finally, implicitly in light of the first three themes, both films raises questions about American society's responsibility for sustaining the institutions and practices portrayed in the two films.

In *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya demonstrates the same inspired, intuitive skill at her task as that of James, although in this case intelligence analysis rather than explosives demolition. Given that intelligence analysis is not nearly as cinematically compelling as dismantling a bomb, we do not "see" Maya's skill in the same way we do James's. Her skill is portrayed by way of her absolute confidence in her conclusions, a confidence that appears foolhardy or fanatical to the less skilled. When she is first introduced to the CIA station in the U.S. embassy in Pakistan, Maya confidently, and correctly, criticizes the analysis of her more experienced peers because it is based on "pre-9/11 behavior." At times, Maya seems to have the ability to make her conclusions true simply through sheer power of will; after laying out her case to Dan, the CIA operative who earlier had tortured Ammar and now has a desk job in Washington, that Abu Ahmed may not be dead, as suspected, Dan responds, "In other words, you want it to be true." Maya answers, "Yes, I fucking want it to be true!" And, of course, it is. Later, at a high level meeting at the CIA headquarters in Langley, the director asks his advisers about their level of

certainty that the compound identified in Abbottabad is the location of Bin Laden. Some say sixty percent and others say eighty; then, when Maya is asked her opinion, she responds, “One hundred percent, he’s there. Okay fine, ninety-five percent, because I know certainty freaks you guys out; but it’s a hundred!” Because of her skill, Maya is able to reach a level of certainty and confidence that her more cautious superiors lack. The only other characters who share Maya’s certainty are the Navy SEALs selected to carry out the assassination of Bin Laden, perhaps because they, like her, are masters of their chosen practice. Justin, one of the SEALs, asks Patrick, another SEAL, why he believes Maya’s theory about Bin Laden’s compound, to which Patrick responds, “Her confidence”; Justin then counters, “If her confidence is the one thing that’s keeping me from getting ass-raped in a Pakistani prison . . . I don’t know. I’m gonna be honest with you, though, I guess I’m cool with it.” Patrick combines Maya’s confidence with James’s nonchalance.

As with James, Maya’s devotion to her practice overwhelms the other areas of her life. Whereas James at least had a family, Maya has no back story to speak of. As Peter Rainer writes in the *Christian Science Monitor*, she is “a cipher - a vengeance machine with flame-red hair,”⁴⁸ and Hanna Rosin notes that, like James, Maya has “no existence outside of war.”⁴⁹ In a conversation between Maya and the CIA director, we learn that she was recruited by the CIA right out of high school, and when the director asks her, “What else have you done for us besides Bin Laden?” she replies, “Nothing, I’ve done nothing else.” Maya’s lack of social relationships is brought out in a conversation with Jessica, her colleague at the CIA station in Pakistan:

Jessica: We’re just worried about you okay, is that okay to say? I mean, look how run down you are. Where’s Jack?

Maya: Probably stuck in some checkpoint somewhere.

Jessica: You two hooked up yet?

Maya: Hello, I work with him. I’m not that girl that fucks, it’s unbecoming.

⁴⁸ Rainer, “Jessica Chastain.”

⁴⁹ Hanna Rosin, “The Auteur of Unease,” *New Republic* (Feb. 11, 2013): 8.

Jessica: So? A little fooling around wouldn't hurt you.
Maya: [Rolls eyes.]
Jessica: So no boyfriend. You got any friends at all?

Note that while Maya's response to the question about hooking up at first implies that it is workplace romance that she objects to, her answer suggests that she is uncomfortable with any sort of sexual relationship. Ryan Gilbey, writing in the *New Statesman*, makes the interesting point that Maya's pursuit of Bin Laden takes on an almost erotic quality: "Maya only has eyes for her special guy, her Mr Wrong: Osama Bin Laden."⁵⁰ In the same conversation with Maya already cited, Jessica appeals to another relational metaphor, again suggesting that Maya's obsession has taken the place of other types of relationship: "Look, I know Abu Ahmed is your baby, but it's time to cut the umbilical cord." Maya's exclusive focus on the practice of hunting for Bin Laden is most poignantly demonstrated at the end of the film. After Bin Laden's death, we see Maya boarding a C-17 cargo plane alone. The pilot says, "You must be pretty important, you got the whole plane to yourself! Where do you want to go?" Maya's only response is to silently break into tears. She has nowhere to go; her life now lacks narrative coherence, absent its one, overriding practice. Maya, like James, is a pathetic character, although James at least had the option of redeploying.

Maya stands out from her colleagues because she is uncorrupted by their concern for external goods; in *Zero Dark Thirty*, however, the concern is not with family but with careerism. As MacIntyre notes, prestige is an external good necessary for the functioning of an institution, but which can also corrupt the practices for which the institution exists. In this case, it is necessary for CIA agents to be concerned for their careers and seek advancement; the agency's mission depends on talented agents rising through the ranks. In the film, however, this concern is portrayed as leading to tragic failure. This failure is most evident in Jessica. In a conversation

⁵⁰ Ryan Gilbey, "Searching for Mr. Wrong," *New Statesman* (Jan. 25, 2013): 48.

with Maya, Jessica claims that “Facilitators come and go, but one thing you can count on in life is that everyone wants money,” to which Maya objects, “You're assuming that al-Qaeda members are motivated by financial rewards. They're radicals.” Jessica and Maya’s disagreement about the enemy reflects their own personalities, the one skilled but mercenary, the other fanatically focused on her work.

Later, Jessica believes she has come across an important lead, a Jordanian doctor with access to the inner circle of al-Qaeda, apparently willing to betray them: “The Jords worked him for a year. Dinners, money. They've convinced him that it's his patriotic duty to turn on al-Qaeda and get rich doing it.” Although CIA station chief Joseph Bradley and Maya express skepticism, they allow Jessica to set up a meeting with the doctor at Camp Chapman in Afghanistan. As Jessica awaits the arrival of the doctor, she tells Lauren, a young agent, “Washington will want real time updates so please stay on top of that. Be concise. The Director is in the loop. And I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't update the President.” Jessica’s words and tone subtly suggest that she is partly motivated by gaining the attention of her superiors, all the way up to the president. We quickly learn, however, that Jessica’s assessment of the doctor is wrong; he kills Jessica and the waiting team with a car bomb. Jessica’s concern for recognition and career advancement, and her assumption that others are motivated by similar things, clouded her judgment. As Maya hears the news report of the attack, the newscaster mentions that Jessica was a mother of three children, a hint of *The Hurt Locker*’s similar representation of the clouding effects of family.

Other CIA staffers, and in particular Maya’s superiors, are corrupted less by careerism than by political demands. Throughout the film, Maya and the other CIA agents become aware of the Riyadh compound bombings in 2003, the London bombings of 2005, the bombing of the

Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in 2008 (at which Maya and Jessica are present), and the failed Times Square bombing in 2010. These recurring events put pressure on Maya's superiors to get results, to find those responsible. After Maya has laid out some of her findings, Bradley warns her, "Let me know when you've got some actionable intelligence, preferably something that leads to a strike." After the Camp Chapman attack, George, a CIA supervisor, arrives in Pakistan to berate the team:

We are failing. We're spending billions of dollars. People are dying. We're still no closer to defeating our enemy. They attacked us by land in 98, by sea in 2000, and from the air in 2001. They murdered 3,000 of our citizens in cold blood. And they have slaughtered our forward deployed, and what the fuck have we done about it, huh? What've we done? We have twenty leadership names, we have only eliminated four of them. I want targets. Do your fucking jobs, bring me people to kill.

Maya shares this goal; her own response to the Camp Chapman attack was to vow, "I'm going to smoke everybody involved in this op. And then I'm going to kill Bin Laden." Maya, however, unlike her supervisors, recognizes that this task requires patience and diligence, and that a quest for immediate results is actually a distraction from the painstaking work that needs to be done.

This becomes clear in a lengthy exchange with Bradley:

Bradley: Someone just tried to blow up Times Square and you're talking to me about some facilitator some detainee seven years ago said might be working with al-Qaeda?

Maya: He's the key to Bin Laden.

Bradley: I don't fucking care about Bin Laden, I care about the next attack. You're going to start working on the American al-Qaeda cells, protect the homeland.

Maya: Bin Laden is the one who keeps telling them to attack the homeland. If it wasn't for him, al-Qaeda would still be focused on overseas targets. If you really want to protect the homeland, you need to get Bin Laden.

Bradley: This guy never met Bin Laden. This guy's a freelancer working off the fucking internet. No one's even talked to Bin Laden in four years, he's out of the game. He may well even be dead. He might as well be fucking dead. But you know what you're doing, you're chasing a ghost while the whole fucking network grows all around you.

Maya: You just want me to nail some low level Mullah-crack-a-dulla so that you can check that box on your resume that says while you were in Pakistan you got a real terrorist. But the truth is you don't understand Pakistan, and you don't know al-Qaeda. Either give me the team I need to follow this lead, or the other thing you're gonna have on your resume is being the first Station Chief to be called before a congressional committee for subverting the efforts to capture or kill Bin Laden.

Bradley: You're fucking out of your mind.

Maya: I need four techs in a safe house in Rawalpindi and four techs in a safe house in Peshawar. Either send them out or send me back to DC and explain to the Director why you did it.

Maya has clearly learned to appeal to her superiors' careerism and political instincts without falling prey herself.

Ironically, the same political instincts that lead Maya's supervisors to demand immediate results also lead them to hesitate in carrying out a strike once Maya has actionable intelligence. This hesitance leads to one of Maya's most characteristic gestures: counting down the days since the discovery of the compound in Abbottabad without a strike with a bright red marker on George's office window. Both the CIA Deputy Director and the National Security Advisor appeal to the supposed certainty over the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as reason to approach the new intelligence concerning Bin Laden's whereabouts cautiously. Even Dan, who earlier had in a sense acted as Maya's mentor, assesses his trust in her conclusion at sixty percent, demonstrating by his lack of certainty that by moving to Washington, he has become a political animal. We see a foreshadowing of Dan's coming weakness when he earlier explains that he is leaving Pakistan because "I think I've seen too many guys naked. It's going to be over a fucking hundred at this point. I need to go and do something normal for a while." After suggesting that Maya also move to Washington, she responds, "I'm not going to find Abu Ahmed from DC." Only the CIA Director seems to understand Maya; he asks Jeremy, a CIA official at Langley, "What do you think of the girl?" Jeremy responds, "I think she's fucking smart," to which the Director replies, "We're all smart, Jeremy," suggesting that he recognizes that Maya possesses something that goes beyond the technical knowledge possessed by most other CIA officials, again illustrating the distinction between excellence in a practice and technical skill.

Therefore Greenwald's claim that in the film, "All agents of the US government - especially in its intelligence and military agencies - are heroic, noble, self-sacrificing crusaders

devoted to stopping *The Terrorists*; their only sin is all-consuming, sometimes excessive devotion to this task,” is simply false.⁵¹ Although skilled, most CIA officials in the film come off as flawed. Graham Allison is closer to the truth when he asserts that the film overemphasizes the role of a single CIA agent in tracking down Bin Laden, when instead “the truth is thousands of intelligence officers - literally thousands - devoted a decade of extraordinary work collecting information from sources of all kinds, analyzing it for minute clues, connecting dots, and then subjecting conclusions to competing analyses that connected other dots to contrary conclusions”; he continues, “the film's hype of a fictional heroine who succeeded by defying ‘the system’ is fundamentally misleading.”⁵²

As the preceding analysis has shown, although Maya is portrayed as highly skilled, and perhaps even as noble, it is not clear that even she is intended to come across as heroic or virtuous. As Winter and Rothman point out, as a result of “Hollywood-movie conditioning,” we have “the expectation that we should identify with a heroic protagonist, share her motivations, enjoy her successes and, above all, feel a sense of triumph as we walk out of the theater,” but, they add, “Bigelow's movies don't work that way.”⁵³ For example, Greenwald refers to Maya as “the film's pure, saintly heroine,”⁵⁴ but perhaps this characterization is unjustified. In critiquing the film, Susan L. Carruthers writes that torture “appears to do no lasting damage to either torturer or tortured,”⁵⁵ but it should be clear that in some sense Maya is damaged, not only in her personal life but also in her moral life. Perhaps the film in fact asks us to question the worthiness of the war on terror, or aspects of it, as a national goal if the master practitioners we need to execute this goal are like Maya, “ciphers” without friends or relationships, or Dan, the

⁵¹ Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty: CIA Hagiography.”

⁵² Allison, “Zero Dark Thirty.”

⁵³ Winter and Rothman, “Art of Darkness.”

⁵⁴ Greenwald, “Zero Dark Thirty: CIA Hagiography.”

⁵⁵ Carruthers, “Zero Dark Thirty,” 51.

“sadistically enthusiastic”⁵⁶ CIA agent who can say, while torturing Ammar, “This is what defeat looks like”? Characterizing Maya as a “blank” because of her lack of personal narrative, Peter Rainer asks the right question, “Is Bigelow saying that, in the ‘war on terror,’ only the blanks can get the job done?”⁵⁷ Have we as a society embarked on a path that requires us to be guided by people alienated from their personal narrative context, which is necessarily their moral context?

Conclusion

Because it puts great emphasis on narrative, virtue ethics functions well as a tool in interpreting film. Although it raises provocative questions, however, compared to more act-centered approaches to ethics, virtue ethics often fails to offer straightforward answers. How can one provide a definitive answer, for example, to the question of whether James’s fecklessness in family life is intrinsic to his excellence as a soldier, or whether the Army could have served him better by helping provide a more healthy balance in his life? Or to the question of whether or not Maya’s social and moral rootlessness makes her ideal for carrying out the tasks required of her in the war on terror? Our questions should be, “Does the story ring true?” and, “Does it illuminate the real life experience of soldiers and others engaged in the war on terror?” If we find a story unconvincing, perhaps the best response is to tell a different story of our own. MacIntyre points out that because we develop our own personal narrative within a shared social context, a shared narrative, we are able to call one another to account, “Asking you what you did and why, saying what I did and why, pondering the differences between your account of what I did and my account of what I did, and *vice versa*.”⁵⁸ That is not all that different from the actress Jessica Chastain’s characterization of Bigelow’s method, in reference to *Zero Dark Thirty*: “I believe that was Kathryn’s intention when she made the film — to open a conversation. She ends it with

⁵⁶ Rainer, “Jessica Chastain.”

⁵⁷ Rainer, “Jessica Chastain.”

⁵⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

an unanswered question, Where do you want to go? She's asking the audience, Where have we been, and where do we go from here?"⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Winter and Rothman, "Art of Darkness."