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Zero Dark Thirty, Maya and the myth of the Calydonian Boar

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Abstract

Zero Dark Thirty depicts its female protagonist as a leading strategic character in the fictionalised account of the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Yet, as this study argues, she is paradoxically framed in terms of her capacity to disrupt the status quo. Kathryn Bigelow's Maya (Jessica Chastain) is often marginalised by the male-dominated culture within which she works. This is a recurrent theme in military/combat narratives, evident as far back as Ovid's tale of the warrior woman Atalanta. Research challenges the idea that physical and psychological differences make women less fitted to active combat, yet Bigelow's cinematography and staging establish a narrative that expresses a mythological fear and mistrust of women's inclusion into the fraternal unit. In arguing that the fate of Maya represents a cultural template which extends back to ancient mythology, this study unpicks the ideological forces which inform Bigelow's framing of her female protagonist.

Keywords *Zero Dark thirty*; myth; gender; spatial cartography

Introduction

Zero Dark Thirty (Bigelow 2012) concerns a fictionalised account of actual events that took place in May 2011 when Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda, was pursued, shot and killed by US special forces as part of operations in response to the attacks of 9/11. Central to the narrative is the character of Maya, a CIA intelligence analyst who tracks bin Laden to his compound in Abbottabad in Pakistan. Maya, therefore, plays a key strategic role, yet she is often geographically located within the *mise-en-scène* as an outsider, observing her male counterparts from a distance as they carry out heroic military operations. This article addresses the gendered aspects of Bigelow's geographic orientation of characters through a formal analysis of three key scenes in the film. In an interview with Gavin Smith before the film was made, Bigelow emphasised the importance of geography in action sequences, stating, 'I see a lot of films in which geography is sacrificed, it's just a lot of fast cutting, a lot of noise, a lot of impacts – and I have no idea where I am, or who is coming from left or right' (in Smith 2003, 20). During the interview, Bigelow outlines the importance of detailed planning, storyboarding, modelling and the staging of action sequences. Her aim in this is to firmly establish visual and narrative orientation but without compromising on tempo and fluidity of action, a vital aspect of her work. Bigelow describes how shooting with several cameras simultaneously conveys turbulence while maintaining spatial orientation. The combination of rigs, stabilisers, Steadicam and hand-held techniques that she uses creates an immediacy suggestive of current affairs reportage, typifying Bigelow's style (see Smith 2003, 20–31). A similar approach is also apparent in many of the less action-orientated sequences in *Zero Dark Thirty*. This style manifests through a subtle use of mis-framing and reframing with deliberately blurred and obscured shots – an aesthetic device that is maintained throughout the film (King 2017, 56). The technique conveys anxiety and watchfulness and makes visible the proximity between control associated with US military strategy and violent unrest particular to the locations where characters are situated. However, controlled turbulence is balanced with Bigelow's detailed awareness of the complex geographic orientation of characters. In this respect, attention is given to the spatial positioning of gendered bodies as Maya negotiates the hierarchical structures of predominantly male working environments. While throughout the film men and women are located as together or separate, participating or watching, a recurrent visual theme is discernible whereby male characters are often positioned in semi-circular and inward-facing formations to the exclusion of Maya, who inevitably looks on from an exterior perspective. Such spatial positioning of gendered bodies is interpreted here as a geographical template or cartography that is matched and repeated in diverse locations throughout the film; a 'black ops' torture site, the political boardroom and in a military compound where special forces prepare for attack.

This article addresses Bigelow's approach to cinematography in the framing of gendered identities, with close attention to the spatial positioning of characters in scenes. Furthermore, her use of visual composition is contextualised through cultural mythologies grounded in ancient history and repeated over time. Some of these themes have already been addressed in existing scholarship on Bigelow. For example, her cinematographic style has been theorised in terms of its relationship with culture and mythology, but less attention has been paid to locating gendered subjects in key scenes (King 2017; McSweeney 2019). So too are there critical debates surrounding the ethics of torture portrayal, the framing of history and of Maya's female identity, although not in relation to technical and spatial composition (Coll 2013; Schlag 2019). Similarly, much has been written about gendered relationships, spatial composition and viewer identification, particularly in the opening torture scene of the film, but these debates have not explored the mythological and cultural foundations for its visual cartography (Åhäll 2016; Mantoan 2018; Purse 2017).

This article, then, extends a number of these themes to argue that Bigelow's spatial organisation of gendered bodies is inflected and informed by a historical, cultural template that dates back to Greek mythology. It also addresses the contemporary military contexts that lend coherence to Maya's positioning as isolated from the homosocial fraternity,

despite her role as key protagonist in the film's narrative. Arguably, Maya's exclusion visually reinforces narrative themes whose patrimonial heritage can be found in ancient mythology. I contend that much of its narrative resonates with the ancient legends of heroic battles, in which women are framed as passive bystanders – Arthur's Guinevere, for example – or to convey that their presence both disrupts and threatens the status quo. An example of this is found in Ovid's retelling of the Greek myth of the Calydonian Boar, which introduces the Tegean girl – sometimes known as Atalanta – who pursues and wounds a wild boar but with disastrous consequences for the male band of warriors she has joined (Hamilton 1942; Melville, 1986). Traces of Atalanta's story can be found in Bigelow's treatment of Maya. Like Atalanta, she is responsible for locating and targeting the enemy. Yet her successes are largely uncelebrated, and she is often rewarded by being ostracised by her male colleagues. Atalanta's story provides an aesthetic patrimony or cultural template that repeats and reinforces hegemonic stereotypes predicated on a fear and mistrust of women's inclusion in the fraternal unit.

I borrow the term aesthetic patrimony from Michael Shapiro (2007) who describes a template or heritage through which cultural hierarchies are established, embedded and naturalised over time. For Shapiro, an aesthetic patrimony underpins geopolitical power dynamics between states and state subjects in times of war. He defines these forces in terms of 'Violent Cartographies' (1997, 2007) in which articulations of allied self and enemy other are generated by 'geographic imaginaries and antagonisms, based on models of identity difference' (Shapiro 2007, 291). Shapiro's work resonates with Michel Foucault's theorisations on biopolitics which map the relationship between the subject, governmentality and power (Foucault 1977; Shapiro 1997). Here, Foucault refers to 'The mechanism through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power' (1977, 2004). Cultural identities – heroes and villains – and visual cartographies – interior and exterior spaces – are appropriated in ways that reflect particular state ideologies at a specific given time (Shapiro 2007). In this study, an aesthetic patrimony operates as a cultural palimpsest which has its genealogy in ancient myths that are repeated over time until they become an established normative position – such as the exclusion of women or minority groups from military forces. In this respect, Bigelow's treatment of Maya as spatially dislocated perhaps has a familiar resonance with the filmmaker's own position in a male-dominated film industry. As Shapiro notes, 'the dominant geopolitical map has been imposed on the world by power rather than simply emerging as an evolutionary historical inevitability' (1997, 15) with deeply embedded cultural mythologies leading to the perception that state-sanctioned violence is a 'man's game' (Basham 2016, 29). Shapiro describes the military unit 'as a place in which the self can be realised or perfected. However, the implication is that the primary "self" exemplified is masculine' (1997, 106). His theorisations aptly describe several scenes in *Zero Dark Thirty*. In one such scene, discussed later, a unit of Navy SEALs,¹ before they go on their mission to capture bin Laden, play a game using horseshoes. Maya is positioned at the edge of their makeshift desert enclosure where her solitary status is juxtaposed against the tight semi-circular formation of men. The composition of the scene is both open and closed, the Navy SEALs on the inside being symbolically protected from those who do not fit or belong – in this case, a female CIA operative who stands outside looking in at the men who are at rest or absorbed in play.

Utilising formal analyses, this article explores the geographical relationships between gendered bodies within the mise-en-scène. As noted, it argues that the gender dynamics associated with *Zero Dark Thirty* are reflected in a spatial cartography in three key scenes, including a black ops site, the political boardroom and in the preparation for a military raid. The Greek myth of Atalanta underpins an argument that Bigelow's organisation of such spaces reflects a cultural heritage founded on misogyny and a deep-seated mistrust of women in military ranks. The article also acknowledges Bigelow's spatial cartography as reflective of the contemporary debates concerning women's roles in armed combat that were ongoing during the making and release of the film (MOD 2010). Military and government reports produced in the US and UK highlighted a profound mistrust of women's inclusion in military combat. These concerns were based not on factual evidence but on embedded perceptions surrounding a fraternal cohesion, deemed necessary for effective military performance (Basham 2016). I extend theorisations by Carole Pateman to define the fraternal unit as 'a patriarchal pact' (Pateman [1989] 2002, 131) that establishes and reinforces hegemonic rights over women. A military fraternity is also grounded in a patrimonial heritage in which performed rituals associated with hegemonic masculinity are learned and assimilated in almost exclusively male groups (Barrett 2001; Greven 2009). Raewyn Connell's analysis of 'hegemonic masculinities' is further pertinent to the overarching discourse that surrounds Maya's isolation. For Connell, hegemonic masculinities are conceptualised as aspirational systems of gender practices based on masculine ideals which establish the dominant position of men over women and other men (Connell [1995] 2005, 77). It is my assertion that Maya's framing is based on a combination of enduring hierarchical power structures and associated mythological fears that are both culturally and politically pervasive. To argue this point I will turn first to Ovid's Atalanta and her encounter with a band of male heroes in their pursuit of a wild boar.

The Tegean girl, Atalanta and the hunt for a wild boar

Atalanta's encounter with the Calydonian wild boar appears in Apollodorus around the first-or second-century AD, and

also in Homer and Ovid. The heroine is portrayed as daring, inimitable and alone from the start of her story, much like Maya. Abandoned by her father, raised by a bear, Atalanta is mentored by Diana, the goddess of girls and hunting. She lives among animals and learns to run, hunt and wrestle. By comparison, Maya is also positioned as a remote and solitary character. Her inscrutability is matched by single-minded determination, to hunt and kill bin Laden. Both Atalanta and Maya's dedication to work is accompanied by a rejection of presumed normative heterosexual behaviours. Maya demonstrates an indifference to sexual relationships when asked by another colleague about 'hooking up' with male operatives that she works with. Similarly, Atalanta's strength and dedication is amplified by her indifference to her many male suitors. The classicist Edith Hamilton writes of Atalanta, 'she had no liking for men except as companions in the hunt and she was determined never to marry' (Hamilton 1942, 174).

The myth of the Calydonian Boar is set in the ancient city of Calydon. One year, after an abundant harvest, the gods are offered gifts, in line with tradition. However, the king of Calydon, Oeneus, neglects Diana, who is enraged and sends a wild boar to wreak havoc on the people of Calydon. Following the boar's attack, Oeneus sends a band of warriors, led by his son Meleager, to kill it, in order to avenge, protect and restore the city of Calydon. Oeneus's warriors are listed as Laertes, Theseus and the celebrated female hunter, Atalanta. Despite her modest dress and boyish looks, male warriors complain of Atalanta's threat to their prowess, belittled that they should hunt with a woman. They are jealous because Meleager has fallen in love at first sight, although Atalanta does not reciprocate.

The band of warriors track and locate the boar at the bottom of a gully where a fierce battle ensues. Atalanta draws her spear, pierces the monster between his eyes and draws first blood where her male counterparts fail, this having grave consequences later in the story. The men are initially 'flushed', in Ovid's retelling, with masculine pride over the victory. 'All praise for manly prowess', says Ovid although pride turns to jealous rage when Meleager awards the animal's hide to Atalanta. Meleager's uncles seize the hide from Atalanta but Meleager, in a fit of rage, kills the men, threatening the rest of the warriors with the same fate if they dare to defy him. News of the victory over the wild boar is sent to Oeneus but Althea, Meleager's mother, is enraged that her brothers have been killed by her son – and over a woman. In a grief-stricken fury Althea invokes a spell which causes Meleager's sudden death but, in regret, hangs herself, while Atalanta goes on to further adventures (Hamilton 1942, 175).

A horseshoe cartography

The trajectory of this myth corresponds with that of *Zero Dark Thirty*, materialising especially in its visual cartographies. As Shapiro asserts, 'How we have the world is a matter of the shape we impose on it' (2007, 294). In Ovid's allegorical retelling, chaos breaks out when Atalanta joins the band of warriors. In scenes where Maya watches her male colleagues at work, a visual cartography resonates with similar ideologies concerning power and gender hierarchies to which the characters are subjected. Unlike Atalanta's story, however, heroic conquest is framed as a masculine pursuit, facilitated and observed by a woman (Mantoan 2018, 172–83). *Zero Dark Thirty* also visually maps out the dichotomy between a sense of protection and vulnerability in the open and closed spaces within the diegesis. It is contended here that these assume a 'horseshoe' cartography, which describes the symbolic and visual templates that are established and repeated as part of the film's construction. Bigelow's visualisations of belonging and enmity operate as a palimpsest in the mapping of interior and exterior spaces. Examples of such a cartography are found in Bigelow's visual staging of CIA boardrooms and during torture scenes where Maya is invariably present, but positioned as a witness.

Black Site. Undisclosed Location. 2003

The cartography of the interrogation scene in *Zero Dark Thirty* is makeshift in its initial manifestation. A hole in a corrugated tin roof of a military hut admits a circular shaft of light into its darkened interior, the camera pulling focus to sharpen the light-beam. In the following shots the shaft of light creates a circular spotlight effect on the floor and geographically positions violent torture. The refocusing of the camera also establishes another visual theme: the viewer is reminded of the optical apparatus involved in watching both through the lens and on the screen, an important narrative and visual feature of Maya's progression through the film. The sound of a heavy bolt creates a dislocating effect that could be mistaken for the electrical clunk of stage lights to match the beam. However, this is immediately followed by the screech of a rusty door and footsteps on a stone floor. At this point, a shot change reveals a white-walled space before an over-the-shoulder shot aligns the viewer momentarily with a detainee, Ammar (Reda Kateb), as two figures enter from the doorway. The first figure, Dan (Jason Clarke), is a CIA operative responsible for running the interrogation programme, while the second is later identified as Maya. Because she initially wears a balaclava and thick boiler suit, her identity and gender are at first ambiguous. She is also silhouetted and obscured by the figure of her colleague, the first visual reference to her marginalisation within the scene. A cut to a reverse-establishing shot positions the camera behind Dan and Maya, thereby geographically mapping all the figures within the scene. Ammar is positioned centre frame in a slumped standing position inside the circle of light, and on either side, facing inwards and circled around the detainee, are three balaclava-clad figures. The semi-circular arrangement of figures is open to Dan and Maya as they walk towards the detainee, although Maya stops mid-frame as Dan enters the illuminated zone to stand face to face

with the detainee. At this point, the semi-circle is partially closed off to Maya's gaze, her exclusion established in the cartography of the scene and before a word of dialogue is spoken. The overall effect is that four men form a circle around the detainee, while Maya watches from outside and, as an extreme close-up on Maya's hooded eyes aligns her spectatorship with that of the viewer, several close-ups of the interrogation disclose the oppressive positioning between the encircled men. The camera remains steady but fluid, with continual reframing, as Ammar is pushed, jostled, restrained in a stress position by his wrists, and then left alone.

Her gaze

An important aspect of *Zero Dark Thirty's* diegesis centres around Maya's presence as witness to the action within scenes. In fact, for most of the interrogation, her character is geographically located as a witness rather than a participant. Regardless of whether she looks towards or away from uncompromising scenes of torture and sexual humiliation, the viewer is aligned with her perspective of events as they unfold. This is conveyed from a distance and spatially located outside of the 'action' of the scene, the theme resonating throughout the scenes selected for analysis. Conversely, in the opening shots, the perspective of the detainee is fleeting and discontinuous, and for the rest of this initial sequence his gaze is not represented. Lisa Purse notes that a visual ambiguity is predicated on the fleeting moments in which the camera aligns with the detainee's spatial positioning (2017). However, she also observes that, for the most part, the viewer is denied an opportunity to identify with his perspective. For Ali Yasar Tuzcu (2019), a process of mono-identification is established through the viewer's alignment with Maya's gaze. As Tuzcu notes, '*Zero Dark Thirty* renders mono-identification possible because it does not provide the spectator with any emotional access to the detainees. The detainees are mainly shown during interrogations and perceived as the tools used to reach the climactic moment of the film, the capturing of Osama bin Laden' (2019, 62). Likewise, in later scenes, a process of mono-identification offers a partisan view from Maya's perspective and with this, any emotional investment in the Navy SEALs' identities or personal stories is denied. They, too, operate as 'tools' used to reach bin Laden – which will be discussed later.

Bigelow says of *Zero Dark Thirty*, 'The film doesn't have an agenda, and it doesn't judge. I wanted a boots-on-the-ground experience' (in Filkins 2012). This statement implies that it is possible to have a neutral, natural and undistorted view. However, Maya's gaze offers a polarised agenda that is neither neutral nor balanced, rather, it is shaped by her obsessive determination. The film's neutrality is also affected by the absence of alternative perspectives, including that of Ammar, and later, the perspectives of the Navy SEALs. In this respect, Todd McGowan refers to 'an absent presence in the visual field that is responsible for the field's distorted character, its lack of neutrality' (2016, 79). To apply McGowan's perspective, Maya's desire to catch bin Laden arguably has the effect of distorting what she sees and how she sees it. Through the process of mono-identification with Maya, the viewer's access to events as they unfold is offered from her viewpoint. As McGowan remarks, 'The gaze exposes the tendentious nature of the apparently neutral visual field: what seems to be simply there to be seen becomes evident as a structure created around the subject's desire. What appears in front of the subject thus loses its independence and external status for the subject' (2016, 79). As the narrative unfolds, Maya's subjective view is conveyed through the unstable camerawork, lens obstruction and the fragmented visualisation of the detainee's body in her field of vision. McSweeney notes that the type of realism conveyed through authentic, 'boots on the ground' experiential camerawork is both subjective, and furthermore has the ideological function of pushing other subjectivities to the margins of the viewers' consciousness (2019, 34).

The torture of Ammar comprises three sections, interludes between each section introducing social and spatial relationships between characters. In relation to these sections, there are several narrative references conveyed through the lens to Maya's orientation within the male-dominated world that she inhabits, but her isolated and subordinate position is also reinforced through dialogue within the diegesis itself. At various points in the film, Maya is advised or instructed by her male counterparts where she should walk, stand, sit or look. For example, a courtyard scene outside the torture room shows Maya for the first time as she removes a boiler suit and balaclava to reveal a diminutive figure with long hair and wearing a close-fitting black suit. After teasing her for her inappropriate appearance, Dan suggests that she watches the next stage on a CCTV screen from outside the room, saying, 'there's no shame if you wanna watch from the monitor', a suggestion that Maya declines. In later scenes, Maya orchestrates, directs and persuades her male colleagues but mainly from a remote and surveillant position, working from screens and monitors. Her work therefore contrasts sharply with that of the male military operatives, particularly those who risk their bodies and lives in the pursuit of the enemy. For Lindsay Mantoan, this gendered spatial dichotomy has the effect of reaffirming a masculine warrior heroism, as opposed to the purely technological operations carried out by the female intelligence analyst (2018, 172–3). When Maya is positioned in direct proximity to male bodies, a horseshoe cartography is enlisted as a reminder of this gendered separation. Such spatial mapping is demonstrated not only in the violence of the interrogation and in military operations but also in the 'suited' boardroom, where Maya meets the CIA director after she has located the compound of bin Laden.

Predator Bay. Undisclosed date. CIA Headquarters

This meeting is convened with the Chief of Staff for the CIA, Leon Panetta (James Gandolfini), to discuss the fact that Maya's orchestration of a detailed intelligence-gathering operation has led to the possible location of bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad. On first viewing, the meeting at Predator Bay barely compares with the torture sequences at the beginning of the film. However, subtle camera movements and gendered spatial positioning are common to both scenes. Importantly, the horseshoe cartography established in the opening enhanced-interrogation scene is echoed in the spatial proximity of senior male CIA officials as they circle around a boardroom table to scrutinise an aerial photograph and model of bin Laden's compound. In both scenes, Maya is instructed on where to position herself, namely, outside, or at a distance from her male colleagues. In both scenarios, Bigelow geographically locates the female character as subordinate to political figures and CIA officials with whom she is working.

At the start of the sequence, Maya is directed into an empty boardroom by her colleague, Steve (Mark Duplass). She walks ahead of him and heads for a chair at the boardroom table, but he stops her and points to the back of the room, well away from the table, telling her: 'Oh, you should sit back there'. Maya stops short, shrugs and makes her way towards the back of the room. The scene is framed at standing height in a wide shot with the boardroom table in the foreground. Senior officials enter the room from behind and to the right of the camera. Maya, her hair tied back, stands up squarely against a wall and straightens her suit as the men walk into the room. Initially, the suited men assume a horseshoe composition around the far end of the boardroom table, while the space immediately adjacent to Maya is open, allowing her visual access to the meeting. A reverse cut aligns with her spatial positioning with shallow focus deployed so that foreground obstructions, including the diffuse blue fabric of suited men's backs, move across the frame as the officials circle around the table. The spatial cartography starts to close as the visual perspective of both Maya and the viewer is obstructed. A cut to a close-up of Panetta also establishes him as isolated, his face partially silhouetted against a window, denying full access to his character as the senior political figure. Even as vagueness and uncertainty among the board members concerning bin Laden's possible presence are expressed in their dialogue, fluid camerawork also indicates their strategic uncertainty as they circle around the table. Concurrently, Maya's relative subordination is further compounded by her attempt to participate, although, as the meeting closes, she interjects in the discussion to assert her presence and indicate her certainty that bin Laden is in the compound. When Panetta asks who she is, she answers, 'I'm the motherfucker that found this place. Sir'. A brief smile from Panetta meets her defiant gesture and momentarily opens up the space. Still, this is swiftly closed off again with reaction shots, some of them disapproving, from her colleagues and as the men leave the scene, Maya remains, resolute, isolated and impassive. Her assuredness is reinforced by relatively static camerawork used in her mid-close-ups. She is also framed to the left by the vertical edge of a gilt frame inside which are the horizontal lines of a US flag. Maya's femininity here equates with stasis, while her strength is compounded by her alignment with the symbol of national identity. Relatedly, Mantoan describes Maya as 'a symbolic representation of the nation itself' (2017, 179). Indeed, her resolve is at its most forthright, and the camera is at its most stable, when she stands beside the US flag. In the same argument, Mantoan also states that the Navy SEALs, in their final mission to capture and kill bin Laden, 'come to represent individual and collective heroism and through them the viewer becomes hero too' (2017, 179). At this stage, it is worth introducing Maya's encounter with the Navy SEALs, who are in their compound in Jalalabad prior to the night-time raid. Earlier scenes have also seen Maya track and locate bin Laden. But unlike Atalanta, who is fully integrated into Meleager's band of warriors, Maya is situated alone, often battling with her colleagues to be heard and trusted. The scene appears towards the end of the film and sets up its denouement, namely, the military attack on bin Laden's compound.

Forward Operating Base: Jalalabad, Afghanistan. 2011

The scene opens with an establishing eye-level shot of military activities in a windswept desert location. Lens flare, dust and camera instability set up a turbulent aesthetic for the whole sequence. An over-the-shoulder-shot of Maya through a telephoto lens establishes her position in the scene, while an eyeline match of Maya's point of view also has a telephoto aesthetic. The shot focuses on a seated figure, an unnamed Navy SEAL, who aims a rifle towards but slightly to the right of the camera. A semi-circular motif is introduced as the soldier arcs his gun, surveying the scene through its sight, from right to left of the frame. Circles also occupy the upper right frame in the form of large storage drums positioned as a temporary wall that the soldier sits beside. A protective and intimate symbiosis is developed through a series of shallow-focused long shots of interactions between men. At the same time, the diegetic audio of music playing is layered with snippets of conversation and the dull recurrent thud of a football, the volume of these sounds being inconsistent with their distance from the camera and creating a distorted sound perspective. Specifically, an instability is created by the juxtaposition of the telephoto shot which establishes distance, and the proximity of various thuds, clicks, voices and radio music. These sound effects give clues to the subtle interplay between men, whereby the prominent clatter of horseshoes intermingles with broken dialogue which is affectionately combative. 'No . . . Yes . . . alright let's be (inaudible) . . . don't fuck around (inaudible) dude . . . You're just fucking around 'cos I'm up by two games . . . here you go'.

The following aerial shot establishes the characters as situated in a desert military base where the *mise-en-scène* constructs a horseshoe-shaped enclosure: the upper right of the frame locates the lean-to shelter hinted at in earlier shots. On either side of the shelter, diagonally pointing towards the lower left of the frame are rows of sandbags and storage drums, positioned to complete the makeshift three-sided enclosure. On the lower right of the frame, three kettle drums form another barrier, creating a narrow entrance into the space where the men rest and play. Maya stands not at the entrance but outside the border of the enclosure, watching through aviator glasses as the men socialise (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Looking from the outside (*Zero Dark Thirty*, Bigelow 2012).

The horseshoe thematic is repeated in the open and closed gestural language of the characters whereby outstretched arms are closed through fist bumps, symbolising the SEALs' shared fraternal trust. Costume enhances this impression as they wear loose vests, headscarves, hats and shorts and their tattooed arms are exposed. By contrast, Maya is gesturally positioned with arms tightly folded and wearing her signature black business suit. Her loose hair windswept by the desert wind blocks the left frame, revealing her quarter profile. It is worth pausing to contrast Maya's demeanour in this respect with the aforementioned boardroom scene where she appears resolute, determined and brave. In the boardroom, her hair is pulled back as a reflection of her controlled certainty. By contrast, in this desert image, Maya's uncertainty coincides with her loose or uncontrollable hair, which, compounded by a shallow focus, obscures the lens and denies full access to the scene. Returning to ancient mythology, one can unpick the symbolic implications of Maya's hair. In Ovid's retelling of Atalanta's story, hair also has a symbolic function. The female hunter is celebrated for her modest, and by default masculine characteristics. 'So she was dressed; her features in a boy'. Specifically, Atalanta's hair is 'simple, gathered in a knot' (Melville 1986) and her success coincides with her pulled-back hair. It is the biological fact of her femininity that disrupts the mission, but her success equates with boyish characteristics. Likewise, the controlled hair and black suit convey a boardroom Maya who is able to confidently address, with expletives, the Chief of Staff for the CIA. Yet in Forward Operating Base, as the mission is about to start, and male heroes are set to risk their lives based on her conviction, an atmosphere of uncertainty coincides with uncontrollable hair and unstable camerawork. For the viewer, the scene is spied through her hair, the gaze thereby characterised as feminine. In Ovid's story symbols of femininity come to equate with danger.

Like Atalanta, Maya here avoids attention and she is silent, but unlike Atalanta, she is largely ignored by the men. Crucially, the SEALs are the object of *her* gaze, but she is not the object of theirs. Over-the-shoulder shots within the scene largely favour her perspective, the viewer being aligned with her, looking at them. The object of her gaze is reinforced by a series of close-ups on her face as she looks, looks away, turns and looks again at the men, the repeated action highlighting her gaze. Similar themes play out in the opening scenes between Maya and Ammar, where the viewer is largely (if not entirely) denied access to his perspective. This scene intercuts tight close-ups on the Navy SEALs' bodies which have the effect of controlling the subjective gaze, directing it towards the elements that are in sharp focus against their blurred context. Fragmented hands, hips, torsos and muscular arms are emphasised against the blown-out desert background. The tight framing of the men's bodies has an objectifying function, which is thus dependent on the nature of *her* subjective gaze. Steve Neale's observations of the fragmented bodies in Sergio Leone shootouts in Spaghetti Westerns are pertinent here: 'we see male bodies stylised and fragmented by close-ups, but our look is not direct, it is heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved' (Neale 1993, 18). Throughout her observation of the men, Maya's expression is mainly impassive, and her body language closed. For her, their bodies provide a means by which she may achieve her goal: to kill bin Laden. In this scene, men appear oblivious to her gaze, intent on their activities. This spectacle conforms to Richard Dyer's reading of male objectification: 'Even when not caught in the act, the male image still promises activity by the way the body is posed' (Dyer 1992, 270). By directing their gaze away from the subject, by engaging in activity, the SEALs successfully 'disavow a default passivity' (Aaron 2007, 49) that is associated with a feminising '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Mulvey 1992, 27; original emphasis). Rather than being arrested by her gaze, the SEALs actively turn towards one another and away from her. Furthermore, her gaze is technically

constructed through camera motion as unsteady yet for the majority of the scene it remains fixed on them. Her look is visualised as ‘surreptitious’ (Dyer 1992) as she spies the men from a distance, with foreground interruptions to her field of vision. Such a closed composition sets up a potentially voyeuristic gaze that, in this case, excludes the subject. Maya can observe, but is precluded from fraternal male spaces. Unstable camera work denotes a narrative instability which is made explicit through a dialogue sequence as detailed below.

‘Her confidence’

A wide over-the-shoulder shot establishes Patrick (Joel Edgerton) as squadron team leader and Navy SEAL operator, Justin (Chris Pratt), at the entrance of the horseshoe enclosure. One is seated and the other stands with his back to his colleague. The men are intent on their game of horseshoes (Figure 2), although they voice anxieties about the forthcoming mission: ‘So Patrick, be honest with me, you really believe this story? I mean no offence’. Justin is momentarily distracted from his aim as he turns his body towards Maya. In an open gesture, he waves the horseshoe in her general direction as a cursory acknowledgement of her presence. ‘I mean no offence, I know but – Osama bin



Figure 2. Horseshoes (*Zero Dark Thirty*, Bigelow 2012).

Laden?’ He asks, ‘What convinced you?’ The shot cuts to Patrick, who, in an echo of his friend’s gesture, briefly turns towards Maya. His arms are outspread, with hands upturned and pointing in her direction. Again, he fleetingly directs his gaze towards her before turning back to his colleague and replying, ‘Her confidence’. Justin responds in a sarcastic tone, ‘That’s the kind of concrete datapoint I’m looking for’. At this point, the exaggerated diegetic sound of clinking horseshoes is audible, emphasising the degree of luck potentially involved. ‘I tell you one thing buddy, her confidence is the one thing that is keeping me from getting arse-raped in a Pakistani prison. I’m going to be honest with you bro’. There is a dramatic pause. ‘I’m cool with it’. The two men smile and fist bump before a third soldier walks into the frame disrupting Maya’s field of vision once more – closing off the horseshoe. The fist bump seals a fraternal agreement, while her exclusion is confirmed as the men turn their backs on the female outsider.

The homosocial pact

Fist bumps and horseshoes which either hit or miss their target thus symbolise the enduring pact between the men to the exclusion of Maya. In an interview with the Directors Guild, Bigelow describes how Director of Photography, Greig Fraser, often used a tripod balanced on a sandbag ‘so there was still some movement in the lens’ (Chagollan 2017). Arguably, her subtle manipulation of cinematography indicates a tacit instability surrounding her perspective on fraternal cohesion. In Forward Operating Base, Navy SEALs perform ascribed bonding rituals associated with dominant masculine heteronormativity (Bhabha 1995, 57). Similarly, in the boardroom, ‘unsteadicam’ (King 2017, 56) describes the uncertainties surrounding a homosocial cartography of men as they gather in a semicircle around the model of bin Laden’s compound. Significantly, in this sequence, the cinematic framing of Maya is almost (but not completely) static, to denote her determination and resolve. Furthermore, Raewyn Connell reminds us that dominant masculinities are neither stable nor consistent and this is perhaps reflected in Bigelow’s cinematographic style whereby, ‘their making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change’ (Connell [1995] 2005, 44). The SEALs’ uncertainty is expressed as a tacit but deep-seated mistrust of Maya. The men will risk their lives based on ‘her confidence’, yet they will not address, seek reassurance from her, or invite her into their space. Maya’s predicament reflects Woodward and Winter’s observations of women in close combat teams: ‘It is their very presence, as women, that is understood as disruptive. Ultimately their difference is held to be the key factor

incompatible with performance in the bonded male team' (2007, 55). The men's behaviour therefore follows a reverse logic. They may endanger their lives based on the hunches of their female colleague, yet their doubt is so innate that they turn their backs to her as if she is barely present. This logic has mythical foundations: Atalanta's story offers a patrimonial warning of the consequences of allowing women to perform with a bonded male unit.

Close with and kill the enemy

Both Atalanta and Maya embark on a mission with a small unit of men to hunt down and kill a named or known enemy. Both fighters experience or cause problems during their missions, largely as a result of their integration into the male unit. Maya's dilemma reflects the UK and US government policies surrounding the inclusion of men and women into military fighting roles that was ongoing when Bigelow's film was made and released. During the decade leading up to the capture of Osama bin Laden in 2011, with battles fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western allied governments were also debating the exclusion of women from fighting combat roles. The British Government undertook a series of exercises to evaluate the preservation of all-male combat troops. The Ministry of Defence profiled eighteen nations, including countries in Europe, US, Canada and Australia to evaluate the continued exclusion of women from close combat fighting. In 2010, the MOD reported that it had found no evidence that women would fail to meet the standards required for performing in 'close with and kill the enemy' ground combat teams (Ministry of Defence UK 2010, 2). Their exclusion hinged on the report's definition of cohesion, 'A source of moral fortitude to fight and keep on fighting [. . .] Moral cohesion depends on cultural solidarity, shared experience, a common sense of worth [. . .] It embodied genuine and deep comradeship that endured notwithstanding violence and fear of death and injury' (Ministry of Defence UK 2010, 6). The report concluded that because there was no evidence that women would either enhance or undermine cohesion, the status quo would be upheld for six more years:

The military viewpoint was that under the conditions of a high intensity close-quarter battle, group cohesion becomes of much greater significance to team performance and, in such an environment, the consequences of failure can have far-reaching and grave consequences. To admit women would, therefore, involve a risk with no gains in terms of combat effectiveness to offset it (Ministry of Defence UK 2010, 9).

Three years later, a similar report emerged from the United States. The global policy think-tank RAND² conducted an impact review into the inclusion of women in close combat teams or special operations forces (SOFs). Integral to the report was a survey and focus group made up of SOFs including SEALs, the combat unit featured in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The research uncovered a 'strong, deep seated and intensely felt opposition' to a proposed integration of women into all male SOFs. These oppositions were based on speculations about what *might* happen in a mixed unit. Respondents expressed concern that standards may fall, that leaders would be less willing to manage conflict between men and women, or that the inclusion of women would lead to family complications. Personnel also raised concerns about women's health, the impact of menstruation on performance and the risk of pregnancy to 'unit readiness' (RAND 2016). All of these factors provided a perceived threat to cohesion, based not on discernible facts but on existing mythologies concerning a mistrust of women, their sexuality and on reproductive differences.

Conclusion

Zero Dark Thirty is a fictionalised account of real events. While it claims to be based on 'first-hand accounts of actual events', the film favours a partisan view of its female protagonist. This is reflected in the camera movement, unstable focus and the open and closed horseshoe cartography that is repeated throughout the film. Bigelow's visualisation of the gendered dichotomy between men and women in male-dominated environments reflects data that reveals a homosocial mistrust of women. It also has parallels with ancient myths of vengeance and power, conveyed through a repeated visual mapping which spatially excludes the female subject from male-dominated scenarios. Maya's story reflects Western military policies which are founded on fear and mistrust of women's inclusion into the fraternal pack. Its narrative resonates with legendary tales in which male warriors hunt, capture and kill the monstrous other. At the same time, it follows Bigelow's attention to spatialities and vision, and one might argue that Maya's exclusion but eventual success mirrors a similar scenario for Bigelow and other female filmmakers. In her 2016 examination of gender roles, social bonding and preparations for war, Victoria Basham writes 'Women's bodies fulfil a symbolic, and integral, role in male military bonding [. . .] but their actual presence is a different matter. Women's bodies are often regarded as weak, leaky and reproductively problematic' (Basham 2016, 36). Basham's observations point towards an entrenched cultural mistrust of women's disruption to the fraternal group, which is based more on mythology than evidence or experience. As Barbara Ehrenreich describes in her foreword to Klaus Theweleit's account of the Freikorps, a fascist volunteer army in post-Weimar Germany, women's bodies symbolised all that was prohibited to the disciplined clean soldier, 'Women's bodies are the holes, swamps, pits of muck that can engulf' (Ehrenreich in Theweleit 1987, xii). In Theweleit's fantasies, women's bodies symbolise national threat, enemy threat, and for the military male body, a loss

of control, a breakdown, a contamination of the military group and subsequently a danger to national security (Theweleit, 1987). Pateman theorises that ‘women are “opposite” to and “outside” the fraternal social contract’ (Pateman [1989] 2002, 126) which has been ‘constructed in opposition to women and all that our bodies symbolise’ (131). The treatment of Maya then in *Zero Dark Thirty* is predicated on mythological fantasies such as that of Atalanta, concerning homosocial cohesion, masculine prowess and an innate suspicion of women. Belonging and cohesion exist against the context of dread, difference, and those who are forbidden. At the end of the film, after a decade-long hunt and the successful capture of bin Laden, Maya continues to be framed as a solitary figure and, as Vincent Gainé notes, she is ‘unable to declare where she wants to go because she has nowhere to go’ (2019, 303).

Notes

1. United States SEAL denotes an acronym for Sea Air and Land special operations group.
2. The US Global Policy Think Tank RAND is an acronym for Research and Development, was founded in 1948 and conducts research and analysis on US Armed Forces. Source <https://www.rand.org/about/glance.html> (accessed March 31, 2021).

Notes on contributor

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