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## A Story of her own: The Absence of Romance in *Zero Dark Thirty*

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### RESUMEN:

Tomando como base la teoría de que *La noche más oscura* puede describirse como la auténtica película para chicas, el presente artículo explora los precedentes, efectos y potencial de una protagonista sin rastro de subtrama sentimental en una producción hollywoodense. Maya responde a la evolución de tres papeles legendarios en el cine contemporáneo: Ripley, Sarah Connor y Clarice Sterling. Obviamente comparada con Carrie Mathison de *Homeland*, la principal diferencia es que el guión de la película borra del mapa la sexualidad de Maya. Esto explica el tono de Juana de Arco en la construcción del personaje, cuya identidad se reinventa de modo incesante, lejos de las exigencias patriarcales. Maya no encaja en ninguna parte, disfrazando a menudo su apariencia física y transformando su lenguaje corporal. Bin Laden es su único interés en toda la película, un hombre cuyo cadáver nunca se llega a ver. En definitiva, *La noche más oscura* demuestra que un papel femenino puede ser lo suficientemente consistente y serio como para concentrar la atención del espectador sin recurrir a ningún cliché tal como la pareja masculina que la apoya.

**Palabras clave:** crítica cinematográfica feminista, estudios de género, teoría queer, película para chicas, once de septiembre, romance

### ABSTRACT:

Based on the theory that *Zero Dark Thirty* can be described as the authentic chick flick, the present paper explores the precedents, effects and potential of a female protagonist with no trace of a sentimental subplot in a Hollywood production. Maya responds to the evolution of three legendary parts in contemporary cinema: Ripley, Sarah Connor and Clarice Sterling. Obviously compared to Carrie Mathison from *Homeland*, the main difference is that the screenplay of the film erases Maya's sexuality. This explains the Joan of Arc tone in the construction of the character, whose identity is incessantly being reinvented, away from patriarchal demands. Maya does not fit in anywhere, often disguising her appearance and transforming her body language. Bin Laden is her only concern in the entire feature, a man whose corpse is never seen. In the end, *Zero Dark Thirty* proves that a female role can be consistent and serious enough to concentrate the spectator's attention without recurring to any cliché like the supporting male partner.

**Keywords:** feminist film criticism, gender studies, queer theory, chick flick, 9/11, romance

Michael Moore defined *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) as "a twenty-first century chick flick" (Moore 2013: n.pag.) since it was directed, produced, distributed by and starring women. However, the element that makes a difference is the nonexistence of a sentimental subplot for the female protagonist, which could open a new path in film industry. A chick flick is a contemptuous term that embraces romance and everlasting same-sex friendship, being women their target audience. For instance, *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) or *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) have become classics of this subgenre which tends to work on such an emotional level in so many features released every year (especially around festivities such as Christmas or Valentine's Day) that a certain renewal of its formula has been necessary in order to maintain its appeal. Anyhow, the audience must believe that they enjoy seeing and reproducing the fashions, vocabulary and attitudes displayed on the screen. This implies that the ideology of the film text not only responds to but also imposes the creation of a very specific type of viewer.

Hollywood film production is in most cases economically sustained by media corporations and their publicity can be devastating overseas. Thus, a strong connection is established between capitalism and entertainment, having as a result the commercialization of culture. No wonder, the historical, cultural and social contexts of a motion feature become indispensable for a profound analysis (Kellner, 1999: 202), in other words, the implications of an interpretation are traced back to the culture that surrounds a text as well as its background and human factors. The films whose budgets have been approved involve an investment that needs to be secured by any means necessary.

Originally, the phenomenon started as *women's pictures* in the 1950s with melodramas that focused on the traditional feminine skills: emotions, sensitivity, the private sphere and family life. Molly Haskell claims in "The Woman's Film" that the plots had to do with the frustrations and longings of "the pinched-virgin or little-old-lady writer" (1999: 20). This way, the bored middle- or upper-class housewife was able to project her fantasies inadvertently and, once the cathartic process was over, continue with her lifestyle unaltered. Deep down, the discourse can be cataloged as repressive due to its stoic tone in the sense that the women portrayed aspire to comply with patriarchal institutions such as marriage or motherhood, where their

identity is transformed from *women* to *wives* or *mothers*. In order to satisfy these social codes, women must not express their needs as individuals, for this switch involves the acquisition of a moral dependence on a man's approval, but not vice versa.

Also known as *weepies*, *women's pictures* treated their main spectators as victims who must accept their fate as social martyrs and overcome their condition through pain and sacrifice (Haskell, 1999: 20-24). The purpose of the conservative ideology behind these stories was to control "the audience's most primitive pre-ego impulses through the 'transparency' of the cinematic image" (Allen, 1999: 134). The success of melodrama could also be interpreted as a harmless method to release women's silenced voices. No doubt, this subgenre denotes masochism, though for a long time it was the only option to visualize a female microcosm where no man disputed her protagonism. Indeed, the narrative had a unique pace that illustrated the misfortunes of an adult woman with promises of accomplishment that turned out to be miserable (Thornham, 1999: 11).

Eventually, *women's pictures* were replaced by romantic comedies in which a man and a woman typically meet and need to surpass either personal or social obstacles so as to be together. Despite the variety of tones, all these films revolve around love and how to get it. Unlike most mainstream films, in *Zero Dark Thirty* the protagonist does not distract any hero. Maya "is not defined by a man. She is not defined by a love interest. She is defined by her actions" (Roberts, 2012: n.pag.). Likewise, the crew estimated that her courage deserved the entire immersion of the spectator, as in the innumerable closeups where she is meditating all by herself just like any other hero. Her dedication is complete to the point of addiction, a lead part with a portrait similar to those played by Al Pacino in thrillers from the 1970s like *Serpico* or Jake Gyllenhal in *Zodiac* (2007), especially in extreme closeups where she obsessively watches a number of videotapes of interrogations.

Such a defining character has three precedents with a comparable determination: Ripley (Sigourney Weaver in the *Alien* [1979-1997] saga), Clarice Sterling (Jodie Foster in *The Silence of the Lambs* [1990]) and Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2* [1991]). In the first case, Ripley represents the science-fiction heroine. Clearly, in *Alien* (1979) she does not have any love interest, though in *Alien 3* (1992) there is a sex scene with

Clemens, her doctor. In the second case, Sarah Connor stands as the ultimate female warrior in *Terminator 2*. However, the plot around *Terminator* (1984) is her love story with the man from the future.

Finally, Clarice Sterling establishes the mood for contemporary female characters whose primary goal in life is not personal, but professional. In fact, Clarice suffers a total transformation from traumatized female to "odourless, sexless bureaucratic 'agent'" (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002: 274), that is, she gets rid of her corporeal dimension so as to become a member of a man's world such as the FBI network. Her aseptic behavior achieves pure perfection to the extent that her gender cannot be publicly perceived. Janet Steiger defines her status as "the most 'other': not heterosexual, not male" (1999: 220). Hers is a hybrid identity whose elements have not been identified yet. The evolution from Clarice to Maya has to do with the reactions their asexuality provokes. On the one hand, Clarice arises all sorts of morbid reflections on the part of Hannibal Lecter. On the other hand, no man ever makes a single comment about Maya's sexual life.

When *Zero Dark Thirty* was released, it was obviously compared to the hit series at the time: *Homeland* (2011-). Both Maya and Carrie are the product of the critical perspective that became unavoidable after the social indignation ignited by the documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and clips available online where militaries degraded prisoners. In opposition to the triumphant tone displayed in early responses such as *World Trade Center* (2006) or *Home of the Brave* (2006), both *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Homeland* analyse the possibility of having become torturers: "The fear is not just of Other but what Self becomes in response of Other" (Wetmore, 2012: 5). The women of the present phase are way past the crying widow or the injured lady; they are actively responsible for the advances in US tradecraft, whether legitimate or not.

Based on the fact that Maya accepts physical and psychological torture when she arrives in Pakistan, many reviews were centered on imperial feminism. This term erases personal experience in favor of political ideology, which implies that female protagonists end up being aligned with cultural interpretations rather than concrete individuals (McCabe, 2004: 38). Moreover, according to these reviews her resolution would have been defined as "aggressive" (Kapp-Klote, 2013: n.pag.) had she been a man. Basically, their

statement is that the only distinction between the period before and after the election of President Obama is that now the abuser is a woman, so criticizing her actions becomes controversial in the Western World. For these critics, it is just a question of political correctness. Others underlined the triumph of intellectual analysis over physicality in the figure of a young, delicate woman (Carmon, 2013: n.pag.).

In truth, Maya as well as Carrie are shown with virtues and flaws, just like any other human being. They do not constitute menacing figures to male sexuality taking into account that the audience admires their perseverance but pities their loneliness. The sequence where Maya identifies Bin Laden's corpse only expresses desolation. A medium shot shows Maya right at the center of the frame going straight to a tent in the darkness of the night. The next long shot presents Maya walking disoriented from the background to the foreground. The moment where she finally gets to see the body has an intimate nuance by cutting a long shot to a medium one in which it is obvious that she feels lost. Then, a long shot is also cut to a closeup from a low angle to visualize her sadness. In the end, she comes out of the tent and closes her eyes at the center of the frame in a medium shot. The epilogue reinforces this idea. Bigelow returns to a long shot with Maya at the center, about to enter an aircraft. The pilot speaks off-camera, declaring her relevance: "You must be pretty important. You got the whole plane to yourself. Where do you wanna go?" (2012: n.pag.). She is unable to pronounce a single word in a scene that switches from a long shot to an emotional closeup where she drops a tear. Maya has no place to go.

Laura Mulvey's theory of woman as spectacle cannot be applied since these characters cannot be associated with visual perfection or idealised glamor, in other words, they are no fetish. Moreover, neither Jessica Chastain's nor Claire Danes's profile matches that of a classic star. Once Maya is properly introduced after the first two sequences there is an abundance of medium shots with very few closeups, which indicates the protagonist's discretion and the journalistic narrative adopted by Kathryn Bigelow. Similar to a documentary, the editing tries to minimize the star effect that emphasizes the lead with continuous closeups from the very beginning. This way, the spectator can observe her evolution as she gets closer to Bin Laden.

Another point in common between *Homeland* and *Zero Dark Thirty* is that the

audience does not perceive any natural female community in which the protagonist can feel supported, that is, a sisterhood. Positively, the very concept of female identity turns out to be problematic. In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the Edge of Normal*, J. Jack Halberstam prefers “a network ideological image, suggesting the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and the body politic” (2012: 170). Carrie leans on men with different levels of sentimental and professional power over her, whereas Maya does have several female coworkers. Even so, she does not seem to try and socialize with anybody, for the ultimate cause absorbs all the aspects of her life. Or so it seems on the screen. Actually, the key is that the screenplay considers any subplot irrelevant, so they are totally deleted. Maya gets to interact with another woman, though the patterns used to develop that relationship are parallel to the ones present in male acquaintances. First, they seem to ignore each other and barely discuss details of operations. Next comes the respect for the tenacious outsider and inclusion in the team. Ultimately, some kind of bonding is suggested by means of a screensaver of their portraits, notwithstanding no display of emotional release will happen at any point. All the audience obtains is subtle hints.

This behavior is in connection with Halberstam’s notion of a new feminism with no sense of union among women inasmuch as no identity is stable and there is no way to dictate it, either. In reality, the basis is a combination of physical, psychological, political and cultural changes towards renewable definitions that imitate the frugality of multimedia (2012: 63). Hence, there is no sexual threat but intellectual inferiority since both screenplays describe a tremendously unfair environment where brilliant women are supervised by incompetent men. In particular, the story line of *Zero Dark Thirty* is rather simple considering that Maya locates Bin Laden’s premises rather soon. It is the fact that she must convince an army of sceptical men that delays the end time and again as they will not listen and many times do not even seem concerned. Yet Maya endures to prove that she was right all the time. Thereupon, the signification is far deeper than in Mulvey’s theory.

All in all, the key factor that differentiates these female portraits is Carrie’s bipolar condition in opposition to Maya’s calculated movements. As a person continually associated to hysteria, the screenplay of the entire show—season

four is currently on air—emphasizes this CIA agent’s guts despite the disapproval of superiors and peers. Such is the case with Lieutenant/Senator Brody, eternal suspect of terrorism. The ambiguity displayed regarding his recent past in Irak and potential sympathies for Al Quaeda do not count for her since she feels sexually attracted to the marine at first sight. It is precisely this passion that compels her to disobey orders and take action in order to defend her lover’s innocence.

Carrie is part of the Central Intelligence Agency, albeit her methods are so based on her instincts that they end up being questioned and even censored a few times. Evidence and leads may or may not mean anything; it is mostly her beliefs that count. At least, such is the case when she controls her impulses with drugs. Every time she decides to stop the treatment, it is her hormones that speak, which triggers crises that culminate in discredit.

The pilot episode presents Carrie as a stereotypical workaholic in her thirties who does not care about her personal life. She is a top professional and nothing else. Enter Brody and she gets obsessed with him. Her intuition makes her invalidate the marine’s version of his period as a war prisoner owing to her suspicions that he has been turned after suffering the Stockholm syndrome. Suddenly, the unthinkable happens. They start an affair that she cannot help. The couple gets apart and reunites on several occasions to the point that Carrie chooses her complicated love life over her career. Devastated when Brody becomes a fugitive, she takes up drinking alcohol as a diet and has unprotected sex with a stranger that looks like her beloved. The climax of this hormonal celebration is her pregnancy, that is, the result of her irrational needs. Wherefore, Carrie becomes a mom with no maternal background whatsoever as her mother passed away a long time ago. Eventually, the baby will be raised by her dad and sister so as to counterbalance her irresponsible conducts.

She could represent a—sometimes--medicated mad woman in the attic that longs to run free in the wild, as scary as it sounds to civilization due to her challenge to strict social conventions and codes. For Carrie, her sexuality dictates its own rules. Incidentally, Inkoo Kang defines her behavior as hyperemotional because “it questions the value of gender-neutrality and asks why women should want things that *men* have designated as desirable . . . why should Carrie’s emotional instability be counted against her when it’s her perilous

leaps of logic and mania-induced zealotry that enables her to see what nobody else can?" (2012: n.pag.). According to a postfeminist approach, Carrie's bipolar extremes may also bring positive consequences since the rational way does not necessarily have to be the only way. Excess can sometimes be effective. Sadly, values ancestrally linked to femininity are liable to be unappreciated or even despised on the grounds that they never exclude: cooperation, commitment or caring, among others. They all appeal to emotions or, at least, respect for other points of view.

Historically, Hollywood constructed role models that influenced Western society to the extent that they were seriously attached to real people as labels or, at worst, straitjackets. Types such as the *femme fatale* or the self-sacrificing mother repressed women's attitudes and actions so they would fit in artificial categories. As reported by Janet McCabe, "these stereotypical images afford female audiences little chance for authentic recognition. Instead they produce a false consciousness for women, offering them nothing but an escape into fantasy through identification with stereotypical images" (2004: 8). Unrecognition or even social exclusion awaited those that dared defy the aforementioned expectations. These days, the portraits of women like Carrie and Maya force breakthrough categories in the stagnated star-system universe.

The audience demands new profiles as a result of the exhausting repetition of the renowned ones. An update has become mandatory because the complex relationship between subject and object is no longer intimate but distant or even parodic. The implicit ideology changed its path in behalf of the spectator's lack of communication with the products reflected on the screen, a basic rule in consumerism. Slowly, new categories are emerging as a consequence of "a dialectical interplay of multiple feminine identities" (Stacey, 2003: 227), in other words, there is a process of deconstruction of previous models and reconstruction of credible ones.

Characters such as Carrie or Maya received the heritage of numerous working girls who confronted the patriarchal hierarchy and uncovered many sexist traditions and prejudices as artefacts that served certain interests. It is women's employment that destabilised the scale of power so much that it affected the masculine self-esteem. For one thing, the male body--as well as marriage--stopped being indispensable. After all, single parenthood was already an option. The quest of determined

young women to either make a career or fight for labor and union rights already appeared in *Norma Rae* (1979), *Silkwood* (1983) or *Working Girl* (1988), though the inclusion of a sentimental subplot was still inevitable. David Bordwell claims that in the 1980s Hollywood launched about ninety-five features out of one hundred with romance as one of its main plot lines, whereas eighty-five focused on heterosexual love (2006: 42).

Today, the field covered by females has been expanded to the military, the police force or national intelligence agencies, that is, hardcore areas for men due to physical requirements, firearm carrying, and potential violence. Even the strict division of space in sport is changing while the line between male competitors and female cheerleaders is vanishing. Many women switched their destinies thanks to their determination, which empowered their confidence so as to amplify the range of professional fields.

In this sense, the shift of roles in the private and public spheres is directly related to postindustrial capitalism on the basis that the accepted concepts of masculinity and femininity keep mutating. Halberstam employs the performance of Lady Gaga to exemplify the unlimited number of possibilities to create a—temporary—female identity: "they are unbecoming women in every sense—they undo the category rather than rounding it up, they dress it up and down, take it apart like a car engine and then rebuild it so that it is louder and faster" (2012: 8). In short, identities are personalized and improvised by every individual in a playful way that denotes fluidity in sexual orientation.

Judith Butler claimed that the body had the potential for materializing continuous possibilities beyond pure matter (2009: 99), though Halberstam plays with the form itself. Moreover, the resulting identities do not include negative connotations. On the contrary, such multiplicity enriches sexuality as a concept with less prejudices and more negotiation due to its inherent contradictions and partial position. This mobile and interactive identity can be tracked down to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of deterritorialization because they understand the body as a succession of interrelated copies with no distinctive origin to invoke as the established characteristics are the effect of male domination. Thence, biology does not say the last word (Kaufman, 2000: 130).

Most feminists agreed that the term *women* could only be defined associating fields

such as "specific properties..., qualities..., or necessary attributes... that women have developed or have been bound to historically, in their differently patriarchal sociocultural contexts, which make them women, and not men" (de Lauretis, 2001: 310). Deleuze and Guattari go a step further by declaring the temporariness of each of those vertexes. Identity as such remains in perpetual crisis. The ultimate masculine model incorporates both sensitivity and metrosexuality in actors such as Ryan Gosling in *Drive* (2011), whose performance can only be explained through the effects of education accepting and adapting male role models that involve housework, childcare, shared decisions in their sentimental relationships and collaboration in the professional ones (Fuchs, 2006: 57). Maya represents the newest contribution to the remodeling of the chick flick interpreted as film designed for the female audience. Few are the exceptions that count on a woman to lead a feature, but *Zero Dark Thirty* goes ahead and deletes any romantic interest. It is stubborn women that keep the case in progress: Maya is the one that believes in the courier theory till she discovers Bin Laden's location, but previously Jessica had been killed by a double agent in a suicide bombing in Afghanistan, and Debbie finds the real Abu Ahmed's file in the archives.

The spectator has no idea about Maya's thoughts whether they include romantic cravings, nostalgic memories, beliefs, comic reliefs or not. Her circumstances are considered unnecessary because that is not the purpose of the story. The private sphere is just subtly hinted, for it is Maya's certitude that matters. So, no supportive boyfriend/affectionate husband ever shows up to remind her that she is getting in trouble. Paradoxically, this void does not decrease the spectator's level of attention. On the contrary, it cancels any possible distraction from the objective.

The film starts with a blank screen and this caption: "The following motion picture is based on first hand accounts of actual events" (2012: n.pag.). It clearly sets the tone, restricting the number of potential subplots in view of the tragic reality that it alludes. 9/11 had so many repercussions worldwide and so many people watched it live that the spectator empathizes immediately with Maya's cause. Also, no technical or screenwriting conventions must be visibly applied in the sense that the film intends to reproduce a certain hyperreality. Thereupon, the prospect of a male lead or, at least, a romantic subplot disappears immediately, for the seriousness

of the subject demands a unique story line with no superficial digressions. There is not even room for any comic relief, not to mention sexual innuendoes.

At first, the spectator presupposes that Maya and her colleague Dan will end up together because of the amount of time they share on the screen. For instance, both are introduced at the same time in the torture scene, though Dan is placed in the foreground as the tough guy with scruffy looks. In other scenes, like the interrogation to Amman, Maya and Dan are standing in the same frame in a medium shot. Undoubtedly, the vague recollections of the story between Sigourney Weaver and Mel Gibson in the political thriller *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) end there because Dan disappears, only to reappear very briefly. Forsooth, this procedure takes place every time an attractive actor shows up.

What is more, Maya's absolute privacy denotes a taken-for-granted asexuality: black outfits, beige and grey t-shirts and scarce make-up even for Maya's closeups suggest invisibility; the gloomy cinematography with a very limited chromatic range in, mostly, tiny offices with pulled curtains composes claustrophobic, sterile stages. Most of the times, Maya is shown so calm and even cold-blooded that she looks like a flesh-and-blood robot, in other words, a cyborg. The concept coined by Donna Haraway makes sense in a postgender society where gender and sexuality are denatured, giving way to a hybrid identity with multiple options for reinvention (1990: 150). Maya's body is denaturalized by exposing its cultural condition just like any other sign.

The uninterest in sex is in connection with Fredric Jameson's concept of abstinence. More than a mark in moral terms, it empowers Maya since she is over social order. Needless to say, its conventions and rules do not affect her considering that she does not need a male body or authority for self-fulfillment, which makes her a willing outcast. Likewise, Jameson claims that sexual abstinence has prophetic virtues associated with asceticism because it "places the body in a situation receptive to visions and prophetic efflatus: it is a cleansing process that enables the spiritual transfiguration of which prophecy is a sign" (2000: 167). The mind perceives beyond what is established, a gift that constantly reminds Maya of her call of duty. This positive interpretation of asexuality—whose role is considered surprisingly active instead of the orthodox passivity that revolves around

this concept—rises above the repression that virgin women presumably suffered. Untied to any reproductive responsibility, these females were perceived as dangerous as they could become out of control any minute. Merely, their lifestyles passed unknown configurations. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, not even a hint of sexual attraction is permitted. For example, there is a closeup of Maya being watched by the security guard where he smiles at her and she automatically looks down, uninterested. Besides, she is watched by cameras and officers every time she enters the Embassy, which she stoically stands.

There is only one moment in the entire film in which she has to clarify this point: having dinner with Jessica at the Marriott Hotel. While Maya complains about a lead and texts at the same time, Jessica begs her to be social. Right after that, she brings up whether she is seeing Dan. Her answer is fast:

MAYA. No! I work with him.  
I'm not that girl that fucks, it's unbecoming.  
JESSICA. So? A Little fooling around wouldn't hurt you... So, no boyfriend. You got any friends at all? (2012: n.pag.)

This character is the only one that intends to keep a conversation out of focus, to no avail. She is also the one that makes the only maternal reference by calling Abu Ahmed—Bin Laden's most reliable courier—Maya's baby, but she does not respond either. Paying attention to the chick-flick codes, if Abu Ahmed is the creature she nurtures, then Bin Laden would be her only goal in life. Or so it seems in the last scene, when she cries alone on the aircraft because for a decade all she had was her obsession for the manhunt and now it is over.

Not surprisingly, her male coworkers and superiors do not even take her for an adult, but for a child with a divine obsession as Jameson would put it. It is her youth that they fear. The confidence she irradiates is too insulting. For instance, when she arrives at the Embassy, Dan tells her superior as he sees her leave:

DAN. Don't you think she's a bit young for the hard stuff?  
JOSEPH BRADLEY. Washington says she's a killer.  
DAN. Children's crusade. (2012: n.pag.)

Her constancy is camouflaged with details of infantilization, for they will never refer to

her as *woman*. Qualified as a killer, a child and a martyr, the Joan of Arc syndrome comes to the surface. She acts like an illuminated saint that leads the way to find the Holy Grail, which could be implicit in a medium shot of her on the right of the frame, next to the US flag. Originally, the effect is introduced when she finds out that her coworker has been murdered, meditates what to do next, and states: "I believe I was spare so I can finish the job" (2012: n.pag.). The scene is composed of closeups and extreme closeups of Maya continuing with an aerial view showing her entire body on the floor.

As a child, she observes and respects the methods based on intense physical pain. The torture sequence introduces Maya in a long shot in the background disguised in a black tracksuit and a ski-mask that she takes off once she leaves the room. After the initial brutality, the spectator perceives a petite redhead whose paleness and delicate features resemble those of Botticelli models. But she is not an ice queen despite her black suit; her face shows fatigue and disgust. Nevertheless, Maya reminds the officer in charge to go back inside. Still in the background though in medium shots, this time she decides not to cover her body just like her partner, Dan, who remains in the foreground. Needless to say, injuring people is not her flair, though it does not work, either. For example, she is flexible enough to wear the Islamic veil during the bit in which Dan and herself pretend that Amman helped them save many lives by revealing exclusive information. Also, she usually attends interrogations accompanied by a male—a partner or simply a military used as a punching weapon—except once with a nonviolent prisoner.

Even the way she speaks to her boss sounds too colloquial at times, aware that he is of less value. Although this is her usual attitude throughout most of the film, there is one final exception with the head that plays the father figure: James Gandolfini, the C.I.A. Director, who irremediably reminds the audience of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). His presence fills the screen in such a way that she will not dare question his authority. Magnanimous, he is the only one who compliments her labor. As unexpected as it is, this sincere dialog during lunch in the cafeteria is filmed in shot/reverse shot mode using medium shots.

Furthermore, there is a scene where she drinks Coke and chews red candy. It starts with a long shot of Maya in a burka, carrying plastic bags at home. Afterwards, there is

a detailed microshot of the Coke can and her tennis shoes. This is followed by a closeup of her lying on the couch. Finally, a shot/reverse shot of the TV screen and Maya. The image is increasingly shocking considering its allegorical implications, for Coke and candy constitute symbols of the American way of life and the burka consecrates the aesthetic repression of women under the cover of an inaccessible enigma. In another sequence a terrorist is arrested by Pakistani policemen disguised in burkas. It is the design of the unknown, the exotic, turned upside down for the Western spectator.

Maya annuls all those values just by her mere presence because she constitutes a challenge to both civilizations. Such a mixture confronts the panic for the Other, a figure constituted not only by Eastern people, but also by Western women. This subversive scene is in opposition with the initial sequence, in which Maya also uncovered her black camouflage. However, the former showed Maya comfortable, whereas the latter contained several medium shots focusing on her facial disgust.

The image could also allude to the fact that in developing countries the obstacles to reach gender equality are almost insurmountable no matter how hard the First World may press: "literacy, income, health, nutrition, male violence, rape, and abuse very much to the fore" (Maynard, 2005: 37). No doubt, a lot more women in those territories could have been in Maya's relatively privileged position had they had the chance to go to college and pursue a career. As a matter of fact, Maya does not connect with Pakistan at all. There is no romantic vision of the area as the one narrated by Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa* (1985), but a total isolation from its people and habits. The only interaction she allows herself, apart from the interrogations, is through the TV screen; several closeups portray Maya watching TV footage in different sequences. She never walks in the open air, only drives to the US Embassy. Certainly, this is not a coincidence. When Debbie invites her to have a kebab, Maya responds without even looking at her: "Don't eat out. It's too dangerous" (2012: n.pag.).

The tension rises when she discovers Bin Laden's surroundings, but the information is ignored. For this reason, her discourse switches from meditated to virulent as a response to consecutive confrontations with her superiors. Reflecting on the screen, now there are hardly any long shots of Maya and

fewer medium shots in favor of closeups that clarify her protagonism. Petite as she is, her courage is visualized through an aerial view of Maya facing Joseph Bradley. Up to now, her procedures have consisted of farses and archive analyses. Always subtle as well as misleading, she is obliged to sit back at the decisive meeting and wait for her turn to speak. Maya obeys, though by the time the C.I.A. Director asks who she is, she has the nerve to respond: "I'm the motherfucker who found this place, Sir" (2012: n.pag.). In short, she has to masculinize her speech so as to add consistency to the message.

Verbal violence predominates in her speech in the final part of the film, often implying a loud tone and exaggerated gestures with her hands. For instance, the scene where she calls Dan she talks on the loudspeaker in a horizontal pose; half the scene consists of a closeup in which Maya pronounces a monologue in exclamatory terms and hits the table with the palm of her hand just like a wild cat. Dan asks her to calm down, which she does. In fact, her features perfectly match what Mark Maier described as *corporate masculinity*, that is, those ethical characteristics traditionally associated to men in Western societies like rationality, efficiency, command, self-control, competition or autonomy (Fischer and Vianen, 2005: 344). These are all expected from a professional male. Unfortunately, they call the attention of the audience when this is all they obtain from a professional female. For instance, she tells the military that their rest is not her concern. At once, the maternal and the lascivious hints are missing. Surrounded by males in black suits, when asked about probability she declares: "I know certainty freaks you guys out, but it's a hundred" (2012: n.pag.). Hers is a combative spirit with no scale for truth. In the end, this is not about the persecution of the most famous public enemy, but the triumph of a woman over unlimited handicaps to make her voice heard and gain respect.

Her moment arrives with *the canaries*, that is, the elite squadron team that breaks into the premises. Prototypes of the hypermasculinity so popular in the 1980s with actors like Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean Claude van Damme or Steven Seagal, they comply because they believe in her confidence. The canaries would be her pets without any type of emotional involvement. In this sequence the entire art direction switches from long and medium shots of a room full of men and a woman sitting in the background to a central petite female figure standing in a



long shot, circled by muscular men paying attention, ready to take action. For this episode, she wears her aviator sunglasses in shot/reverse shot mode, which affirms her strength. As she said, they killed Bin Laden for her. Paradoxically, their explosion of joy clashes with her mutism.

Maya completes the assignment having no methodology to guide her, a trademark that turns this character into a fountain of knowledge for future projects. In the end, normative structures are responsible for the construction of someone's identity since they are internalized through discursive channels like the educational system or mass media. That is the reason why the stable subject is a fallacy looking for redemption, which comes in the shape of unstoppable mutability and provisionality. No fixed rules bloom this uniqueness. Moreover, the profusion that Foucault handled is not enough, for the mere concept of classification belongs to external factors with a rationalising mission. Consequently, free choice of sexuality deals with an exhaustive process of recreation out of performance.

Despite the significant number of scenarios yet to be explored on media screens, such as the house as home and workplace, motherhood in the twenty-first century and the new models of family, the parliament and the legal obstacles to overcome sexual politics, domestic finance or women's sexuality, every case means a step forward to construct alternative viewpoints to largely assumed stereotypes whose harm has become unnoticed over the centuries: "new spectator-text relationships —ones which render problematic the pleasures of cinematic voyeurism— might be generated, new subjective structures obtained" (Flitterman-Lewis, 2000:19). Different visions are the result of different connections between films and the audience, attachments that at least question the validity of the social codes and conventions displayed so far.

According to Teresa de Lauretis, the point of women's cinema is not to criticize the flaws, incoherences and falsehoods incorporated in patriarchal perspectives, but to design other elements for the equation, including the premises and circumstances around the fresh individual portrayed on the screen and the one that watches it (a, 2000: 324). This would invalidate Laura Mulvey's theory, for women could become subjects that decide what to project without the omnipresence of a man that they hypothetically complement in comedies and threaten in thrillers; in

any case, mirrors to check their identity. *Zero Dark Thirty* proves this autonomy by eliminating any trace of romantic subplot and still keeping the audience in suspense for two hours and a half.

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