Heroes in the security state: casino royale and zero dark thirty essay examples

War, Intelligence

In the post-9/11 world of espionage, soldiers have been replaced with spies as nationalist heroes – since drones do much of the grunt work now as opposed to reservists, the nebulous War on Terror is fought through intelligence and espionage. At the same time, we take a much more self-reflexive look at our heroes, especially in media, and question whether or not they are truly worth rooting for. These notions of the flawed heroic spy, the one who does what is necessary while putting themselves through misery, is explored in depth in the recent films Casino Royale (2006) and Zero Dark Thirty (2012). Between Daniel Craig's superspy James Bond and Jessica Chastain's CIA analyst Maya, our new heroes are found to be those who are not able to enjoy the " beautiful green fields" cited by Kathleen ni Houlihan in her notions of heroism (Yeats 36). Instead, they must tear themselves apart, reflecting the self-destructive nature of the post-9/11 intelligence state.

Kathleen ni Houlihan, the fictional heroine of Yeats' Cathleen Ni Houlihan, promises an Ireland that needs heroes that will lay down in the dust for mother Ireland (represented by Houlihan herself, an old woman who has been victimized). According to Houlihan, injustices must be repaid in blood – after the rebellion she feels is necessary, " many a child will be born and there will be no father at the christening" (Yeats 36). This dedication to fighting for forces beyond themselves (king, country, etc.) make up a quintessential hero. In the case of Casino Royale, James Bond follows that tradition in spades – he shoots and punches his way through action setpiece after action setpiece, following his own Houlihan in the form of his matronly superior M (played by Judi Dench).

Casino Royale, a gritty reboot of the long-running Bond film franchise, stars Craig in his first mission as a 00 agent, infiltrating a high-stakes poker tournament in order to catch terrorist arms dealer Le Chiffre (Mads Mikkelsen). Along the way, he meets, falls in love with and loses fellow agent Vesper Lynd (Eva Green). The film acts as both a celebration and critique of the historically misogynistic sex symbol, as Vesper continually criticizes his sociopathic behavior. She calls him a " maladjusted young men, who give[s] little thought to sacrificing others in order to protect queen and country, " acting as the film's observer of the masculine hero persona. His hero is taciturn and distant, unable to behave as a real human being, Vesper noting that he's " got [his emotional] armor back on" at one point in the film. Bond, as a character, is shown to be a horrifyingly calculated and robotic killer, dispatching enemies with drone-like proficiency. When Vesper asks him if it bothers him to kill people, he merely replies, " Well, I wouldn't be very good at my job if it did." Bond even describes himself early on as " half-monk, half-hitman", to which M responds, " Any thug can kill. I need you to take your ego out of the equation." He is effectively an avatar for the horrifyingly brutal things the security state must do to defend freedom: in a film where a government official is paranoid enough to say, " Sometimes we pay so much attention to our enemies, we forget to watch our friends as well," the film becomes clear in its criticism of the overly-eager intelligence state.

Casino Royale, particularly in its treatment of Bond, acts as a post-9/11 answer to the typically Cold War hero. In the old days, Bond was treated as an unambiguous sex symbol, a jet-setter with a glamorous mission to defend

Mother England. Now, the film laments that simplicity (M groans, " Christ, I miss the Cold War") because of the icky moral questions being a unilateral weapon of the state brings up. Bond is a disposable soldier (" double 0s have a very short life expectancy") with the emotional vacuum of a Predator drone; he is given a glimpse of a happy life of romance with Vesper, only to have it taken away. As a hero, he is celebrated but wounded, as the life of a Houlihan-style hero is shown to be terrible, empty and conducive to sociopathic behavior. The Bond of Casino Royale is a broken shell of a man, a thug in a tuxedo, who can barely hide the inhumanity that being a 21st century " hero" requires.

Zero Dark Thirty may not contain as many sexy locations and high-octane action, but its criticism of the emptiness of the 9/11 surveillance state is equally potent as Casino Royale, if not more so. Following a fictionalized account of the real search for Osama bin Laden, Zero Dark Thirty follows Maya (Jessica Chastain), a single-minded, aggressive CIA analyst through nearly a decade of back-channeling, interrogation, boardroom bickering and manipulation to track down the man behind the 9/11 attacks. The Houlihan-ian notion of a hero who will shed blood for her country is somewhat subverted in this film, as with few exceptions most of the spy work is done in cramped interrogation rooms or in cold, antiseptic conference rooms.

Much like Bond, Maya is an arrogant, cocksure spy, who is so completely sure of her intelligence (received through ill-gotten gains, as depicted in the unsettling torture scenes in the film) that she pushes around her superiors until she gets what she wants. When showing bin Laden's location and being asked who she is, Maya says, " I'm the motherfucker that found this place,

sir." Her life, family, everything is sidetracked for the sake of this decade-long mission; even once she finds the place and goes in with a Navy SEAL team of roided-out jocks, she tells them off : " I didn't even want to use you guys, with your dip and velcro and all your gear bullshit. I wanted to drop a bomb." Maya's lack of compromise is Houlihan's hero writ large – someone who will stop at nothing to get the job done. Much of her dialogue revolves around this single objective: " I'm going to smoke everyone involved in this op and then I'm going to kill bin Laden," and so on.

Maya learns much of this ruthlessness early on from fellow agent Dan (Jason Clarke), whose early treatment of detainees establishes the need to give no quarter to perceived enemies of America. Dan tells a detainee, " I'm not gonna help you. I'm gonna break you." He alternates ' good cop' friendliness (" You guys like a bit of Bob Marley?") with bad-cop strong-arm tactics (" Partial information will be treated as a lie!"), showing a modern perception of a hero as someone who will violate laws of common human decency to defend their country, performing inhuman acts (like waterboarding) to eke out bits of information from prisoners.

Of course, director Kathryn Bigelow suddenly brings the point of Maya's single-mindedness home in the final shot of the film, in which Maya sits down in the C-130 after bin Laden has been killed. After the years of searching, Maya finally did it, and all she can do is weep silently in an empty aircraft. After all, what is she going to do now? She has no family, no friends, nothing but this search. This single shot brings home Bigelow's condemnation of the post 9/11 spy hero – they are not victorious or triumphant, but sad, hollow shells of beings who must do unspeakable things to achieve their objectives.

In order to defend their home countries, they commit the blood sacrifice that Houlihan earnestly begs for, but are shown to audiences to have lost everything that made them human in the first place. Between James Bond's open sociopathy and Maya's arrogant, career-minded opportunism, the agents of the state apparatus don't get happy endings for themselves. All they get is a world surrounded by death, with no family or friends to give them solace.

Works Cited

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