

Celluloid scripture?

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [February 6, 2013](#) issue



Jessica Chastain in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

When director Oliver Stone produced *JFK*, which fantasized that the assassination of President Kennedy resulted from a vast and byzantine conspiracy, he was accused of historical revisionism. Stone took the charges in stride and announced that his next movie would be not about one man but about “the men who shot Liberty Valance.”

Stone’s quip came to mind amid the brouhaha surrounding *Zero Dark Thirty*, director Kathryn Bigelow’s movie about the hunt for Osama bin Laden. On the positive side, the film has been touted as a “stylistic masterwork” and named by a number of critics as best picture of 2012. Negatively, the movie has been charged with ethical numbness and with mangling history, particularly in graphic scenes of torture that imply—erroneously—that such brutality yielded vital information leading to bin Laden.

While critic Owen Gleiberman praised the film as “written with lightning,” the *Guardian*’s Glenn Greenwald sputtered that the film is pro-torture propaganda exceeded only by “suffocating jingoism” and an uncritical acceptance of the CIA’s distorted view of reality. Jane Mayer of the *New Yorker* was shocked over Bigelow’s moral obtuseness in turning a story about torture into a mere police procedural. “If she were making a film about slavery . . . the story would focus on whether the cotton crops were successful.”

Normally this tempest would rage only in the teapots of film criticism, but this time it boiled over to the highest levels of government. When word got out that the CIA had cooperated in the production, the agency's acting director, Michael Morell, fired off a memo saying that the movie's portrayals of torture were "a dramatization, not a realistic portrayal of the facts." Even more interesting, Senator John McCain joined Democratic senators Dianne Feinstein and Carl Levin in writing a letter to Sony Pictures that called the movie "grossly inaccurate and misleading." "You have," warned the senators, "a social and moral obligation to get the facts right."

Really? Since when does Hollywood have a social and moral obligation to get the facts right?

Washington's anxiety over the movie's facticity is sad evidence that, having ceded the task of constructing our social narrative to the entertainment industry, we are now fearfully beholden to it. If we allow movies and television to be our only storytellers, then we are bound to be alarmed when they press the limits of acceptability. Should it disturb us that Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* rearranges some historical details for dramatic effect? No, not as long as we have other narrators such as historians Doris Kearns Goodwin and David Herbert Donald to recount the tale. But yes, we should be disturbed if the movies are our only gospel, a kind of celluloid scripture governing how we understand history and ethics. In a postmodernity that's boldly free of metanarratives, the price we pay may be getting jerked around by the little narratives that float down the cultural stream.

At a deeper level, the concern for historical veracity misunderstands the moral value of fiction. Paul Ricoeur once described narrative fiction as an opportunity to experiment with alternative constructions of the world, a chance to ask imaginatively, "What would life be like, who would I be like, if the world were *this* way?" As such, fiction—even ethically suspect fiction—becomes an important means to allow one's narrative of self and community to be put to the test, thus strengthening and seasoning moral discernment.

Seen in this light, the best criticism of a film like *Zero Dark Thirty* is not that the movie cheats on history but that it projects a moral universe in which the human spirit cannot flourish. Our umbrage over a morally blinkered film should not be, "Hey, it didn't happen that way," but that we entered imaginatively into its universe and found it ethically stifling.

But this works only when those viewing the film have a trustworthy moral narrative already in place, somewhere to stand while exercising imagination. Biblical scholar Jean Calloud understood the story of Jesus' temptation as precisely this kind of imaginative experimentation. The evil one does not tempt Jesus to misbehave—to steal a purse or to cheat on his income tax—but instead offers alternative moral narratives. "Imagine a world in which you would turn stones to bread." Each time Jesus returns to the narrative given him in baptism and in the story of Israel ("it is written") that moral narrative is tested, strengthened and deepened.

Film critic Roger Ebert once said that he would like to think that forms of art, such as movies, "serve beauty and truth," but admitted that some art serves neither. However, he said, even corrupt art can strengthen our moral imagination, because it "provides an insight into human nature, helping us understand good and evil."

If the church can renew a focus on Christian formation, it can enable people to know the trustworthy story, what "is written." Then we can with confidence put that story to the test in countless acts of moral imagination. Not *Zero Dark Thirty*, indeed not even the gates of hell, can prevail against that.