OPINION

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There's No Redacting the Truth Once You Can Clearly See It

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We, all of us, at some point in our lives, need a little help in seeing more clearly. A pair of corrective prescription eyeglasses or a pair of 'readers'—spectacles with a fixed degree of magnification—will more often than not help do the trick. Bringing things into sharp focus: not only making them much easier to read, but also much easier to comprehend. And all to the good as we're all of us far more likely to believe or take as true what it is we actually see for ourselves.

All thanks to the properties inherent in a convex-shaped glass lens: helping to draw all the light to a specific point. Important that.

But as an old tutor of mine once pointed out to me: if you want to see things even more clearly still, it's possible to go a step further. And the metaphor he gave to help illustrate his point has stayed with me ever since.

He dubbed it "The Way of the Second Lens". Seeing the addition of a second lens; or multiple lens, whether convex or concave, or both, as occurs in a telescope or microscope; as having the unique ability to catapult you into a different realm of experience and reveal new and hitherto unseen understandings.

The newspaper columnists and political cartoonists you seek out on a regular basis can have a similar effect. Their ever-sharpened wits cutting portholes in what previously might have appeared to be a complete and utter fog. Each and every one of their distinctive points of view, by addition, helping to shape or form one's own.

Books can do that, too: help reframe an issue, help clarify it, make it accessible; help focus your mind. But films, oftentimes, can have a far broader and more immediate effect and, whether drama or documentary, live-action or animation, can have a much more dramatic impact on real life. Not simply by entertaining us and tickling our emotions; always a movie's prime function; but also by dint of helping change our perspective, expand our understanding and, sometimes, even, challenge us to do something about what we've just seen; what we've just experienced.

That 'Second Lens' effect at work again. Only, this time, writ much larger than life; the reel unspooling its own unique magic to help make things appear all the more real; the sense of everything heightened, by virtue of it being presented as a cogent narrative.

That's why movies have long been seen as an effective mechanism for dealing with society's most highly charged hot-button issues. Anti-Semitism. Antiapartheid. Ethnic Cleansing. Civil Rights. Gay Rights. Climate

Change. And, if the times and tides are right, certain movies have helped galvanize whole swathes of society to demand and/or fight for something to be made better, put right, or eliminated altogether; sometimes, even, igniting national or international movements for change.

Which I very much hope is the case with the film I very much urge you to see, even though the subject is about one of the more unpleasant aspects of man's inhumanity to man: torture. And even though the film is, currently, only streaming on Amazon Prime, and won't be all that easy for some people to access, it does need to be sought out, seen, and not forgotten.

The film is called: 'The (Torture) Report'. Only the word 'torture' in the title has been purposefully redacted; obscured by a thick red line. Which is why the caption beneath the title resonates so very strongly: 'Truth Matters'.

The film details the story of Daniel Jones, Senate staffer and lead investigator for the US Senate's sweeping probe into the Detention and Interrogation Program that was instituted as a result of the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, in New York on 9/11, 2001. The CIA authorised black-ops, secret torture program that clearly violated international treaties to which the United States was and still is a signatory. An insidious program, that later was not only found to have been excessively brutal and—a pause, here, for momentary reflection—but also wholly ineffective. For as the film makes all too clear, the answers the CIA sought with brutish, dead-eyed abandon; the names and whereabouts of other terrorists and the details of planned future terrorist attacks; never once did materialize.

The actual report documenting the long and sustained abuse of prisoners took Dan Jones (superbly played by Adam Driver) and his team six years to complete. The 6,400 page final document released, in a severely redacted version, in 2014.

Which is why the grinding, step-by-step detail of how Jones and his boss, Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, Head of the Senate Intelligence Committee (a commanding performance by Annette Bening) battled so long and so tirelessly to make public what a whole host of people in power, in Washington, the Pentagon, and the CIA sought to keep secret and far away from the public eye, is so utterly compelling and so very disturbing.

Otto von Bismarck's old saw: "Laws are like sausages; it's best not to see them being made" or the stark, clear-cut allusion to a military-industrial-sized meat grinder, arguably, never more true or apropos.

'The Report' takes no prisoners in its determination to both provoke and challenge. For veracity, it neither shies away, nor seeks to attenuate the very real horrors of the CIA 'black sites': the ice baths, the waterboarding, the mock burials, the sleep-deprivation, and other "enhanced interrogation techniques", are all shown in brief flashbacks in nauseating detail.

And, so, huge kudos to the film's producers and the film's writer and director Scott Z. Burns ('Contagion', 'The Bourne Ultimatum'), for their courage and tenacity in bringing the all too recent story to the screen and shining a bright light on the whole sorry sordid mess. As many of the people depicted, no doubt, still wield considerable influence in Washington.

Back in August, I wrote about another film that very much deserved to be seen, 'The Great Hack', and quoted the late and much-missed Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert: "I don't think that people often go to the movies and have their ideas change. But I think people can go to movies and have their feelings change. And those feelings can lead to new ideas."

My hope, now, is that this is also the case with 'The (Torture) Report': that you get to see it and that, even as it confirms your worst fears about the abuse and misuse of absolute power, it also arouses in you a staunch determination to seek out the truth whenever and wherever you can.

''The (Torture) Report' needs to be seen as it's a salutary lesson in the need for eternal vigilance if what we think of as democracy is ever going to survive. The one saving grace, that, in this case, truth mattered enough to enough people in Washington to ensure that, despite determined opposition from multiple powers that be, it was finally brought into the light of day.

I see it as no little coincidence that in 2017, the venerable 'Washington Post' introduced a slogan beneath its masthead; the first time in its 140-year history; and that it elected to choose a phrase long associated with one of the newspaper's most storied reporters, Bob Woodward, of 'All The President's Men' and Nixon Impeachment fame: 'Democracy Dies in Darkness'.

Bring on the Klieg lights. For it's become all too clear we need those same intense carbon arc lamps, used to light up film sets the world over to do the same in many more places the world over, too.

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