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UNDOING VIOLENCE: POLITICS, GENRE, AND DURATION IN KATHRYN BIGELOW'S CINEMA

CAETLIN BENSON-ALLOTT SURVEYS AN INNOVATIVE CAREER IN AND OUT OF HOLLYWOOD

In her thirty years as a feature film director, Kathryn Bigelow has amassed an impressive *oeuvre* of films celebrated for their radical representations of race and gender as well as their innovative cinematography and action sequences. These aspects often overlap, as when she encourages viewers to rethink action-hero masculinity by breaking with genre conventions and slowing down cinematic violence in her first feature, *The Loveless* (1982); her blockbuster, *Point Break* (1991); and her recent Oscar-winner, *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Bigelow's work presents an ongoing engagement with Hollywood genres but is neither simply subversive nor easily classifiable as commercial. Instead, her career has followed an unusual trajectory as she has been both insider and outsider in relation to mainstream cinema. Along the way, her engagements with the U.S. film industry and its genres have been paradoxical and provocative. Her big-budget blockbuster for Twentieth Century Fox, *Strange Days* (1995), flopped, whereas *The Hurt Locker* was independently produced yet brought Bigelow many prestigious awards, including the 2010 Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director.

Bigelow's shifting relationship to Hollywood forms is also reflected in the fact that she has repeatedly commissioned purpose-built camera equipment to create unique mobile shots within established generic conventions. Dynamic maneuverings also characterize the plots of her films, which feature marginal or countercultural characters in conflict with social norms. Often valorizing an outsider position, the films search for a balance between rebellion and social order in both narrative and form—although some do fail to find it. This is especially the case in *Strange Days*, where a relatively bold treatment of police racism is ultimately subordinated to a conventional romantic ending. Yet while an isolated reading of *Strange Days* might conclude that progressive politics and generic formulae make uneasy bedfellows, taken in the

wider context of Bigelow's *oeuvre*, the film's visible compromises instead suggest a struggle to create new meaning from Hollywood convention.

In what follows, I explore Bigelow's films chronologically and in terms of these recurring tensions and conflicts; I view her *oeuvre* as a set of questions and engagements rather than a predetermined auteurist statement. Too often, Bigelow's champions (of which she has and deserves many, in both the academy and the industry) impose an overly unified interpretation of her filmmaking. This reflects an understandable desire for coherence, but at the same time it does the films a disservice by downplaying their dynamism, not to mention the significant industrial and artistic challenges Bigelow has faced throughout her career. Each film grapples with these challenges uniquely, and it is only by recognizing their respective struggles that an accurate image of Bigelow's auteurism emerges.

THE LOVELESS AND NEAR DARK

In the years leading up to her first feature, Bigelow studied painting at the San Francisco Art Institute and New York's Whitney Museum. She was very involved with New York's conceptual art scene, particularly the 1970s artists' collaborative Art and Language, which critiqued commodity culture. Bigelow's early work benefited from her apprenticeships with Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, and Lawrence Weiner; she also acted in Lizzie Borden's 1983 feature *Born in Flames*, a fictional account of a feminist revolution that blends genre and political filmmaking in what might be considered a model for Bigelow's later work. While working with Art and Language, Bigelow began a short film, *The Set-Up* (1978), which she submitted as part of her MFA at Columbia University. A reflection on the fascistic appeal of screen violence, *The Set-Up* laid the foundation for many of the production techniques that define Bigelow's later work, including rigorous storyboarding and intensive collaboration with actors, editors, and other directors.[†] However, Bigelow's recent interviews

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suggest ambivalence toward the film's overtly philosophical framework. In a 1995 *Film Comment* interview with Gavin Smith, reprinted in Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond's collection, *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (Wallflower Press, 2003), Bigelow coyly encourages viewers to regard *The Set-Up* as a "politically literal" text about violence (29). This reductive account of the film belies its real violence, as Bigelow asked her actors to actually beat and bludgeon each other throughout the film's all-night shoot. More recently, she has affirmed critic Amy Taubin's view that *The Set-Up* "contains in embryo everything that would preoccupy Bigelow through the seven feature films that followed," thereby recuperating the project even if she now rejects the way she executed it (*Film Comment*, May/June 2009).

That critical distance from her own work is already visible in her 1982 feature, *The Loveless*, co-directed with Monty Montgomery. It is a sedate, almost anti-narrative homage to post-war biker films such as Laslo Benedek's classic, *The Wild One* (1953). Whereas *The Set-Up* supplements its gory on-screen violence with voiceover commentary from two Columbia University professors—a somewhat didactic technique—*The Loveless* offers only the most clichéd narration by its central character. His trite asides provide no key to the film's interpretation, so the viewer is obliged to confront the film's visual style without pedagogy or guidance. Bigelow's first feature is no less philosophical in its approach to questions of representation than *The Set-Up* as it invites us to reconsider familiar subject matter. Through deliberately stilted dialogue and slow camera movements, it creates critical distance between spectator and narrative that throws the film's still landscapes and shut-down lives into stark relief. In this languorous atmosphere, nothing much happens, so the viewer starts to ask where violence will come from and why she is waiting for it.

The film begins at dawn in a nondescript Southern bayou. To the tune of Eddy Dixon's "Relentless," the camera waits beside a mint-condition Indian motorcycle for its rider to appear. When he does, it pans up his iconic black boots, jeans, and leather jacket to discover Willem Dafoe's now-iconic scowl. *The Loveless* was the actor's first film, but its focus on his intensely disaffected demeanor establishes the template for his subsequent cultural prominence (while also emphasizing the biker hero's customary alienation). Yet even as the film invokes such generic conventions, the soundtrack unsettles viewers' expectations. For when the camera reaches Dafoe's face, the music stops and the diegetic hush of the bayou takes over. In this quietude, the camera pulls back into a long shot of the biker donning his gloves, taking a first and then a second try at starting his bike, and slowly entering a

quiet highway. When "Relentless" eventually recommences (about halfway through the shot), it no longer seems to refer to the biker; instead it comments on the shot itself. Relentless duration characterizes *The Loveless*'s cinematography and its anti-narrative. Whereas most road movies dare the spectator to keep up, *The Loveless* challenges her to endure, to sit through shots that—like the bikers themselves—seem to be going nowhere. For nothing much happens—but this nothing much nonetheless produces abrupt, brutal, and devastating violence.

Setting therefore becomes very important for *The Loveless*, most of which takes place in an economically depressed truck-stop town where Dafoe's Vance and his gang undertake some minor mechanical repairs. While in town, the gang does everything movie bikers are supposed to do: they intimidate the local boys, flirt with the waitresses, threaten the patriarchs, and spout impossibly cool, cryptic slang. The mundane familiarity of their behavior enables the film to spend more time contemplating the gang's boredom than advancing the plot. What plot there is seems to progress almost by chance, as when an androgynous young woman, Telena (Marin Kanter), happens into the gas station, flirts with Vance, then takes him for a ride to a local motel. In a mid-drive anecdote, Telena reveals that her father has been sexually abusing her since her mother's suicide, yet when her father later drags her from the motel, Vance barely moves, as if resisting the call of a Hollywood revenge plot. Telena subsequently takes her own revenge by showing up at her father's favorite bar with a gun, but the film presents the timing of this reprisal as almost arbitrary. It could just as easily have happened another evening, or not at all. Indeed, the pace of the film makes its violent conclusion feel without context, because without a narrative arc supporting it, it cannot bear any larger social or symbolic significance. In short, by manipulating the rhythm of the biker genre, Bigelow and Montgomery divest it of its conventional ideological closure and suggest that violence does not necessarily contain meaning. In most action-oriented B-movies, a narrative arc codes climactic bloodshed as a crucial precursor to resolution; violence creates the new status quo. *The Loveless* asks what violence can mean—if it means anything—without its conventional framing or when it seems more closely associated with boredom than righteousness.

Near Dark (1987) extends Bigelow's interrogation of character motivations and screen violence and develops her aesthetic in important ways—most notably in her use of lighting and color. The film opens with a sunset. The warm sepia and orange tones of a Midwestern evening give way to a blue-black night as the film's cowboy protagonist, Caleb (Adrian Pasdar), goes hunting for beer and girls. As in *The*



Kathryn Bigelow directing *The Hurt Locker*
 Courtesy of Summit Entertainment.

Loveless, cool lighting palettes play a significant role in Bigelow's evocation of small-town tedium, and ennui again brings the threat of violence, this time to Caleb's encounter with his similarly bored friends. However, in *Near Dark*, cinematographer Adam Greenberg's electric blue moonlight enhances the vampire film's distinctive combination of horrific surrealism and melancholic romanticism. Greenberg developed this aesthetic while working on James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), where it contributes to a futuristic dystopia set in contemporary L.A. *Near Dark* likewise exploits Greenberg's fluorescent blue light to illuminate new worlds in familiar terrain. It dramatizes the vampires' unconventional hunger and how that hunger produces not only alternative circadian rhythms but also the alternative kinship networks of their nocturnal world. However, *Near Dark*'s vampires are less inclined to existential debate than the ones in *The Hunger* (1983) or *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). Those vampires discuss the nature of their plight, but Bigelow's monsters seem bored by self-reflection. For them, the nomadic lifestyle is a test of endurance and the will to survive, and the film's ethereal, immobilizing blue light and

slow camera movements represent their exclusion from ordinary time.

The lighting also conveys how violence has become the preferred means of marking—or perhaps killing—time for Bigelow's vampires (and maybe for the movie audience too). The lighting creates a contrast between lyrical scenes of immortal leisure and the film's gruesome feeding sequences, which employ a very different aesthetic. In the most notorious set piece, *Near Dark*'s predators—including Lance Henriksen's dissolute Jesse, Bill Paxton's sadistic Severin, and Jenny Wright's androgynous yet maternal Mae—attack an isolated Texas roadhouse, and as they effectively turn the bar into an abattoir, Bigelow and Greenberg use hot fluorescent lights to reveal every drop of spilt blood. The scene also deviates from *Near Dark*'s otherwise leisurely pace; instead Bigelow and her editor, Howard E. Smith, build the roadhouse episode around the tight cuts and quick inserts common to splatter movies. The change in pace and style connects the film unmistakably to the horror genre, but it also offsets the horror element and isolates it from the film's more contemplative moments. In this way the viewer is



Top two: *The Loveless*. © 1981 Pioneer Films Corporation. DVD: Blue Underground. Next two: *Near Dark*. © 1987 Near Dark Joint Venture. DVD: Optimum Releasing (U.K.).
Bottom four: *Blue Steel*. © 1989 FSI-Precision Film Venture I Joint Venture. DVD: Lionsgate (U.K.).

allowed a certain detachment from the carnage once it is over—a detachment not dissimilar to the vampires'. Thus it appears that Bigelow utilizes the conventions of the horror genre both for their own power and to study the relationship to violence they produce.

BLUE STEEL AND POINT BREAK

Bigelow's subsequent trilogy of action films—*Blue Steel* (1989), *Point Break*, and *Strange Days*—merged her philosophically minded manipulation of pace with the market demands of mainstream filmmaking. In the process, Bigelow became recognizable as both a Hollywood brand and an auteur. All three films rethink the conventions of action cinema while exploring gendered and racial politics. This is not an easy project, and Bigelow did not always succeed in making genuinely progressive mainstream genre movies. Indeed, after *Strange Days* flopped she was forced to reassess her direction, but these attempts nonetheless offer fascinating evidence of the difficulty of addressing politically sensitive topics in Hollywood.

Blue Steel opens as Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) finishes the New York City Police Academy and begins work as a Manhattan beat cop. During her first day on the job, a deadly incident brings her into contact with a psychopath who subsequently begins to shoot random New Yorkers with bullets bearing Turner's name. This murderer, Wall Street trader Eugene Hunt (Ron Silver), only begins his rampage after he sees Turner kill an armed robber. Thus it would seem that violence begets violence, both for Hunt and for Turner, who repeatedly suggests that she chose to become a cop after growing up in an abusive household. Her violent occupation now defines her relationships with men, alternately attracting and repelling them. Her father is disappointed by her choice of profession, but it entices both her boss and the yuppie killer. Indeed, Hunt not only murders in Turner's name but also seeks her out romantically, inviting her to share a cab during a downpour and then charming her with expensive dinners and a helicopter ride.

As she does in *Near Dark*, Bigelow visualizes *Blue Steel's* web of violence, gender, and power through lighting design. Most notable are the blue gels and kick lights that appear whenever Turner expects to wield control over men but does not. The dramatic power of the gels also creates a kind of temporal layering as they generate associations with previous scenes through color repetitions and associations. Specifically, the lights produce patterns that allow the viewer to see the effects Turner's father, the NYPD, and her romantic aspirations have on all her relationships. For example, blue light frames Turner's sexy red dress at the end of her second date

with Hunt while she naively tries to convince her own stalker to come upstairs. Because the spectator already knows about Hunt's murderous behavior, Turner's sexual confidence seems foolhardy; where she sees romance, the spectator recognizes the blue glow of potential violence. The contrast between the blue light and Turner's red dress also recreates the color scheme of the NYPD police lights, dramatizing how her institutional relationship to violence persists in the background of her out-of-uniform femininity and sexuality. It is a subtle effect that emphasizes Turner's vulnerability and indicates the extent to which her profession is not a liberation. Likewise, when Turner must readopt police colors for her final confrontation with Hunt, the film makes consistent use of slow motion and color repetition to convey the dehumanizing violence these two sources of masculine threat enact on her. The film ends with an unsettling long take that questions the value of what Turner has endured. Through a minute-long medium close-up of her impassive profile, *Blue Steel* both abandons the violence it has portrayed and challenges any sense of it as empowerment, female or otherwise. Turner's stillness, isolation, and downcast eyes suggest defeat, not victory. The violence involved in conquering Hunt also conquered her.

Point Break similarly features masculinity as masquerade and a doomed romance—or “bromance,” in the parlance of our times. In it, Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves), another law enforcer, and bank robber Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) find themselves drawn into a violent homoerotic flirtation that raises questions about sexual normativity and the social order Utah represents. The film begins with a beautiful surfer, presumably Bodhi, riding the waves, intercut with another scene of embodied masculine performance: Utah completing an FBI Academy field test. Turner failed a similar exam at the beginning of *Blue Steel*, but Utah aces his, and *Point Break* represents his examination as a performance rather than a trial. Turner bears scrutiny unhappily, as if expecting to be found lacking, but Utah embraces attention, making a spectacle of himself at both FBI headquarters and on the beach, where he goes undercover as a neophyte surfer in order to infiltrate Bodhi's gang, the Ex-Presidents. Furthermore, Reeves's casting highlights masculine spectacle and stardom because *Point Break* premiered less than two years after his iconic turn as Ted Logan in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989). Given the cultural prominence of the Logan character in the early 1990s, Reeves himself seems undercover as Utah—a surfer playing an FBI agent playing a surfer—which produces an ironic twist on idealized, action-film masculinity. Similarly, Swayze's bearing and reputation as a dancer invite the viewer to reinterpret his stunt work as choreography and so recognize

the physical demands of the genre. Finally—and whether by accident or design—neither Swayze nor Reeves turns in a particularly convincing dramatic performance, which has the effect of highlighting their androgynous grace and celebrity power over their realism as actors.

Arguably, then, Bigelow's casting and direction of Reeves and Swayze prompts a degree of metacinematic reflection that her cinematography encourages further. *Point Break* both slows down and speeds through the usual action set pieces to invite viewers to think about genre conventions and their typical masculinist focus on the individual. Take, for example, the scene in which Utah and his partner hunt down Bodhi's gang during its penultimate bank heist. The chase begins with an extended, rapidly intercut sequence as the two agents pursue the thieves through the Los Angeles sprawl of strip malls and parking lots, ending when the Ex-Presidents pull into a service station to swap cars. There the film cuts to a long shot as Bodhi, wearing a Ronald Reagan mask, turns a gas nozzle into a flamethrower to incinerate their ex-vehicle. Abandoning the 180-degree rule, the camera pans behind the gas pumps to contemplate the fire in slow motion before cutting in for a close-up of the grinning mask. The scene is both lyrical and formally transgressive because Bigelow's pacing and beautiful framing undermine the genre's ideological center without sacrificing excitement. A second virtuosic chase sequence follows, this one enabled by a lightweight modified Steadicam known as a Pogocam. As Utah pursues Bodhi on foot, an up-tempo surf-rock beat accompanies their journey through suburban alleyways, kitchens, and living rooms before coming to an abrupt halt in the L.A. River. Such tight turns as occur during this second chase are extremely hard to film and consequently quite rare in action movies, which is why Bigelow and her director of photography, Donald Peterman, had to develop their Pogocam to create the exhilarating sense of physical involvement the sequence gives its viewer.

In fact, tinkering with and advancing camera design is one of Bigelow's most celebrated engagements with genre convention, and in *Point Break* she premieres another modified Steadicam designed to mimic more accurately the movements of a human head. Bigelow and Peterman use it to manipulate the focalization and deepen the spectator's emotional involvement when Utah must temporarily join the Ex-Presidents to rescue a hostage. As the robbers enter the bank, the filmmakers swivel their camera like a human head, its focus scrambling over figures and fittings, struggling to make sense of the scene. At first, this terrified gaze seems to belong to Utah, the most disoriented and frightened protagonist in this scene. But then there is a sudden reverse shot to Utah,

and when the spectator suddenly realizes that the gaze no longer belongs to him, she may become newly aware of an exhilarated empathy with the character. As the heist proceeds, the camera's movement becomes increasingly mobile and depersonalized, but the switch in viewpoints foregrounds the mechanics of identification in *Point Break*, and especially how Utah forms his homoerotic bond with Bodhi. Thus Bigelow's formal technique intensifies the film's dramatic tension while also mimicking processes of affiliation and identification that bond characters together.

STRANGE DAYS

Both *Blue Steel* and *Point Break* demonstrate Bigelow's interest in rethinking the action film and finding technological and aesthetic strategies to question its violence without sacrificing genre pleasure. This project also dominates *Strange Days*, a sci-fi thriller about a fictional new technology—the Superconducting Quantum Interference Device (SQUID)—that can record and replay every component of a user's experience. To create SQUID's first-person perspective onscreen, Bigelow and cinematographer Matt Leonetti spent over a year in preproduction developing an eight-pound, ultra-mobile camera that could move with the same smoothness and agility as the human eye. This allowed them to compose the film's notorious opening shot, a three-minute point-of-view long take in which an anonymous SQUID-wearer robs a Thai restaurant and dies trying to escape. Steven Shaviro offers a brilliant reading of this scene in "Straight from the Cerebral Cortex: Vision and Affect in *Strange Days*" (*The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*), observing that "neither the doer nor the observer is a fixed, identifiable self. It is only with the interruption of the tape, at the death of the person whose POV we have been sharing, that we find out who the diegetic spectator is" (163). During this complicated play of identities, the film also cites both Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), thus combining its futuristic, neo-noir setting and technological innovation with a metacinematic reinterpretation of familiar film history.

Despite the device's artistic (and allegedly military) potential, most SQUID clips in *Strange Days* only offer their viewers cheap, sensationalist thrills. In an archetypal example, one businessman uses the equipment to perceive himself in the body of a young woman taking a shower. Thus Bigelow both indulges and exposes our appetite for sleazy imagery even as her film pursues loftier goals. *Strange Days* also outlines an antiracist critique of U.S. culture by recreating the 1992 Los Angeles riots in its eve-of-millennium setting. Bigelow sets this critique against the SQUID's sensationalist



Top four: *Point Break*. © 1991 Largo Entertainment (in the United States and Canada)/Largo International N.V. (in all other territories). DVD: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment (U.K.). Bottom four: *Strange Days*. © 1995 Lightstorm Entertainment Inc. DVD: Universal Studios (U.K.)

escapism, but ultimately it is confounded by an unusual conformism on Bigelow's part, specifically to the convention of Hollywood romantic endings. Ultimately, this compromise destroys both the film's progressive politics and Bigelow's career as a blockbuster filmmaker.

Strange Days revolves around an underground SQUID dealer, Lenny (Ralph Fiennes), and his investigation of the murder of his friend Iris (Brigitte Bako), a prostitute killed shortly after entrusting him with an unmarked clip. After two rogue cops chase and nearly kill Lenny and his sidekick

Mace (Angela Bassett) in an attempt to recover the clip, the latter decide to pick up Mace's son and hide out at a house party in South Central L.A. to find out what is on the tape. As they escape, Bigelow blends her signature blue light with orange street fires and Molotov cocktails that evoke the network news coverage of the 1992 L.A. riots. Once at the party, Lenny immerses himself in the clip while Mace watches her son dance with a sparkler. Presented in slow motion, this dance represents an apolitical, innocent alternative to the riots and Mace's subsequent agonized exposure to the clip. Unfortunately, this juxtaposition has the effect of marginalizing the clip's contents, as though the events it depicts ruptured a previous idyll. The clip begins as Iris flirts with a celebrity rapper and activist, Jeriko-One (Glenn Plummer), in his car. When the two cops pull him over, Jeriko accuses them of racial profiling and promises to publicize their prejudice, so they kill him. While Mace and Lenny are grievously surprised by this revelation of police racism, the scene feels sadly familiar to anyone knowledgeable about the 1992 riots, which followed the acquittal of four LAPD officers caught on video beating Rodney King. That footage, recorded by amateur videographer George Holliday, outraged viewers and was taken by many to be evidence of not just an isolated civil rights violation but decades of systemic brutality and bigotry.

Such deep-rooted social issues cannot be resolved in two hours, but *Strange Days* nonetheless offers a form of fictional closure through a conventional Hollywood double plotline. Put simply, the double plotline weaves together two stories, such as a political intrigue and a romance, so that the resolution of one (usually the romance) can stand in for or incorporate the other. In *Strange Days*, this narrative convenience subordinates Jeriko-One's assassination to Mace and Lenny's romantic union. Throughout the film, Mace repeatedly indicates her desire for Lenny, but he ignores the advances. Finally, as the clock strikes a new millennium, Lenny looks over his shoulder and suddenly reciprocates her unwavering affection. He kisses her, and the camera pulls back from their embrace to take in the way a riotous crowd, previously incensed by the murderous cops' last-ditch attack on Mace, suddenly becomes joyous and even affectionate. As the closing music rises, the couple's passionate embrace seems meant to represent hope for a new era. It may even remind the viewer of an earlier statement by Lenny's ex-girlfriend, Faith (Juliette Lewis), who said she prefers movies to real life because "the music comes up, there's credits, and you always know when it's over." Unfortunately, the problem of institutionalized racism is not over; *Strange Days* just neatly set it aside.

To be sure, celebrating a mixed-race couple is still radical in Hollywood film. Steven Shaviro even suggests that the

ending might commandeer the double plot in order to stress its ideological limitations, specifically the lingering influence of the Hayes Code, which banned images of interracial affection. Yet for such a recuperative reading to be convincing, one might expect the characters themselves to recognize the political significance of their situation, that there is much more at stake in the Jeriko-One crisis than their love or desire. Instead, the film ends with Lenny observing, "We made it." This "we" explicitly refers to the happy couple; the question of whether his city will "make it" out of this political quagmire seems forgotten. And what hope can there be for antiracist reform in a movie whose heroes forget they were even on a mission? Finally, it is worth noting how these tensions affected the reception of the film. As Will Brooker demonstrates in "Rescuing *Strange Days*: Fan Reaction to a Critical and Commercial Failure" (also included in *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow*), many fans and critics give credit for *Strange Days*'s creative vision to Bigelow's ex-husband, James Cameron. This discourse reduces Bigelow's influence to the melodrama of the romantic couple and obfuscates the film's political aspirations as neatly as its conclusion. Whatever the ultimate failings of *Strange Days*, it deserves better than that.

THE WEIGHT OF WATER AND K-19

In the wake of the commercial failure of *Strange Days* (it grossed less than a fifth of its production budget), Bigelow presided over three highly acclaimed episodes of *Homicide: Life on the Street* and then adapted Anita Shreve's historical novel *The Weight of Water* (2000), which managed only a very limited theatrical release. Ironically, Bigelow's sixth film received scant notice for its study of female subjectivity even though *Near Dark*, *Blue Steel*, and *Strange Days* were all lauded for comparatively cursory treatments of the issue. It contains the most sustained and complex inquiry into women's relationships to violence, interweaving the stories of two women who respond violently to family crises and showing how gender roles contributed to their breakdowns. *The Weight of Water* opens as a contemporary photojournalist, Jean (Catherine McCormick), investigates the 1873 murder of two women on New Hampshire's Isles of Shoals. Jean invites her husband, a poet, and his brother along on her research trip, but much to her displeasure, the brother brings his new girlfriend, Adaline (Elizabeth Hurley), another writer who greatly admires Jean's husband. The film intercuts personal tensions with flashbacks to the true story of the Shoals murders, which were committed by a woman threatened by another sort of romantic rivalry.

As with *The Loveless*, *The Weight of Water* contains an implicit thesis on violence, namely that it happens more by

chance than by design, because of small decisions that might just as easily have been inconsequential. During an unexpected ocean squall, Jean has a moment to warn Adaline about an unsecured boom. Instead she does nothing and watches as the boom hits Adaline, knocking her into the water. In 1873, Maren Hondvedt (Sarah Polley) has to react to another threat to her family, and her response is no more premeditated than Jean's. When Maren's sister discovers her cuddling with their brother's wife, she threatens to expose not just this infidelity but also Maren's childhood affair with her brother. Before she has the chance, Maren kills both her and their sister-in-law. These crises allow Bigelow, her editor, and her cinematographer to explore how suddenly violence emerges and dissipates by slowly creating constrained atmospheres of frustration and animosity. Intercut with Maren's isolated existence on the Isles of Shoals, most of Jean's story takes place aboard her brother-in-law's yacht, where scenes of leisurely sailing contrast with the rapidly escalating feelings onboard. In these hermetic settings, tension builds slowly until there is a sudden burst of action. *The Weight of Water* exploits this effective narrative drama to succeed as a ruminative, experimental film that explores how violence can emerge gradually and then all at once.

This attention to pacing continues in Bigelow's next film. Starring Harrison Ford and Liam Neeson, *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002) is set aboard a 1959 Soviet nuclear submarine and shares with *The Weight of Water* both a nautical setting and a developing interest in how human agency is shaped by environment. These films show Bigelow moving away from her earlier studies of ennui and action aesthetics toward *The Hurt Locker's* exercise in sustained, unrelenting tension. In retrospect, *The Weight of Water* and *K-19* belong together with *The Hurt Locker* in a new phase of Bigelow's career, one in which slow-burning animosity and perseverance are the crucial themes. Perhaps most notably, the rivalry between *K-19's* two captains, Vostrikov (Ford) and Polenin (Neeson), prefigures the uneasy interdependence of *The Hurt Locker's* bomb squad. Both films also eschew the interstitial moments of light relief typical of many action genres. What is left is an endurance test for both characters and spectators caught up in the constant accumulation of suspense.

For the first hour of *K-19*, Vostrikov drills his crew after the submarine suffers a mechanical failure during a routine inspection. Although the test was routine, the breakdown is real, and the film plays with the confusion between simulated and actual perils as Vostrikov's drills strain both the spectator and the crew. However, they also increase the audience's connection with the crew as both tire of Vostrikov's games. When the crew must unite to mend a burst coolant

hose in an overheating reactor, our identification with their ordeal allows *K-19* to alter the standard rhythm of an action movie—crisis and recovery, crisis and recovery—so that it can instead oscillate between suspense and tragedy. Bigelow and veteran editor Walter Murch first increase spectator anxiety by cutting rapidly between soldering irons and tense, sweating faces and then elongate other shots that emphasize small moments of devastatingly bad luck. At one point, they allow the camera to linger over Polenin's discovery that the repair crew will have to venture inside the reaction chamber without radiation suits because "the warehouse was out." Such temporal respites do not provide the viewer with any sort of reassuring levity; rather, the way they vary the tempo renews the spectator's sympathy for the crew members while also compounding their trouble. Last but not least, the film exploits the horrifying threat of radiation poisoning as Bigelow and Murch build a complete environment of danger.

THE HURT LOCKER

Menace and threat also proliferate in *The Hurt Locker*. As with the Hollywood trilogy, Bigelow succeeds in fashioning a highly exciting and visually involving film which at the same time interrogates genre conventions, specifically the way many war films distance or sanitize violence. One of the major ways in which Bigelow does this is to draw attention to her own media, which are not always film. *The Hurt Locker* includes low-resolution and high-speed digital video to represent soldiers' fractured experiences of high-tech warfare. Hers is not just a film and, by extension, not just a war film of either the jingoist or activist kind. Bigelow proves this point most subtly during the sharply detailed high-definition bomb explosions that expand her previous experiments with slow-motion cinematography and reconfigure the spatiality of violence. In *Strange Days* she uses slow motion to increase the spectator's investment in Mace's son as a counterpoint to the emotional impact of the Jeriko-One clip. Similarly, *Point Break* slows down to capture Reagan and Bodhi's gunfight and the fluid grace contained within this action sequence. Slow motion is a recurring technique in Bigelow's storytelling, often most successful where it is the most experimentally employed, where it can help the spectator participate in a collective meditation on action and affect.

To that end, *The Hurt Locker's* first explosion deploys slow-motion HDV close-ups of road gravel and car rust rising from the force of the explosion to remove the viewer from the human scale of the blast and suggest the extensiveness of its destructive power. This adjustment of scale places a few moments of grace and beauty at the center of this



Top two: *The Weight of Water*. © 2000 StudioCanal France. DVD: Lions Gate. Next two: *K-19: The Widowmaker*. © 2002 IMF Internationale Medien und Film GmbH & Co. 2 Produktions KG. DVD: New Films International. Bottom four: *The Hurt Locker*. © 2008 Hurt Locker LLC. DVD: Lionsgate (U.K.).

scene of the death of Staff Sergeant Thompson (Guy Pearce). Bigelow prefaces this depersonalizing of the first explosion by visually emphasizing the free-floating paranoia of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal team. The film punctuates the team's nervous joking with rapid pans that become cuts—as if the camera were too jumpy to complete its movement—and bouncy handheld shots that alternate between point-of-view and defocalized perspectives. This technique generalizes the scene's tension and frees the film from any one character's experience. The movie maintains this distance when the bomb goes off, cutting first to the gravel and rust and then to a high-angle, slow-motion long take of Thompson running toward the camera. In a haunting twenty-second shot, his passing appears as the movement of smoke and debris, the smooth unfolding of a catastrophic event. The unearthly pace of the shot suggests a perspective outside of time, outside of all embodied, partisan positions. This is the hurt locker, the temporal and physical space of peril and pain that the film understands as beyond any sectarian frame. The scene's mournful, displaced lyricism defamiliarizes and depoliticizes its subject—there are no (living) voices, eyes, or subjective perspectives inside the hurt locker, only and always death. Critics as distinguished as A. O. Scott of *The New York Times*, Martha P. Nochimson of *Cineaste*, and Carla Seaquist of the *Christian Science Monitor* have expressed reservations about Bigelow producing such an apolitical war film, but as it plays out onscreen, *The Hurt Locker* succeeds because it upsets received war-film pacing. Its deliberate distance actually forces the spectator to slow down and think about the horror of military violence.

The Hurt Locker later expands this critique of war films by providing its spectator with only limited access to its characters and emphasizing their limited vision. During its opening exposition sequence, the film features close-ups of the sunglasses worn by Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) as well as POV shots warped by the oblong distortion these glasses generate. During other bomb scenes, the camera shifts between the perspectives of its protagonists and of anonymous bystanders, none of whom seems to understand where the danger is coming from or why they are involved. The film further depersonalizes its analysis of the Iraq war by presenting its central character, Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner), as a cipher, blocking access to his emotions even at the expense of condemning the forces that imperil him. *Strange Days* is similarly dominated by a male protagonist, but whereas that film uses personalization as a retreat from politics, *The Hurt Locker* insists on James's unknowability in order to depsychologize the military rela-

tionship to death and violence. In the much-discussed shot of James standing alone in a supermarket aisle, having returned from his tour of duty, his blankness is again emphasized: he is utterly disconcerted by its plethora of breakfast cereals. As the film tells us, “war is a drug,” and this is a man suffering withdrawal symptoms, ready to return to his addiction. The film accompanies this relapse with “Khyber Pass,” an anti-Bush anthem by Ministry. However, the audience hears only the rousing, instrumental portion of the song and so its political dimension is hard to decipher. It is a fitting final note for a film that avoids taking sides in order to concentrate on fashioning an environment of unresolved and all-pervasive anxiety.

The controversies surrounding Bigelow and her treatment of screen violence in *The Hurt Locker* exemplify the complexities of trying to blend genre conventions and art-film technique in twenty-first century U.S. film culture. Her films rarely reveal Bigelow's political affiliations as transparently as critics would like; instead, her investigations of contemporary gender, race, and military politics unfold in her long shots and transitions, in her exploration of film as a time-based medium. Thus Bigelow's repeated engagement with Hollywood genres can best be understood as a challenge to hegemonic temporalities, to narrative orders that only engage some people's experiences of desire, violence, and death. Examining Bigelow's *oeuvre* in order, it is clear that her filmic experiments are not all equally successful, but together they suggest an artistic practice both indebted to and critical of sensationalist spectatorial engagement. At variable distances from Hollywood, more or less of an outsider herself, Bigelow makes films that challenge the way we think about the relationship of agency to environment, acknowledge the effects Hollywood genres have on the way we see the world, and invite us to see differently.

†One of the actors in *The Set-Up*, Gary Busey, also appears in *Point Break*. In addition, Bigelow has worked repeatedly with Bill Paxton, Tom Sizemore, Ralph Fiennes, and James Le Gros. These collaborations have drawn less attention than Bigelow's cooperation behind the camera with directors Monty Montgomery and James Cameron, screenwriters Eric Red and Christopher Kyle, and editor Howard E. Smith, who contributed to four of Bigelow's films.

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ABSTRACT Kathryn Bigelow's eight feature films all seek a balance between progressive representations of gender and race and the demands of commercial filmmaking. Close attention to the filmmaker's experiments with duration and camera technology reveals her interest in reworking Hollywood conventions to critique conventionally masculinist genres.

KEYWORDS Kathryn Bigelow, *The Hurt Locker*, *Strange Days*, *The Weight of Water*, *Near Dark*