

## Blurring the Boundaries: Auteurism & Kathryn Bigelow

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Born in California in 1952, Katherine Bigelow is one of the few women directors working in Hollywood today. She is exceptional because she works primarily within the traditionally male-dominated genres of the action cinema. Bigelow's films often reflect a different approach to these genres as she consistently explores themes of violence, voyeurism and sexual politics. Ultimately she seems to be concerned with calling the boundaries between particular genres into question. Bigelow's visual style echoes this thematic complexity, often introducing elements of an art-house aesthetic. Bigelow emerged from the New York art scene in the 1970s, having won a Whitney Scholarship to study painting. She later transferred to the Columbia Film program. Critics such as Yvonne Tasker have commented on the amalgamation of spectacle and adrenaline with more thoughtful analysis typical of Bigelow's cinema "what is so distinctive about her movies; an artful immersion in generic popular culture that is simultaneously stylish, seemingly ironic, but also deeply romantic"(Wallflower, 46). Bigelow's subsequent career has been marked by her immersion in her projects, bringing her experience in the visual arts to striking cinematic effect. Like her first two films (*The Loveless*, 1983 and *Near Dark*, 1987), *Blue Steel* clearly disturbs generic expectations and audience conceptions of gender. Bigelow has stated that "it all began with the idea of doing a woman action film. Not only has no woman ever done an action thriller, no woman has ever been at the center of one as the central character"(Smith, 21). Throughout the film Bigelow plays with the notion of Jamie Lee Curtis's Megan as "woman", highlighting the place of both the actress and the character in a traditionally male role. The opening shots of the film show Curtis putting on her police uniform; the frilly lace of her bra at odds with the crisp lines of the uniform, 'masculine' and 'feminine' attire are starkly juxtaposed. Curtis's character becomes decidedly androgynous, a recurring motif in *Point Break* and *Strange Days*, but a motif she ultimately abandons in her more recent films *The Weight of Water* (2000) and *K19: The Widowmaker* (2002). The figure of the androgynous female who is capable of violence is a recurrent one throughout Bigelow's films, the association of the two often combining to give an erotic charge. This is made explicit in *Blue Steel*: the killer Eugene's fixation on Megan is linked to her possession of, and ability to use her gun (leaving the film wide open to psychoanalytical and feminist readings).

The 1991 film *Point Break* is Bigelow's biggest commercial success, perhaps because it mostly conforms to its action genre. The film focuses on the relationship between Keanu Reeves' Johnny Utah, an FBI agent, and his chief suspect in a series of bank robberies, Patrick Swayze, the surfer cum guru whose spirituality is based upon the adrenalin junkies need to confront death in order to feel truly alive. It's examination of masculine relations and the lines between right and wrong is complimented by testosterone infused action sequences. Bigelow's familiar

group of outsiders living by different rules are presented here as whole-heartedly cool. And the aesthetic style of the film is indicative of Bigelow's increasingly idiosyncratic choices that create arresting images and innovative action sequences. *Strange Days* (1995) is the film in Bigelow's oeuvre that has received the most critical and theoretical attention, and so for the purposes of this analysis it will be referred to but not fully theorized. *Strange Days* is a neo-noir science fiction film that presents the future on the eve of the new millennium, a dystopic Los Angeles which is on the verge of erupting into a race war. The film was a critical if not commercial success, building upon recognizable Bigelow motifs. The film is a rich tapestry of narrative threads, stunning visuals and soundtrack, all of which compete for attention. Perhaps this dense layering of material fighting for audience attention explains the film's lack-lustre reception. *Strange Days*, in line with Bigelow's other films, also switches traditional roles. Here the hero Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) is largely ineffective, the action role being played by Angela Bassett as Mace, a kick-boxing security specialist. Interestingly, in a storyline reminiscent of Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), the film deals in part with a murderer who films his kills and through SQUID technology relays the images and emotions back to his victims. The bathroom scene featuring rape and murder caused controversy on release, and in the same manner as *Peeping Tom*, raises questions of voyeurism, relating it to the wider context of the cinema audience.

One of Bigelow's more recent films demonstrates her tendency to transcend or blur generic boundaries, *The Weight of Water* (2000) is a historical murder mystery, a thriller based on Anita Shreve's critically acclaimed novel and stars Catherine McCormack, Sean Penn and Sarah Polley. It juxtaposes two stories and draws thematic comparisons between each. The first, which is set in 1873 and told in flashback, focuses on a murder and trial in New England. The second takes place over a hundred years later and revolves around a journalist who is writing a story about the case. Bigelow is significant, not just as an all too rare successful female director working within Hollywood, but as a director who manages to combine thematic complexity, technological experimentation and a sophisticated visual style with a more populist approach. What follows is an analysis of Bigelow as an interesting and at times problematic example of a contemporary Hollywood auteur, who is that much more uncharacteristic because she is a woman working within the traditionally male dominated genre of action cinema. Violence, both implicit and explicit, is an integral part of all her films, but is violence something that lends itself to authorial purpose or defies it?

Despite the apparent contradictions evident across Bigelow's body of work, there are a number of qualities that lend themselves to a conception of her 'signature'. These include the ongoing interrogation of gender, of the arguable essences of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and the

concomitant embodiment of androgyny by several of her protagonists; the examination of technology not as fundamental to human progress, but as a tool used, and misused by those in positions of authority, power, and /or law enforcement; the self-conscious fascination and manipulation of the cinematic gaze; and the transgression of traditional genre boundaries (resulting in hybridized texts that resist easy classification). Critics and academics have had difficulty theoretically situating Bigelow and Bigelow herself plays with her status as an auteur. For example, there is a striking physical resemblance between Liz Hurley/ Catherine McCormack/ Kathryn Bigelow. Hurley and McCormack are two central characters in *The Weight of Water*, which is a very self-reflexive text that probes the psychologies of people who make their livings as writers/poets/ photographers. Bigelow has created several female characters who embody both femininity and authority. One thinks of Megan Turner's prowess with a gun, and Angela Bassett as Mace in *Strange Days*, the physically imposing protector of the effeminate Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes). Bigelow is exemplary of a female director who works not only within mainstream Hollywood cinema, but also within the traditionally male dominated genre of the action film, that in her hands, undergoes a transformation toward the creation of a new cinematic text.

Deleuze has theorized the action-image, and some of his ideas facilitate a more thorough consideration of the action-image in Bigelow's cinema:

What constitutes realism is simply this: milieux and modes of behaviour, milieux which actualize and modes of behaviour which embody. The action-image is the relation between the two and all the varieties of this relation. It is this model which produced the universal triumph of the American cinema (Islam, 93).

The generic labels used to describe Bigelow's films are invoked not without irony, as within them genres undergo a certain metamorphosis. The tradition of the genre film is one which explicitly informs Bigelow's work, yet the acknowledgment of generic specificity and codes becomes possible largely because of Bigelow's deviation from and transformation of them. The idea of the genre film is not sustained through conventional genre films but rather through films about genres and generic codes. These are articulated largely through excess, dislocation, and the conjuncture of seemingly incompatible registers.

Auteurism does not stand in contradiction to structuralism, poststructuralism or other theories such as psychoanalysis. It is useful to examine Bigelow's films from various perspectives, and psychoanalysis and structuralism are relevant to an analysis of the text of *Blue Steel*. Structuralism is concerned with immanent relations/functions constituting language (and other symbolic/discursive bodies) as a system. The systemic is realized through binary oppositions; their elements are defined by their differential value. Narrative discourse is one of these binary machines by which society specifies and attempts to establish such ideological unities as masculine and feminine identification. When Jamie Lee Curtis dresses as the law and employs her revolver in defense of the law, the

film mobilizes a range of divergent subjectivities that preclude the failure of classical narrative closure. D.N. Rodowick argues that psychoanalysis understands the development of sexual identity as an experience of division and loss and that:

any attempt to associate subjectivity with criteria of unity, coherence, or mastery, especially as one side of a binary equation, is meaningless... From the perspective of psycho-analysis understanding of sexual identity, the goal is to understand the range of scenarios that describe the different experiences of division and loss where sexual positions are constructed (Self, 92).

The image of castration is the central trope of the film, the revolver heavily weighted, it's symbolism in excess of what the narrative requires, therein becoming the fetishized object representative of the phallus whose power in classic narrative structures usually rests in the hands of men. The terms agent and recipient, subject and object, active and passive, sadism and masochism, and masculine and feminine blur and baffle in their references. Bigelow's decision to muddy traditional representations of gender and what meanings those representations imply emerges at the beginning of the film, in the three brief scenarios that set the narrative in motion: the castration joke, the precredit sequence, and the credit sequence.

In the castration joke a prostitute accidentally bites down on man and proceeds to sew the penis back on backwards. The joke, it's telling by Detective Nick Mann, and its central trauma constitute an unresolved anxiety about sexual identity and power, guilt and retribution that dominates the film. The film opens with a hand-held camera tracking down a long narrow hall behind a police officer who is approaching a closed door. The sounds of a woman can be heard. The officer breaks into the scene of domestic violence and shoots the man. The woman, then, surprisingly, shoots the officer. The scene dissolves into the theatricality of a police academy test for cadet Megan Turner, but it foreshadows Megan's later intervention in her father's physical abuse of his wife. It is also a precursor for one of the opening scenarios in *Point Break*, in which Keanu Reeves, as FBI agent Johnny Utah, performs a shooting exercise as a performance test. In *Blue Steel*, this scenario introduces Megan into the space constituted by the institution of the law. Her failure to assume the role of liberating officer of the law in the fiction is marked by the 'shooting' of the female cop by the abused wife. Her failure is further marked by her failure of the test, as the instructor says with heavy sarcasm, "you killed the husband and the wife shot you" (Self, 96)). The credits then roll over a series of slow-motion images,

that examine in extreme close-up a police .38 special and then look into its empty cylinders and watch its loading and finally its holstering - an emptiness then a fullness, a presence then a hiding in plain sight. The revolver is fetishized and eventually transformed into a receptacle for male desire, particularly in the scene when Eugene is raping Megan and using the revolver as a fetishized symbol of power. The scrutiny of the gun yields to the spectacle of Megan dressing in her police uniform, still in slow-motion, close-

up cinematography accompanied by a droning electronic music that connotes another imaginary reality (Self, 96).

The first shot tightly frames a woman's chest; as previously mentioned, Megan's lacy brassiere disappears as she buttons the front of a police uniform blouse. This is also a concrete representation of the gender blurring Bigelow seeks in several of her films in which she deliberately casts and shoots women and men as androgynous figures rather than clearly sexualized ones. The close-ups reveal different parts of her body- blouse, boots, gloves and hat- captured in a rapt slow- motion close- up gaze. The camera finally assumes the place of a mirror. "The images culminate in a medium shot of Megan staring directly into the lens of the camera as she straightens her cap, a look of satisfaction on her face as she stares into the mirror of the spectator's eyes, the specular (female) other as the law" (Self, 97). Bigelow has overturned traditional representations of gender through the simple fact of putting the power of the phallus, embodied by the gun, in the hands of Megan Turner. Her manipulation of that power encounters failures and successes throughout the narrative. When Eugene Hunt (Ron Silver) sees Turner gun down the robber in the convenience store, "without blinking an eye", he is enthralled by the authority with which she wields the gun. When the robber's gun, shot in slow motion, spins to the floor not far from where Eugene is sprawled on his stomach, he pockets the gun and sets in motion the remainder of the narrative.

*Blue Steel* typifies Bigelow's tendency to subvert the cinematic codes and conventions that identify both genres and genders. In *Blue Steel* it is a woman at the center of the cop thriller. She embodies the power and authority of the law. The number of films at the beginning of the 1990s "that thrust women into figures of the law reflect many problems of identity surrounding the changing status of women in the culture" (Self, 104). Some of these films include, *Impulse* (Locke, 1990), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), *V.I. Warshawski* (Kanew, 1991) and *A Stranger Among Us* (1992). Most of these films enact traditional narratives that are structured around conflict and its resolution, guilt and punishment. *Blue Steel* activates instabilities of sexual difference without containing them. The viewer might expect a narrative trajectory organized around investigation, capture/ punishment and so on, but the organization of Bigelow's film deconstructs those connections, turning Megan's act of law enforcement into a motive for her investigation by that law. The supermarket robbery that sets the narrative in motion results in Turner being suspended, in effect losing the authority whose uniform she wears. At one point it also appears as though Megan will be blamed for Eugene's crimes, particularly the break-in that he stages in order to suggest his victimization. When Eugene's crimes are blamed on Megan, those crimes initiate Megan's punishing investigation of Eugene while simultaneously desiring her punishment and punishing her desire. One must also reflect on the deeper theme of female victimization, for example Megan's mother still in an abusive marriage, Megan's witnessing of Eugene

gunning down her best friend, and Eugene's shooting of Nick after Nick and Megan have made love, in effect punishing Megan for experiencing any pleasure at all. The message seems to be that to be aggressive is to be transgressive, is to unleash a force of repression and hostility of which the transgression is both cause and target. It would seem that to be woman, active or passive, is to be a victim. "What finally is central to sexual identity in *Blue Steel* is the constant veneration, contestation, and instability of authority" (Self, 105). *Blue Steel* critiques the power embodied by institutions of authority as does Bigelow's next film, *Point Break*.

Contextually, the film appears at a particular juncture in American cinema when the 'hard bodies' that populated the 1980s action movies were being replaced by a 'new man'. Bigelow was conscious of these hyper- masculine representations from the Reagan-Republican era, and is one of the first directors to re-shape and re-imagine masculine identity ( although films of the 1970s also seem to be a reference point). Third, *Point Break* re-imagines and transcodes the visual and narrative conventions of the action film. The film is a breathless text of attractions. It might even fit Linda Williams conception of the 'body genre' because the film revels in exhibiting bodily excess. Further, the film is a knowing, playful and at times subversive staging of the action film. "Bigelow is playing with film form, invigorating the process of spectatorship, and self-consciously referring us to her own authorship and the constructed nature of film representations" (Redmond, 109).

Basically, *Point Break* stages a confrontation between two cultures. The FBI represents a bureaucratic, time-bound, law-abiding, individualist culture. Representative of the dominant culture? In contrast to the FBI machine is the counter-culture of the surfers, bohemians, existing outside of time, community-based, law-breakers. Bigelow has said:

The unique thing about surfing is that it kind of exists outside the system, the people that embody it are of their own mind set, they have their own language, dress code, conduct, behaviour and it's very primal, very tribal. I tried to use surfing as a landscape that could offer a subversive mentality (Redmond, 109).

The opening shots of the film are of the ocean, the surf, bathed in the orange glow of dusk, a warm, tranquil expansive set of images. A series of shots of an idealized, balletic surfer (Bodhi) gliding on the waves follows as water literally pours over the camera. From the beginning of *Point Break*, there is constant camera movement, including the incessant movement of what is in front of the camera. The titles flow into one another, the star names dissolve into one another, and the slow motion photography effects a sense of the narrative unfolding outside of time, or irrespective of the limitations time necessarily imposes upon us. Absolute spatial and existential freedom is connoted here. The sequence continues with what seems to be parallel action, Keanu Reeves in the rain, loading a rifle and preparing to fire. The blue light, gray drizzle and the low-key lighting of the land based mise-en-scene

stands in stark contrast to the limitless ocean. A whistle blows, a click of a stop watch, and one is reminded of the opening of *Blue Steel*, when Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) has to respond to an armed domestic dispute, and even Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) throwing herself into the physical and psychological demands of an assault course that begins Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*. These are women-centered cop movies, failure is implicit in their efforts, but for Utah, his shooting is "perfect".

Bodhi and Utah are representative of the opposition between surfer and cop that Bigelow stages throughout *Point Break*, an opposition that ultimately appraises the counter-culture more favorably than the institutional white authority Utah enacts. Bodhi surfs in an endless ocean, captured in slow-motion, accentuating the timelessness that connotes the freedom experienced by the surfers. The blue hum of the synth score heightens the romanticism with which these scenes are shot. By contrast, Utah is chasing 'real' time (he has to beat the clock to prove his skill as an FBI agent). Utah is both defined and confined by the law and order machine which he serves:

The sound of the heavy rain, and the gunshots are aural, staccato punctuation notes that shatter the romance of the music that carries across the two planes of action. Utah's representation, characterization and performance can be read as a clearly signaled, knowing, excessive parody of the hyper-masculine male (Redmond, 112).

It is the constructed nature of his masculinity that is actually being foregrounded in this scene. The way Bigelow shoots Reeves as well as the boyish star image Reeves embodies establish his performance as a simulacrum, as artificially constructed as the cardboard characters he shoots to prove his eligibility for the role of FBI agent. This (highly camp) masculine performance is one that Utah/Reeves will reject by the closure of the film (the performance then foregrounds and problematizes gender in much the same way as *Blue Steel* and *The Silence of the Lambs*).

The opening sequence foreshadows Bigelow's characterization of masculinity as a constructed identity. Also the conformist, time-bound, technology based dominant culture is represented as brutal and relentless, a machine that cannot win against the freedom portrayed by Bodhi and his community of surfers. Time, technology, and the body are the markers for what is a dystopian critique of the conformist, repressive culture of modern America, transposed onto the FBI (this is akin to the critique of State authorities and figures of law and order in *Strange Days*). The first time that special agent Johnny Utah enters the L.A. headquarters of the FBI, a continuous hand-held steadicam shot follows him around and through the building for about 1 min, 53 seconds of screen time. The movement and kinetic energy of the single shot is meant to capture the hive-like activity of these headquarters and provides a continuum with the opening sequence (it is also a visual trademark for Bigelow). The surfers are the counter-culture that stands as an alternative to this sterile machinery of power that the FBI represents:

When the Ex-presidents surf, and when Bodhi catches his first tube, ecstasy, the pleasure is over-determining.

The sounds, the frenzy and the way Bigelow captures this type of carnival, suggests bodies beside themselves with pleasure. Bigelow has said, "Thrill-seeking adrenalin addicts have always fascinated me. The idea seems to be that it's not until you risk your humanness that you feel most human. Not until you risk all awareness do you gain awareness. It's about peak experience" (Redmond, 114).

It is only when Utah and Pappas go with their gut feelings and intuition, finally, that they can close in on the Ex-presidents. The message here is similar to that of *Strange Days*. Where technology over-determines human action, and where mechanical surveillance replaces human interaction, humanity and social difference are threatened. In *Point Break* technology is set against nature; machine against man; regulation against freedom; bureaucracy against individuality; and docility against blood, tissue and bone.

Susan Jeffords has traced the transition from the hard-bodies like Schwarzenegger, that populated the big screen throughout the 1980s, to the 'new men' of the early 1990s, often new actors capable of sensitivity, generosity and change. In this revisionist cinema, the new man was also encoded to fail in some way. This plays out in *Point Break* in the re-injury Utah suffers at the climax of his first chase sequence following Bodhi. At the crucial moment his knee gives out and he must give up his pursuit. This injury impairs his athletic abilities for the duration of the film, culminating in his futile effort to follow Bodhi across the desert after free-falling from a plane and catching the parachute of Bodhi during his final escape. Along with a representation of this new man, *Point Break* subverts and redefines the action film in two clear ways:

First, its kinetic, pulsating and thrill-seeking set of encounters is akin to the type of 'body genre' that Williams has reserved for the horror, melodrama, and pornography genres. It is arguable that spectators of *Point Break* are meant to feel or ride *Point Break* in ways similar to the protagonists in the film. Second, this over-determination of excess and spectacle, and the textures of irony and parody that ripple through the film, point to the subversion of the genre and to a self-referential critique of the Hollywood machine that produces it (Redmond, 121).

Bigelow's knowing, telling, radical signature is all over the film. *Point Break* is steeped in self-reflexive irony and parody suggesting that the film, on the discursive level, is functioning as a critique of the action genre specifically and the Hollywood machine more generally. The text revisits the theme of androgyny, as Reeves and Petty embody both the fierceness that Petty admires in Reeves, and the skill and mastery Reeves admires in Petty's surfing. The two even look alike. The film is intertextual with bohemian and counter-culture aesthetics. Gary Busey, as Pappas, gives a nod to his role in the surfing movie *The Big Wednesday*. Reeves's intertextuality is most explicit in the scenes when he is collecting hair samples from sun-tanners. One recalls his "dude" language from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. And as aforementioned, Bigelow does appropriate a few key images from *Dirty Harry*, Johnny Utah throwing his shield down in defiance just as Harry Callahan is determined to quit the force. Similarly,

throughout *Point Break* there are a set of cliched authority figures, who deliver a range of cliched lines but because of the manner of the performances and the style of delivery of these lines the cliché is deliberate or conscious. *Point Break* then, is both knowing and critical of the action film and through this offers another way into the film for spectators. However, the real self-reflexivity in the film comes from the action and spectacle sequences, in particular from the skydiving sequences onwards. When Tyler is kidnapped and Utah is in pursuit, the spectator might expect a 'classical' ending. Instead of staging the final contest on the beach or in Bodhi's house, instead of guns and explosions, there is a shoot-out, two extended skydiving sequences and finally a fist fight on an Australian beach. This comprises another forty minutes of screen time. Tyler is nowhere to be seen, the ending a mirror of the opening sequence but with Bodhi and Utah now literally side-by-side. This is deliberately excessive, therein foregrounding the plot contrivances or lack thereof that action films rely on in order to reach kinetic, energetic action sequences. Here, in the absence of any subplot, the spectator becomes aware of their own investment in simply watching the spectacle before them.

Because *Strange Days* (Bigelow, 1995) is the Bigelow film that has received the most critical attention, this cursory analysis of the film is intended only to enunciate the features that make *Strange Days* a distinctly Biglovian film, and the ways the film has been theorized in a way similar to *Point Break*, connecting the experience of viewing *Strange Days* with concepts of sensation and the action-image as theorized by Deleuze. Because of its overwhelming style and catchy soundtrack *Strange Days* can be seen as pure, even excessive entertainment. It is a science fiction film set in a dystopic Los Angeles, on the eve of the new millennium. Like her other films, Bigelow finds an arresting sequence with which to begin her film. A visual blur and a difficult to hear, "boot it", are the only clues that the opening sequence is not real. The spectator shares the subjectivity of a character robbing a restaurant. There are no spatial parameters, strictly a POV shot of what the character is seeing as he is seeing it (it would seem). The police arrive and a chase ensues, culminating across rooftops, where the person whose subjectivity has been objectified plummets to his death. This scene can be linked to the rooftop chase in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Scottie is holding onto his partner's hand as he dangles over the edge and eventually falls, precipitating Scottie's affliction of 'vertigo'. What makes this opening sequence significant is the knowledge that the experience is a simulation, experienced by Lenny Nero, who is wearing a SQUID (superconducting-quantum-interference-device) on his head. Essentially being wired enables the wearer to share the sensory experiences and memories of another person. All the sequences involving SQUID playbacks in the film unfold through a subjective point-of-view shot that instead of enabling the viewer to identify with the subject, actually creates a strangely distant perspective, disturbing because in one sense the spectator is sharing an experience with the character in POV shots that provide no

spatial specificity, and in another sense, the spectator knows that the unfolding event is something that is already past. It has occurred, been recorded at some time prior to when the spectator views it. The commodification of memory, or more generally an examination of the constructedness of memories as markers of personal experiences is something that has manifest in other postmodern science fiction films such as *Blade Runner*.

*The Weight of Water* (Bigelow, 2000) is the first film in which Kathryn Bigelow did not have an active role in writing the script. In fact the film was based on the best-selling novel by Anita Shreve. It is the first Bigelow film based on a literary adaptation, and the changes the narrative undergoes can probably be attributed to her intentions regarding how she wanted to visually translate the book for the screen. It is also the first Bigelow film that could be categorized as historical drama, two narrative strands whose trajectories unfold a century apart, but both of which concern the brutal murders of two Dutch women settlers on the Isles of Shoals. The story is being re-visited in the present by a young journalist whose brother-in-law owns a yacht and volunteers to take her and her husband Thomas to the island for the weekend. What some critics have focused on, in the generally negative reception the film received in the press, is the fact that the film does not conform to the "idea" of "Kathryn Bigelow - Hollywood action director". But this kind of criticism is almost meaningless because it is evaluating the film based on preconceived notions and expectations a reviewer brings to the viewing of a Bigelow film. It is becoming more and more clear that Bigelow is participating in her own construction as an auteur by deliberately choosing film projects that depart from her previous works. She not only blends film genres within any given film, she also subverts audience expectations of the kind of film she will make, therein deconstructing her own auteur status. Some critics complained that the dual narratives were not connected persuasively, while others suggested that a mainstream audience might find the fractured structure distancing. The film occupies a border space between art cinema and Hollywood, a position Bigelow often occupies but one that might disappoint those spectators wanting Hollywood spectacle.

Although *The Weight of Water* does not belong to the action genre, the film can be evaluated alongside other Bigelow films, re-confirming her auteur status. Because another element found in most of her films is melodrama. Despite the melodrama and action genres being genres which are oppositionally 'gendered', their mutual preoccupation with 'excess', in performance, aesthetics and narrative, suggests they nevertheless share much common ground (Jermyn, 132). Indeed, Bigelow is not the first director to combine action and melodrama, the most explicit example of their fusion found in the films of John Woo. While Bigelow can indeed 'do' action, she has also demonstrated a penchant for contemplative and explosive explorations of the textures, tensions, and turbulence of families, relationships and domestic spaces, themes typical of melodrama. In *Blue Steel*, the *mise-en-scene* of the

family runs as a subtext throughout the film, culminating in a scene in which Megan arrests her father for spousal abuse, handcuffs him and begins the drive back to the precinct. En route, her father begs for understanding and eventually Megan succumbs to his pleading and his promises to never hit Megan's mother again. By the time they return home, Eugene, no longer in jail, is sitting in the family living room. Cinematography and editing remove the impotent and abusive father from the scene and replace him with the homicidal and manic 'lover'. Melodrama's critical angle on capitalist and patriarchal institutions has been a part of all of Bigelow's films. The domestic violence endured by Megan's mother in *Blue Steel* is the primary reason she became a cop; the loaded looks and passionate exchanges between Johnny Utah and Bodhi in *Point Break*'s homoerotically charged central relationship is pure melodramatic excess; and Lenny's refusal to relinquish his failed love affair in *Strange Days* is as fundamental to his characterization as are his SQUID dealings. Families recurrently carry within them secrets and tragedies in Bigelow's films and women often bear the brunt of their destructiveness.

Feminists continue to endeavor to claim Bigelow as one of their own, an assignation Bigelow vehemently resists. *The Weight of Water*, like her other films, is challenging to locate within a female perspective. It is an adaptation of a novel by a woman, and Shreve enjoys a large and loyal female readership. The lead protagonist in each of its two narratives is female and a female point of view is inscribed through a number of devices; two sets of female voice-overs, the use of Jean's camera to give her point of view (freeze-framing the action and rendering it black and white, though this device dwindles as the film progresses) and the curious mirroring and intermingling of the two women's stories across time and space. In each of their stories care is taken to expose the tensions and struggles of their daily lives, particularly Maren's life as a fisherman's wife caught in a life of banality and drudgery. Over a hundred years later, Jean is married to a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet but is a successful photographer in her own right. It is remarked that when they first met, Thomas felt they were similar creatures, both trying to stop time. And although Jean is comfortable, she is jealous and emotionally repressed. Both women are dour and introspective, not characters to gain sympathy easily. And both women are tainted by their complicity in the suffering of other women, even before the revelation that Maren was responsible for the hideous deaths of Karen and Anthe. But more troubling to critics than the characterization of Maren as duplicitous and monstrous, was the scene on the boat in which Adaline, played by Liz Hurley, runs an ice cube over her topless body while Thomas and Jean watch themselves watching her. If one examines the scene it is not necessarily an example of the kind of objectification typical of Hollywood. The lingering excess and laboured exchange of looks is a kind of self-conscious and critical commentary on cinematic voyeurism by Bigelow. This kind of reading can be supported by the acting choice for the role of Adaline. Elizabeth Hurley was a cover girl and

former face of Estee Lauder, as well as the girlfriend of famous actor Hugh Grant. As the focal point for the tensions and exchanges of looks on the boat, Hurley adds another element of reflexivity to the role and suggests that Bigelow might be using her as a way of interrogating the objectifying gaze of cinema.

Kathryn Bigelow may be the only female director working within the parameters of mainstream Hollywood cinema. But even this pronouncement is complicated by Bigelow's tendency to infuse traditional forms such as the action or science fiction genre, with an art-house sensibility. Her most recent cinematic endeavor was *K-19: The Widowmaker*. The film is based on the true story of the "1961 maiden voyage of Russia's first nuclear ballistic submarine that suffered a reactor malfunction at the bottom of the north Sea, threatening to bring the world's superpowers to the brink of nuclear war" (Jermyn, 12). But the film met a mixed reception. Bigelow's auteur status continues to be contested. Her work within and around the margins of Hollywood cinema has proven contentious and innovative, "perplexing and inspiring, traveling a number of tumultuous career highs and lows along the way" (Jermyn,19). This analysis has focused on those attributes of Kathryn Bigelow's cinema that support her auteur status. The depiction of violence in her films is linked to a particular passion. Regarding violence she has said:

It goes back to the voyeuristic need to watch and the Freudian idea that you want to view what you've been denied. You don't want to watch what you can always see- you want to see something that is transporting in some way, either frightening or some other reaction (Smith, 26).

But theorizing her cinema should not be limited to any singular theory. Her films lend themselves to different perspectives that include feminism, psychoanalysis, queer theory and cultural studies. The definitive aspect of her cinema is her ability to transcend those limitations imposed upon her by traditional cinematic forms, categorical imperatives attributed to her films by critics, and audience expectations of what a Bigelow film should look like. ☺

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