

Article

TOUGH GUY IN DRAG? HOW THE EXTERNAL, CRITICAL DISCOURSES SURROUNDING KATHRYN BIGELOW DEMONSTRATE THE WIDER PROBLEMS OF THE GENDER QUESTION.

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the various approaches adopted towards Kathryn Bigelow's work, and their tendency to focus on a gendered discourse, obscures the wider political discourses these texts contain. In particular, by analysing the representation of masculinity across the films, it is possible to see how the work of this director and her collaborators is equally representative of its cultural context and how it uses the trope of the male body as a site for a dialectical study of the uses and status of male strength within an imperialistically-minded western society.

KEYWORDS

Counter-cultural, feminism, feminist, gender, masculinity, western.

Whether the director Kathryn Bigelow likes it or not, gender has been made to lie at the heart of her work, not simply as it figures in her texts but also as it is used to initiate discussion about her own function/place as an auteur? Her career illustrates how the personal becomes the political not via individual agency but in the way she has come to stand as a particular cultural symbol – as a woman directing men in male-orientated action genres. As this persona has become increasingly loaded with various significances, it has begun to alter the interpretations of her films. Therefore, to consider her representations of masculinity for the purposes of this article, it is important to begin by examining the operation of the extra-textual in relation to Bigelow and how her construction of an authorial personality has become a site for the contestation of other institutional agendas.

Within textual criticism, an overriding narrative of ‘difference’ abides in the treatment of the rhetoric of masculinity constructed within Bigelow’s films. In fact, this preoccupation with gender throughout her work obscures the fact that her representations of masculinity may be interesting less for the exercise of her ‘womanly gaze’ than for the ways in which it reflects various shifts taking place in the prevailing cultural and political discourse. This is nowhere more pertinent than in her Iraq war actioner, *The Hurt Locker* (2008). This film’s critical reception has been dominated by a discourse that ignored the wider political implications suggested by her textual exploration of masculinity, conceived through the characters and narrative structure in her films such as *Blue Steel* (1989) and *Point Break* (1991). Indeed the Oscar triumph itself highlights the wider repercussions of the focus on Bigelow’s approach to gender.

Themes of transgression and masquerade recur constantly in Bigelow’s texts and in Bigelow as a text and inform various critics’ responses from the early 1990s to the current context. As the following analysis will argue, their reception of these elements (both textually and extra-textually) has changed; from a perception of a positive political power in the transgressive representations of the earlier films to a more negative assessment of the transgressive nature of Bigelow herself as a successful women filmmaker in Hollywood¹. As a director interested in the

action genre and representation of masculine subjects, the particular challenge, in her thirty-year career, has been a constant attempt to avoid this situation of becoming the story herself. The success of *The Hurt Locker*, however, has finally defeated this objective – and firmly fixed the director’s gender above the title (as if to underline this shift, the band played her out with: “I am woman, see me grow”) even though she has clearly constructed a personal to resist conventional tropes of femininity and, in fact, embrace a variety of masculine identities.

This has not prevented a number of feminist critical voices from claiming her as their own. Whilst some of these have characterised her as a woman creating ‘counter cinematic’ discourses in the mainstreamⁱⁱ, Bigelow’s own extra-textual discourse has been characterised by silence on the issue of her femininity, regularly eschewing that idea in any of the forms in which it may appear – whether in terms of subject matter, institutional position or audiences. Manohla Dargis (in the *New York Times*) sees this as her “rebellion”, which still places Bigelow back into a consciously dynamic relationship to these discourses. The director’s silence, therefore, contributes to a constant tension between text and context and creates a gap that has become increasingly populated by various contextual readings of her work, not least as positioning it as a body of films created by an auteur director. Here, her femininity is still a vital trope, both in determining the meaning of her representations and positioning them as part of the social discourse at the time in relation, particularly, to the cultural perceptions of masculinity. Thus, interpretations of the transgressive nature of relationships portrayed in *Point Break*) can both function to reflect the representational currency of the early 1990s (e.g. Redmond: 2003) and structure Bigelow’s intentions as consciously feminist (e.g. Lane: 2000).

The latter critical position constructs Bigelow as a woman creating ‘counter cinema’ within the mainstream; a conceptualising of her work which draws on Claire Johnston’s ground-breaking 1973 notion of women-made cinema, which argues it should seek to find ways of interposing female voices within mainstream texts rather than confining itself to alternative spaces and aesthetic constructions in telling women’s stories. Bigelow’s films are often analysed as

containing an underlying rhetoric of resistance, which would make it commensurate with Johnston's objective of presenting feminist perspectives within mainstream films without sacrificing our pleasure in the experience of classical cinema forms. Thus, Christina Lane claims Bigelow's texts as interventions of this kind; one of the director's intentions is of "probing gender and genre in a way that deconstructs both terms" including her questioning of "rigid conceptions of gender" achieved by "thematically emphasizing the instability and 'deconstructability' of the male/female binary opposition"(100-01). Significantly, Lane's overtly pursues this analysis without a need to rely on statements of author intention, given that Bigelow remains "ambivalent about labelling her films in terms of gender or politics". (2000: 101) Instead, Lane manages the contradiction in her own analysis of the films by drawing back from the label "feminist", choosing instead to see the films as moving "within a 'feminist orbit'" and engaging with "political issues" (2000: 123) in a more general sense.

This position directly leads from and relies on Christine Gledhill's remark that "such cultural criticism is not concerned with the progressiveness or reactionariness of the text, but with tapping its cultural energy ... making it productive for feminist debate and practice" (2000: 26. Cited in Lane). Lane argues for the independent life of the text, beyond the immediate context of author and institution; a life that is constituted in the critical responses the film receives and its interpretation according to the prevailing cultural discourses. Bigelow's own "ambiguous" (2000: 101) relationship to feminist discourses is, therefore, to some degree irrelevant. Deborah Jermyn, in a volume of collected essays on the director's work, picks up the same theme, but accepts Bigelow's wish to remain neutral, adding:

Certainly to expect some kind of simple correlation between women directors and 'positive' female characterisation or politics is in itself arguably a reductive process which risks underestimating the vast array of individual and institutional influences brought to bear in the film-making process, and in Hollywood in particular." (2003: 139).

This statement sets up a sympathetic echo with Bigelow's own statements: "What is a masculine subject, what is a feminine subject? Those notions tend to ghettoise men and women and ghettoisation is unproductive ... there's nothing more counter-productive than the notion of

gender-specific filmmaking.” (Bigelow in Fuller: 1995: 44). Moreover, viewed as a body, her extra-textual statements identify Bigelow as unwilling to perceive herself as part of a filmic sisterhood. In 2002, she identified a lack of “tenacity” to account for other women’s failure to persist in filmmaking: “It takes everything you’ve got ... Women may just not be able to wait it out.” In the same article, she ended an anecdote about diving in Fiji with the words: “I like to be strong. I just like it” (Diamond: 2002), clearly inferring that this is not just a physical attribute but also a personal and professional necessity. Bigelow’s denial of femininity as a guiding principle, and her representation of herself as strong in masculine terms, may well be heartfelt, but also provides a very useful position for an ambitious female director to occupy, particularly one who wants not only to maintain her career, but who has a specific commitment to directing Hollywood action movies. In doing this, however, Bigelow is implicitly reaffirming a dichotomy she is attempting, superficially, to reject. She may, in reality, have no intention of subverting or transgressing the binary and essentialist notions of gender. However, whereas she is silent – or dismissive – of questions relating to her femininity, she is not averse to another kind of gendered discourse, cultivating a discussion of pastimes that are conventionally masculine: she also regularly discusses her work in terms of the minutiae of technical innovation, which is of itself a particularly gendered form of discourse. Hers is an essentialist, but essentially masculine, extra-textual discourse.

Thus, Bigelow has not necessarily been passively silent or “rebellious” with regard to her own femininity but, instead, has arguably performed a kind of masculinity to suit her purposes, along the lines of a model of one of Judith Halberstam’s “drag kings”. Just as these female drag artists act out versions of hegemonic or dominant masculinity, Bigelow has taken the costume of a dominant, corporate form of masculinity (the Hollywood ‘auteur’) and dressed herself in it. In the case of the drag king, there is an emphasis on a “reluctant and withholding kind of performance” and a naturalistic achievement of the understated behaviour of a male through a “performing non-performativity” (1998: 259) or in Michael Kimmel’s words, a performance celebrating that “invisibility” of gender “privilege” (2003: 4).

This performance of cultural invisibility seems to resonate precisely with the understatement that Bigelow appears to seek to achieve in the industry, through her silence not only on matters of gender but on her private life in general. Importantly, however, is that there is enough detail established about this to preserve its anonymity and avoid a ‘negative’ impact of the political visibility of certain forms of sexuality. Bigelow remains an “approved” form of female masculinity (in Halberstam’s terms) because of the proof of her “resolute heterosexuality” (the narrative of her marriage with James Cameron, ended in 1991, but still reproduced in various media outlets at Oscar time) that, in turn, assured others of her underlying normality. As a consequence, she evinces no worrying political agenda either through her femininity or her sexuality to disrupt either the circulating hegemonic or postfeminist discourses of gender, nor does she suggest a lack of conformity within that most conventional of institutions. That Bigelow articulates this ambivalence within the cultural context of postfeminism creates a further complexity to her position in Hollywood. Postfeminism’s own ambivalent discourses - of ostensibly a more public role for women (now that feminism’s battle have been won (Tasker and Negra: 2005: 108; McRobbie: 2008) and yet, simultaneously “reinforcing conservative norms as the ‘best choices’ in women’s lives” (Negra: 2009: 4) – creates for Bigelow an ambiguous position as a cultural female - both an acceptable role model but still not comfortably recognisable as one of their own. Remaining unmarried since her divorce and childless, she evades the comforting narratives of women’s ultimate preference for private over public in their lives (narratives “energised” by the crisis of 9/11 and, according to Diane Negra, clearly visible in postfeminist chick flicks (2008)).

This does, though, leave Bigelow free to carve out a unique status (for a woman) of being that most masculine of popular film concepts, an ‘auteur’ director. This is not least because she has, by working consistently, been able to assemble a body of work (albeit only eight feature films in thirty years) about which it is possible to write. Extra-textually, she has avoided the institutional ghetto of being a woman director – instead marking an individuality in tune with the differentiated identities available to men such as Scorsese, Cassavetes, Eastwood; and, as

illustrated by that list, the use of a surname is a first step to assuming a position within the film industry contextualised history and entering its mythology.

In the “business” of being an auteur (to utilise Timothy Corrigan’s concept (1990)) she has recognised the need to construct a persona that will enhance the power of a particular cultural brand. It is the emphasis on her masculine traits, both in Bigelow’s own statements and those structured around her by others, that is exactly mirrored by the kinds of aspirations held by her central characters (therefore reinforcing her credibility to ‘guide’ their action) and to the cultural discourse that exists in the institution of filmmaking (independent or Hollywood) of which she is a part. Less of a woman pioneer, Bigelow is a very successful director and collaborator for hire, because of her ability to construct the ‘Bigelow product’ to key male audiences in their favoured genres and formats. Her representations of masculine subjects refract less through her femininity than directly through the cultural lines of popular genres thus ensuring that her movies will make a profit for the entertainment institutions.

Despite the way in which Bigelow may have branded herself as ‘male’, Yvonne Tasker defined her as commanding a “strange visibility” (1999) as a female director in a man’s genre. The essential dichotomy of her position is constantly reinforced – by the critical responses to her texts and personal responses to her extra-textually. Following her Oscar win, Sigourney Weaver (a star of James Cameron’s film *Avatar* (2009)) reportedly attributed Cameron’s ‘second place’ at the awards to the fact that he “didn’t have breasts ...He should have taken home that Oscar.” (www.newyorkpost.com: 13 April 2010). Weaver’s reported remark suggests that Tasker’s comment is maintained its relevance from the late 1990s to today – resistance is futile, even disingenuous, since Bigelow’s femininity in a man’s world has consistently been the brand signifier to sell her movies, or has been used as an authorial gimmick to make her pitch more interesting than the next guy’s. Going forward, faced with a slew of commentary in respect of her historic win, this has no prospect of changing since she will (ironically) be forever associated with being the woman who broke the glass ceiling.

The persistence of this discourse concerning gender is also visible immediately in the critical discourses that – even whilst they do not take an overtly feminist or female-orientated stance – have used gender identity as a means of establishing critical readings of Bigelow as the “hollywood transgressor” [sic] and to interpret her work as “counter-cultural”. As well as reinforcing Bigelow in a particular institutional space, these discourses also engage with her in terms of gender and examine the way in which she brings an emotionality to the representation of the masculine ‘condition’, reinforcing the binary tension of a woman working in a masculine genre.

The discourse of auteurism supports Bigelow’s own silence because of its ability to detach criticism from gender and relate it to a specific authorial voice and preoccupation. Thus, her interest in creating transgressive representations – of challenging mainstream hegemonies – is seen to be present in a number of her films in the way she reconstitutes genre, for example, in *Near Dark* (1987). However, this auteurist perspective is often gendered; Sean Redmond’s analysis of *In Point Break* demonstrates how the filmmaker has inserted melodrama at the heart of an action film to create a destabilising emotional core to the simple action narrative. Sean Redmond described how these representations produced are ultimately “counter-hegemonic” and “radical” (2003: 107) – not only because the central eroticised relationship between the two male protagonists in that film leads one to reject his role in “law and order” but also because so-called normative ideology is challenged more widely by the “gendered and sexualised identity crisis” (2003: 107) at the heart of the film. Irrespective of the particular aim of the critic, the existing cultural notions of gender in relation to emotion that inform the way we perceive film genres and textual tropes, mark this discourse as a gendered one and constitutes Bigelow as very much a woman auteur.

However, this kind of gendering reflected the critical moment, arising through the 1990s, where playing with gender (and sexual) identities could be conceived as having a counter-cultural edge.

So, existing and working creatively in that same cultural moment as the critics, Bigelow's films might demonstrate not only an auteurist interest in transgressive gender representations, but also show how she may be as much a cultural conduit of her times and one of many channels for the existing nature of mediated masculinity at any one time. Her work itself can, therefore, epitomise changing perceptions of masculinity over a long period of time; a review of this representational arc across these texts reveals a surprising regression from the blurring of gender and sexual identities and sexualities, towards a more atavistic and conventional masculinity. Working on films that deal with highly 'masculine' subjects, even working at the margins of Hollywood Bigelow's work still traces a movement from resistance to incorporation and therefore suggests they can have a wider importance as they reflect the kinds of masculinities that have currency at any one time. Counter-cultural male bonding (the surfers of *Point Break*) moves through images of paternalism (of *K-11 The Widowmaker* (2002)) to the traditional, redneck masculinity on show in *The Hurt Locker*.

As a product of her time (rather than as a woman), this contrast demonstrates a move from masculinity characterised as being in crisis (within the 1990s) to a time when, by 2008, this perceived crisis has arguably been resolved by the reintroduction of that greatest and least problematic of masculine occupations – conventional warfare. Bigelow's protagonist in *The Hurt Locker*, Sergeant First Class Will James (Jeremy Renner), is a character who could be a product of such discourses - a modern "adrenaline addict" of war, the soldier who returns to Iraq despite the horrors he has endured there because it is the one thing (as he confides to his baby son) he truly still loves.

What follows here is a discussion of how this refraction of cultural representations is blended with thematic preoccupations and techniques that could be identified as 'Bigelovian'. As such, the relevance of her femininity fades in favour of a thematic examination, arguably visible in a number of her films, of what it means, and what it costs, to be strong in our particular western culture. As such, Bigelow is more significant, along with her collaborators, as a cultural conduit

(to utilise Peter Wollen's 1972 structuralist notion) than as a wholly personified counter-culturalist or a feminist-manqué. This still presupposes an auteurist approach, but utilised in conjunction with what the industry will tolerate at any given time and what is more broadly current in cultural terms.

Without returning to a pure study of the auteur, grouping Bigelow's work together allows us to track its cultural nuances and changes with regard to masculinity. Taking, however, a modified/more modest auteurist approach, it is possible to identify a recurring metaphor in these films - the symbolism of power as it is represented through the visual trope of the male body. Even when Bigelow identified herself as an adrenaline junkie (for commercial or other purposes) - this tended to confirm that her extra-textual statements provide a vital reference-point for the interpretation of her work.

That Bigelow should be interested in masculine subjects, therefore, and should contribute (in writing but mostly in direction) to stories of the male body in action is entirely understandable. In our culture, the male body has been, and still remains, at the centre of discourses concerning issues of power. Even when this power is constructed, as it is in *Blue Steel* (1989), with a female character at the centre, the focus is on the female protagonist Megan's (Jamie Lee Curtis) acquisition of patriarchal 'paraphernalia' - her police uniform and weapon, an acquisition symbolic of her attempt to accede to a place in the order.

The narrative, however, punishes the main character for this attempt to take on a man's role, while Bigelow and Eric Red's narrative remains productively ambiguous for much of the film, withholding its judgement as to whether her attempts to break patriarchy are misguided or whether her story is really the struggle of a woman within rigid patriarchal constraints that cannot bend to allow her entry.

In *Blue Steel*, there is an overt interplay of the feminine against the masculine both narratively and visually. By the time of *Point Break* in the early 1990s, Bigelow has combined this with a perspective on the muscular heroes of the late 1980s onwards, those individual roles (male and female) which are problematised by their reliance on the pumped-up corporeal body (reflective of the body politic in the Reagan era (Jeffords: 1994)). As a trained visual artist, she explores the display of the body, especially the body in action, to express a discourse concerning the limits and the possibilities of that strength, keeping these binaries in constant tension.

Critics note how this trademark viscerality together with a notion of the excessively powerful “spectacular” body (see Tasker: 1993 and Williams: 2000) was subverted in Bigelow, once FBI agent Johnny Utah’s (Keanu Reeves) “übermensch” physique began to fail him (Redmond: 2003: 116). By contrast, his armed robber counterpart, Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), accesses ‘nirvana’ through his, in a (albeit capitalist-funded) life beyond conventional society. Bigelow’s films explore how that self-actualising drive has its own price and how the male body can only explore it so far, unless willing to surrender to death as a consequence.

Returning, then, to *The Hurt Locker*, one can perhaps see how previous analysis of her counter-cultural attributes (the “hollywood transgressor”) might sit uncomfortably with the masculine representations in this latest text. The film does not engage with the macro-politics of the Iraq war or aims to address its origins and the moral responsibilities of the military protagonists.ⁱⁱⁱ However, an analysis of a more Bigelovian theme - masculinity and the masculine body – is representative of where that adrenalised, power-seeking gene leads, suggesting the existence of an underlying narrative that demonstrates how individual action has wider implications within the body politic. This can be illustrated by the filmic construction of Sergeant James by Bigelow and her writer, Mark Boal (and by Jeremy Renner in his performance).

Generically, the film's debt to the western – and the kinds of masculinities contained therein - is highly visible. From vampire westerns (*Near Dark*) to wet westerns (*Point Break*) to east westerns (*The Hurt Locker*), Bigelow's creation of masculine genre types is centred within a genre (the American Western) that reiterates the underlining narrative of how gendered identity is forged in encounters with extreme circumstances. James is the individualist at the wild frontier (as Alan Ladd's Shane (1953) or John Wayne's Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956)) a professional, whose dialogue and his performance are readily recognisable from previous film texts, but as we attempt to read his character through a raft of Hollywood films and their generic types – the lone star of the western genre or, more broadly, the thriller/action maverick who subverts protocol but ultimately protects society – the application of these models highlights James's masculine inadequacies as that hero type. A gifted bomb disposal expert (873 bombs disarmed) he is a maverick who refuses to obey army protocol on each mission. Although good at disarming devices he often makes the wrong decision, putting his life and the lives of his teammates in danger. When Owen Eldridge leaves on the helicopter, his femur smashed in seven places with the words: "Fuck you, James, no really fuck you" the accumulated mini-narratives of each mission position the audience to be entirely sympathetic to him (as with Sanborn when he punches him after another 'successful' mission). James really is that kind of asshole – constructed through the myriad of performative utterances he uses ("I'll handle it") which generate waning confidence in his ability to do just that. As in her previous films, the male body features as a trope for strength or failure – James can take a punch from Sanborn (Eldridge draws the target visibly on his stomach) and he walks towards danger rather than away from it, removing his bomb suit in order to "die comfortable". Nevertheless, whilst Sergeant Will James contains a Bohdi-esque reckless bravery in *The Hurt Locker*, it is his inability to process his emotions and to form connected relationships that have now become a greater part of the narrative focus, suggesting that the cultural metaphor of masculine limitation shifted towards a more positive reading.

As far as the main character is concerned, we can never slip comfortably into condemnation and there is evidence of authorial intent in these accentuations of the dissonances in his character

representation. Exploring these patriarchal tropes and narratives, Bigelow's particular directorial strength is, moreover, to manage this discursive rhetoric of masculine conventional bravery together with an artistic ability in delivering the spectacular that, dialectically, avoids having to make a judgement either way in *The Hurt Locker*. In the latest film, the visual technique of the cinematography (the use of the 'roving eye' effect of the handheld camera) means that the audience surveys the scene in restless movements as a soldier entering a field of danger; the effect of which is to provide a cinematic equivalent of the kind of tension and adrenaline that James is so addicted to. This is deeply 'Bigelovian' in the sense of its attempt to find a visual and aural language that translates visceral excitement (negative and positive) and the continuity of this perspective can be traced from the split moment decisions of policing in *Blue Steel*, the skydiving of *Point Break*, to the rush of virtual reality robbery in *Strange Days* (1995) and finally to the disarming of an improvised explosive devices in Iraq. As Yvonne Tasker analyses regarding *Point Break*, Bigelow is able to provide a "fascinating excursion into the territory of male bonding" based on her facility with constructing those sensations filmically: "as interesting as the obvious play with the intensity of male bonding and homoeroticism." (1993: 13). Bigelow's own (masculine-inflected) motivation is not an area of silence for her – often speaking in interviews of her interest in the development of technical innovations to translate that physical affect in the cinema (e.g. the modelling of a lightweight Arri camera for the chase sequences in *Point Break*, the devising of a mobile camera fitted to the DOP to mimic eye-movement in *Strange Days*).

The Hurt Locker, like her earlier films, delights in its set pieces with a new technical puzzle at the centre of them which repeatedly create that (now arguably rare) moment in a large multiplex where there is silence in the audience. James, our screen surrogate for those sequences, is the driver of that tension and the master of that moment of physical identification. The celebration in these set pieces of temporary masculine triumph (in traditional terms) in the narrative offer the possibility of the variant critical responses Bigelow receives; her sleight of hand in relation to her critics, is that she cannot help but deliver the visual pleasures of that masculinity while providing her audience with a form of secondary identification (Metz (1975)) with that power. However,

the cinematic ‘rush’ does not prevent the possibility that our analytical responses may be at variance from our instinctive ones. When the ruthless army colonel describes James as a “wild man” to his infantrymen, the superficial praise also contains potential irony, as though our own response to James’s bravery is becoming more detached and complicated. This is further illustrated in a later scene when James beats on his colleague Sanborn, calling him “bitch”. It is a kind of redneck masculinity that either repels or attracts and that can equally engender identification and aspiration or, alternatively, recoil and rejection, depending on the individual or subjective responses of film audiences.

Thus, Bigelow uses very conventional tropes of masculinity to create a surprisingly complex portrait. However much the figure is drawn from the action genres (war, westerns), there is a difference here because it allows for a greater range of reaction. The protagonist’s heroism is deeply ambiguous, since his bravery is counterpointed by his emotional limitations, accentuated by the clear contrast that is made with Sanborn’s moral development in the film. None of the masculinities represented by the three main protagonists are, in fact, drawn as dominant, meaning they are able to ‘compete’ as narrative discourses on relatively equal terms.

Sanborn’s disaffection with the idea of masculinity the army has offered him and his discovery that he not only desires, but needs, to have a son (i.e. to create rather than to destroy) is clearly a more humanistic and affirmative choice in the narrative. A man’s ‘gotta do’ what he has to do – in this case, defend the homestead. Relevant to Renner’s portrayal of this American type, Susan Faludi’s *The Terror Dream* contends that 9/11 awakened that deep-rooted national cultural myth of the homestead, but now in response to the equally deep-rooted national insecurities about the U.S. male’s ability to do what he should do. James embodies a man increasingly revealed to himself as failing in his judgement in action but a man discovering that it is only in war and in that act of defence that he can personally function; to find that you love the war itself more than you love what you defend (homestead, national honour, family life) places James beyond a normative discourse within the film. This is further illustrated by a comparison of the endings of

Point Break and *The Hurt Locker*, which illustrates the altered resonance of a similar state of masculinity. In both, we watch the protagonist walk away from the camera or off frame, but there is both a pertinent contrast underlying the visual likeness. The earlier character exits, as Sean Redmond states (2000: 115), for a place beyond the dominant order. James, instead, is walking towards a place in the (American) dominant, imperialistic order – affirming those values aggressively on foreign soil. However, what links these two disparate characters is that they have both rejected the wider political state in order to adhere to a personal one.

In these two examples of Bigelow's principal males, public action is subverted by individual choice, even to the point that Will does not return to Iraq because he wishes to serve his country but instead he returns because he is addicted to the 'adrenaline' that war provides. The difference is that, whilst Utah makes a conscious rejection, Will has never considered his place in the social order – he is an unthinking machine in the political process. His personal need for war means that he remains a potential pawn in the system – a much more ambivalent and unsettling conclusion. Thus, the later film sets out how a political compromise inevitably follows the surrender to a personal addiction to war, although the exact implications of this are deliberately ambiguous. The ending is silent as to whether this is right or wrong – this is simply how things are. It is potently connected to other visual and narrative signifiers at different stages in the film, such as the repeated shots of the local community as they look at the foreigners taking charge of their country or the outcome of the mini-narrative concerning James's affection for 'Beckham', the Iraqi boy he befriends inside the camp. Together, these elements suggest the existence of an underlying narrative concerning the failure of individual masculinity (despite its mental and physical strength) to make the difference (as it would in more conventional western genre drama). The film's rhetoric of description not analysis – its silence as to judgement - leaves those questions hanging visibly in the air and in dynamic relationship within the text without an overall authorial commentary constructing a textual message on these themes. This recalls the authorship visible even as early as *The Loveless* (1982) or *Blue Steel* (1989). In the latter film, Megan's apparent battle with the patriarchal structure the police force ends ambiguously. Narratively, she does defeat her attacker, Eugene (Ron Silver), by her own violent action, having

taken back the uniform and the gun she has lost – both through suspension and through her status as a victim. She refutes this position (her response to the guard officer’s sympathetic observation “Boy, you sure been through something” is to punch him unconscious – a practical means to escape and a symbolic statement) and hunts Eugene down herself. However, after the death she discards the gun but surrenders herself to the arms of the police officers arriving on scene. It is unclear whether they pull her from the car to help or arrest her, but her final passivity implies an acceptance to re-entry into that order as a female rather than as a male, suggesting her attempt to accede to this masculine power was misplaced and became an unsustainable charade (of unsuccessful kinging). Symbolically, these opposing messages created by her contradictory actions in the final sequence are left in dialogue even at the film narrative’s final close.

This is an aspect that appears particularly ‘Bigelovian’ in all of this; whether examining transgressive gendered identities in the 1990s or atavistic masculinities, her films continue to offer a dialectic on cultural identities without overt or pejorative judgements. Part of this effect is created aesthetically, by creating a disjuncture in the overall rhetoric of the film – between what is being overtly visualised in the frame or said within the dialogue and what is communicated overall thematically or emotionally – the result of which is to avoid the reinforcement of one particular message or emotion through the effect of repetition through the different channels of the text. In *Point Break*, the physical similitude of Utah and Tyler (Lori Petty) visually depicts his move, narratively, away from the patriarchal order that he has been part of, accentuating the allure of Bodhi as he is physically different to Utah.

At times, this ‘underlying rhetoric’ appears entirely contrapuntal to the superficial visual or aural statement being made in the individual scene. This use of film form appears in *The Hurt Locker* in the way in which it is structured as a number of disconnected scenes or set pieces, out of which multiple and connected discourses relating to war and masculinity are constructed through the advancing argument of the juxtaposed, disparate scenes. This results in an occasional contrapuntal effect for the audience who do not always have a clear on-screen utterance (in the

guiding signifiers such as dialogue, music or camera framing) in which to locate their responses. The ambiguity created may allow those distinctive audience responses and critical readings since Bigelow's disjointed filmic style- its use of different camera and film stock - actively foregrounds the disjuncture between the various aspects of her protagonist's personality. This is where Bigelow is very productively silent in textual terms, her direction ultimately refusing any kind of judgement because of the priority given to the experience of the moment. Thus, even if one disagrees with the film's politics, as it asks little about the moral rights and wrongs of the war in Iraq; even as one might pity the central protagonist's emotional stuntedness – the visceral strength of the visual and aural signifiers make it difficult to be anything but completely absorbed in the moment.^{iv}

Managing to be one of the boys in institutional terms, seems to allow Bigelow the space to expound these contradictions within a popular genre (one which is suited to such an exploration) such that she brings no counter-cultural re-reading but rather an individual style of argument, through disjuncture in juxtaposition, that is sensitive to the cultural concerns of the given time.^v However, the fact that Bigelow is interested in this kind of subject matter, with this kind of man at its centre, remains too much of a betrayal for some female critics. In persisting with the gender problem, Bigelow is seen as nothing more than an institutional patsy. According to Martha P. Nochimson, she is a “tough guy in drag” and (in an article at the time of Bigelow's Oscar nomination) states that there are: “no cheers for Miss Kathy for breaking the glass ceiling by fabricating my worst cinematic nightmare” referring to her as the “Transvestite of Directors”. Clearly frustrated by the institutional sexism that she sees surrounding women in Hollywood, Nochimson turns her fire on Bigelow as she is poised for her greatest success, by questioning its intellectual validity: “Looks to me like she's masquerading as the baddest boy on the block to win the respect of an industry still so hobbled by gender-specific tunnel vision that it has trouble admiring anything but filmmaking soaked in a reduced notion of masculinity.” Whilst, in 2000, feminist Christina Lane could enjoy her “authorial enterprise...of probing gender and genre in a way that deconstructs both terms” (2000: 100), in 2009 Nochimson highlights Bigelow's masculinity negatively – *The Hurt Locker* is a “valentine to an emotionally challenged war

addict” which is symptomatic of an institution which “doggedly preserves the hierarchy of men above women”. In the 1990s, transgression for the feminist and other academic critics is Bigelow’s fascinating ‘masquerade’ of gender and its sexual politics of that era, now her transgressiveness signifies only political betrayal.

There is evidence here of the gender politics that cannot allow Bigelow the individuated identity (of the auteur) but works rather to ghettoise her work. Nochimson also finds fault with the style criticism that admires Bigelow’s handiwork^{vi} because it has failed to honour other directors such as: “Ephron and Meyers [who] aren’t up to much because they don’t use hand-held cameras and flashy cuts that tensely survey an inscrutable environment.” However, there is nothing liberatory in the discussion that still frames itself in terms of gendered attributes and is, in effect, blowing the whistle on Bigelow’s ‘masculinity’ – as if that was the problem in itself.

Manohla Dargis, a film critic with *The New York Times*, notes the venom of Nochimson’s attack but continues the gender theme, regretting the cultural marginalisation of the chick flick since it is a: “world that, however artificial, offers up female characters who are not standing on the sidelines as the male hero saves the day.” Dargis notes, crucially, that Bigelow’s role is not to carry the hopes and aspirations of all types of women’s films: “she is very much her own woman, and her own auteur.” Bigelow remains, however, within a frame of discourse now reconceived as Bigelow and her attempts to escape her gender.

Whilst far more aware of the complexities of the case, it’s difficult to see much progress from Bigelow the problem woman to Bigelow the woman dealing with a problem. Dargis’s apposite arguments are still centred on the director as she is the cultural symbol of the institutional sexism that prevails. Articles such as this deal directly with an institutional reality - the dominance of gender in commercial terms to ascribe power in film institutions, but this is inexorably linked to ideas of what films’ internal content should be. Nochimson emphasises more conventional taxonomies of pleasure for women audiences, firmly clanging the lid down on female audience

preferences once again. If Bigelow chooses masculine subjects, doesn't that suggest that other women might want, at least, to watch the same? And is success really to be measured by how many *Mamma Mias* are 'green-lit', reinforcing a binary of gender never to be crossed, rather than regarding all subjects be of equal availability?

No wonder Bigelow kept quiet and got on with it. However, whilst she continues to avoid engaging in overt debate, her creative film texts and her directorial persona as a text itself are set to remain the site of gender politics – even if her own statements continue to insist that this sister is simply doing it for herself. However, a more pressing concern is arguably the wider debate we missed because we spent all our time on Kathryn – her great body, her earlier marriage, her/our gender problem. Whilst *The Hurt Locker* was praised for its realism (not least by the bomb disposal experts themselves) its relationship to other, more overtly condemnatory, films on the Iraq war stamps the director as a political conformist in this. From American perspectives, their troops are (again) dying on foreign soil, this time in Iraq and Afghanistan, on a mission without formal international, political approval. Thus, the argument regarding Bigelow's institutional conformity or otherwise has obscured the question of the conformity of her film text.

The academy could, unknowingly and comfortably, bypass the controversy of a debate on Iraq since the film presented no such political challenges (in the way in which Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) did – as did his Oscar acceptance speech) for *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) prior to that. Instead, they were free to make a different political gesture, one which could demonstrate how much progress the institution had made. However, for the many of us who knew that Bigelow was always good enough, her Oscar win was a case of 'about time, now what?' particularly since her breaking of the glass ceiling has seemed to herald no great rush to women up the ladder. Since a wider political debate, evident in *The Hurt Locker*'s representations of masculinity has been comprehensively lost, we might feel, to borrow a phrase from Sigourney Weaver, that there was a more critical way in which Kathryn's breasts did unfortunately matter.

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i Although production financing for her films has always come from non-Hollywood and mainly independent companies, Hollywood studios have often acquired and distributed by Hollywood conglomerates. She is, therefore, working within the Hollywood system at the margins rather than at the centre.

ii See Jermyn and Redmond (2003) for the prevalence of this discourse in relation to her work.

iii A way of dealing with the problem which haunts a number of Iraq or Afghanistan based films recently (e.g. *Restrepo* (2010)).

iv Sean Redmond (2003: 121) has discussed *Point Break*'s relationship to the body genre film – after Linda Williams' analysis (2000).

v Her first film, *The Set-Up*, showed visual scenes of violence overlaid by a philosophical commentary, suggesting this is not an unconscious use of dialectic in her latest film (as does her background of study in art and semiotics).

vi It should be noted, artistically, in collaboration with Barry Ackroyd, no stranger to capturing visceral realism since his extensive work alongside British social realist, Ken Loach.