

The Poetics of Obsession: Understanding Kathryn Bigelow's Characters

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Abstract:

The work of Kathryn Bigelow is more often than not discussed in terms of her technical and stylistic achievements. Critics have focused on her knowing experimentation with genre and aesthetics, and the way in which story-telling devices such as point of view and surveillance become the subject matter of her films. Laura Rascaroli has described her early work as 'a discourse on vision'ⁱ, while Caetlin Benson-Allott has identified the way in which the later work is dominated by a relentless, 'slow burning' intensityⁱⁱ. Relatively little has been written about her characterisation, arguably because her protagonists tend to be less than sympathetic – enigmatic to the point of illegibility and driven in ways which can be hard to fathom. Arguably, however, it is precisely their detachment and single-mindedness that makes them so watchable. What Bigelow's protagonists – and indeed her villains – have in common is an obsessive quality that also haunts her filmmaking. In this paper I will draw connections between some common themes at the heart of her films and the aesthetic and structural strategies she employs. In particular I will explore how her use of point of view and close-up highlights her characters' obsessive qualities; how her use of surveillance and mediated vision creates a recurring atmosphere of paranoia; how an uncanny stillness at the centre of her jumpy, frenetic camera work emphasises the single-minded focus of her protagonists; and how framing and narrative structure work with performances to create the fascinating, if at times infuriating, inscrutability that characterises so many of them. I will also look at how her rare engagement with out-and-out villains creates variations on these themes. I will thus seek to define the grammar of obsession that pervades Bigelow's filmmaking, connecting visual language, thematic content and characterisation.

Keywords: Kathryn Bigelow; character; sympathy; identification; obsession; paranoia; the drive

Introduction

A war-torn street in Iraq. Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) sits in the front of a wrecked car, carefully manipulating wires connected to a trunk-full of explosives. He wears no protective gear and has removed his headset. He is absolutely focused, but also absolutely calm, even relaxed. Around him, however, the tension is at fever pitch. The two soldiers covering him are jittery - increasingly aware that they are being watched by local men on the balconies, roof-tops and towers all around them, any one of whom might have the means to remotely detonate the bomb. A few moments later, back in the safety of the army truck, James allows himself a reserved 'woo-hoo', calmly remarking 'that was good' as he admires the recovered detonator – another souvenir for his collection

This scene from *The Hurt Locker* (2008) is a study in intensity and an object lesson in sustained, subtly escalating paranoia. It is also a study of character, presenting the spectator with an obsessive, single-minded, enigmatic hero who, like many of Kathryn Bigelow's heroes, provokes an odd combination of fascination and discomfort, close scrutiny and emotional distance. Bigelow's work is typically discussed in terms of its technical virtuosity and the workings of an 'art house' aesthetic within the context of mainstream genres, its explicit engagement with notions of surveillance, violence and spectacle, and the often problematic nature of its politics. Relatively little attention is paid to the function of character. Yet Bigelow's principal characters are as critical an element of her filmmaking as her studied visual style and her reflexive play with the cinematic gaze. They are pivotal to her narratives, and to audience engagement with those narratives, while their distinctive qualities resonate throughout the films they inhabit. This article sets out to explore Bigelow's characters, their construction and their operation within the text, as a key contribution to better understanding her films.

Bigelow's characters can be challenging from a viewer's perspective. Often enigmatic to the point of inaccessibility, they tend to lack much in the way of backstory, and operate within a very narrow sphere of action which reduces their opportunities to appeal to the viewer's sympathies. On the other hand these same qualities produce a certain fascinating potency, a cool charisma that draws the audience in. The characters typically project an intensity that is reflected in the (sometimes uncomfortable) intensity of the audience experience. This, I

suggest, results largely from four interconnected traits or tropes that repeatedly surface in her films: inscrutability, single-mindedness, paranoia and obsession. All four qualities have a tendency to ‘bleed’ beyond the borders of the characterisation, so as to suffuse the film itself until it becomes difficult to separate the characterisation of the protagonist (or antagonist) from the structural, technical and affective qualities of the film as a whole. Thus we find that the obsessive commitment of the main character drives the narrative, and is expressed visually through an intense, even hypnotic use of point-of view and close-up; single-mindedness is reflected in a pared-down, streamlined narrative, and a degree of moral ambiguity; inscrutability is, naturally, an effect of casting and performance, but is also associated with a lack of backstory or extraneous character detail within the narrative; finally the atmosphere of low-level paranoia that surrounds both heroes and villains is associated with diegetic instances of surveillance, and with the disquieting effects of narrative elision.

In this article, I will examine each of these tropes in some detail, drawing on key examples from across Bigelow’s oeuvre. First, however I will explore in more general terms the ways in which Bigelow’s films use character to organise the text and shape an audience response, utilising two conceptual lenses: Murray Smith’s notion of the ‘structure of sympathy’ and Jacques Lacan’s concept of ‘the drive’.

Constructing Character

Kathryn Bigelow’s own commentary on the place of character in her work betrays something of a paradox. Interviewed in *Cinema Papers*, for example, she says: ‘With my training [as a painter], I can obsess on the visuals forever. But I focus more on the story and the character, because that is what needs work’ (Bahaiiana 1992: 34). Recognising the importance of character, she simultaneously acknowledges that, unlike visual style it is not her natural medium of expression. Elsewhere, she describes action as ‘pure cinema’, effectively suggesting that it is inimical to the development of character: ‘Character can evolve within the context of a scene with dialogue, but when you’re in a situation where a person is simply surviving, it’s very cinematic’ (Hamburg 1989). This idea of a tension between character and ‘the cinematic’ is no more evident than in Phoebe Hoban’s piece on *Blue Steel* at the time of its release: ‘Overall what I’m most pleased with is the performance’, says Bigelow. ‘I think that’s where *Blue Steel* transcends its genre and becomes a character piece’ ([1990] 2013: 29). Ron Silver, however, who starred as the psychotic villain, Eugene Hunt, takes a rather

different view of Bigelow's priorities: 'She cares about the image a good deal, and I think she'd sacrifice aspects of her continuity and even perhaps character motivation if the image was cinematic and intriguing and striking enough' (2013: 26).

Critical responses to Bigelow's work have also echoed something of this tension. Writing on her first feature, *The Loveless* (1982), Barry Keith Grant suggests that the characters 'become objects of aesthetic contemplation' arranged in still 'Brechtian tableaux' (2004: 375) and presented in long, lingering shots. Caetlin Benson-Allott suggests a similarly Brechtian reading of character in *Point Break* (1991), noting that 'whether by accident or design—neither Swayze nor Reeves turns in a particularly convincing dramatic performance' (2010: 38), which serves to highlight the actor as image at the expense of psychological realism and, together with the director's virtuoso cinematography, prompts 'a degree of metacinematic reflection' (2010: 38). In a similar vein, Christina Lane argues that *K19: The Widowmaker* (2002) is not character driven as it 'lacks attention to internal conflict and anything more than cursory inter-personal drama' (2002: 103). Conversely, Colleen Keane approaches *The Hurt Locker* in part as a character study, only to find its central character elusive; she concludes that the 'real motivations and meanings of individuals' personalities and lives are impenetrable in the end' (2010: 127). It is Larry Gross, in his review of *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) who perhaps best articulates the paradoxical nature of Bigelow's relationship with her characters, arguing that 'Bigelow is ultimately more interested in the intensity of the absolute singularity of an event than she is in regular character development and its predictable resolution' (2012), yet noting at the same time the protagonist's powerful cinematic presence; Maya (Jessica Chastain), he observes, visually dominates the film. This is something she has in common with many of Bigelow's leads, whose presence sets a certain tone within the text that goes beyond their narrative role. We may, as Gross suggests, look in vain for regular character development, but it would be a mistake on that account to dismiss or overlook the importance of character in Bigelow's films.

I suggest that Bigelow's characters are in fact both structurally and aesthetically central to her films, yet they do not make for an easy point of spectatorial 'identification', seeming to repel a questing gaze as much as they attract it. To better understand the dynamics at play here it is useful to consider these characters in the light of what Murray Smith has called the 'structure of sympathy' (1994: 34).

Structures of sympathy

In practice, when critics, or indeed members of the wider audience, talk about the degree to which a film is ‘character driven’ or a character ‘realistic’, and above all when they talk about the degree to which they are able to relate to, or identify with a character in a film, they are talking about the ‘structure of sympathy’ (1994: 34) which Smith argues is constructed by and around that character. It is this that enables the spectator to engage with what is, ultimately, no more than a ‘communicatively constructed artefact’ (Eder 2010: 18).

Dismissing simplistic models of identification Smith argues that, our ‘imaginative engagement with characters’ operates on three levels: recognition, alignment and allegiance (1994: 35). ‘Recognition’ describes a spectator’s basic ability to comprehend fictional constructs as characters (as ‘people’ in the broadest sense). ‘Alignment’ indicates the way in which the spectator is imaginatively aligned with a character, through a combination of ‘subjective access’, revealing something of a character’s inner life, and ‘spatial attachment’ (Smith 1994: 41) to a character’s individual storyline, actions and experiences within the diegesis - a relationship that may be, but is by no means necessarily, associated with cinematic point-of-view. ‘Allegiance’ refers to a moral position taken by the spectator in relation to the character and the values they seem to represent.

Drawing on a cognitive approach to narrative, Smith stresses that these structures are not properties solely of the text as they depend on the responses of actual spectators; nevertheless he suggests that individual texts may be understood in terms of how they ‘produce or deny the conditions conducive to various levels of engagement’ (1994: 40). It is certainly enlightening to look at Bigelow’s films through this particular lens in order to understand how the characters operate within them and how these levels of engagement might shape our experience as spectators.

At its most basic, Smith describes the structural level of recognition as generally unproblematic:ⁱⁱⁱ and indeed Bigelow’s characters are all recognisable as human beings. However, the lack of backstory in so many of her films tends to impede a more nuanced degree of recognition. While it is common for action films in particular to establish the lead character at the start of a film as ‘relatable’ through a mundane domestic moment, or a humorous exchange with a friend, Bigelow eschews such devices (most notably in *Point Break*, *K19*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*). Clearly these characters are to be read as human, but are they really human ‘like us’?

With regard to alignment, many of Bigelow's protagonists offer the spectator very little by way of subjective access, leaving us to speculate on their inner life – although we are compensated, to a degree, by a heightened sense of spatial attachment. Indeed, Bigelow's most inscrutable characters are also those who occupy the greatest percentage of screen time, providing ample opportunity for such speculation. Smith's warning against making assumptions about the role of 'perceptual alignment' (1994: 41) are particularly interesting in relation to Bigelow's work. She is mistress of the unreliable, or misleading point-of-view shot: both *Blue Steel* (1989) and *Point Break*, for example, feature 360-degree pans that appear to begin from the protagonist's point of view, but end with the protagonist as the object of the gaze;^{iv} *Strange Days* (1995) explicitly puts its characters in the position of looking from another subject's point-of-view; while both *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* play tricks with surveillance footage that interrupts the 'natural' association between the subject and the gaze.

Smith argues that allegiance to a character 'depends upon the spectator having what s/he takes to be reliable access to the character's state of mind, understanding the context of the character's actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge' (1994: 41). A lack of subjective access, and limited contextual information makes allegiance especially problematic where the morality of a character's actions is far from straightforward – which is quite frequently the case with Bigelow's characters. The scene in which we are introduced to Maya near the beginning of *Zero Dark Thirty* appears to deliberately challenge the audience in this respect: not only do we first encounter our 'hero' assisting in the torture of a prisoner at a CIA Black Site, we encounter her wearing a full balaclava face mask. It soon becomes apparent that this is her first time taking part in such an interrogation, but our access to her feelings about it could hardly be more limited. Bigelow often seems to rely on external context (here the 9/11 bombings) or generic convention as a structural substitute for character motivation and moral positioning. The latter is not an uncommon strategy in conventional genre films, but Bigelow's habit of deliberately subverting genre norms^v serves to upset the easy assumptions that might otherwise provide a passable shortcut to moral allegiance. Thus, for example, we might be generically prepared for the sudden violence of the motorcycle gang toward the end of *The Loveless* but, as Victoria Hamburg (1989) makes clear in her interview with the director, it is more difficult to process the moment when Vance (Willem Dafoe) stands by and watches his lover shoot

herself. Here, as elsewhere in her work, the audience is kept on the ‘outside’ of the psychological action by motivations that remain obscure.

Structures of sympathy are generally under-developed in Bigelow’s films. Or rather, because this would seem to be an aesthetic strategy as opposed to a deficiency, they are repeatedly undermined by something ‘off’ in the characters - something that tends to alienate rather than to suture the spectator into a character’s experience. Nevertheless, these same characters exert a particular allure that would seem to be a direct consequence of their inaccessibility: they are, in both senses of the phrase ‘hard to get’.

The Drive

Smith suggests that his cognitive approach to character might be complementary to some psychoanalytical approaches (1994: 49). Once such approach is adopted by David Denny in his 2011 essay on *The Hurt Locker*. He introduces a perspective that potentially illuminates the cinematic charisma and opaque motivations not only of Sergeant James but of many other Bigelow characters, by deploying the Lacanian concept of the ‘drive’.

Denny’s contention is that Sergeant James, the apparently fearless bomb disposal specialist at the centre of *The Hurt Locker*, ‘embodies the psychoanalytic notion of the drive’ (2011). The drive is conceptualised by Lacan ([1959-64] (2004), as a counterpoint to desire, motivating some of the more perplexing aspects of human behaviour. While desire is characterised by constant striving after its object and the imagined pleasures it will bring, the drive endlessly circles its object and finds its own satisfaction (in Lacan’s terms, *jouissance*) in so doing. The drive, in this respect, is self-sufficient: it is, as Denny explains, ‘beyond the law, [...] [it] has no allegiance to a cause other than its own movement, and is satisfied by the affect of its own repetition’ (2011).

For Denny, there is subversive potential in the drive’s ‘alien and machine-like insistence to keep going, to not give way and thus potentially destroy the fabric of a symbolic order’ (2011). He describes how ‘At first glance, Sergeant James embodies the timeless motifs of heroism [...] But upon closer look we begin to suspect that something is awry. Sergeant James seems to derive just a little too much enjoyment from defusing the IED’s....’ (2011). He is motivated less by cause or country than by his own, perpetual drive. It is this that explains his preternaturally calm exterior and his indifference to the doubts that plague his

fellow soldiers, and it is this that explains the fascination he exerts: the ‘attraction’ and ‘enthralment’ that draws the spectator into the text.

In this respect, I suggest, James is not alone among Bigelow’s characters; indeed, the sense of something ‘awry’, of some driving inner force that is not entirely rationale might be considered their defining trait. From the off-beat intensity of Utah (Keane Reeves) in *Point Break*, to the near psychopathic patriotism of Captain Vostrikov (Harrison Ford) in *K19*, to Maya’s myopic mission in *Zero Dark Thirty*, these are all driven figures. It is suggested here that the operation of the drive in these characters provides a counterpoint to the structure of sympathy, underpinning the four tropes of obsession, single-mindedness, inscrutability and paranoia and their operation within the films.

Obsession

While the drive may care nothing for the law, sometimes its manifestation coincides, superficially at least, with the requirements of society; at other times it most emphatically does not. Obsession in Bigelow’s characters takes a range of forms that lay along a spectrum from the purely destructive to the socially productive. At one end of the spectrum, obsession is manifested as addiction.^{vi} *Near Dark* (1987), Bigelow’s western-themed vampire film, foregrounds the craving for blood and reinforces the analogy with drug culture in scenes like that in which a policeman mistakes the strung-out Caleb (Adrian Pasdar) for a junkie. *Strange Days*, meanwhile, renders its protagonist’s obsession in terms of an addiction to the enhanced voyeurism offered by the SQUID^{vii}: Lenny’s (Ralph Fiennes) repetitive viewing of scenes from his past relationship renders him infuriatingly ineffective in the present. Erotic obsession is revisited in *The Weight of Water* (2000), while the *ennui* that characterises the biker gang in *The Loveless* – apparently the very opposite of any kind of drive – in fact overlays a nihilistic nomadism that drives them to move from place to place.

At the other end of the spectrum, obsession is manifested as a heightened, almost pathological sense of duty such as that demonstrated by Captain Vostrikov of the Soviet submarine ‘K19’, who would rather let his crew die of radiation poisoning than accept help from the American fleet. But duty for Bigelow’s heroes is often as much alibi as motive. Todd McGowan, writing on the importance of duty to the heroes of Michael Mann, describes their actions as deriving, in fact, ‘not from obedience of the demands of the social order, but

from adherence to and embrace of the enjoyment that exceeds that order' (2007, 57). This Lacanian enjoyment of the action for its own sake is acknowledged in the on-screen text that opens *The Hurt Locker*, quoting war correspondent Chris Hedges: 'War is a drug.' It is also evident in CIA agent Maya's crusading commitment to the hunt for Bin Laden, even when the focus of the US intelligence agencies has moved on to more current threats; in FBI agent Utah's improbable off-screen pursuit of Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) across continents after his escape; and in New York cop Megan's (Jamie Lee Curtis) relentless game of cat-and-mouse with her nemesis, Eugene Hunt, in *Blue Steel*. McGowan suggests that the drive in Mann's films manifests itself in textual excess, producing 'the hyper-realistic and overly cinematic style that annoys his critics' (2007: 59). In a similar way the obsessive commitment of Bigelow's heroes can be said to fuel both the stylistic excesses that hold the spectator at a reflexive distance and the diegetic excesses that mark her characters, challenging the spectator's allegiance.

Blue Steel makes explicit the relationship between commitment and obsession, on the one hand clearly distinguishing between them by associating them with the hero and villain respectively, yet on the other hand repeatedly aligning them both visually and in terms of the narrative. The film is a neo-noir police thriller telling the story of Megan, a newly qualified cop, who attracts the attention of charming psychopath Eugene by firing an entire barrel of bullets into an armed robber in a shop. In the confusion, Eugene takes the dead robber's gun, and Megan finds herself suspended, on suspicion of having used excessive force. Eugene engineers a meeting with Megan and they begin to date, but meanwhile Megan finds herself implicated in a series of random shootings featuring bullets engraved with her name. Eugene soon gives himself away through his fetishistic obsessions, but Megan only finds herself in more trouble as she seeks to bring him to justice: Eugene convincingly plays the part of respectable citizen, and his lawyer accuses Megan of harassment. Megan's narrative role moves back and forth between investigator/hero and *femme fatale*/victim until, after being violently raped by Eugene, she finally hunts him down and kills him – echoing the earlier shooting as she empties her gun into his chest, point blank.

In the scene where Eugene reveals himself as the killer he tells Megan 'We are the same, you and I'. She of course denies this, but the film-maker's use of parallel narrative and match-cuts seems to support his thesis. Megan's relationship with power and the gun is not pathological, but it certainly goes beyond her role as a law-keeper. There is a Freudian undercurrent to her jokes about why she became a cop (because she likes shooting people) and to the clear

satisfaction with which she teases a sexist barbeque guest about possible traffic offences, and arrests her own father for domestic abuse. Likewise, other ‘false’ accusations to which she is subjected seem to function as metanarrative commentary. She is not technically guilty of the charge of excessive force for which she is suspended, since the man she shot in the store was armed - nevertheless her response was excessive. She is not actually guilty of harassment as Eugene’s lawyer suggests, yet it is true that her pursuit of him is personal and exceeds professional boundaries. Notwithstanding her name on the bullets, she is not really implicated in Eugene’s killing spree, but she does seem to have been responsible for setting his psychosis in train. In the final shoot out, she kills Eugene in cold blood while his own gun hangs empty at his side. Megan’s identity is intertwined with that of her enemy, her commitment with his obsession. In this respect *Blue Steel* dramatizes a tension that is implicit in later films.

Described by Laura Rascaroli as ‘essentially a discourse on vision’ (1997: 232), *Blue Steel* also exemplifies the way in which obsession is rendered in terms of the dynamics of the gaze in Bigelow’s work. Eugene’s obsession is explicitly fuelled by the scopic drive: it is the image of Megan pointing a gun that excites him, as well as his own image, similarly armed, in the mirror. As an audience, moreover, we are implicated in his obsession through the opening sequence that alternates between a loving examination of the gun in extreme close-up, and the reverse strip-tease of Megan preparing for her swearing-in ceremony. Megan’s gaze, meanwhile, is rendered unreliable: she repeatedly misses or misrecognises key information – a trope established in the training exercise she fails at the very start of the film. In the final sequences, however, as her motivation hardens into a single-minded pursuit of her nemesis, her gaze becomes as focussed as her obsession.

The relationship between obsession and the gaze is reinforced in many of Bigelow’s other films through technologies of looking. *Strange Days*, as we have seen, directly identifies obsession with scopophilia,^{viii} while *The Weight of Water* makes a more subtle connection through its photographer heroine. *Zero Dark Thirty* represents Maya’s obsessive commitment primarily through her mediated gaze as she pours over videos, photographs, satellite pictures and real-time helmet-cam footage, while in *The Hurt Locker* James’ forensic gaze is echoed in the various levels of surveillance that surround him. Bigelow’s interest in both the cinematic gaze and in the ubiquity of surveillance is well documented^{ix}, as is its influence on her visual style; it is perhaps unsurprising that her characters so often express their obsession through the gaze.

Megan, as much victim as hero, and with a relatively detailed backstory, is one of Bigelow's more accessible protagonists. It is noticeable, however, that in the later scenes of the film, as she casts aside the role of 'victim' in favour of that of 'hero', Megan also casts aside much of that emotional accessibility to become as 'steely' as the weapon with which she is implicitly equated. Her obsessive determination in these final action sequences offers another, more visceral, kind of access to ensure that, in Bigelow's words, 'you really ride her ride' (Hoban [1990] 2013: 29). For many of Bigelow's protagonists, I would suggest, it is less the conventional strategies of accessibility that are deployed to keep the spectator 'on board', than that same obsessive intensity and the cinematic magnetism it exerts.

Single-mindedness

The second defining trait shared by many of Bigelow's heroes is an uncompromising single-minded focus on their goal. This may seem to be a natural expression of the drive but in fact exists in a degree of tension with it. There is a similarly paradoxical impact in terms of the structure of sympathy: on the one hand, narrative focus and the sheer volume of screen time often occupied by Bigelow's heroes promotes spatial attachment; on the other, the narrowness of each protagonist's own focus and conflicted moral framework present a challenge to the spectator's allegiance. This is perhaps most marked in *K19*'s Captain Vostrikov who insists on pursuing his chosen course of action, impervious to a moral perspective that would put the lives of his men above the preservation of military secrets or patriotic pride. It also appears in *Point Break*'s dogged FBI agent, ploughing on with his mission despite the temptations of sex and surf, and in *Strange Days*' flawed hero, whose blinkered pursuit of his lost love makes him oblivious to other dangers, other priorities and other opportunities for romantic fulfilment. *Detroit* (2017), Bigelow's dramatization of police brutality during the 1967 '12th Street Riot', offers a twist on this theme in the form of racist police officer, Krauss (Will Poulter), whose single-minded determination to identify a non-existent sniper fuels the terrorisation and murder of innocent bystanders. Krauss is, of course, the villain of the piece yet his absolute commitment to his warped agenda is what makes him the most cinematically captivating character in the film.

The sense of purpose that informs her single-minded heroes is often reflected in the structure of Bigelow's films, which tend to favour an economical, pared-down narrative. *The Loveless* and *Near Dark* draw on the linear logic and narrative tropes of the road movie; *Blue Steel* and *Point Break*, notwithstanding their seductive antagonists, are tightly organised around the

core investigation; *K19*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, meanwhile, all take a similar approach to storytelling, layering details within the core narrative rather than elaborating around it. It is notable that the exceptions have been less successful as films although arguably among Bigelow's more interesting projects: what *The Weight of Water*, *Strange Days* and *Detroit* have in common is that their dispersal of narrative focus, and complex plotting, serve to drain the emotional energy of the story. While these films may offer more character complexity, they lack the dynamic drive that powers the others. Narrative simplicity, together with a straightforward character trajectory, seems to better support the 'sensorial immersion' and 'enthrallment' (Denny 2011) that mark Bigelow's characters at their best.

Maya, the CIA analyst in *Zero Dark Thirty*, epitomises the single-minded protagonist of a single-strand narrative. Having set the scene with original audio from the 9/11 attack, the film picks up the narrative in 2003, at the start of Maya's personal hunt for Bin Laden. It follows her for the next eight years as she reviews existing evidence, interviews prisoners and coordinates surveillance of various kinds, eventually tracking down her target and overseeing his assassination by US Navy SEALs. The trajectory of the narrative is as focused and uncompromising as its hero. Gross (2012) comments on the extraordinary number of shots featuring Maya alone. One effect of these, I would suggest, is to emphasise her isolation at the centre of the narrative; another is to create a sense of control (illusory, at least in part) over the maelstrom of action around her. Thus, during the extended sequence that gives the film its name, when the SEALs storm Bin Laden's stronghold, the camera repeatedly cuts back to Maya watching the action, as though the whole exercise were a manifestation of her will.

Brook Barnes, in her review for the *New York Times*, remarks that Maya 'is defined only by her work' (2012) and indeed, the one scene that sees her engaged in a social interaction, dining with a colleague, lasts just long enough for her to explain her complete lack of romantic entanglements, before the restaurant is blown up. It is precisely this absence of elaboration, however, that gives the character such unassailable dramatic force. Maya's single-minded pursuit of her goal is morally ambiguous at best, and has been read by many as an apologia for US foreign policy in general and enhanced interrogation tactics in particular. Agnieszka Piotrowska (2014), however has proposed an alternative moral perspective, describing Maya's quest in terms of a Lacanian ethics that privileges fidelity to one's own convictions, and to which she attributes Maya's unshakable resolve. When the leader of the

SEALs, tasked with storming the suspected Bin Laden stronghold, is asked what convinces him that their extraordinarily dangerous mission will be worthwhile, he replies, with an emphatic gesture, 'her certainty'. Problematic ideology notwithstanding, it may be that the dramatic force of 'her certainty' has the potential to exert a similar hold on the spectator as it does on the SEALs.

In the closing moments of *Zero Dark Thirty*, her mission complete, Maya sits alone in a troop carrier. When the pilot asks where she wants to go she is unable to answer. Instead she weeps silently: suddenly without purpose, and without the identity defined by that purpose. This image of Maya has been evocatively described by Guy Westwell as 'a pieta for the war on terror' (2013: 87). From the point of view of character, it might just as aptly be described as a fugue. It echoes the final scene of *Blue Steel*, when Megan, having killed Eugene, appears drained of autonomy - her near-catatonic state emphasised by an uncomfortably long take, before she allows police officers to lead her away. A corresponding loss of purpose and identity is seen at the end of *Point Break*. Utah, having hunted his man across continents only to let him ride out to catch his final, fatal wave, throws his FBI badge into the sea and walks out of the frame, the winner of a pyrrhic victory. *The Hurt Locker* also features a moment of fugue, but this time in the midst of the narrative. During his shore leave James finds himself in a supermarket, staring at an endless expanse of breakfast cereals, unable to make a choice: exaggerated wide angle shots and deep focus create a nightmarish moment in which he seems to lose any sense of self.

These moments of fugue are symptomatic of the tension between the characters' single-minded focus on achieving a goal, and the repetitive, obsessive workings of the drive. The two forces are structurally contradictory: the drive, according to Lacan, finds fulfilment in circling its object and cannot be satisfied by the achievement of a goal, which effectively defeats its purpose. For Maya, Megan and Utah, triumph feels like defeat because the destruction of their opponent takes away their sense of purpose and with it their sense of self. For James, the loss is only temporary as the story structure embraces the circularity of the drive. Shortly after the supermarket episode, James tells his baby son that over time a person comes to care about only a few things – maybe only one. What that one thing is for James is left in little doubt: the next scene sees him back in Iraq, having signed up for another 365 days. These odd moments of fugue, then, speak to the complexity of the protagonists' motivations - not fully accessible even to themselves, yet generating a dramatic underlying

tension which pulls the spectator in – albeit without offering the satisfaction of a final reveal or a classic Hollywood ending.

Inscrutability

Perhaps the most obvious barrier to the operation of the structure of sympathy in relation to Bigelow's work is inscrutability. Visually, the enigmatic images of the protagonists dominate her films, yet insight into the inner lives of those characters is distinctly limited. It would be a mistake, however, to assume the inaccessibility of these characters represents some kind of limitation in terms of directorial style. Bigelow's antagonists, such as Eugene, Bodhi and Krauss, may share the single-minded focus of her heroes, but are memorably colourful and decidedly more expressive. The victim-protagonists of *Near Dark* and *Detroit*, meanwhile, are empathetic, but notably lacking in the cinematic charisma of a Vance or a Maya, suggesting that the relatively impassive presentation of her hero-protagonists is a matter of creative choice, whether conscious or otherwise.

It is clear from Bigelow's interviews that casting for her is very much about personal charisma and a certain visual impact. As she explains in an interview for the Director's Guild of America, she is drawn to her lead actors: 'they're not always necessarily conventionally beautiful, yet they're exquisite looking. And I enjoy looking at them in the cutting room for months on end' (Chagolla 2017). The cool, self-contained demeanour that she favours in her casting choices is reinforced through pared-down performances that reflect her pared-down narratives. There is nothing to distract the viewer from the 'pure cinema' of action. The resulting aesthetic is arresting but presents the spectator with some difficulties in terms of access - difficulties that are exacerbated by the lack of backstory. This becomes particularly problematic when we are confronted by questionable moral decisions and motivations that do not entirely make sense.^x

It is perhaps significant that Vance, the protagonist in Bigelow's first feature film, is the personification of 'cool'. Indeed 'cool' seems to be the *raison d'être* of *The Loveless*, an *homage* to the biker films of the 1950s and '60s, just as it is for the biker gang it portrays. In the latter case, it is an affectation, of course: the insecurity and aggression beneath the surface break through with minimal provocation. Vance himself, however, remains mostly unreadable. In place of a backstory, at the start of the film, we are offered a singularly unrevealing voice-over that serves only to feed the enigma. Like the ill-fated Telena (Marin

Kanter), the spectator may be seduced by Vance's physical beauty, lovingly depicted in lingering shots and slow pans – but we are repelled by his fundamental nihilism, exemplified in his complete absence of reaction to Telena's death. The tension between attraction and repulsion holds the spectator in an uncomfortable state of limbo.

Vance's successors are to be found throughout Bigelow's work, in heroic protagonists cast for their distinctive looks and understated performances. *Point Break* offers a notable example in Johnny Utah, a young FBI agent who arrives in LA, keen to prove himself. He undertakes to crack the unsolved case of a gang of bank robbers who have carried out a number of successful, casualty-free hold-ups over the course of several summers; his partner believes the gang are surfers, and Utah goes undercover to infiltrate the surfing community. The novice quickly finds himself entranced, to an equal degree, by the thrill of the surf and the charisma of surfing guru Bodhi. Casting the famously 'wooden' Keanu Reeves as Utah was an entirely deliberate creative decision on Bigelow's part, for which she lobbied against considerable opposition predicated on his lack of experience or profile as an action star. (Schneller [2002] 2013, 115). Reeves' reserved performance and smooth, clean-cut look contrasts sharply with that of the exuberant and shaggy surfers, as it does with the colourful shirts and 'lived in' face of his FBI partner, Pappas (Gary Busey). When Utah and Pappas raid the house of a group of surfers they suspect of being the robbers, they encounter an irate DEA^{xi} agent, also undercover. This agent, unlike Utah, has disguised himself as one of the gang, adopting clothes, hair and tattoos in keeping with the role – which, he is anxious to point out, constitutes a not inconsiderable personal sacrifice on his part. Utah, in a metacinematic twist typical of Bigelow, adopts no such strategy. He has infiltrated his own surfing group by simply providing a blank sheet onto which they can project their assumptions. Such backstory as Utah provides, meanwhile, is largely untrue, offered to Tyler (Lori Petty) as a ploy to initiate a relationship. By the end of the movie, all we know about him for sure is that he injured his knee playing high-school football.

Bigelow's later heroic leads typically arrive unannounced and divulge very little about themselves, often taking up considerable screen time without much in-depth engagement with other characters. Even *The Weight of Water*, from which, as a melodrama, a spectator might expect more character development, provides relatively little background on the protagonist of the primary narrative. Mostly, these characters give performances that seem calculated to actively withhold access to their inner lives, working against the structure of sympathy in this

respect. Yet, undeniably, there is dramatic force in this very withholding, which requires the spectator to work at solving the enigma, and thus invest in these challenging characters.

Paranoia

Arguably, this lack of emotional access to the inner world of the protagonist is balanced by the atmosphere of paranoia that pervades so many of the films. Paranoia is not necessarily a quality of the characters themselves (although antagonists Eugene in *Blue Steel* and Krauss in *Detroit* are portrayed as pathologically paranoid): it is a quality of the text that informs our relationship with the characters. This textual paranoia results largely, from an oppressive sense of surveillance and a degree of narrative elision that draws attention to that which is not known or seen. It contributes to the impression of an isolated, embattled hero; it also performs a kind of suture by inviting the spectator into a parallel space alongside the protagonist, and thus providing an alternative form of access to, and alignment with, their experience.

Smith's structure of sympathy is predicated on an understanding that the spectator's engagement with a fictional text is primarily through an act of 'acentral', as opposed to 'central' imagining as explained by Richard Wolheim (1984: 74). That is to say, the spectator enjoys the vicarious experience by imagining that the diegetic action is 'really' happening, but not that it is happening to her/himself. Thus the spectator may sympathise strongly with the character at the centre of this action but does not 'become' the character as naïve models of identification suggest. There are exceptions to this form of engagement, however, whereby, as Smith explains, the structure of sympathy 'draws on various phenomena which constitute forms of central imagining, or what psychologists call empathy: emotional simulation, motor and affective mimicry, and autonomic reactions like the startle response' (1994: 39). He suggests that these mechanisms may inform the cognitive processes by which we construct characters, but 'may also function as a subsystem at odds with the structure of sympathy' and effectively override it (1994: 39).

Bigelow seems to describe just such a 'subsystem' when she talks about the importance of the 'immersive' and 'visceral' elements in her filmmaking. She argues, for example, that 'immersion can create empathy - not sympathy, empathy [creating] a more active relationship with the content' (Chagolla 2017). The nature of that relationship in Bigelow's films is invariably one that involves a non-specific fear or, at least, extreme anxiety – a ubiquitous

paranoia. In the final frames of *The Weight of Water*, the protagonist, Jean (Catherine McCormick), effectively sums up the film, saying: ‘There are times in your life when you sense that something is about to happen and at the same time you realise that it already has’. The haunting combination of anticipation and fatalism she describes is to be found underpinning all of Bigelow’s films in one way or another. Something is about to happen – and that something will involve a sudden explosion of violence.

The undertow of paranoia takes different forms depending on the genre and tone of each film. In *The Loveless* and *Near Dark*, while the violence, when it occurs, is shocking, it is the anticipation of violence that carries the greater dramatic force. This is most marked in *The Loveless*, where the threat is dissipated several times before it comes to fruition. *Blue Steel* constructs a noirish, paranoid scenario that is ‘more visceral than rational [...] [with] the logic of nightmare’ (Turan 1989: 162). *Point Break* plays with increasingly complex structures of knowledge in terms of who knows what about whom – with a metanarrative commentary provided by the slightly comical ‘pass-the-parcel’ parachute routine enacted when Utah goes sky-diving with the surfing bank robbers.,

Paranoia is an explicit theme in *Strange Days*, a neo-noir science fiction that taunts both protagonist and spectator with narrative elision and misdirection. The conspiratorial plot is played out against a background of existential threat, generated in part by the explosive atmosphere of *fin de siècle* decadence and violence, and in part by the SQUID surveillance technology at the centre of the story, and the uncanny access it affords to the subjectivity of another. Paranoia is expressly discussed in the course of the film, albeit (and not inappropriately) by highly unreliable informants. Philo (Michael Wincott), owner of the Retinal Fetish nightclub, tells Lenny ‘Paranoia is just reality on a finer scale’; while Lenny’s manipulative friend Max (Tom Sizemore) tells him ‘the issue isn’t whether you’re paranoid: the issue is whether you’re paranoid enough’.

Notwithstanding the questionable sources of these aphorisms, both resonate with other films in Bigelow’s oeuvre. In *The Hurt Locker*, for example ‘reality on a finer scale’ is precisely what we experience watching James in action, our senses, as Steven Shaviro has it, ‘stretched to a point of acute tension’ (2010) as we are invited to share in what Benson-Allott calls the ‘free-floating paranoia of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal team’ (2010: 43). The CIA agents in *Zero Dark Thirty*, meanwhile, are most certainly ‘not paranoid enough’. Maya survives two assassination attempts more by luck than judgement, while her friends are not so

fortunate. The tone of each of these films is inflected by Paul Ottosson's subtly haunting soundscapes, designed to manipulate the spectator with barely perceptible sonic cues.^{xii} Each is characterised by forms of elision in the narration: in *Zero Dark Thirty* the constant emphasis on 'what is not seen, what is excluded' as described by Gross (2012); in *The Hurt Locker*, the 'disjointed filmic style' that, according to Rona Murray, 'actively foregrounds the disjuncture between the various aspects of [James'] personality' (2011: 16). Both strategies serve to put the spectator on edge.

Bigelow's immersive filmmaking techniques and the intense experience they offer the spectator is perhaps best demonstrated in her *huis clos* scenarios, where hermetic, claustrophobic settings are used to generate a sense of escalating and inescapable tension with nightmarish overtones. Most recently this strategy has been used in *Detroit* to create the deeply disturbing sequence at the Algiers Hotel, in which police officers hold a group of 'witnesses' hostage while they interrogate them about a supposed shooting. The prisoners are a disparate group of young black men, along with two white girls, whose very presence in such company clearly enrages the white policemen. For forty long minutes of running time, we see them subjected to a gruelling programme of verbal, physical and psychological abuse, of which the latter is, perhaps, the most powerful, as the characters are deliberately kept in a state of terrified anticipation. Bigelow places the spectator in a similar position, drawn into the centre of the action and unable to escape the unfolding horror.

The literal immersion of the Soviet nuclear submarine in *K19: The Widowmaker* provides Bigelow with an opportunity to draw out the almost unbearable intensity of the *huis clos* scenario for almost the length of an entire film. Paranoia is established as the default position at the start of the film: we learn that there have been a succession of technical problems, then the ship's doctor is killed just before the launch and the champagne bottle intended to 'bless' the boat fails to smash. The name 'the widowmaker' is coined by the superstitious crew who fear from the start they may not survive the maiden voyage. Once aboard the submarine the unfolding drama is shot to emphasise the claustrophobic nature of the space,^{xiii} providing the perfect setting for the slow-burning, almost imperceptible, build-up of tension. The captain forces his crew to undertake constant drills, each one responding to a more or less catastrophic scenario. These are punctuated by repeated shots of an engineer tapping nervously on the glass instruments outside the nuclear reactor, while the readings rise inexorably towards the danger point. Once the situation becomes critical a succession of crew members are dispatched to fix the leak inside the reactor chamber, and we find ourselves

drawn into the anticipatory horror of the men as they watch their colleagues carried away one by one, with disfiguring symptoms of radiation sickness, in the knowledge that they are next in line.

It is in *The Weight of Water*, as Benson-Allott remarks, that Bigelow first experiments with the hermetic environment and the ‘slow-burning animosity and perseverance’ that informs the later films (2010: 41). The narrative blends together the present-day story of Jean, a photojournalist, and the story she is investigating – that of an unsolved nineteenth century murder on a tiny isolated island off the New Hampshire coast. The historical tale (as it is imagined by Jean) is one of brooding frustration and jealousy creating an unbearable tension that is broken when dutiful wife Maren Hondvedt (Sarah Polley) slaughters her sister and sister-in-law. Polley’s impassive expression and the matter-of fact tone of her voice-over narration has a disquieting effect, set, as they are, in counterpoint to repeated scenes of extreme violence and its bloody aftermath. An even stronger sense of foreboding pervades the contemporary story, however, in which Jean visits the scene of the murder on her brother-in-law’s sailing boat, accompanied by her poet husband and, to her displeasure, her brother-in-law’s new girlfriend. The oppressive atmosphere of impending danger is created in part by the mournful jazz soundtrack, in part by the use of long lingering close-ups and extreme close-ups, but primarily through the force of Jean’s plaintiff, prolonged gaze – with or without her camera. Disturbingly, Jean often seems to be able to see the historical events which haunt the island, and their dreamlike intrusion into the present creates an uncanny relationship between the two stories. Violence, when it comes in the contemporary timeline, takes the form of a preventable accident, rather than a deliberate act, yet the effect is as profoundly shocking as the historical murder. This, I would suggest, is a direct result of the way in which the two stories are interwoven to suffuse the text with a paranoid sensibility.

Paranoia in Bigelow’s films can be read as kind of psychic excess generated by the drive. As a textual effect it appears to be an inescapable corollary of the obsessive protagonist. Where our sympathies for that protagonist are strained, paranoia has the potential to bypass the cognitive structures and to draw the spectator into the story world, if not actually into the consciousness of the protagonist.

Conclusion

Bigelow's characters are not always 'easy' to watch. They do not give up their secrets lightly, if at all, and do not fit readily into generic moulds. Much of the time they seem to positively resist audience engagement, working against the structures of sympathy that should help the spectator form an imaginative bond with them. Given the technically adventurous filmmaking for which Bigelow is known, the spectator's most straightforward response, then, might be to dismiss character altogether and focus on the director's often ravishing aesthetics and exhilarating action sequences.

Yet it is precisely their 'difficult' qualities – their inaccessibility, their opaque motivations and their morally dubious actions - that make Bigelow's characters interesting. It is their 'difficult' qualities that bring a level of complexity to the films which, along with the director's metacinematic sensibility, separates Bigelow's work from more conventional genre cinema. Beneath the surface, almost all of these characters embody something of Lacan's 'drive'- an irrational force that powers the narrative and produces a textual intensity, an immersive atmosphere of paranoia that draws the spectator into the action. Obsessive, single-minded and inscrutable, Bigelow's protagonists, and indeed her key antagonists, are able to exert a fascination that, while it may not always produce sympathy, can certainly intrigue and enthral the spectator. Gross (2012), talks about the way in which Bigelow's narrative in *Zero Dark Thirty* 'sucks' the audience in then 'pushes' us away again, his imagery conjuring up the surf that mesmerises the hero of *Point Break*. I would argue that Bigelow's characters operate in a very similar way, attracting and repelling the spectator by turns, to create an effect that is perhaps more hypnotic than sympathetic.

The contention here is that Bigelow's approach to character needs to be seen less as an accidental casualty of her focus on 'pure cinema' than as an integral part of her film-making, aligned with both her visual style and the themes that dominate her work. This article, in aiming for breadth, has, I would suggest, only scratched the surface of a topic which others, it is to be hoped, may go on to explore in greater depth.

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ⁱ Rascaroli, L. 'Steel in the Gaze', in *Screen*, vol. 38 no. 3, Autumn 1997, p232.

ⁱⁱ Benson-Allott, C. 'Undoing Violence: politics, genre and duration in Kathryn Bigelow's cinema', *Film Quarterly*, vol 64 no. 2, Winter 2012 p.41.

ⁱⁱⁱ A key exception being some non-human characters, such as the aliens in *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009), whose challenges with recognition Smith discusses elsewhere (2017)

^{iv} For detailed analysis see Rascaroli (1997: 232) on *Blue Steel* and Benson-Allott (2010: 38) on *Point Break*.

^v As discussed by Jermyn and Redmond (2003: 3)

^{vi} Within psychoanalysis, the drive has been implicated in addiction, as exemplified by the work of Cristina Laurita (2011)

^{vii} The 'Superconducting Quantum Interference Device', originally an FBI surveillance tool, now available on the black market for entertainment purposes, records an individual's experience and plays it back so that it can be relived vicariously by others.

^{viii} The 'SQUID' is diegetically explained as going beyond the visual, bringing subjective experience 'straight from the cerebral cortex', yet cinematically its use is rendered as voyeurism – an effect reinforced by the metacinematic commentary inherent in, for example the naming of the nightclub at the centre of the plot the 'Retinal Fetish'.

^{ix} Bigelow has compared *Strange Days* to Michael Powell's 1960 film *Peeping Tom*, explaining that it 'utilizes the medium to comment on the medium' (Rynning (2013)[1996]: 106), while in relation to the focus on surveillance in *Zero Dark Thirty* she explains: 'we're a watched society and a society of watchers' (DiGiacomo, 2012)

^x Even in *Strange Days*, which, in a sense, is all back-story, key questions are left unanswered (Why, for example, did Lenny lose his job as a cop? How was Macy (Angela Bassett) able to morph from maid to bodyguard in a matter of months?).

^{xi} Drug Enforcement Administration

^{xii} Ottosson, the sound designer on both films, used subsonic elements and the eerie sounds of the two-stringed erhu and of a guitar distorted using an electronic ‘ebow’ to create an atmosphere of ambient threat in *The Hurt Locker*, while the more subtle sense of jeopardy in *Zero Dark Thirty* is heightened by the uncanny sound of a spike fiddle, imperceptible amid the seemingly diegetic soundtrack.

^{xiii} For the internal dolly shots, for example, Bigelow created what Lane describes as ‘a monorail system that enabled the camera to glide through the submarine’s tight caverns alongside its more visible pipes and wires.’ (2002: 105)