

Kathryn Bigelow by Philip Kemp



Action directors, it seems, are allowed to screw up now and again. Ridley and Tony Scott, Roland Emmerich, even the revered Clint Eastwood have all perpetrated the occasional box-office disaster, apparently without doing irrevocable major damage to their careers. It's only if – as so rarely happens – the action director in question is female that the rules seem to be different.

In the 1980s and 1990s Kathryn Bigelow looked like one of the most intriguing filmmakers working in American popular cinema, intent on subverting its conventions from within. Her background was unconventional for a film director. Born in 1951 in San Carlos, California, into a prosperous middle-class family, she studied painting at the San Francisco Art Institute until, at the age of 19, she won a scholarship to the Whitney Museum in New York, where her tutors included Susan Sontag and Richard Serra. Becoming active in the New York avant-garde art scene, she affiliated to Art and Language, the British-based group of conceptual artists

whose aim was the 'exploration of theoretical, literary and political topics through writing and painting', and worked as assistant to the performance artist Vito Acconci.

Increasingly, though, she found herself drawn to cinema. 'I felt painting was isolating and a little bit elitist,' she later explained, 'whereas film has the potential to become an incredible social tool with which you can reach a mass audience. Some painting requires a certain amount of knowledge or education on the part of the viewer to be appreciated. Film is not like that. It must be accessible to work within a cinematic context.' Accordingly she enrolled in Columbia University's Graduate School of Film, where she worked, among others, with Milos Forman and film theorist Peter Wollen.

Bigelow's 1978 graduate film, the 17-minute *The Set-Up*, mapped out in miniature her chosen territory as a filmmaker: a fascination with the testosterone world of masculinity and violence, tempered by a certain ironic critical distance. Two men (one of them played by Gary Busey) fight violently in an alley, while on the soundtrack the semioticians Sylvère Lotringer and Marshall Blonsky comment on and deconstruct the action. Her first feature followed four years later, co-written and co-directed with fellow Columbia film student Monty Montgomery. (It was Montgomery's sole foray into directing; he went on to become a producer, most notably on David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* and Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady*.)

The Loveless gave fair notice of Bigelow's offbeat approach to genre cinema. Starting out from the classic set-up established by *The Wild One* and later productively mined by Roger Corman – a gang of black-leather-clad bikers, moody and sexy, sweep into an

**The Loveless**

all-American small town and disrupt its values – *The Loveless* slows down the action, putting a dreamy Sirkian spin on events and, taking a leaf out of Kenneth Anger’s book *Scorpio Rising*, fetishising the gang’s machines, clothing and accoutrements to the point of delirium. For all their apparent menace, the bikers (led by Willem Dafoe in his first major screen role) are essentially passive and self-absorbed; the film displaces the impulse to violence on to the respectable townsfolk.

The Loveless heralds elements that would recur throughout Bigelow’s work. For her, as for Arthur Penn two decades earlier, ‘a society has its mirror in its outcasts’. The bikers are the first of her self-contained groups of outsiders: seemingly defined by their opposition to conventional mores, they represent an alternative dark-side structure, respectable society’s hidden needs and appetites made manifest. (‘They’re animals,’ mutters one of the town’s old-timers. ‘Heck, I’d love to be them for a day or two.’) And local teenager Telena (Marin Kanter) who latches eagerly on to the gang – and later shoots her sexually abusive father before killing herself – represents, with

her boyish figure and short hair, the first of Bigelow’s gallery of androgynous heroines in a man’s world.

The Loveless was cautiously received. Many reviewers found it slow and lacking in action. It wasn’t a charge Bigelow would incur again. Around this time she experienced a cinematic epiphany. Her studies at Columbia had left her in thrall to European directors such as Fassbinder and Pasolini. Then one night she watched a double bill of *Mean Streets* and *The Wild Bunch*. ‘It took all my semiotic Lacanian deconstructivist saturation and torqued it,’ she recalled. ‘I realised there’s a more muscular approach to filmmaking that I found very inspiring.’

Following her own mantra – ‘Rules are meant to be broken, boundaries are meant to be invaded, envelopes meant to be pushed, preconceptions challenged’ – Bigelow rejigged the contours of the action genre, rejecting standard rollercoaster excursions in favour of cross-fertilising experiments in genre-bending. Her next film, *Near Dark*, an insidious vampire western tinged with noirish melancholy, also tosses in elements of star-crossed lovers romance and the counterculture road movie.

**Near Dark**

Set in the scoured flatlands of the American southwest and shot almost entirely at the magic hour, *Near Dark* pivots around a series of archetypal opposites – light and dark, love and death, nurturing and destroying – that intertwine and merge. Caleb (Adrian Pasdar), an Oklahoma farm-boy, finds himself torn between two families: in the light, his widowed father and self-assured little sister; lurking in the dark, the itinerant vampire clan into which he's inducted by the sensual Mae (Jenny Wright). The film's action highpoint comes when the clan trash a redneck bar and its patrons, watched with horrified fascination by Caleb. The scene's played with measured, almost courtly pacing, and leaves room for black humour. 'I hate it when they ain't bin shaved,' growls Severen (Bill Paxton) as he sinks his fangs into a biker's neck.

Bigelow followed it up with *Blue Steel*, a cop drama laced with horror-movie tropes; as if to underline the generic links, Bigelow cast as her lead the iconic queen of stalk'n'slash, Jamie Lee Curtis. In this film the fetishistic impulse turns yet more intense: in the credit sequence light caresses the contours of a handgun (a key factor in the plot) in extreme close-up, transforming it into an abstract study of curves and shadows. Curtis plays a rookie New York cop (unusually for Bigelow, a female protagonist) who, after a shoot-out in a late-night convenience store, acquires a lethal stalker: a market trader (Ron Silver) who, having stolen a gun from the shoot-out scene, becomes obsessed with her and with random killing, scratching her name on his bullets like twisted valentines.

By now, Bigelow was attracting attention as a woman not only working in the hitherto men-only field of action movies, but proving herself exceptionally adept at them. Her appearance – 6 ft tall, slim, strikingly attractive with long dark hair – added to the media's fascination. (Vogue described her as looking like 'the world's highest-paid dominatrix'.) She fielded persistent questions about her supposedly anomalous status with weary courtesy tinged



Blue Steel

with exasperation. 'I tend not to dignify it as a gender occupation. I see myself as a filmmaker, period. If other people find me a novelty that's their problem.' Her own style she summed up as 'visceral, high-impact, kinetic, cathartic'.

Her next film certainly ticked the first three boxes, though some reviewers found it more risible than cathartic. *Point Break* again melded genres, crossing a heist thriller with a surfing movie and tossing in a sky-diving episode for good measure. As before, Bigelow focuses on a group of social outsiders, this time a quartet of California surfing dudes who finance their pursuit by robbing banks as 'the Ex-Presidents', wearing rubber masks of Reagan, Carter, Nixon and LBJ. Their leader, Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), is much given to windy philosophical musings: 'This was never about money – it was about us against the system.... To those dead souls inching along the freeways in their metal coffins, we show them that the human spirit is still alive.'

Going up against the gang is an ambitious young FBI agent, Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves),

**Point Break**

who takes up surfing in order to infiltrate their society. Though Johnny falls for a female surfer, Tyler (Lori Petty), another of Bigelow's short-haired androgynes, the film's strongest relationship is between him and Bodhi. This homoerotic bond, and the surfers' self-absorbed intensity ('Riding waves is a state of mind – it's that place where you lose yourself and you find yourself,' proclaims Bodhi), create a superheated mood in which the frequent absurdities of the plot dissolve into irrelevance. Bigelow's skill at staging action sequences hits virtuoso levels: in an on-foot chase sequence, her unbroken Steadicam hurtle through the alleys, gardens and houses of Santa Monica outdoes Scorsese's famous shot in *Goodfellas*.

Bigelow's first four features built her a strong niche following, pitching her midway between maverick and mainstream. *Strange Days* looked like her bid for major-pantheon status. An intricate, hugely ambitious vision of the millennium, it packs its dystopian sci-fi framework with elements of love story, noirish murder mystery and political satire, borrowing and creatively reworking influences from a dazzlingly eclectic range of sources: *Hawks*, *Hitchcock*, *Scorsese*, *Blade Runner*, *Peeping Tom* and cyberpunk fiction, to name but a few. As always, Bigelow brought an artist's visual sensibility to the film with stunning imagery, sweeping imperious camerawork and sculpted lighting. Her scrupulous attention to formal style, sometimes mistaken for emotional detachment, is counteracted by the dark romanticism that suffuses all her work.

Bigelow described *Strange Days* (co-scripted by her ex-husband, James Cameron, who also co-produced) as 'the ultimate Rorschach' – an artefact lending itself to as many interpretations as it has viewers. The action plays out in the dying hours of the 20th century in Los Angeles, a city quivering with Millennium fever and incipient racial violence. Ex-cop Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) peddles 'clips' – recordings of other people's subjective experiences that can be played back directly through the cerebral cortex for the ultimate out-of-body high: virtual reality that's indistinguishable from real. But someone is using the technology to commit ingeniously sadistic murders, and the victims are coming dangerously close to Lenny. The plot asks more questions than it answers, though; the film nags and probes at our own voyeuristic tendencies, pushing us to react not only to what we're seeing but to our motives in wanting to watch it. But in presenting audiences with such a convoluted, demanding collage, inviting simultaneous engagement on a multiplicity of levels, Bigelow outpaced her public and the film stalled badly at the box office.

**Strange Days**



The Weight of Water

There followed a further debacle. Company of Angels, her long-planned concept of a Joan of Arc movie, fell victim to a clash with the project's executive producer, Luc Besson. Bigelow had chosen Clare Danes to play the Maid; Besson wanted to cast his then partner, Milla Jovovich. When Bigelow refused to accede, Besson withdrew his finance, two weeks before shooting was scheduled to start, and proceeded to make his own movie, *The Messenger* (1999), with Jovovich. That it proved just as ineptly conceived and direly miscast as Bigelow had predicted scarcely compensated for the loss of her cherished project. Another pet project, *Ohio*, about the 1970 Kent State shootings, languished for want of funding.

The failure of *Strange Days* badly dented Bigelow's career. Not for five years was she able to direct another film; and even then *The Weight of Water*, though completed in 2000, had to wait nearly two years for its US release. (In the UK it went straight to video.) This was Bigelow's first (and so far only) film adapted from another source, a novel by Anita Shreve. It traces two parallel stories: a double-murder case (based on a real-life incident) on an island off the New Hampshire coast in 1873, and the tensions and jealousies among a modern-day quartet on a yacht visiting the murder site while one of them, a photographer (Catherine McCormack), tries to unearth the truth behind the killings.

For once, a Bigelow film features neither cars nor guns, and for much of its length it feels

uncharacteristically quiet and low-key – though the claustrophobic atmosphere on the island in the period story is vivid and increasingly ominous, gradually building to a violent climax that envelops both stories. Vigorous as ever at this juncture, Bigelow's direction whips up twin physical and emotional storms; but the two stories never fully mesh, the dialogue all too often judders, and Elizabeth Hurley's crude vamping tips several of the modern-day scenes into farce.

Bigelow's next film was out before *The Weight of Water* received its belated release. At a budget of US\$100 million, *K-19: The Widowmaker* was her most expensive film to date, and said to be the most expensive film yet directed by a woman. It's based on the real-life story of the catastrophic maiden voyage of the USSR's first nuclear submarine in 1961 at the height of the Cold War, only a few months before the Cuban Missile stand-off. Rushed into panicky production to counter the perceived US threat, launched with an inadequately trained crew, the ill-made sub heads out under the ice of the Bering Sea. Disasters mount, culminating in the nuclear reactor springing a leak.

Tension on board is heightened by the cumbersome double-command structure. The Party, doubting the commitment of Captain Polyaniin (Liam Neeson), a humane commander who enjoys the loyalty of the crew, shoehorn in a doctrinaire martinet,



K-19: The Widowmaker

Captain Vostrikov (Harrison Ford), over Polyanin's head. Bigelow depicts an edgy, all-male culture of suspicion and accusation, intensified by the claustrophobic confines of the sub – which she had built exactly to scale, to preserve authenticity. K-19 exerts a grim fascination and carries an intriguing (and, aptly enough, submerged) political subtext. But the constricted environment cramps Bigelow's expansive shooting style, restricting her largely to fast tracks forwards and back, and the plot is let down by an unconvincing change-of-heart development towards the end. Despite its substantial investment, K-19 was dumped out on a midsummer release in the US, up against popcorn fare like *Spiderman* and *Men in Black II*, and predictably flopped. Its UK release, given minimal support, lasted barely a week.

Once again, Bigelow's career had suffered a bad knock, and it was six years before she released another film. When she did, it was to some of the best reviews she had received since *Near Dark*. *The Hurt Locker*, set in Iraq one year after Saddam Hussein's regime has been toppled, focused on the work of a three-man US Army bomb squad. When the sergeant in charge (a brief cameo from Guy Pearce) is killed by an IED, a new disposal expert, Sgt

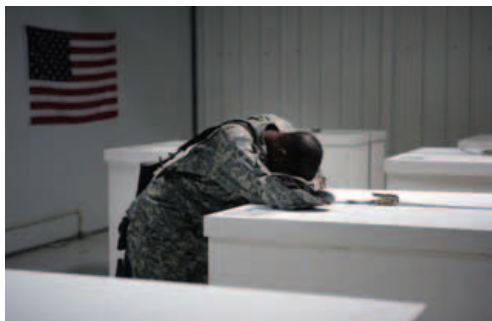


The Hurt Locker

William James (Jeremy Renner), comes in to replace him. His two colleagues soon realise that James, though instinctively brilliant at his job, is a reckless wild card, high on adrenaline and endangering them all. Their company is nearing the end of its tour of duty; an on-screen countdown of days heightens the suspense.

The Hurt Locker opens with a quote from New York Times war correspondent Chris Hedges: 'The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug.' The script, by freelance journalist Mark Boal (who also scripted *In the Valley of Elah*) draws on his experiences when embedded with just such a squad in Iraq. Unlike other Iraq movies, *The Hurt Locker* passes no comment on the rightness or otherwise of the US-led invasion. Bigelow, who insisted on shooting in Jordan rather than in Morocco, South Africa or other less logistically problematic locations, simply aims, with visceral immediacy, to get us inside the heads of soldiers operating with that degree of danger in gruelling, always potentially hostile terrain. 'War's dirty little secret is that some men love it,' she says. 'I'm trying to unpack why, to look at what it means to be a hero in the context of 21st-century combat.' As ever, her action sequences are textbook examples of clarity, pace, timing and gut-churning tension. The nearest hint to a political comment comes when James arrives at what he thinks is Camp Liberty, to be told it's been renamed Camp Victory because 'it sounds better'.

The Hurt Locker won a number of awards following its premiere at the Venice Film Festival. In the wake of it, Kathryn Bigelow's stock is again riding high. But despite its acclaim, the film received only a relatively restricted release and, on past evidence, it may take only one box-office disappointment to knock her back to square one. It does seem that, if a woman has the audacity to choose to operate in an overwhelmingly male genre, she's only ever allowed to be as good as her last picture. And though Bigelow famously dislikes being labelled a 'woman director',

**The Hurt Locker**

it's known that, as her friend Willem Dafoe notes, she's repeatedly come under pressure from 'the boys' network in LA'. She herself, while insisting that her gender never causes her any problems during the making of a film (a view endorsed by those who have worked with her), adds, 'That's not to say that there isn't an inequality in the business. There is, but the prejudices are perceptual. It is a very competitive field and that can create some

limitations. It's not that women can't make films, but that some people think they can't.'

Currently, Bigelow is working again with Mark Boal on a project called Triple Frontier, an action-adventure film set in the remote jungle zone where the borders of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil come together, an area much favoured by organised crime and drug barons. It sounds like ideal material for one of the most intelligent, individual and technically accomplished of today's action directors, one who sees as her strategy to 'include genre elements which make you comfortable, and then I add other dimensions'. Let's hope none of those 'perceptual prejudices' get in her way this time.

PHILIP KEMP is a freelance writer and film historian, a regular contributor to Sight and Sound, Total Film and DVD Review, and teaches Film Journalism at the University of Leicester.

Kathryn Bigelow filmography

[feature film directing credits only]

1982

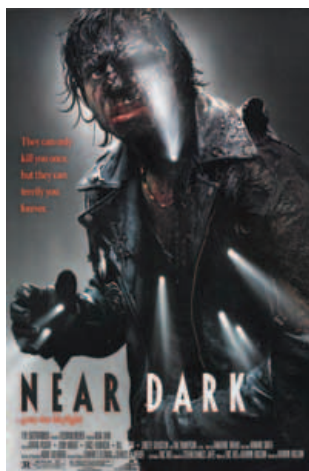
THE LOVELESS

Co-director: Monty Montgomery. Script: Kathryn Bigelow, Monty Montgomery. Photography: Doyle Smith. Production Design: Lilly Kilvert. Editing: Nancy Kanter. Music: Robert Gordon. Players: Willem Dafoe (Vance), Robert Gordon (Davis), Marin Kanter (Telena), J Don Ferguson (Tarver), Tina L'Hotsky (Sportster Debbie), Lawrence Matarese (La Ville), Danny Rosen (Ricky), Phillip Kimbrough (Hurley), Ken Call (Buck), Elizabeth Gans (Augusta), Margaret Jo Lee (Evie), John King (John), Bob Hannah (Sid), Jane Berman (Lady in T-Bird), AB Calloway (Truck Driver in Diner). Produced by A Kitman Ho and Grafton Nunes. 85 mins

1987

NEAR DARK

Script: Kathryn Bigelow, Eric Red. Photography: Adam Greenberg. Production Design: Stephen Altman. Editing: Howard E Smith. Music: Tangerine Dream. Players: Adrian Pasdar (Caleb Colton), Jenny Wright (Mae),



Lance Henriksen (Jesse Hooker), Bill Paxton (Severen), Jenette Goldstein (Diamondback), Tim Thomerson (Loy Colton), Joshua Miller (Homer), Marie Leeds (Sarah Colton), Kemy Call (Deputy Sheriff), Ed Corbett (Ticket Seller), Troy Evans (Plainclothes Officer), Bill Cross (Sheriff Eakers), Roger Aaron Brown (Cajun Truck Driver), Thomas Wagner (Bartender), Robert Winley (Patron in Bar). Produced by Steven-Charles Jaffe. 94 mins

1989

BLUE STEEL

Script: Kathryn Bigelow, Eric Red. Photography: Amir Mokri. Production Design: Toby Corbett. Editing: Lee Percy. Music: Brad Fiedel. Players: Jamie Lee Curtis (Megan Turner), Ron Silver (Eugene Hunt), Clancy Brown (Nick Mann), Elizabeth Pena (Tracy Perez), Louise Fletcher (Shirley Turner), Philip Bosco (Frank Turner), Kevin Dunn

(Asst Chief Stanley Hoyt), *Richard Jenkins* (Attorney Mel Dawson), *Markus Flammagan* (Husband), *Mary Mara* (Wife), *Skipp Lynch* (Instructor), *Mike Hodge* (Police Commissioner), *Mike Starr* (Superintendent), *Chris Walker* (Officer Jeff Travers), *Tom Sizemore* (Wool Cap). *Produced by Oliver Stone, Edward R Pressman.* 102 mins

1991

POINT BREAK

Script: Rick King. W Peter Iloff. Photography: Donald Peterman. Production Design: Peter Jamison. Editing: Howard Smith. Music: Mark Isham. Players: Patrick Swayze (Bodhi), *Keanu Reeves* (Johnny Utah), *Gary Busey* (Pappas), *Lori Petty* (Tyler), *John McGinley* (Ben Harp), *James Le Gros* (Roach), *John Philbin* (Nathaniel), *Bojessa Christopher* (Grommet), *Julian Reyes* (Alvarez), *Daniel Beer* (Babbitt), *Chris Pedersen* (Bunker), *Vincent Klyn* (Warchild), *Anthony Kiedis* (Tone), *Dave Olson* (Archbold), *Lee Tergesen* (Rosie). *Produced by Peter Abrams, Robert L Levy.* 120 mins

1995

STRANGE DAYS

Script: James Cameron, Jay Cocks. Photography: Matthew F Leonetti. Production Design: Lilly Kilvert. Editing: Howard Smith. Music: Graeme Revell. Players: Ralph Fiennes (Lenny Nero), *Angela Bassett* (Lornette 'Mace' Mason), *Juliette Lewis* (Faith Justin), *Tom Sizemore* (Max Peltier), *Michael Wincott* (Philo Gant), *Vincent d'Onofrio* (Burton Steckler), *Glenn Plummer* (Jeriko One), *Brigitte Bako* (Iris), *Richard Edson* (Tick), *William Fichtner* (Dwayne Engelman), *Josef Sommer* (Palmer Strickland), *Joe Urla* (Keith), *Nicky Katt* (Joey Corto), *Michael Jace* (Wade Beemer), *Louise LeCavalier* (Cindy 'Vita' Minh). *Produced by James Cameron, Steven-Charles Jaffe.* 145 mins

2000

THE WEIGHT OF WATER

Script: Alice Arlen, Christopher Kyle. Photography: Adrian Biddle. Production Design: Karl Juliusson. Editing: Howard E Smith. Music: David Hirschfelder. Players: Catherine McCormack (Jean Janes), *Sean Penn* (Thomas Janes), *Sarah Polley* (Maren Hontvedt), *Ciaran Hinds* (Louis Wagner), *Josh Lucas* (Rich Janes), *Elizabeth Hurley* (Adaline Gunne), *Katrin Cartlidge* (Karen Christenson), *Vinessa Shaw* (Anethe Christenson), *Ulrich Thomsen* (John Hontvedt), *Anders W Berthelsen* (Evan Christenson), *Adam Curry* (Emil Ingerbretson), *Richard Donat* (Mr Plaisted), *Joseph Rutten* (Judge), *John Walf* (Defense Attorney), *John Maclaren* (Dr Parsons). *Produced by A Kitman Ho, Sigurjón Sighvatsson, Janet Yang.* 113 mins

2002

K-19: THE WIDOWMAKER

Script: Christopher Kyle, Louis Nowra. Photography: Jeff Cronenweth. Production Design: Karl Juliusson, Michael Novotny. Editing: Walter Murch. Music: Klaus Badelt. Players: Harrison Ford (Capt Alexei Vostrikov), *Liam Neeson* (Capt Mikhail Polyaniin), *Peter Sarsgaard* (Lt Vadim Radtchinko), *Joss Ackland* (Marshal Zeleentsov), *John Shrapnel* (Admiral Bratyeev), *Ravil Isyanov*



(Suslov), *James Ginty* (Anatoly), *Donald Sumpter* (Dr Gennadi Savran), *Ingvar Sigurdsson* (Chief Engineer Gorelov), *Michael Gladis* (Yevgeny Borzenkov), *Gerrit Vooren* (Voslensky), *Steve Cumyn* (Arseni), *Peter Oldring* (Vanya), *Peter Stebbings* (Kuryshv), *Christian Camargo* (Pavel). *Produced by Kathryn Bigelow, Edward S Feldman, Sigurjón Sighvatsson, Christine Whitaker.* 138 mins

2008

THE HURT LOCKER

Script: Mark Boal. Photography: Barry Ackroyd. Production Design: Karl Juliusson. Editing: Chris Innis, Bob Murawski. Music: Marco Beltrami, Buck Sanders. Players: Jeremy Renner (Sgt William James), *Anthony Mackie* (Sgt JT Sanborn), *Brian Geraghty* (Spc Owen Eldridge), *Guy Pearce* (Sgt Matt Thompson), *Ralph Fiennes* (Contractor Team Leader), *David Morse* (Colonel Reed), *Evangeline Lilly* (Connie James), *Christian Camargo* (Col John Cambridge), *Suhail Al-Dabbach* (Black Suit Man), *Christopher Sayegh* (Beckham), *Nabil Koni* (Professor Nabil), *Sam Spruell* (Contractor Charlie), *Sam Redford* (Contractor Jimmy), *Feisal Sadoun* (Contractor Feisal), *Barrie Rice* (Contractor Chris). *Produced by Kathryn Bigelow, Mark Boal, Nicolas Chartier, Greg Shapiro.* 131 mins