

Sway of the Sea: Kathryn Bigelow's Imperial Eco-Eschatology

Benjamin Halligan

Abstract

In a 2013 public letter to Bigelow, which concerned *Zero Dark Thirty*, Naomi Wolf wrote: 'Like Riefenstahl, you are a great artist. But now you will be remembered forever as torture's handmaiden'. This essay will expand on this condemnatory Riefenstahl/Bigelow association - but not through a straight likening of Riefenstahl's exaltation of the Nazi Party in *Triumph of the Will* to Bigelow's apologetics for torture in the 'War on Terror'. Rather, the concern will be that of aesthetics in relation to landscapes and ecology, that is, the parallel is to Riefenstahl of her earlier 'Mountain Films' period. Bigelow, at times, reaches for a feminised, New Age mysticism through which her characters are momentarily lifted out of their mundane earthly concerns to commune with the wider universe. And it is this wider universe which seems the ultimate arbitrator of their actions, rather than any (Geneva-based) concerns around human rights. Thus different paths to psychic fulfilment seem to determine *Point Break*, or the idea of the restless spirit against the failings of the Repressive State Apparatus in *Zero Dark Thirty*, or soul against the system in *Detroit*. And thus, and most tellingly, in *Last Days of Ivory*, Bigelow advocates for military action against African tribal people in the name of conservation, on the grounds (soon revealed to be highly questionable) that the illegal ivory trade funds the terrorist group, Al-Shabaab. The crudity of Bigelow's propaganda in *Last Days of Ivory*, which chimed with Hillary Clinton's position on the same (a greenwashed liberal interventionism) is lent the approval of elephants, and of the wider ecology, in Bigelow's film. In the same way that Riefenstahl once repurposed German Romanticism for a sequence of Hitler descending from the clouds as the saviour of Germany from its enemies, Bigelow reworks such Romanticism in the name of the 'white woman's burden': the Western imperial feminist speaks out on the part of the oppressed, and summons the ecosphere as her witness.

Keywords propaganda, torture, ecology, *Last Days of Ivory*

In ‘A letter to Kathryn Bigelow on *Zero Dark Thirty*’s apology for torture’, written by high profile and then notable feminist Naomi Wolf (2013), Bigelow, seen in the photograph accompanying the article grasping her 2010 Oscar, is called-out by Wolf as a fascist of the old school. That is, not the left-liberal-despising insurrectionist paramilitary zany, familiar from the images and footage of the invasion of Capitol Hill on January 6, 2020, but the realist who is nonetheless part of the larger mob of thugs harrying and beating the ethnic or racial other. Although, from this later perspective, the ‘bro culture’ torturers of *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow 2012), as with the protagonist of *American Sniper* (Eastwood 2014), pre-empt those kinds too: fictional variants of decent white, working class males, caught between performing traditional masculinity, and a sense that this performance has now excluded them from social betterment. These suggest a lineage back to happier times: the idea of Southern ‘good ol’ boys’ – as per *The Dukes of Hazzard* (television series; 1979-1985) or, in terms of North American cinema, the late 1970s turn to a ‘New South’ (as argued by Ryan and Kellner 1990, 105-135), with its discovery of a financial dynamism, shirking bureaucracy and social niceties, in Southern white male conservatism.

Specifically, Wolf engages with the portrayal of torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* as having been cleansed of its sexualised element – there is no, for example, anal rape of male suspects. The letter moves to its conclusion, addressing Bigelow directly:

[i]n a time of darkness in America, you are being feted by Hollywood, and hailed by major media. But to me, the path your career has now taken reminds [me] of no one so much as that other female film pioneer who became, eventually, an apologist for evil: Leni Riefenstahl. It may seem extreme to make [a] comparison with this other great, but profoundly compromised filmmaker, but there are real echoes ... [as with the Nazi forerunners] of today’s Guantánamo, Bagram base, and other unnameable CIA ‘black sites.’ And Riefenstahl was lionised by the German elites and acclaimed for her propaganda on behalf of Hitler’s regime.

But the world changed. The ugliness of what she did could not, over time, be hidden. Americans, too, will wake up and see through *Zero Dark Thirty*’s apologia for the regime’s standard lies that this brutality is somehow necessary. When that happens, the same community that now applauds you

will recoil. Like Riefenstahl, you are a great artist. But now you will be remembered forever as torture's handmaiden (Wolf 2013).

Common criticism of Bigelow from some quarters at the time, with respect to the racial stereotypes of *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow 2008) and then later, around the selective or revisionist history of *Detroit* (Bigelow 2017) (and with its casting of military figures as progressives against the murderousness of the police figures), chimes with Wolf's position.¹ But Wolf's identification of Bigelow's fascism, interjecting publicly as a mainstream commentator, is arresting. The danger in Bigelow, one surmises, is aligned to her excellence as a film-maker. The Oscar that she clasped represented the first award, for Best Director, to a woman. In this, Bigelow was sullyng a certain strain of (Bill Clinton era) liberal-Democratic intelligent or artsy Hollywood film-making, by pushing into an era of George W. Bush-era entertainment with a return to the pantomime excesses of Vietnam films. Those previous rewrites of history, or black propaganda, had tended to be safely schlocky and hysterical (as with *The Green Berets*, Wayne/Kellogg 1968) or B-moviesque (the 1980s cycles of films in which the Vietnam war was either won by heroic supermen, or lost at the behest of government liberals and bureaucrats).

The apologist's prize is platform, access and acclaim: the populist state historian, embedded within the Pentagon, creating and delivering a rallying discourse from and with and for, to use Retort's term, the 'military-industrial-entertainment complex'.² This effective weaponisation of Hollywood was already familiar to critical theorists. The weaponisation of the image was true of Jean Baudrillard's central thesis of *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), identifying infotainment spectacles of warfare, with their strategic propaganda use read as primarily in terms of their reportage potential, rather than illustrating a routing of the enemy – winning hearts and minds back home, in peak viewing slots, as the war abroad falters, and casualties mount. (This winning strategy itself is one of the media lessons of Vietnam, and its trajectories to ever more critical coverage). And weaponisation of the image was true too for Paul Virilio, in a reading that collapses entertainment into warfare – the 'cinematic artifice of the war machine' of Hollywood, from showcasing military

¹ See Walsh (2013a; 2013b; 2015), Hersh (2013), Kennedy (2016). *Zero Dark Thirty* also appears in, as part of a critique of the disinformation media fog of war, a pained attempt to recover the Democratic Party from their complicity and disgrace: *The Report* (Burns 2019). Burns also has a screenplay credit on Bigelow's *Last Days*.

² The Retort collective expanded Eisenhower's term: the 'military-industrial complex' (2005, 37)

technology of the present and near-future, in the guise of entertainment, to equipping that technology to project its own film-like fantasies, as in the ghostly ‘decoy-image-cum-ship-image’.³ So Bigelow engages the state apparatus and illustrates that the war effort includes, as Wolf identifies, the need to rethink, positively, torture as standard practice, the first step towards which, as any amateur psychologist would say, is to further other and de-naturalise the ethnic other.

This article will explore the philosophical, theological and aesthetic roots of this first step on Bigelow’s part, and so look back to the base-line of this operation: that which is considered familiar rather than other, and natural rather than unnatural, in Bigelow’s conception. My intention is to scope Bigelow’s soft or nascent fascism through a textual consideration of how she sutures ideas of destiny between man and landscape. Finally, and to return to her more recent work, the article then turns to the expression of this philosophy to brazenly imperial ends in Bigelow’s *Last Days* (2014). In this, *pace* Wolf, I take Riefenstahl’s lead in these matters, whose films before *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens* 1935) concerned figures and landscapes: in terms of her own acting and dancing, in *The Holy Mountain* (Fanck, 1926), and her directing and acting, in *The Blue Light* (Riefenstahl 1932).⁴

Mountains

Film historians, working with Lotte Eisner’s *The Haunted Screen* (1969), have tended to trace an aesthetic continuum from German Romanticism to the ‘Mountain Films’ (such as *The Holy Mountain* and *The Blue Light*), and thereafter to, or into Riefenstahl’s propaganda. So the clouds of Casper David Friedrich’s canvas ‘Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog’ (1818) would be repurposed as the clouds through which the aeroplane travels, carrying Hitler himself into the German heartlands, for the opening of *Triumph of the Will*. Or, also like Friedrich, in the repeated framing of this lone figure (the Wanderer/the leader) in vast spaces, contemplating and beholding. And the snows of ‘Winter Landscape with a Church’ (1811) are recalled in the snowy mountains of the Mountain Films. Indeed Fanck may have taken a step towards recreating Friedrich’s snow-capped Christ (on a crucifix sheltered by pine

³ Virilio here talks of the way in which naval defence systems include the projection of false ship images to the sensors of incoming missiles; (2009 [1984], 62, 110).

⁴ One could add later Riefenstahl nature films too: *Tiefland* of 1954, the unreleased *Allein unter den Nuba* of 1965, and *Impressionen unter Wasser* of 2002. Riefenstahl (1902-2003) sporadically directed films across 70 years.

trees in ‘Winter Landscape’): one of the characters of *The Holy Mountain* is left suspended for hours over an ice precipice, dangling in a blizzard, his face snow-caked.

For Eisner, Riefenstahl lacks the abilities and authenticity of Fanck. Rather, her films merely “‘illustrate’ a drama with the beauty of nature’, and she is ‘incapable of attaining such visual force [of Fanck’s 1934 *The Eternal Dream*], even though she usurped Fanck’s cameraman’ (1977, 313) – doubly retrograde for the silent era’s exclusively visual communication (although *The Blue Light* exists in silent and sound versions). As with Alexander Sokurov’s adoption of this aesthetic vernacular for his Hitler film, *Moloch* (1999), the ambience suggests a rejuvenating airiness: clear mountain ozone, pine-cleansed, fog-washed – breezing and coursing around the mountain-top Nazi retreat: central command, certainly, but also a stone crow’s-nest thinktank of Aryan futures. But the wonderment fails to materialise in *Moloch*, with characters succumbing to forms of hypochondria, manic episodes and paranoia rather than communing with nature.

Theologically, this aesthetic continuum of wonderment and nature into the twentieth century parallels the Modernist dialogues of the Christian church in the West, as it began to address the industrial twentieth century and how the spiritual, or a spirituality, rather than Medieval-era miraculous, would now be obliged to coexist with the secular. For Christopher Hollis, writing first in 1935 (2017), and as reiterated again in 1967:

Modernism ... in broad can be said to have launched three separate attacks. It attacked the historical reliability of the Gospels – and in particular their accounts of the life of Christ. It attacked the traditional Catholic view of philosophy; and it attacked the traditional view of the nature of the Church. (2017, 191)

In progressive Roman Catholic thought (for Hollis, as prepared by Pope Leo XIII and with a middle ground via St John Henry Newman – and then into the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, 1962-1965), this Modernist dialogue resulted in not so much a dissolution of God, but a dissipation of God, a shift from person to presence. But the operation essentially remained conceptualised to the same ends in the documents of Vatican II, so that one could identify a renewal rather than complete reconceptualization: divine revelation, so steering the destiny of man. Revelation remained related to ‘the existence of created things’: ‘an enduring witness to Himself

in created realities' (Abbott 1966, 112 footnote 4, 112, respectively). (And, thereafter, moves into the hermeneutics of biblical interpretation, church organization, and so forth).

This idea is anticipated and problematised (that is, when the witness does not deliver the desired account) in the proto-Modernist work of the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, remembered particularly for an articulation of just as much: 'The world is charged with the Grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil' (*God's Grandeur* of 1877; Gardner 1985, 27). This charging is molecular in that *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875-1876) articulates a sense of the divine determination of the world at the level of stringing matter or molecules together (the fibrous 'strand' of the world), in respect to both humanity and nature – both as simply 'created things.' Here, of nature: God is the 'World's strand, sway of the sea' – a global dynamism of near-infinite interactions: the ecosystem itself (for which the Anthropocene is only a moment). This is quite different to, as per the contemplations of Christian mystics, God as apparent in the formal beauty of bits of flora and fauna, as some sort of pinnacle or baroque excess of aesthetic achievement. Of man: God 'hast bound bones & veins in me, fastened me flesh' – the very fingers-in knotting together of human innards; (Gardner 1985, 12). God, then, as the now-hidden presence in everything, with the suggestion of an enclosed, holistic system, namely, man, environment, the grandeur of nature (even in its illogical brutality), as the sea sways into lungs and drowns the five blameless Franciscan nuns to whom the poem is dedicated, and by whom it is inspired. For Elizabeth Jennings, the poem is 'a complete vision of creation held in the hands of God' (1975, 192) with that completeness representing a consistent position of the incarnation of the divine in the material world. But I do not wish to suggest these ideas somehow find direct equivalency in the films under scrutiny, which are entirely populist. I would be more comfortable with a level of equivalency of Modernist theological ideas refracted in the uplifting imaginings of middlebrow Protestantism, as geared towards 'the plain man' (Sharpe 1967, 143). One thinks of 'Hills of the North, Rejoice', by Charles Edward Oakley, and which first appeared as a hymn in 1867 (see French 1867): compass extremities – 'Hills of the North' (tellingly, first), 'Isles of the southern seas', 'Lands of the east', 'Shores of the utmost West' – united in their anticipation of Christ, and imagery suggesting chambers and spaces for a multitudinous, echoing resonance for the hearty singing itself: 'Valley and lowland, sing', 'Deep in your coral

caves’, ‘Break forth to swelling song; / High raise the note...’; ‘Shout, while ye journey home; / Songs be in every mouth.’⁵ And, from these ideas, (in the fascist turn, which required aesthetic realisations), up on mountains we have the testing of man, the magnificence (rather than frailty) of man, the conquest of the environment, and so the building of a conceptual sense of man’s dominant position in the environment. (Indeed, this generic identifier is already gender corrected at this moment: Riefenstahl, a woman, tested in those mountains – most men, in *The Holy Mountain*, are found to be particularly feeble). From this narrative arises quite naturally a sense of innate rightness: visionary contemplative leaders, with a mandate given by the environment itself, necessitating an abrogation of democracy.

The Modernist phase itself shifted Catholic theology to a sense that democracy was an appropriate form of societal organisation (as if a consequence of the third line of attack that Hollis identifies), in theory, if not, as per Catholicism in fascist Italy, in practice. But *The Blue Light* aspires to exist slightly before these framings, in that the film is pagan or heathen, and mythical as with its archetypes, inexplicable energies, and a village that seems still in the Middle Ages. Riefenstahl and Fanck’s on/off animosity seems to have had an aesthetic basis of difference too, Fanck being the nature realist, and Riefenstahl the semi-Expressionist, even though both hoisted cameras up actual mountains. In general terms, Fanck’s compositions seem to seek to showcase natural splendour, variously subdued to or overwhelming man, whereas Riefenstahl’s compositions seem to pictorialise and so fix natural splendour, synthesising this mythos with the mythos of man. It is for this reason that the consistent uniformity and reassurance of Oakley’s vision rather than the chaos of Hopkins’s seems more apt as an equivalency. And Riefenstahl dares to deal with an unworldly presence in the narrative of *The Blue Light*, which she also wrote. She plays Junta, taken for a mountain-dwelling witch, but the only one who seems to understand the blue light that emanates from the mountains during the full moon. The light, like Wilhelm Reich’s Orgone energy, disinhibits those channelling it or immersed in it. And so, accordingly, Junta seems to become subject to orgasm, the landscape itself shimmers, and the village men lose their senses and scale the mountain, with fatal consequences. But one visitor, a young scholar and somewhat akin to Friedrich’s Wanderer, does not fall for the villagers’ scorn of Junta and forms

⁵ The hymn exists in various versions, but for the original see (Anon 1871, hymn 92).

a bond with her. She reveals the source of the light to him as caves of crystals, which he promptly arranges to loot, and leaves Junta, as if deprived of this mountain energy, to die. The legend is recorded in the history book that closes the film, as if it is all a Pagan-era parable or morality tale, regarding the abuse of natural splendour: ‘That’s how the poor Junta of Santa Maria died – they got rich with the stones of the Monte Christallo’. In contrast, *The Holy Mountain* closes with an intertitle sentiment symbolically relating natural splendour to spiritual renewal: ‘Above it all looms a Holy Mountain – a symbol of the greatest values that humanity can embrace – fidelity – truth – loyalty – FAITH.’ (And, earlier, dialogue such as ‘[w]hy is nature so beautiful to us?’, ‘[b]ecause we invest our very souls in it.’). *The Blue Light* achieves that Modernist theological synthesis whereby the miraculous turns out to have a mundane explanation, but one which nevertheless still casts a flabbergasting spell, and overwhelms the God-fearing innocents.

The Blue Light immediately attracted two commissions. Riefenstahl writes, in her autobiography, of a first approach from the Catholic Church, in the form of Father Josef Frings.⁶ Riefenstahl recalls that ‘[f]rom my conversation with the priest I learned that *The Blue Light* had had a strong impact on the Vatican, and more than anything it was the mystical character of the film that so appealed’ (1993 [1987], 104). One could speculate it may have been an attempt to harness Riefenstahl’s synthesis at a precise moment, from Modernist dialogues to the thought that led to Vatican II. In the event, she declined on the basis that she would not accept a commission or ‘prescribed films’ (1993, 106).

Riefenstahl also attempted to decline the second approach, but Adolph Hitler would not take ‘no’ for an answer. Hitler had reportedly said ‘The most beautiful thing I have ever seen in a film is Riefenstahl’s dance on the sea in *The Holy Mountain*’ (1993, 105). And, once Riefenstahl and Hitler first met, walking along a beach, ‘[h]e made enthusiastic comments about my “dance on the sea” and told me he had seen all the films I had appeared in. “The film that made the strongest impact on me was *The Blue Light*...”’ (1993, 106). *Triumph of the Will* would follow, conceptualised by Hitler, to Riefenstahl, in relation to *The Blue Light*. (As Riefenstahl recalls) Hitler said, ‘I don’t want a boring Party rally film; I don’t want newsreel

⁶ Frings was later Archbishop of Cologne and then, as Cardinal, closely collaborated with the future Pope, Josef Ratzinger, at the point of and throughout Vatican II, including in respect to formulating the position on divine revelation briefly engaged above; (see Ratzinger 1998, 128-129).

shots. I want an artistic visual document. The Party people don't understand this. Your *Blue Light* proved that you can do it' (1993, 158). For Frings, the synthesis may have appealed; for Hitler, the mythologizing seemingly did.

Nirvanas

The Riefenstahl/Bigelow provocation is suggested by Wolf, but even without her letter, and without Bigelow's cheerleading or shilling for the War on Terror, the connection seems blatant, even unavoidable. The prelude of *The Holy Mountain* sees Diotima (Riefenstahl) dance along the shore (that scene that so impressed Hitler) – at first as if she is conducting the turbulent ocean, and then dancing in harmony with it in a co-choreographed swell and undulation. Later Diotima dances with a gauzy and mist-like veil. And the dancing here is often punctuated by millisecond poises, like the crest of the wave, that seems momentarily suspended before crashing down. She is presented as mythical, and in this is a kind of amphibian mermaid and so able to master too the frozen wastes as she sets out to rescue the object of her affections. This vigour and strength, and her strong limbs and radiant skin, are restored to the previously famished German population, and particularly in the energised faces of the fledgling Hitler Youth, in Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, as the beguiling promise of the restoration of national health with Nazi rule.

Bigelow's *Point Break* (1991) reprises the opening of *The Holy Mountain*, with undercover FBI Agent Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) on a firing range, in a heavy rainstorm. But the rainwater seems like spray from intercut shots of waves and surfers (especially those surfers executing close calls to, and so spraying, cinematographer Donald Peterman's camera). The associative montage is, in these opening seconds, unclear in intent, but Utah's mastery of the firing range, to serve justice, will clearly translate into a mastery of the water-range, to further serve justice. Both interact and just as Diotima draws or channels energy from the waves, so too Utah draws some kind of something too – who can say what? – from the untamed elements. Later, on surfing, dialogue includes: 'it's the source; it'll change your life'; 'the ultimate ride'; on the ocean: of 'the spiritual side' of 'the seas'; 'it's a state of mind – it's where you lose yourself... and you find yourself.'⁷ And Utah's perfect firing range score, and the football-coach-like elation of his trainer over this ('100%, Utah! Good job!' as he

⁷ *Point Break* was written by W. Peter Iliff.

semi-punches the air, and gives a thumbs-up), suggest an influx of a new generation of go-getting high achievers into the state apparatus, akin to the driven and righteous Maya (Jessica Chastain) in *Zero Dark Thirty* up against defeatist bureaucrats, twenty years later (and indeed unlike the good Soviet sailors seen to have been betrayed and forgotten in Bigelow's *K-19: The Widowmaker*, 2002).⁸ *Point Break* explicitly plays such strata and their character types off against each other for dramatic tension: Utah's partner, a jovial but jaded Vietnam war veteran who dates his start with law enforcement to 1968/69 (stating '22 years – man, LA has changed a lot during that time: the air got dirty and the sex got clean'). And Utah himself penetrates other strata, surfer gangs and fraternities, perilously – nihilistic punky, 'New Agey', and something between the Paisley Underground and rave-y (as per the house party; see Hann 2013), and with bikers and Spring Break-like walk-ons: a scoping of post-baby boomer Los Angeles subcultures. That is, the oceanic channelling for Utah means the step beyond the materialistic yuppie type of the years immediately prior, where his effective older brother in this – Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* (Donaldson 1988) - essentially just chases the gains of sex and wealth, and beaches and pools are for holidays or sales, but just essentially glamorous accompaniments. The step beyond results in a softer figure, now attuned to and connected to the natural surroundings, and with righteousness replacing materialism as the index of successful behaviour. For this, it is in the return to a cultural constellation more attuned to the spiritual or mystical that Utah is able to revisit and navigate the line between good karma and bad karma, for law enforcement ends.

Utah then needs to work through these positions as the infiltration is not just of a gang, but of an entire counterculture. (Or, at least, a certain variant of it: this is the white Los Angeles that Davis associates with Roger Corman beach myths of the 'endless summer' – that 'mesmerizing vision of a white kids' car-and-surf-based Utopia', rather than, as I have argued elsewhere, the paranoid and excluded condition of those jettisoned into the Californian dystopia; Davis 2006 [1990], 65-66, and

⁸ It is a jarring starting point – and recalls the firing range sequence in the second Dirty Harry film, *Magnum Force* (Post 1974), which also involves the undercover penetration of a criminal fraternity, and was also accused of fascist tendencies. But here the high score is used quite otherwise: as a matter of suspicion (against Dirty Harry's competition opponent – a ruthless vigilant), and as a matter of misused ability on the part of Harry himself (known for his liberal use of his .44 Magnum handgun). Thus marksmanship is not a matter of personal excellence, enhancing law enforcement, but a kind of weakness – identifying those too adept at killing, so undermining law enforcement more generally. Dirty Harry (Clint Eastwood) is dressed in a disarmingly academic way during the sequence too.

Halligan 2017, respectively) And to infiltrate requires a negotiation of a sense of man in nature – that constant theme of Riefenstahl’s – as if to wrestle back from nature a sense of natural justice.

This is the repeated – and escalating – position of *Point Break*, a film which can be considered to be a sequence of daring interactions with, or testings by, nature. These start with Utah trying to surf and, unable to desynchronise from the crashing waves as he surfaces from underwater to breathe, almost drowns – only to be saved from failing this test of nature by the former or sometime girlfriend of the leader of the bank robbing gang he is hunting, Tyler (Lori Petty). There is an inauthentic reprise of this nature test, but one that also needs a kind of psychic or intuitive ability, in the antiseptic environment of a swimming pool. Here Utah’s partner, Angelo Pappas (Gary Busey), is blindfolded and asked to locate two plastic bricks from the pool floor. He jokes that he does not understand the function or use of such an exercise – and with this exercise, for him, as typifying the managerial turn of law enforcement.

The escalation peaks with Utah abandoned in a light aircraft by his nemesis: the surfing, serial bank robber, with mystical-shading-to-Mansonite pretensions, Bodhi (Patrick Swayze) – ‘they call him the Bodhisattva.’⁹ Bodhi has taken the last parachute, and seemingly and gracefully ends the climax narrative around their one final bank job victoriously, by bidding farewell (‘I’ll see you in the next life!’) and jumping from the aircraft. Utah, alone, has a small outburst or fit and will simply refuse to let the enemy escape, or accept this as the outcome – and with their shared love interest, Tyler, in peril, at the hands of a Manson family-esque character. Utah grabs an abandoned gun and, parachute-less, also jumps from the aircraft. Bigelow delivers this as a vertigo-inducing point-of-view shot. It is a striking moment in the film in that it is illogical and defiant, stress-testing the sense that, in such films, everything will come good.¹⁰ Utah places himself, further to his quest for justice, in the hands of God whereby nature itself is asked to determine his fate – to uphold its (nature’s) own law of gravity, allowing him to plunge to earth, accepting this as a suicide action freely entering into, and for the bad to triumph, or to allow him to fly.

⁹ In the Buddhist tradition, the Bodhisattva is a figure who delays entering the nirvana that they could access in order to mentor those still with worldly attachments.

¹⁰ During an open-air ‘Screenfields’ screening, on June 23, 2011, in Spinningfields, Manchester, the defiance of this moment, as the ne plus ultra of action, proved too much, eliciting a joyous and loud whoop from an audience member. He may have been performing such an idea, with a touch of irony, but the identification of this moment for it nevertheless stands.

In a previous jump, with Utah undercover and undetected, he comes to experience the free-fall moment as jarringly mystical: ‘Yeah! Yeah! Amazing! Fucking amazing!’ and, once on the ground, ‘Jesus Christ – I gotta be losing it!’ and he laughs again. A member of Bodhi’s gang advises him, ‘Closest you’ll ever get to God.’ The air, at this altitude (that is, the air that has not yet ‘got dirty,’ and so avoided Los Angeles-ification), and then the air above deserts and lakes, transposes Utah back to nature, and hence the closeness to God (that is, without anything, such as a city and its fleshpots, as a buffer) – as does the ocean. The computer profiling and identification of his fellow sky-divers, as seen earlier, now means nothing in this elemental context: they are all bodies, or Bod[h]ies, caught between air and gravity (that is, what they are). ‘Sea and sky,’ writes John Durham Peters, ‘the extra-terrestrial commons,’ are the twin sublimities that ring the human estate’ (2016, 167).¹¹ Utah, at these moments, then solely represents the agent of law, or works to bring that philosophy into this sublimity, a position with which the sublimity then seems to concur (since he survives).

Or, at least, and recalling something of the pitiless storm that wrecks Hopkins’s Deutschland, the sublimity concurs albeit with one final point of reservation. *Point Break* ends with a coda, seemingly some time later by which point Utah has shifted from post-yuppie to double-denim-clad proto-grunge, suggesting a character step towards authenticity over the earlier-seen high achiever.¹² He has tracked Bodhi down to Australia, where he waits on the very cusp of the storm of the century (discussed, even mythologised, earlier in the film), thus anticipating the culmination of his life’s surfing and already soaked in the incoming storm’s rain and spray. Utah surprises and confronts Bodhi and then handcuffs him as they fight. The police support closes in to formally make the arrest but Utah, hearing Bodhi’s argument as to the uniqueness of the moment (part *ad misericordiam*, part *ad astra*: this is to be Bodhi’s entry into nirvana), releases him, and he surfs off, seemingly never to be seen again. Thus newly authentic Utah, contemplating the enormity of the waves and sensing an empathy through their shared surfing, displaces earthly justice in favour of cosmic justice. Bodhi’s suicide could be associated with his Bodhisattva

¹¹ Peters here cites (Bryld and Lykke 2000, 19-21, *passim*).

¹² On grunge as a soulful authenticity (for the white male), as germinating in the late 1980s in punk-influenced cultures outside the mainstream, see Bell (1998). But Utah here now recalls, in his dress and long hair, another figure who is sometimes cited as exerting an early influence on grunge: the disaffected John Bender (Judd Nelson) of *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes 1985).

destiny (as obliterated into the ocean), or as recalling Ahab's being dragged to the depths in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (killed by the object of his obsession) or just, as in the dialogue that follows, allowing Bodhi to carry out his own death sentence ('[h]e's not coming back!'). Nature has exacted an oceanic death penalty, in the form of the ultimate surfing experience. And Utah, hearing the bewilderment and anger of the approaching police, throws his police badge into the surf, reprising the same gesture that ends *Dirty Harry* (Siegel 1971), with the killer dead, and sinking into water, and the cop walking away alone.

Elephants

With *Last Days*, also known as *Last Days of Ivory*, Bigelow's campaigning documentary of 2014, this philosophical/aesthetic position remains intact. The film advocates, in the name of conservation and defunding terrorist cells, military adventurism into various areas of Africa. *Survival International* summarised the calls for the film to be withdrawn on the grounds of its misleading inaccuracies regarding Al-Shabaab and ivory poaching, citing reports from the Royal United Services Institute (Maguire and Haenlein 2015) and the United Nations Environment Programme and Interpol (Nellemann et al, 2016). There is also racialised collateral damage at work: '[t]he film is being used to bolster the move towards *a more violent conservation* that criminalises tribal peoples for subsistence hunting ... [those] evicted from their land and [who] suffer violence at the hands of heavily armed anti-poaching squads ... [and] face arrest and beatings, torture and death, while fee-paying big game hunters are encouraged' (Anon 2014; original emphasis). For the *New York Times*, this 'myth' is a 'beguiling story divorced from reality' and directly parallels, as with *Zero Dark Thirty*, strategies within upper levels of the US state, in this instance, the Clinton Global Initiative's position on poaching and terrorism (McConnell 2015). A 2015 Wikileaks archived letter, from Chelsea Clinton's office, 'Chelsea Update', notes the direct connection: '[w]e worked with Kathryn Bigelow to release a short film called "Last Days" that you should all check' – as well as work on 'No Ceilings' ('our initiative to advance the full participation of women and girls around the world'), mentioning the introduction of elephants onto various fashion catwalk shoots as advancing a conservation sensibility, and Prince William Windsor's support for (seemingly) the *Last Days* initiative; (Chelsea Office 2015). The nature of the film's

position with regards to facts, as with the critiques of *Zero Dark Thirty*, can be placed to one side in respect to the concerns of this article.

Last Days presents lying, duplicitous black figures in a foreign industry, taking Western jobs and undermining Western industry and working practices. It incorporates actual documentary footage of live killings (of shoppers), possibly with a dubbed-on gunshot, complete with the metallic ring of the bullet chamber. But even then, in the narrative ordering, this killing of black Kenyans seems less important than the violence meted out to elephants. And this too could be a particularly Western position, and one therefore readily aligned with the softer, greenwashed politics of Chelsea's mother, Hillary (then soon to be running for presidency): feminism, in the sense of the idea of an emancipation of women in the Global South.¹³ White imperial feminism invariably conceptualises such emancipation along Western lines: away with the burka, welcome to financial autonomy, and so on, along with standard liberal positions on saving the environment. Such liberal-interventionist thinking necessarily remains blind to the history of Western colonialism, and assembles its own revisionist narratives that exclude postcolonial critique – for Achille Mbembe, the lacuna of Western thought, where ‘the liberation of part of humanity from the yoke of colonialism ... [has] left almost no mark on the philosophical spirit of our times’ (2021, 2). And for the Western imperial feminist? Warm empathy with ‘exotic’ sublimity – a de-Other-ing: the women, the elephants, their babies, the villages, the forests, all offer thanks to the white saviour.¹⁴ It is as if the white Westerner has replaced the coming Christ of ‘Hills of the North, Rejoice’ – causing the ecosphere (as in the *Last Days* map to restitution), of ‘valley and lowland [to] sing’ since ‘his word is sure, his promise true’ (and so forth). In contrast to these reassurances is the idea of the meshing of the jungle (impenetrable dank home of the indigenous, and not the scalable airy mountainous vistas of the Friedrich Wanderer) with unregulated, illegal industrial activity, as with colonial overlord fear of the massed or empowered

¹³ Wolf had been an advisor in the mid-1990s to Chelsea's father, Bill Clinton, during his time in office – apparently particularly with reference to reaching female voters; see (Seelye 1999). I present the two letters in this article then as communications from the Democratic Party – albeit the former (from Wolf) for public consumption, the latter (from Chelsea's office) for private consumption – in respect to internecine tensions between Democrat and Republican parties, probably only really in respect to the brazenness and management of human rights abuses.

¹⁴ So apparent was the ideological paucity of such an idea that a full critique even seemed possible via meme: the short-lived Instagram adventures of Barbie Savior. See (The Race Card, White 2016).

'natives'. Even the featurelessness of Bigelow's cartoon (that is, actual cartoons) 'African' figures seems to be pure racism.

But here, as with Riefenstahl, as with *Point Break*, it is the landscape itself which demands justice, and orders a sense of what is right and wrong, and that cries out for white help against the black menace, in the name of saving baby elephants. If Bigelow is a Riefenstahl, then for *Last Days* she is one placed between *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915) and *Dumbo* (Armstrong, 1941). However, the *Last Days* landscape is again reconceptualised or re-modernised, and now of the 'uncivilised' Global South (rather than heathen mountains) – and this time, via the centrifugal, immanent force of white imperial feminism, towards the emancipatory Hills of a (Global) North.

References

Abbott, W.M. and S.J., general ed. 1966. *The Documents of Vatican II*. Translations directed by Joseph Gallagher. London, Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman.

Anon. 1871. *The Hymnal Companion to the Book of Common Prayer*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, & Searle.

Anon. 2015. 'Last Days of Ivory: Kathryn Bigelow Spurns Call to Withdraw Film.' *Survival International*, November 4. <https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/10982>

Baudrillard, J. 1995. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Bell, T. 1998. 'Why Seattle? An Examination of an Alternative Rock Culture Hearth.' *Journal of Cultural Geography* 18(1): 35-47.

Burns, S. Z. 2019. 'The Report'. DCP. VICE Studios / Unbranded Pictures / Margin of Error / Topic Studios.

Bryld, M.M. and N. Lykke. 2000. *Cosmodolphins: Feminist Cultural Studies of Technology, Animals, and the Sacred*. London: Zed Books.

Chelsea Office (2015) 'Chelsea Update'. *Wikileaks: Podesta Emails*, January 15, 2015. <https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/emailid/8436>

Davis, M. 2006 [1990]. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future is Los Angeles*. Photographs by Robert Morrow. London: Verso.

Eisner, L.H. 1977 [1952]. *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Translated by Roger Greaves. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

French, T.V. 1867. *Hymns Adapted to the Christian Seasons Used at Saint Paul's Church, Cheltenham*. Cheltenham: Westley.

Gardner, W. H., ed. 1985. *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. London: Penguin.

Halligan, B. 2017. 'Tension of Exclusion: On Death Grips and the Californian Ideology.' In *A Dark California: Essays on Dystopian Depictions in Popular Culture*, edited by Katarzyna Nowak-McNeice and Agata Zarzycka, 62-74. North Carolina: McFarland & Company.

Hann, M. 2013. 'The Paisley Underground: Los Angeles's 1980s Psychedelic Explosion.' *The Guardian* May 16. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/may/16/paisley-underground-history-80s-los-angeles-psychedelia>

Hersh, S.M. 2013. 'The Killing of Osama bin Laden.' *London Review of Books*, May 21, 203, 37(10). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n10/seymour-m.-hersh/the-killing-of-osama-bin-laden>

- Hollis, C. 1967. *Newman and the Modern World*. London: Hollis & Carter Ltd.
- Hollis, C. 2017 [1935]. *The Church & the Modern Age*. London: The Incorporated Catholic Truth Society.
- Jennings, E. 1975. 'The Unity of Incarnation.' In *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems*, edited by Margaret Bottrall, 186-201. London: Macmillan.
- Kennedy, L. 2015. 'The Elusive Enemy: *Zero Dark Thirty* and the American Worldview.' *Journal of American Studies* 51(3): 965-980.
- Maguire, T. and C. Haenlein. 2015. *An Illusion of Complicity: Terrorism and the Illegal Ivory Trade in East Africa*. London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI).
https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201509_an_illusion_of_complicity_0.pdf
- Mbembe, A. 2021. *Out of the Dark: Essays on Decolonisation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McConnell, T. 2015. 'The Ivory-Funded Terrorism Myth.' *New York Times*, October 29. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/opinion/the-ivory-funded-terrorism-myth.html?_r=0
- Nellemann, C. ed. in chief. 2016. *The Rise of Environmental Crime – A Growing Threat to Natural Resources, Peace, Development and Security*. Nairobi: UNEP-Interpol. https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/7662/-The_rise_of_environmental_crime_A_growing_threat_to_natural_resources_peace,_development_and_security-2016environmental_crimes.pdf.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y
- Peters, John Durham. 2016. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Race Card, the, and Erin White. 2016. 'Hilarious 'Barbie Savior' Parodies Savior Complex of Some White NGO Volunteers in Africa.' *Afropunk*, April 19. <https://afropunk.com/2016/04/feature-hilarious-barbie-savior-parodies-savior-complex-of-some-white-ngo-volunteers-in-africa/>

Ratzinger, J. 1998. *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Retort. 2005. *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. London: Verso.

Riefenstahl, L. 1993 [1987]. *A Memoir*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Ryan, M. and D. Kellner. 1990. *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Seelye, K.Q. 1999. 'Advisor Pushes Gore to the Leader of the Pack.' *New York Times*, November 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/01/us/adviser-pushes-gore-to-be-leader-of-the-pack.html>

Sharpe, E.P. 1967. 'The Language of Christian Worship.' *Baptist Quarterly* 22(3): 143-156.

Various. Television series, 1979-1985. 'The Dukes of Hazzard'. Paul R. Picard

Productions / Piggy Productions, Inc. / Lou Step Productions / Warner Bros.

Television.

Virilio, P. 2009 [1984]. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso.

Walsh, D. 2013a. 'Director Kathryn Bigelow Defends her Indefensible *Zero Dark Thirty*.' *World Socialist Website*, January 18. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/01/18/bige-j18.html>

Walsh, D. 2013b. 'New Revelations about Filmmakers' Collaboration with CIA on *Zero Dark Thirty*.' *World Socialist Website*, May 10. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/05/10/boal-m10.html>

Walsh, David. 2015. 'CIA-embedded Hollywood liars and their lies.' *World Socialist Website*, May 15. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/05/15/lies-m15.html>

Wolf, N. 2013. 'A letter to Kathryn Bigelow on *Zero Dark Thirty*'s apology for torture.' *The Guardian*, January 4. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/04/letter-kathryn-bigelow-zero-dark-thirty>

Dr Benjamin Halligan is Director of the Doctoral College at the University of Wolverhampton and has authored two monographs and co-edited six books, covering visual media, music and critical theory. His next monograph, *Hotbeds of Licentiousness: The British Glamour Film and the Permissive Society* is forthcoming from Berghahn Books.

Email: b.halligan@wlv.ac.uk