

# **Kathryn Bigelow: New Action Realist**

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## **Abstract**

This article argues that Kathryn Bigelow is an auteur of new action realism, a distinct sub-genre within contemporary action cinema. As a new action realist, Bigelow and her collaborators create films that feature unresolved narratives and an aesthetic characterised by claustrophobic immediacy and obscuration. Through discussion of theory, genre, narrative and style in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), I argue that, as a new action realist, Bigelow problematises notions of film realism. Bigelow's work brings the viewer into intimate and sometimes uncomfortable proximity with the violent action depicted onscreen, this proximity being a key feature of new action realism. The presentation is explicit and sudden, the graphic presentation creating a discomfiting nearness which is partially created through immediacy. Such imagery, particularly evident in *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, echoes footage captured by military personnel, news reporters and civilians on portable cameras and smart phones, recalling news reports of 9/11 and similar reports of crisis. With this aesthetic of intimacy and immediacy, Bigelow's new action realism hints at as much as it explicitly presents. This incomplete visual display imbues her films with a sense of confusion and hopelessness and consequently presents a world of fear and paranoia that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, captured by and yet obscured by its medium.

## **Keywords**

Kathryn Bigelow, new action realism, digital film, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *The Hurt Locker*

## **Introduction: Genre, Authorship, Mediation**

Across her career, Kathryn Bigelow has directed a variety of genres. These include horror and science fiction as well as the western, psychological thriller, women's film, heist film and nautical thriller. Often, these assume the format of the action film, but with further generic crossover here. *Near Dark* (1987) is both western and horror, while horror inflects *Blue Steel* (1990), a story of a rookie police officer that is both women's film and psychological thriller. *Strange Days* (1995) merges science fiction with neo-noir as well as social drama through its depiction of racial tensions. *Point Break* (1991) combines the heist thriller with a buddy movie dynamic while also incorporating the surfer movie. *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002) utilises the surroundings (physical as well as generic) of the submarine film, at one point visually referencing *Das Boot* (1981), but also adopts aspects of the historical drama through its restaging of a documented event. Bigelow's most recent film at the time of writing, *Detroit* (2017), dramatises the 1967 incident at the Algiers Motel (see Hersey 1968), and 'shifts from social realism to courtroom drama via crime thriller, musical fantasy and social chiller' (Kermode 2017), demonstrating the multiple influences upon her work.

Multiple influences are evident in the films under discussion here. *Zero Dark Thirty* is a fictionalised account of the CIA's hunt for Osama bin Laden, therefore utilising historical events in conjunction with detective and espionage thriller tropes as well as the military drama. *The Hurt Locker* is a fictional story set within the documented Iraq War of 2003-2011, based on the experiences of actual soldiers (see Borys 2007), but while it is overtly a combat film (see Gaine 2011), it also incorporates elements of the buddy movie and detective thriller. Through the threads of these interwoven genres, Bigelow displays an established and consistent aesthetic style.

In considering Bigelow in terms of aesthetics, and indeed as a filmmaker, this analysis encounters the difficulty of any auteurist study, that of assigning responsibility to an individual. Any film is collaborative, and to consider Bigelow as an auteur, the study needs to acknowledge and therefore incorporate her various collaborators. Therefore, when I refer to the auteur 'Bigelow', I incorporate the person Kathryn Bigelow as well as her collaborators. These include Mark Boal (screenwriter and producer of *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*),

cinematographers Barry Ackroyd and Greig Fraser (*The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, respectively), Greg Shapiro (Bigelow's producing partner), composers Marco Beltrami and Buck Sanders (*The Hurt Locker*) and Alexandre Desplat (*Zero Dark Thirty*), stunt coordinators and performers, second unit and production management teams, among many others. As noted, the auteur 'Bigelow' works across genres in terms of narrative, but nonetheless displays stylistic consistencies. These stylistics add up to an 'immersive experience which places the viewer' (Kermode 2017) within the action, an experience achieved through an ongoing and sometimes relentless delivery of cinematic excess (see Thompson 2004). For instance, *Blue Steel* is characterised by shafts of light through darkened rooms; *Point Break* incorporates highly kinetic camerawork; and *Strange Days* features multiple point-of-view shots (POVs) from different characters, including perceptions within perceptions.

For the current study, I place Bigelow's cinematic style as part of a larger movement that I dub *new action realism*. This subgenre of the action film has emerged over the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, typified by an aesthetic that emphasises grounded action rather than the fanciful exploits employed in the science fiction, fantasy and superhero genres. Alongside contemporaries such as Paul Greengrass and Michael Mann, Bigelow is a prominent practitioner within this subgenre, delivering narratives that are explicitly concerned with current, 'real-world' events such as terrorism, post-traumatic stress disorder and surveillance culture. As a prominent and distinctive practitioner of new action realism, Bigelow creates a claustrophobic immediacy that positions the viewer at an uncomfortable proximity to action, violence and uncertainty. Bigelow creates this proximity through multiple forms of imaging, much of which is facilitated by digital film (see Gaine 2019). Digital film implies artifice, a reconstruction of events rather than a physical imprint. The medium therefore creates a remove between the events originally captured by the camera and the finished presentation. The viewer is further distanced from the events on screen by the multiple forms of imaging. But paradoxically, Bigelow uses such artifice and mediation to create a distinctive type of realism that lacks narrative, visual and ideological certainty, a lack brought about not least by the excesses of imaging.

### **Visual Imprints and Deconstructions**

It can (and has been) argued that cinema realism is that of verisimilitude, the creation of life, objects and environments on screen that are comparable to the world that the

viewer inhabits. However, the act of presenting the on-screen life, objects and environments, that is, the filming process itself, may not be informed by cinematic realism but by every manner of artifice. In the case of Bigelow, her work is sometimes described in terms of authenticity (see Yabroff 2009; Rose 2009; McDonnell 2010). However, her cinematic style is also emphasised (see French 2013; Puig 2017; Semley 2017; Shone, 2017). Therefore, in order to understand why Bigelow can be treated as not only a realist filmmaker but specifically a *new action realist*, it is necessary to define and interrogate notions of ‘realism’, especially in relation to contemporary developments in filming.

The photographic image has been described as an ‘indexical imprint of reality’ (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002, 200), a record of the actual. In the case of motion pictures, long takes and mobile shots assemble detailed records of objects from all angles. Furthermore, realism ‘resides in the homogeneity of space’ (Bazin 1967, 50), space filmed in its entirety owing to deep focus camera shots. Within this homogenous space, reality, in all its depth and character, has been captured. The cinematic frame flattens the space into two dimensions, yet within the deep focus shot exist different planes of action. These planes can be analysed through editing, as different shots bring the viewer into closer relation with particular parts of the overall space. The cumulative effect here is of a transparent window onto the reality captured by the camera, a record that observes without disrupting the integrity of reality. This is dramatic realism (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002, 199), where the camera is an uninvolved observer, subject to the reality rather than influencing it. Deep focus helps to create psychological realism (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002, 199) by mimicking the act of seeing, transparently presenting objects in their entirety within space as the viewer would see them.

New action realism disrupts this transparency. The disruption is achieved through ‘a claustrophobic alignment of the spectator’s “*potential* field of vision” with the actual images that appear on the screen’ (Di Sotto 2011, 31, emphasis added). The ‘potential field of vision’ relates to the depth of the aforementioned reality of the scene. However, the visible depth of the scene may not be the entirety of the scene, but rather an illustration of Siegfried Kracauer’s theory of ‘finite fragments that signify a depth to the reality of the scene that the camera is *unable* to capture’ (Di Sotto: 31, emphasis added). The ‘potential field of vision’ only captures ‘finite fragments’ rather than the entirety. Indeed, realism in this case is dependent on the

limited field of vision – the close alignment of the viewer with the fragments means that we cannot see everything, just as our own visual field cannot capture the entirety of our actual world.

Within new action realism, the incomplete visual field is emphasised through the use of ‘an unobtrusive, under-privileged sense of framing [and] light camerawork’ (McKibben 2011: 1). Digital imaging creates a further complication. Whereas photochemical processing generates the ‘indexical imprint’, digital film is inherently a deconstruction and reconstruction, ‘a computer-encoded simulation of reality’ (White 2009, 5). The light sensitive image sensors of digital lenses translate the images that they receive into data and then reconstitute that data into an image on whatever screen the lens is connected to. This screen may be part of the camera or even a separate device such as a laptop or tablet, but in neither case is anything physically changed. It can therefore be argued that there is no realism in digital filming: ‘The celebration of the digital has thus been one way of doing away with the critique of realism, for if there is no longer any realism, there is no need to critique it’ (Rushton 2011, 15). However, this broad statement does not take account of the elements of realism present within digital film, especially the acknowledgement of depth beyond the scope of the camera. The ‘finite fragments’ (Di Sotto 2011, 31) of realism are even more fragmented when digitised, realism created with what is *not* filmed as much as what *is*. Within new action realism, absence coexists with presence, 0 alongside 1.

In addition, the alignment between viewer and digital filming *device* is closer than that between viewer and earlier types of camera. Martin Barker describes this alignment as a ‘YouTube aesthetic’ (2011, 34–37), which includes ‘hand-held quality [and] grainy shooting’ (Barker 2011, 36), echoing footage of military actions: ‘[T]he military ... is busy filming itself at every turn, from high-altitude surveillance transmits to video diaries and cell-phone souvenirs’ (Stewart 2009, 45). The close alignment also has civilian parallels, the most infamous example of ‘am-cam realism’ being footage of Manhattan during the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in 2001 (West 2005, 88). More recent examples include amateur footage of violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 (see Marcolini and Decker 2017), as well as the January 2021 insurrection at the Capitol in Washington DC (Sabur 2021). What is expressed here, both in amateur footage and feature filmmaking, especially new action realism, is the impression of *experience*.

Classical realism presented a ‘transparent window’ onto events captured as indexical imprints. New action realism, often (though not exclusively) captured digitally, creates an obscured and incomplete impression of reality through highly detailed yet fragmentary images. This impression is characterised by *participation*, as both characters and viewers only partially see their environment. Bigelow places the viewer alongside the soldier in the Baghdad alley and his teammate scanning for hostiles through his rifle sight; at the shoulder of the Navy SEAL in Bin Laden’s compound or the CIA officer watching the incursion on a bank of monitors. The films’ aesthetic is one of groping in the dark, despite and in some cases because of the plethora of images, as we will see in the next section.

### **Restricted Vision**

As a new action realist, Bigelow confuses the viewer by presenting a restricted view of the cinematic space. This restricted view is created through various techniques, such as a recurring lack of an initial establishing shot. The opening sequence of *The Hurt Locker* comes from a camera mounted on a remote-controlled robot, capturing nothing but the ground directly in its path. Later in the film, after the central trio of characters survives a tense drawn-out battle with a sniper, the film quickly cuts to their celebration in the midst of them wrestling each other. The sudden change in location and sound levels as well as onscreen action is jarring and disorientating, with no visual cue such as an establishing shot. A later sequence drops the viewer into the middle of the action with a close-up of a soldier shouting, again with no warning or introduction to the space of the sequence. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, CIA case officer Maya (Jessica Chastain) appears in multiple offices and bases, with little distinction between Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US. A sequence begins with Maya viewing a news report on a television through a doorway in a corridor before approaching her superior Joseph Bradley (Kyle Chandler), while the crucial CIA debriefing that leads to the climactic assault on Bin Laden’s compound begins with a longshot of Maya entering a boardroom like various others that she has already been seen in. Bigelow often eschews signposting, implying a depth to the cinematic space that may or may not become clear, as the following analyses demonstrate.

In *The Hurt Locker*, a variety of shots in a Baghdad street express the space visible to and hidden from Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) as he searches for an improvised explosive device (IED). The sequence begins with an

establishing long shot of James (0:22:04<sup>1</sup>) walking through the street in a blast suit (an image echoed in the film's final moments). The next few shots, tellingly, shift in terms of alignment. One is over James's shoulder, another his point-of-view of some locals in a high window, the next a medium shot of James as he moves on despite the suspicious looks of the locals. The film then cuts to two subsequent shots from within a darkened and seemingly abandoned shop front. The implication is that someone is watching James without his knowledge, a perspective enhanced by a long shot of him entering the frame followed by a closer shot in which he exits the frame. The viewer does not see this shop from James's POV, thus making it an area outside of his perspective, its details beyond the scope of spectatorial vision and therefore unsettling.

The next sequence presents James scrutinising the ground for an IED. A point-of-view shot through the oval visor of his helmet presents his reduced visual field within the cinematic frame. An overhead shot captures James moving within a similar oval created by a decorative metal loop on a balcony above him, again illustrating the confined space that he occupies, while further roving POV shots mediate his gaze as he identifies the wire that leads him to the device. Subsequent close-ups and extreme close-ups are closely aligned with James as he uncovers and disarms the bomb. The unsteady cinematography and the camera's close proximity give the impression that the spectator, who has a similarly restricted point-of-view, is alongside James, and therefore equally subject to the danger posed by the bomb. After disarming the device, wider shots capture local civilians as well as James's squad mates Sergeant J. T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) and Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), widening the visual field beyond James's immediate surroundings. The wider scope includes a local man (Wasfi Amour) on a balcony above the street, looking down but with one hand out of shot. His sudden appearance recalls that of a similar figure in the film's opening scene, who used a mobile phone to detonate a bomb. The man in this sequence may also be holding a phone, but his out-of-shot hand is a blind spot and potential danger.

The sequence quickly returns to James as he discovers another wire. A further series of shots, again closely aligned with James, follow his progress as he traces the wire to other devices, before cutting back to the man on the balcony. The next image

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<sup>1</sup> All timestamp references are to the UK video on demand release.

captures James framed again within the metal loop from earlier. The juxtaposition of this shot with the previous shot of the man on the balcony suggests that the visual through the metal loop is the point-of-view from the balcony. Therefore, James is being watched by a man who may be holding a trigger for the bomb James is working on. James's progress leads him to a junction from which multiple wires radiate, and a series of overhead shots present him in the centre of a ring of bombs. As he attends to them, close-ups of James's hands are intercut with shots of the man stepping into the apartment behind him and running down the stairs of the building. The pace of the editing increases, heightening the tension as James traces the wires further, eventually to a wall where they end, unconnected to a power source which renders the bombs inert. The man from the balcony exits the building, shares a look with James before running away, and drops a battery as he does so.

The implication of the sequence is that the man from the balcony constructed the bombs and could have detonated them had he attached the battery to the wires, but this is not clarified. This lack of certainty, combined with the steady but incomplete reveal of visual details, means that the sequence is constructed in 'finite fragments' such as the wires and the tops of the bombs, and especially the detonator that James mockingly shows the man in their momentary encounter. Simultaneously, however, the film betrays a depth beyond the immediate field of vision, a depth expressed by the widening scope of the sequence including the mysterious man from the balcony. However, Bigelow ties her camera closely to James's perspective, presenting a restricted field of vision and therefore simulating the experience of being in that scenario: if the viewer were in the alleyway alongside James, they would similarly be unable to see everything around them. Although the viewer sees more of the man than James does, we learn nothing about him definitively, left only with the same supposition as James.

This restricted field of vision appears throughout Bigelow's new action realism. Typically (though not exclusively), the fragments of the locations on screen constitute the immediate surroundings of the characters, and, during the action set pieces, these are also the most dangerous locations. Yet the danger extends beyond those specific zones, and the surrounding areas are far from stable due to explosions as well as other unexpected events. These outbursts shock the viewer with sudden visual and aural distortions, distortions that arise from within the cinematic space rather than intrude from outside.



*The Hurt Locker* demonstrates this internal distortion in its opening sequence. The original team of IED technicians, consisting of Sanborn, Eldridge and Sergeant Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce) attempt to dismantle a device, only for it to be triggered and kill Thompson. Like the rest of the film, the cinematography is unsteady and handheld, comprising mainly of medium shots and close-ups. Of the few long shots that do appear, several capture Thompson, the explosion and the cloud of dust that erupts behind him. Other shots capture the ground as well as a car wreck, and in both cases the stones on the ground and the dust on the car are thrown into the air by the explosion. Dust and stones, previously shown as inanimate and quite literally part of the landscape, are disrupted by the explosion. The sudden elevation of these previously immobile particles is presented in slow motion, highlighting the strangeness of their movement. A similarly strange movement is the sudden jerk of Thompson as the shock wave flings him forward like a rag doll. Like the sequence in the alley discussed above, this opening scene is constructed in fragments, steadily building up to an overall picture of the scene. But the explosion disrupts the visual composition of the image through unexpected movements and the speed of events. Slow motion of inanimate objects and the unnaturally fast movement of the human body combine to create an image that is confusing and untrustworthy.

Importantly, the explosion comes from within the visual space that the scene constructs. Indeed, the IED is the centre of the sequence, as the scene follows the team attempting to dismantle it. Therefore, dangerous objects that kill characters and distort the visual space are integral parts of that space. A similar disruption, this time of a larger space, occurs in *Zero Dark Thirty*. CIA case officer Jessica (Jennifer Ehle) awaits her informant Humam Khalil al-Balawi (Musa Sattari) at US Camp Chapman base in Afghanistan, on a date that super-text informs the viewer to be December 30, 2009 (see Windrem and Engel 2010). Wide shots capture Balawi's car moving through the base and approaching Jessica's position, intercut with close-ups of Maya at the CIA's Pakistan station receiving updates. A wide shot shows the car halt in front of Jessica's group before a series of medium shots capture the soldiers inspecting the car. Balawi steps out, his progress intercut with reaction shots from the soldiers and Jessica's smiling face, before a bomb explodes, the explosion engulfing everyone around the car. Balawi's exit from the car to the explosion takes place across twenty shots, mainly close-ups and medium shots. Shot Three in this sequence (1:00:30) is a long shot, capturing Balawi, the car and the group surrounding it. After

a series of close-ups with soldiers shouting about an object in Balawi's pocket that remains constantly out of frame, the pace of editing rapidly increasing, the film cuts to a long shot from the same angle as Shot Three mentioned above, as the explosion erupts in the frame (1:00:47). The previously established visual space is now torn apart by the explosion. A subsequent aerial perspective shows the blast in a more expansive space, the neat, orderly lines of the base's buildings, fences and roads juxtaposed with the shapeless, multicoloured eruption of dust and smoke in their midst. As before, the cinematic space is presented incompletely and opaquely, before being disrupted, once again from within. Balawi is the object of the sequence, situated within it and therefore a constitutive element of the visual space, and the constitutive element that destroys the space.

The shock of this explosion alongside similar events demonstrates *suture*: 'the successful positioning of the spectator into an imaginary relation to the image' (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002, 202). This relation becomes part of the cinematic diegesis and therefore adds to the effect of realism. In the case of action cinema and especially new action realism, this imaginary relation causes the spectator to experience the characters' bodily shock (see Purse 2011, 42–48). In addition, there is a further stylistic tension within these sequences. The suture that the film performs is juxtaposed with *rupture*: while the spectator has an imaginary connection to the image, the image itself is ripped apart by these eruptions. As well as experiencing the character's bodily shock, the viewer experiences an existential shock as their stability is disrupted along with the image as a whole; this destabilises the surroundings of the viewer that they have been sutured into. The viewer may be associated with the image, but the different aspects of that image are not reliably related to each other.

*Zero Dark Thirty* maintains the conceit of suture and rupture throughout its running time. The multiple methods of image capture, including handheld cameras as well as satellite and drone images, might seem to contradict the incompleteness referred to earlier: so many images and forms of technological observation suggest a panopticon, 'a central point of view circumscribing all visible space under a mobile and pinioning gaze' (Stewart 2009, 48). However, the film declares from its opening sequence that it is as much about what cannot be seen as what can. Just as some individual scenes lack an establishing shot, the opening sequence consists of no image at all. Instead the viewer is confronted with a black screen accompanied by recordings of 911 calls from the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The sequence

lasts for two minutes before a call is cut off abruptly. This scene sets the tone for the rest of the film, both in terms of the grim subject matter but also the *inability to see*. Some films have attempted to visualise the events of 9/11, including *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006), but Bigelow explicitly avoids such an approach. The black screen expresses the inexpressible: the experience of being inside the burning, collapsing World Trade Center is beyond the realms of presentation, and the rest of the film is an attempt to present a cognitive response to that inexpressibility. And yet, despite its multitude of image forms and devices, ultimately the film does not find such a response and the inexpressibility lingers.

*Zero Dark Thirty*'s finale most emphatically mediates the visual variety and the incompleteness of representation. This finale features the climactic Navy SEAL assault on Bin Laden's compound and the aftermath of this assault. The SEAL team are equipped with multiple forms of imaging technology, including night vision and infra-red. As they approach the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, by helicopter, they activate their night vision goggles and POV shots are intercut with normal cameras to establish the green shade of the viewing technology. Once the team arrive at the compound, multiple shots in low light levels capture the SEALs' stealthy approach to the door. So subdued is the lighting that the viewer must strain to see what is happening, which again creates a sense of participation and subsequent incomplete perception. Much like the Baghdad street with James, there is a depth to the reality of the scene that the camera cannot capture.

Once the SEAL team breach the house of the compound, the cinematography becomes more varied. The subsequent extended sequence (2:06:24), which lasts for twenty minutes, features a combination of night vision POV and an objective normal camera. Both the objective and subjective shots are restricted, never revealing everything despite the multitude of viewing technologies. Indeed, the different types of viewing offer little or no visual authority, presenting confusion rather than certainty.

The eventual shooting of Bin Laden, ostensibly the central object of the film, is itself obscured. The segment begins with a series of shot/reverse-shots, consisting of green night vision and the reverse angle of normal camera with very low lighting, while one SEAL whispers 'Usama'. In the reverse angles, the SEALs are only visible by the reflective lenses of their goggles; the device that enables them to see is all that can be seen of them. This emphasis upon seeing the tools of sight highlights the

visible fragments and the greater depth, the greater reality, that is present but not fully presentable.

Within one of the night vision shots, a figure appears in a doorway right of frame (2:16:41). The nearest SEAL fires his rifle and the figure falls out of sight. The camera then cuts to the reverse shot of the SEALs advancing through the doorway. Much like the imagery of explosions discussed earlier, a visual field is disrupted internally: the initial shot/reverse-shot pattern establishes the geography of the scene, and from within that geography come the gunshots, the violent bursts part of the visual space.

The next shot is again mediated through night vision technology as the SEALs enter the room to inspect their kill. Cutting between night vision and low light normal camera, for the first time one of the SEALs, team leader Patrick (Joel Edgerton), raises his goggles and turns on a torch, adding illumination to the normal camera shots. The body of the man who has been killed appears in several overhead frames, but crucially his face is not clearly visible, medium shots capturing only his bloodied chest and part of his beard. When Patrick photographs the body, the corpse is only seen in the camera flash, before the image of the body appears on the camera screen. This is the closest thing to a definitive identification that the film offers, and photography might suggest clear documentation.

Despite this suggestion, however, the viewer never views the body clearly. When it is brought back to the US base, a long shot captures Maya approaching the body bag in a tent bustling with SEALs (2:27:10). The camera cuts to the reverse angle of Maya, the view obscured by the jostling men around her. This shot is over her shoulder, the viewer sharing her perspective if not her exact POV. Three consecutive shots capture Maya drawing closer to the body bag, the first of them from a low angle with the bag obscuring the top left quarter of the frame. The third of these shots (2:27:29) focuses on Maya's face as she reaches the body bag, before a wider shot includes Maya and the stretcher in the foreground with the soldiers in the background. The shallow focus in this shot visually occludes the surrounding men and emphasises the central encounter between the film's subject (Maya) and object (bin Laden), the object still hidden, even as Maya unzips the body bag within the same shot. Curiously, there is a repeated shot from a low angle, looking up into her face. This might be read as the POV of the corpse. The angle of this shot however is not from where the body would be, and the third shot from this angle shows Maya

zipping the bag shut but the screen does not go black, so the camera is clearly outside the bag. The dead man, presumably bin Laden, is denied a perspective just as he is a clear presentation, only glimpsed in fragments. The clearest image of the corpse is a medium shot at the foot of the stretcher (2:28:13), as though the camera/viewer is standing beside Maya, but we never get Maya's POV. Despite all the ways of seeing that pervade the film, and the various angles around the object of the narrative, there is a conspicuous absence at the heart of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the reality of the event never fully captured. Like the experience of being in the World Trade Center as the towers collapsed, closure and certainty are not clearly expressed in visual form.

Conspiracy theorists might argue that bin Laden was never actually killed by US forces, but Bigelow's emphasis is more upon the uncertainty. The film does not claim that the killing of Bin Laden did not take place, but rather presents ambiguity through incompleteness.<sup>2</sup> The film seems self-conscious of this incompleteness, the emphasis on visual technology at times appearing fetishistic and most apparent when Maya is surrounded by screens that provide her with masses of information. However, this information is fragmented and the sheer volume of data becomes confusing. The culmination of this confusing excess is the conspicuous absence of the definitive view of bin Laden's body. With all that technology, from drone footage to satellite imagery to the night vision goggles, the film openly acknowledges its lack of clarity by never presenting the body conclusively. The participatory nature of the aesthetic adds to the uncertainty: the viewer is not ignorant because they were not there but uncertain because they *were*. Certainty cannot be viewed because the depth of field is beyond visual reach. Thus, ambiguity and uncertainty are key to Bigelow's new action realist aesthetic, characterised by the fragmentated experience of participation, fragmentation that is often facilitated by digitisation. Furthermore, Bigelow's films deny straightforward relationships between character and goal, as the narratives are as opaque as the visuals.

### **Action Narratives**

The narratives of action cinema are typically structured around set pieces, that is, complex sequences that are organised for maximum effect. Each set piece is based

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the film's omission reflects real world events: following the death of Bin Laden, President Barack Obama ordered no photographs of the body were to be released (see Mardell, 2011).

around a specific goal while the film's overall structure is geared towards a larger purpose (see Bordwell 2006, 2007; Thompson 1999). This overall structure for film narrative typically follows the loss and re-establishment of equilibrium, and through generic familiarity, instils certain expectations in the experienced action cinema viewer. This established-but-malleable framework is at odds with some critical disparagements of action cinema (see Bordwell 2006, 104-5), but ironically also contrasts with certain cinematic traditions also dubbed as 'realist'. For example, British social realism and Italian neorealism emphasise 'the significance of cinema not residing in action but in contemplation, in respecting a life lived rather than a plot mechanized, with characters ciphers to it' (McKibbin 2011, 1). Because the tightly constructed narrative of the action film is predisposed toward action set pieces, it therefore largely ignores such 'a life lived' in favour of a more predictable artificial structure.

Bigelow's new action realist films do feature such mechanised narratives. In *The Hurt Locker*, an IED disposal team complete their tour of duty in Iraq. The film is chiefly a series of set pieces, as many sequences involve the identification and disarming of IEDs. Stylistic features create tension within these sequences, the lives of the central characters often under threat and, as discussed above, the threat expressed to the viewer through the formal properties of the film. Between the disposal scenes, the team of James, Sanborn and Eldridge are presented off duty but constantly waiting for their next assignment, their lives orchestrated around bomb disposal and, arguably, as much devices of the plot as the bombs they encounter. The CIA's decade-long hunt for Osama Bin Laden forms the narrative of *Zero Dark Thirty*, with Maya's investigation including the questioning of suspects (sometimes employing torture), extensive surveillance, analysis of data, briefings, and set pieces including shoot outs and bombings. The film's style creates almost constant tension throughout the film, both in terms of the physical danger faced by the characters but also the threat to the overall mission of eliminating Bin Laden. Therefore, the plot of the film pivots around Maya's and, more broadly, the CIA's hunt for Bin Laden.

In these narratives, character goals drive the narrative towards set pieces while smaller goals propel the set pieces themselves. In *The Hurt Locker*, Sergeant James's overall goal is the 'high' that he gets from dismantling bombs, and individual sequences are motivated by the dismantling of specific devices. Maya's overall goal is the termination of Bin Laden, a goal that motivates various smaller investigations into

particular suspects, informants or pieces of information. Bigelow's films therefore combine generic tropes and follow narrative conventions of goal-oriented protagonists, as well as action film conventions of movement towards tense set pieces.

Despite the frameworks, however, there are narrative uncertainties, including inconsequentialities that problematise the rigidity of goal-oriented narratives. This is a distinctive aspect of Bigelow's place within new action realism – narratives are left unresolved and goals unachieved. In *The Hurt Locker*, James develops an attachment to a local boy who calls himself Beckham (Christopher Sayegh). When James discovers the corpse of a boy containing explosives, he identifies the boy as Beckham and thus pursues the killer for revenge, this pursuit providing a particular goal that drives the narrative. However, Beckham later turns up alive, making James's vendetta and indeed his goal irrelevant. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya narrowly escapes an attack by gunmen. The sequence makes for a suspenseful set piece but has no relevance to her pursuit of Bin Laden: the film includes no pursuit or apprehension of these attackers, leaving another thread unresolved. With these complications, the films disrupt the notion of an overarching narrative that coheres and unifies all events, once again presenting the tension between suture and rupture. This tension also extends to broader visual and ideological culture.

### **Incoherency and Ideology**

As previously noted, cinematic realism favours transparency. Yet in being ostensibly transparent, this realism may obscure ideology. Richard Rushton notes, 'Classical Hollywood realism has three main characteristics: it privileges aesthetic strategies of transparency; it produces a fixed spectator-subject; and it is unable to adequately portray the contradictions of society' (Rushton 2011, 17). Bigelow's self-consciously incomplete narratives and visual aesthetic acknowledge these contradictions and therefore destabilise the spectator-subject. As noted above, Bigelow's camera is an active participant in the events, and by extension, so is the viewer. The intimacy of the cinematography in *The Hurt Locker* allows Bigelow to remove 'almost every single moment that might be judged political' (Barker 2011, 156), while the film forgoes any explanation as to *why* James is addicted to the dangers of his work beyond him being an 'adrenaline junkie' (Barker 2011, 157). James is 'the *living embodiment of post-traumatic stress disorder*, but is treated by the film as not

disordered at all' (Barker 2011, 157, original emphasis). The film therefore presents James as a paradox: one who has become ordinary in the extraordinary circumstances of his occupation. A reductive reading of his character would be to describe him as inured to his surroundings, but the normalisation that he performs of/within his environment is complex and quite overtly inexplicable, or, crucially, *unpresentable*. Like the fragmentary aesthetic that characterises the film and new action realism as a whole, James's mentality has a dimension beyond the scope of the camera, despite the visual intimacy and the viewer's associated vicarious participation. Bigelow openly presents a contradiction: the viewer participates in the action but does not understand it, the film presenting an inexplicable experience in minute detail that should allow understanding, and yet does not.

The ideology of *Zero Dark Thirty* has been the source of extensive critical debate, specifically relating to the film's attitude towards torture. The film portrays the torture of terror suspects but does not engage in the debate around 'enhanced interrogation techniques.' Slavoj Žižek (2013) and Naomi Wolf (2013) argue that *Zero Dark Thirty*'s lack of condemnation is an endorsement of torture, their position based on a certainty about the film's politics. However, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s overt incompleteness extends beyond its visual aesthetic into its ideological standpoint, thus complicating this certainty.

The film's early scenes take place at a BLACK SITE, explicitly described as an UNDISCLOSED LOCATION. The sequences are filmed in low light, much of the room obscured by shadow. Maya and her fellow agent Dan (Jason Clarke), display little empathy for the prisoner Ammar (Reda Kateb) and no discussion over the ethics of what they are doing. Yet this incompleteness is accompanied by a discomfiting intimacy with the physical effects of violence and human suffering. Ammar's screams of pain and pleas for mercy prompt horror and revulsion in the viewer, both in response to the torture but also to the glaring lack of empathy from Maya and Dan. Thus, the film does not depict torture positively or even neutrally, but *incompletely*, inviting the audience to provide the absent voice of dissent, or even the sound of reaction. As noted, the finale of the film does not present the death of Bin Laden conclusively, and the incompleteness of the earlier scenes highlights the visual and ideological depth that the film hints at but does not fully present.

The incompleteness of Bigelow's cinema 'recover[s] a core of truth in the incoherence of reality' (Di Sotto 2011, 32). Bigelow's cinematic 'truth' is her



consistent attempt to show the incoherence of reality through narratives that obscure more than they reveal and a visual aesthetic that admits the limits of its own representational capability. It is ironic that admission of such limitations should occur in a period of escalating surveillance, and the associated security/paranoia of the panopticon. Such surveillance would seem to be a central presence in *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* due to the multitude of imaging devices and the plethora of data in both films. But as we have seen, this overabundance leads to confusion and obscurity rather than knowledge or certainty.

Rather than being the ‘central point of view’ (Stewart 2009, 48) of surveillance systems, Bigelow’s new action realism consists of multiple views including hearsay and contradictions, the sheer volume of which is disorientating. The viewer must assemble meaning from this disparate data, Bigelow addressing an ‘active – indeed, an interactive – viewer rather than the passive or “fixed” spectator associated with classical Hollywood’ (Rushton 2011, 18). Bigelow also disrupts the classical pattern of action cinema noted earlier, through her consistent visual style that expresses uncertainty and discordance. Whereas earlier films such as *Blue Steel* and *Point Break* featured a shift from non-action aesthetic to action aesthetic through faster cuts or more mobile shots, *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, as well as her subsequent film *Detroit*, are noticeably consistent in their visual style.

In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the SEAL team penetrates Bin Laden’s compound in an array of long shots, close-ups, and jump cuts. Earlier, Maya presents her findings to a CIA briefing in an array of long shots, close-ups, and jump cuts. *The Hurt Locker* features an almost seamless transition between Iraq and the US, indicating the end of James’s tour but the continuation of his inexplicable mindset back home. A tracking shot through the window of a moving Humvee cuts to a tracking shot along the freezer aisle of a supermarket (2:01:30). The graphic match between the motion of the camera and the glass in both shots is followed by a sequence in the supermarket, James framed in the long stretches of the aisles much as he was in the Baghdad streets. Discontinuous shots from James’s POV show him searching the cereal racks just as he searched the stones and rubble for bombs. As he talks to his infant son about what he loves, literally surrounded by the signifiers of home life, the sound of a helicopter intrudes over the scene. The sound bleeds over the next cut into the subsequent shot that displays the helicopter, its sound bringing the film back to Iraq just as the helicopter itself brings James back. The lack of distinction between

James's homelife and his military work suggests that he never left the warzone, and highlights the pervasiveness of Bigelow's aesthetic: constant fragmentation and ongoing participation.

Such pervasiveness demonstrates that, rather than following a pattern of loss and re-establishment of equilibrium, equilibrium was never there to begin with. Bigelow instead expresses a deterministic fatalism. Many an action film uses violence to provide narrative closure or at least a sense of catharsis, whether it be the death of the villain or the redemption of the hero. Bigelow, however, disavows the fantasy of redemptive violence. The lack of closure, catharsis or redemption ensures that equilibrium is never achieved, nor indeed any sense of a return home. No triumph or welcome is available for Bigelow's protagonists, because 'the dream of repatriation is dead on arrival' (Stewart 2009, 53). After the non-definitive sight of Bin Laden's body, Maya breaks down in tears, unable to tell her pilot where to take her because she no longer has any destination. James's pervasive perspective, whether he is in the US or Iraq, indicates his ongoing engagement with violence, the cyclical nature of which is underscored by the beginning of his new tour that closes the film.

## **Conclusion**

The visually, narratively and ideologically confusing films *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* depict dangerous environments and experiences that are characterised by perpetual instability and confusion. Within these environments and experiences, the viewer is an active participant in the instability and confusion. The participatory visual aesthetic and unresolved narratives create a sense of instability caused by threats unseen and undefined. While the streets of Baghdad and Islamabad, air bases in Afghanistan and secret black sites may be far removed from the average viewer, Bigelow's new action realism makes these worlds immediate and their implications present. Furthermore, Bigelow's new action realism expresses a nihilistic world view with no redemption, catharsis or justice. Just as her footage echoes that of amateur and news footage, so do her films continue to express themes of the suffering and trauma caused by ongoing cycles of violence.

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