

Kathryn Bigelow as an auteur – analyzing *The Hurt Locker* and *Point Break*

In critically viewing film, the auteur theory analyzes how the director can act as the “author” of a work and become the major creative force behind a film. Under this theory, directors are identifiable by audiences as the author as a work, and consequently their films should have distinctive characteristics that define their authorship. While the two films have different plots and genres, *Point Break* (1991) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) exemplify how Kathryn Bigelow operates as an auteur in her directing. Despite their distinctions, both films share many defining characteristics (such as similarity in characters, themes, cinematography, and editing), making Bigelow’s contribution as the author and main creative force clear to audiences familiar with her style and work.

Point Break was released in 1991 and follows FBI Agent Johnny Utah (Keanu Reeves) as he investigates a series of bank robberies led by a surfer, Bodhi (Patrick Swayze). It is an action film with crime elements that heavily features surfing and other extreme sports.

The Hurt Locker, released in 2008, is an action and war film covering the Iraq war and features a non-linear narrative structure. The film follows William James (Jeremy Renner)’s arrival in Iraq (after the death of the previous man in his role) and his group dedicated to diffusing explosives.

One recognizable characteristic of Bigelow as an auteur is the attention to casting in both films, and the way the casting greatly impacts how their respective stories are perceived.

In *The Hurt Locker*, the cast is largely unknown which allows the audience to perceive the characters with no preconceptions about them and to make them seem more like regular people, adding to the film’s pseudo-documentary style. The more famous actors in the film are often the ones to die unexpectedly (such as Guy Pearce and Ralph Fiennes), which creates a

sense of unease for viewers since this often is not the case – it is the characters played by unknown actors who die first in most Hollywood films.

In *Point Break*, there is an opposite effect – the two main stars (Reeves and Swayze) were both popular actors before the film's release and both actors have a large female fanbase. This purposeful casting creates an appeal to women that is typically not present in other action movies. The casting, along with the emotional aspects of *Point Break*, create an action film for the female gaze with a wider audience. Bigelow also breaks genre conventions with Lori Petty's casting as love interest Tyler because she does not fit the archetypal action movie girl – Petty's short, dark hair contrasts the typical blonde model-like looks expected for the romantic interest in an action movie.

While both films have significant casting for different reasons, it's clear that Bigelow does not cast stars simply because they are well-known – the casting in both films have specific intentions that affect the audiences' perception of the films to fit her vision. *Point Break* and *The Hurt Locker* have a notably majority-male cast, which may defy the expectations of a women director by some critics. However, this allows masculinity, and the issues that come along with it, to be scrutinized by Bigelow closely.

Another major trademark of Bigelow as an auteur is how both films are concerned with masculinity and the way male relationships and characters are portrayed. The male relationships (which are hard to define as friendships since they are often wrought with tension) in Bigelow's films stand out as complex and often comment on toxic masculinity. The strained work relationships between Johnny and Angelo in *Point Break* and James and Sanborn in *The Hurt Locker* are shown through the binaries of either an uncontrollable anger or a joking work-relationship. These joking moments often use crude humor that establishes a familiarity between

the characters and consequently between the audience. Often these comedic scenes add little to the overall plot and storyline, but they establish how Bigelow views masculine friendships. The banter is kept deliberately casual and fast-paced to highlight the suspenseful or tense scenes that frequently follow.

These binaries of friendship highlight and criticize how men have an internal struggle to express themselves or lack the trust to do so. In *The Hurt Locker*, this inner conflict is exemplified in how James only truly explains how he feels to his son who is too young to understand anything. Even when Sanborn shares his internal feelings to James after the death of the involuntary suicide bomber, James lacks the ability to do the same in return.

The main characters in *Point Break* and *the Hurt Locker* share similarities in their motivations, personality, and primarily in how they are presented to the audience. Both James and Johnny have an independence that goes against their peers and superiors. They both openly defy orders and instead go with their gut feeling, whether it is correct or not. This independence makes them stand out to the audience and helps us align with them more. Their similarities in character traits also help define Bigelow as an auteur, since both characters are easily identifiable as a “lone wolf” or cowboy archetype.

In *The Hurt Locker* and *Point Break*, Bigelow takes genres (action and war) not typically known for being emotional or sentimental and creates films that evoke those responses while remaining faithful to their genres. This common theme, and the way it is presented through directing, is one of the main ways Bigelow could be defined as an auteur.

Within *The Hurt Locker*, Bigelow frequently uses point of view shots to place us in the minds of the soldiers that are followed. This strong point of view is carried throughout the film, even when it’s not an obvious point of view shot. For example, in every scene where Arabic is

spoken, even when the dialogue seems it may be important to the plot, no subtitles are given.

This places the audience in the point of view of the soldiers who presumably do not know much or any Arabic. This lack of knowledge heightens the audience's own confusion and disarray and consequently the emotional response.

The closeness of the shots often matches the viewpoints of the characters we are following. During the scene with the man holding a camera that they viewed as threatening, the man was only shown in wide shots rather than close-ups. This lack of tight shots in instances like this further builds uneasiness and aligning the audience with the main cast. Conversely, in the scenes where James disarms any explosive, there are frequent tight shots that highlight the intricacy of his actions and his own focus.

The Hurt Locker's use of POV shots, hand-held camera, zooms, fast-pans, and long takes lends a documentary-style to the film that fits a genre which often is the focus of documentaries. *Point Break* utilizes similar techniques, yet due to the film's more unrealistic plot, the effect is not entirely the same. In *Point Break*, these techniques allow the film to become more realistic and relatable and grounds the story, yet never to the same level as *The Hurt Locker*.

Both films stand out for their violence and being a part of genres characterized by that violence. However, neither film glamorize violence nor make it seem desirable in any way. In violent action sequences, there is rarely any background music, and the core sound design is the physical destruction and human pain/screaming that physical violence causes. Even within *Point Break*, which covers a lighter and less-grounded subject than *The Hurt Locker*, the infiltration scene in the house is portrayed as brutal and characterized by close-ups which highlight the pain, along with rapid cuts and pans that create confusion. In this way, Bigelow critiques the genres that her films follow, yet still follows some of the conventions by including this violence.

Within both film's violence and action, there is also an ambiguity of who the enemy is. In *The Hurt Locker*, this seems clear at times, but other cases, such as Beckham and his relationship with James, make this ambiguous. This emotional connection and humanization contribute to Bigelow's thematic style of not glamorizing violence and focusing on the emotional effects of violence. The initial questioning of Ralph Fiennes' character further highlights the sense that everyone unknown is the enemy – and this uncertainty is portrayed in the directing by utilizing wider angle shots initially before his background becomes clear. *Point Break* also utilizes this ambiguity by creating a friendship between Bodhi and Johnny and presenting Bodhi's character as likeable despite his actions and role as the story's antagonist. The likeability of Bodhi is furthered by the casting of Patrick Swayze.

Masculinity is further explored in how both films feature extreme actions or sports – for *Point Break*, the film utilizes surfing and later skydiving, and for *The Hurt Locker* it is the diffusion of bombs/explosives and war as a whole. These actions are presented as dangerous and intense, as shown through the directing – Bigelow often uses tight shots in scenes of disarming explosives to show the technical skill required and in *Point Break* there are frequent fast cuts during the surfing segments. These dangers also serve an important role to analyze how men deal with emotions. Rather than address their emotional issues or trauma, the main characters direct their energy into tasks or hobbies that are life-threatening. While this is somewhat glamorized (notably with the surfing in *Point Break*), the dangers are also stressed. This importance is furthered by the occasional use of slow-motion action shots (such as surfing sequences in *Point Break* and explosions in *The Hurt Locker*) which serve to underscore the violence and importance of action within the respective films.

Bigelow's directing allows the audience to understand the appeal of these extreme actions by focusing on other aspects of the characters. The grocery store scene in *The Hurt Locker* exemplifies this in how it contrasts with the rest of the film. While the majority of *The Hurt Locker* is fast-paced, either with quick cuts or action-filled long takes, the grocery store scene has none of this. The slowness and disconnect with the rest of the film allows the audience to understand James' disconnect with the civilian world. Within *Point Break*, Bigelow highlights Johnny's disillusionment with his job as an FBI agent by glamorizing the surfing, skydiving, and the partying Johnny does with the ex-presidents. These scenes are often fast paced, thrilling, and give a sense of adrenaline and life to the film that is not present in the office scenes or even the more violent action sequences.

While *Point Break* and *The Hurt Locker* seem like fundamentally different stories, they share many similar themes (such as challenging masculinity and criticism of the use of violence) along with stylistic decisions which make them identifiable as Bigelow films and thus makes Bigelow an auteur. The main characters, while in different settings, both embark on similar emotional journeys and end their respective films in a similar state. Both movies end with a rock song that plays into the credits – a trope of action films that also energizes the audience and makes their journey feel complete in some way. The endings represent both main character's inability to return to a "normal" life – for Johnny, it is being an FBI agent and for James it is his life as a civilian at home. These endings exemplify the choice of men to choose extreme danger rather than stability and illustrate Bigelow's interest in exploring highly independent and complex characters.

Bigelow's ability as a director to successfully create emotional action films that have a broader appeal to women and people who typically may not watch action or war films due to the

ways violence is glamorized in those genres. Through her directing style, she garners an emotional response which makes the audience identify with her markedly independent main characters, which furthers the way her films appeal to a broader audience.

One of the primary characteristics of Bigelow as an auteur is her ability and interest in creating an emotional and relatable film in typically male-dominated genres. This approach creates films that, while containing a majority-male cast, distinctly appeal to women and a wider audience due to the way they break their genre conventions in favor of a more immersive and emotional approach. Even within different types of films, Bigelow maintains a similar directing style that once noticed, is easily identified.