

THE HURT LOCKER: MALE INTIMACY, VIOLENCE AND THE IRAQ WAR MOVIE



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Abstract

This essay explores *The Hurt Locker* in three contexts: as a war movie, particularly an Iraq war movie; in relation to themes of masculinity, male heroism and male intimacy; and as a Kathryn Bigelow film, taking account of the director's association with action genres and *The Hurt Locker's* critical and award success. These three critical frames overlap and inform each other. The article provides an analysis of the film's visual style as well as the various reviews and commentaries that accompanied the film, both on its initial release and following its success in securing awards. While reviews and Bigelow herself may have foregrounded a war movie with a documentary aesthetic, *The Hurt Locker* is intensely melodramatic in its presentation of masculinity.

Keywords: *The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow, war movie, masculinity, male heroism, male intimacy.



The Hurt Locker: Eril Yakınlık, Şiddet ve Irak Savaş Filmi

Öz

Bu makale *The Hurt Locker* filmini üç bağlamda incelemektedir: bir savaş filmi olarak (özellikle Irak savaşını ele alan bir film olarak); erkeklik, erkek kahramanlığı ve erkekler arasındaki yakınlık ve son olarak da yönetmenin aksiyon filmleriyle bağı ve filmin başarısını ele alarak, bir Kathryn Bigelow filmi olarak. Bu üç çerçeve aslında birbiriyle bağlantılıdır ve birbirlerini etkiler. Bu makalede filmin görsel stiline analizinin yanı sıra film üzerine yazılmış yorumlar ve eleştirilerin de analizi yapılmaktadır. Bu eleştiriler, Bigelow'un da ileri sürdüğü gibi, filmi belgesel bir estetiğe bağlı kalmış bir savaş filmi olarak tanımlamaktadır ve *The Hurt Locker* her ne kadar sert bir film olsa da erkekliğin sunumu bağlamında oldukça melodramatik bir yaklaşıma sahiptir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow, savaş filmi, erkeklik, eril kahramanlık, eril yakınlık.

Introduction

Our essay explores *The Hurt Locker* in three contexts or frames: as a war movie, and specifically an Iraq war movie; in relation to themes of masculinity, male heroism and male intimacy (all central terms within Hollywood's war genres); and finally as a Kathryn Bigelow film, taking account of the director's association with action genres and the unexpectedly high profile accorded to *The Hurt Locker* following its critical and award success. These three critical frames obviously overlap and inform each other in multiple ways. Thus *The Hurt Locker* is both a war movie in a broad generic sense (featuring scenes of male conflict and bonding; intimacy and loss; connections and profound tensions between soldiers and citizenry), and a film which specifically depicts the contested US presence in Iraq. Because the film's heroes are bomb disposal specialists, *The Hurt Locker* deals with a highly particular form of military labour, and centralises tense set pieces in which soldiers confront danger in the form of explosive devices as much as scenes of direct combat with an actual enemy fighter. The film's distinctive visual style – its combination of documentary and action aesthetics - evokes a feeling of presence or immediacy which is belied by the studied avoidance of wider political or ideological themes in favour of a portrait of heroic male performance under pressure. Thus while the film uses the conventions of the war movie (not least in the combat scenes in the desert and those which stage the team's precarious foothold in the urban spaces where they are primarily seen to operate), it also draws on other genres.

That the war movie has been a crucial site for the articulation of ideas about masculinity, about what it is to be a man, is a commonplace. To this extent the film can certainly be positioned within the decade's prevailing insistence on the need for the US to "man up." *The Hurt Locker* couples its mythicised evocation of men dedicated to their duty, and consequently profoundly outside the mainstream of an American domestic life as it is lived in the movies, with themes of paternity and legitimacy. The film provides an exploration of the nature of masculinity in relation to war, violence and fatherhood. Since Bigelow's films, and most particularly action oriented titles such as *Point Break* (1991), have fairly consistently explored themes to do with men, violence and masculinity, her high profile success with this at times elegiac war movie represents a fascinating development in the career of one of Hollywood's relatively few female directors. Questions about *The Hurt Locker* as an Iraq war film and as a Bigelow film have been extensively foregrounded in its critical reception. Thus, alongside our framing of *The Hurt Locker* as a war movie, a film about men and masculinity and a Bigelow film, we aim to take account of the various reviews and commentaries that accompanied the film, both on its initial release and following its success in securing awards.

“We’re on the same fucking side!” *The Hurt Locker* as Iraq war movie

Making movies about wars - or other forms of violent conflict - which are still unfolding is a challenging task. The filmmaker must address an historical context of uncertainty, whether moral, martial or both. These issues have of course been explored by scholars at length in relation to films of and about World War II, for instance, or the US involvement in Vietnam (the time lag between the Vietnam War and the emergence of Hollywood movies dealing with it is an obvious indicator of the difficulty of this unpopular and ultimately unsuccessful US endeavour). Both these wars were fought by a conscripted military, in contrast to the professional (and in some instances privatised) soldiers of today’s US forces. And while much could be said in socio-economic terms about the make-up of the US military, *The Hurt Locker* foregrounds professionalism and skill over either disaffection or courage. The unpopularity and lack of international legitimacy attached to the Iraq war, and the subsequent occupation, is a crucial part of the context here, rendering implausible the genre’s rhetoric of liberation. Writing on war movies dealing with the first Gulf War, and with an eye on the more recent Iraq war, Robert Eberwein notes an emerging sense that: “the conventions and visual appearance of the earlier war films won’t work for the kind of war we find ourselves fighting” (2010: 130). As Eberwein remarks, the contrast with these conventions continued use in epic films revisiting World War II – showing no sign of abating in the high profile series *The Pacific* (HBO, 2010) – is highly suggestive. The sense that the kind of war we fight now is different – in Iraq and Afghanistan wars consisting of massive aerial bombardment following by low level combat against insurgents; fighting against interests rather than nations – is coupled with and heightened by the unpopularity and lack of legitimacy of this war.

In this context we want to emphasise three aspects of *The Hurt Locker*’s visual strategies and its relationship to the wider genre of the war movie. Firstly its use of a documentary aesthetic and the ways in which this relates to the conventions of action cinema, a genre which, we argue, the film clearly participates in. Secondly the ways in which the metaphor of war as a drug is played out visually, in terms of an evocation of the physical intensity of war (at times hallucinogenic or hyperreal intensity) which is oddly removed from combat. Thirdly the extent to which the film engages (or not) with the war in Iraq, including the construction of an enemy which is at once physical and psychological. As we will argue, the extent to which *The Hurt Locker* sidesteps the specificities of the Iraq war is remarked on by various reviewers, some of whom even attribute the film’s success to what is deemed its apolitical stance.

From the dramatic opening sequence detailing the death of a bomb disposal specialist, Sergeant Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce), *The Hurt Locker* is both visually violent and compelling. It incorporates spectacular and tense action sequences while exploiting a documentary style which works to suggest the immediacy of television news on one hand, video diaries shot by soldiers and civilians on the other. Films such as Brian de Palma’s *Redacted* (2007) had already exploited the mobile, immediate aesthetic associated with soldiers’ video

diaries. Indeed Patricia Pisters places that film along with *The Hurt Locker* as part of a group of texts concerned with the significance and effects of mediation. Given the centrality of the screen to contemporary visual/digital culture she writes that the “presence of multiple cameras and multiple screens in these war films is no coincidence” (Pisters, 2010, p. 232). Such a combination of fantastic (action) and realist (documentary) aesthetics is in many ways characteristic of the contemporary war movie. It is arguably through the combination of action, documentary and – as we explore in the next section – melodrama that *The Hurt Locker* is able to stage war as an exciting spectacle rather than troublesome political question. Reviewer Michael Smith (2009) exemplifies this view, arguing that *The Hurt Locker* as “an apolitical film. It is neither an anti-war film nor a pro-war film. It is, simply, a great war film about courageous men working in chaotic situations, and the collateral damage that comes with the job.”

Bigelow acknowledges that she did not intend the film to function as political commentary, stating in one interview that she “wanted [the film] to be very much like a documentary” (Bigelow interview on You Tube). The documentary style is evident in shaky camera moves, while the editing tends to disorient as much as it works to locate the action spatially. The camera is rarely at rest; reframing, zooming, rack focusing, constantly moving whilst heightening the strain and fear inherently present in the bomb squad's labours. Yet as Pisters observes, the immediacy of that style recalls not only documentary and the video diaries which can be accessed on You Tube but video games, specifically “first-person shooter games” which position the gamer as combatant negotiating complex spaces. As she remarks, “Video games look like war and war looks like a video game” (Pisters, 2010, p. 243). While Pisters is surely right to identify the convergence of multiple screen aesthetics, the gaming dimension forms only one element among several generic sources which *The Hurt Locker* – and other Iraq war movies – exploit.

The Hurt Locker opens with a title which frames war as addictive, if not hallucinogenic: reporter Chris Hedges’ remark that “The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug.” The device works to suggest that the film’s subject is war in general as much as the Iraq war in particular. In this vein the film makes use of aesthetic conventions associated with not only the Gulf war movie – the emphasis on distorted perception as seen in *Jarhead* (Mendes, 2005), for instance or the hyperreal quality of handheld camerawork in *Redacted* – but older conventions such as the emphasis on individual soldier psychology associated with representations of the Vietnam war or the figure of the innocent child whose death suggests the impact of war on civilian populations (for Eberwein this is a cold war era convention originating with Korean war movie *The Steel Helmet* [Fuller, 1951]). With the emphasis on men out of place – notably in the night time sequences that see Sergeant James (Jeremy Renner) go off base or the group unsuccessfully pursue insurgents at James’ insistence - it is hard to take from the film any clear sense of the US military mission. In this sense, it is hardly an apolitical film. Nonetheless, Stephen Hunter (2010) praises *The Hurt Locker* for its attention to military culture and wartime chaos; contrasting the film positively with *Redacted*, *Home*

of *the Brave* (Winkler, 2006) and *Stop-Loss* (Peirce, 2008), he observes that: “it doesn’t see its soldiers as tragic heroes, and the movie isn’t set up to display their crucifixion, to weepy liberal bromides and violin music.”

The Hurt Locker’s critical reception is fascinating with respect to the film’s representation of war: for some it is an action film praised for its realist aesthetic and its evocation of men at war, while others identify a critique of the ill-defined US mission in Iraq. For Seth Colter Walls (2010) *The Hurt Locker* is an Iraq War film which asks the audience not to think about the complexity of the Iraq War, but which manages to leave space to do so, albeit without any clear ideological position. Thus while, “pro-war viewers may see a portrait of a sure-footed soldier saving the day over and over again,” antiwar audiences may “fill in their own narrative of imperial hubris and confusion in the scenes...” For Walls, then, both readings are equally legitimate. As *The New Yorker* puts it: “American audiences worn out by the mixed emotions of frustration and repugnance inspired by the war can enjoy this film without ambivalence or guilt” (cited in Walls, 2010). In shifting attention from the “mixed emotions of frustration and repugnance” *The Hurt Locker* makes use of war film’s post-Vietnam focus on soldier psychology, on inner turmoil as much as combat.

One central combat sequence which illustrates this takes place in the desert, a virtually blank landscape of heat and sand which contrasts to the urban environment in which the squad typically operate. Here the team come across a group of British soldiers, initially mistaking them for enemy fighters. Only when their leader (played by Ralph Fiennes) has been disarmed by Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) does he mutter: “We’re on the same fucking side!” When they come under attack seemingly from nowhere and a gunfight ensues, Owen (Brian Geraghty) asks “What are we shooting at?” to which Sanborn responds, “I don’t know!” Later Owen is uncertain whether to shoot or not at a figure in the distance, underlining the sense of uncertainty which pervades many Iraq war movies when it comes to identifying the enemy (again this is a trope which is generically familiar from Vietnam War movies). The credits list Fiennes’ character as a contractor and indeed he presents as a mercenary figure, keen to secure the financial reward for the Iraqis he has apprehended (when the pair use the fire fight to effect an escape, he shoots them since the reward applies to their capture dead as much as alive). His death and the drawn out waiting game of combat via sniper fire that follows reconfirms familiar boundaries of conflict (US vs Iraqi). While it remains largely with the core US team, the sequence incorporates brief shots of the enemy fighters, sheltering inside the remains of a building.

This desert “battle” scene is the film’s most direct evocation of war as combat. For the most part *The Hurt Locker* foregrounds instead tense confrontations between men and bombs, conflicts between team members (Sanborn expresses the desire to shoot James when he risks danger to retrieve his gloves from a minefield) and the war movie convention of the faceless/unidentifiable enemy. As Richard Alleva’s review (2009) observes: “the enemy is nowhere and everywhere, for the bomber may be long gone or one of the many onlookers on balconies or at second-floor windows, ready to set the bomb

off with a cell phone...” James is perhaps the only character in the film to exhibit clarity of purpose; his overriding goal is to dispose of bombs, devices which serve as disembodied surrogates for enemy forces. A widely used promotional image is drawn from an intense sequence in which James finds numerous devices hidden just under the ground [Figure 1].



Figure 1. James surrounded by the devices which constitute his primary opponent in *The Hurt Locker*.

The camera shoots from above, visually figuring James' danger and isolation as well as his bravery. James can quantify with certainty his record; asked how many devices he has dealt with he responds promptly: “873 sir!” For others, the enemy is more ambiguous; they cannot quantify the number of people they have protected or saved. The audience, then, is left to wonder who is being attacked and defended, as well as by and from whom? Are the Iraqi citizens who watch events unfold civilians or combatants? Are the team members supportive of or pitted against each other? Are the US and British at odds or working together? The majority of the film's reviews highlight the tendency to personalise war; some even refer to it as a new strategy to deal with war in film. However, the focus on soldier psychology is by now an established cinematic (and indeed literary) strategy for making sense of the violence and confusion of war.

In keeping with the development of the genre post-Vietnam *The Hurt Locker* then focuses on the stories of men in war, how they differ, how they cope (or not), with each other, with loved ones and with an ill-defined enemy. *The Hurt Locker* depicts war as both conflict conducted remotely and as a flesh and blood enterprise. Rather than centring on a combat unit, the team's task is to defuse explosive devices left by insurgents to render the city a lethal space. The film's opening sequence features a mechanised surrogate, a robot which fails in the task of defusing a device hidden in a rag pile. The failure of the remote leads to a visual and narrative emphasis on the body, foregrounding the intricacy and



Figure 2. In *The Hurt Locker's* opening sequence an explosion leads to the death of Sgt Thompson (Guy Pearce)

the dangers of manually disarming such devices [Figure 2]. In the explosion death is intensely visceral, the image of blood on Thompson's visor signalling death. As this suggests, while the conduct of war remotely is certainly alluded to, it is the impact of war on bodies – military and civilian - that is foregrounded in the film.

The arrival of James intensifies this focus on the body; his reluctance to use remotes, his recklessness in his work and in exceeding the specifics of his role all add to his characterisation as maverick willing to place himself – and as it turns out, others - in danger. That emphasis on the physicality of war is most vividly expressed in the image of a young boy whose corpse has been turned into a bomb. James must work his way around organs as well as wires in defusing this device [Figure 3]. In this sequence – and in the climactic scene in which a man pleads with James to defuse the bomb that he has been forced to wear – the bodies of Iraqi citizens are the territory over which the war is (inconclusively) waged. In contrast to Iraqi insurgents or those civilians who observe events from the sidelines, these scenes insist on the impact of the war on actual bodies. While critics are right that the film effectively avoids tackling the larger political issues of the war, the bleakness of these images suggests at best ambivalence about the efficacy of the US presence.

“I want a son. I want a little boy Will!” War as a refuge, men, masculinity and melodrama in *The Hurt Locker*

Writing about the way in which American national identity is rendered in contemporary Hollywood war films, Mark Straw argues:

When it comes to war films, the cinema of post-modernity would seem to promote personal traumatic narratives rather than examine political and historical contexts, and any loss of investment in received social myths, such as the law of the father, conversely demonstrates contemporary culture's

dependence on these myths for formulating our ‘cultural imagination’ of war and American national identity (Straw, 2008, p. 141).

Straw’s argument speaks to *The Hurt Locker*’s presentation of James as heroic yet reckless and self-destructive. For Straw contemporary American war films contain recurrent themes of trauma, memory, nostalgia, endings, terminations, death and apocalyptic imagery. He further suggests a connection between the presentation of American national identity as founded upon mythical constructions of victimhood and narratives of male crisis. In the film male subjectivity is presented in connection with the idea of addiction to war. In fact, the metaphor of war as a drug – action and adrenaline as intoxicating – is set up at the film’s outset and pursued throughout up till the coda in which James commences another tour of duty. Throughout the film the camerawork draws us in to an identification with James’ character. In fact, as Martha Nochimson (2010) argues: “Our vision is so completely limited to his expertise in defusing bombs and dealing with invisible enemies that our capacity to think about the larger context of the American presence in Iraq is replaced by nuance-free instincts more characteristic of the tea party movement.”



Figure 3. James endeavours to defuse a bomb implanted in an Iraqi boy’s body.

While reviews and Bigelow herself may have foregrounded a documentary aesthetic, *The Hurt Locker* is intensely melodramatic in its presentation of masculinity. The addictive experience of war is firmly established as a masculine space within the film with James exemplifying the sort of military masculinity that Hollywood movies have long celebrated: a male identity premised on violence which protects a community in which the hero cannot himself find a place. Thus the film concludes with James – who has failed to relocate to the domestic - seen in long shot starting another tour/approaching another device, the war zone the only site in which he is able to function. Of course the violence of the archetypal western hero alluded to here works to protect a community; as in other Iraq war movies, *The Hurt Locker* is far from clear who or what (if anything) is being secured by the heroism which it undoubtedly celebrates. Bigelow describes James as “unpredictable,” adding: “He is attracted to the allure of war and the adrenalin of war and the chaos of war...he arguably has the most dangerous job in the world and welcomes

it” (Bigelow cited in Stahl, 2009). In a review foregrounding the theme of “war as narcotic” a hurt locker is defined as “(1) an unfamiliar place where you wake up after a night of drunkenness; (2) a figurative place representing a tortured state of mind; and (3) an actual place where damaging things are concealed” (Alleva, 2009). With respect to the second of these meanings, *The Hurt Locker* conceives war as the space for the performance of James’ military masculinity. Implicitly he finds meaning in the routines of war rather than those of domestic life. In one scene James tries to phone home; when his wife answers he finds himself unable to respond, listening to her call his name for a few moments before hanging up. Thus while he can access this other world – that of domesticity and home – James cannot effectively communicate. Later when he is actually back at home he talks to his wife about wartime experiences; her only response is to hand him a potato peeler, suggesting that she too cannot communicate across the different worlds in which they operate.

The Hurt Locker self-consciously evokes male western archetypes. Yet, as Nochimson caustically points out: “While Wayne set the testosterone standard in playing characters who lived to fight, his guys also found time to love women... But Will, with his Wayne-ian steely gaze, his laconic ease at the portals of death, and his patented hero saunter, loves “just one thing”, as he tells his baby boy before leaving him, maybe forever, to return to the killing fields of Iraq. And it isn’t women or kids” (Nochimson, 2010). Not only his wife and child but ordinary American life is rendered two-dimensional in these scenes, effectively summed up in the image of the supermarket with its proliferation of products. In his army life, James is skilled at making choices based on fine discriminations between almost identical looking wires and fuses, a situation in which the wrong choice would lead to catastrophe. In the supermarket he is faced with making a meaningful choice between a vast array of virtually indistinguishable items. He seems to have no effective criteria for making a good, a bad or an indifferent choice and there are no real consequences attendant upon any choice he might make: in the end he chooses randomly. This shows, for him, a world without meaning in which his skills are redundant and he has no capacity for rational choice.

If men and women fail to communicate, here, as in other war movies men bond through alcohol and violence. Following the desert battle scene, for example, James, Sanborn and Owen drunkenly pummel each other in a ritualistic affirmation of their connection. Alongside the figure of war as drug, being a father, and most particularly father to a son, is the film’s most insistent metaphor regarding masculinity as heroic and yet out of place. James is father to a young boy but is unable to make a place for himself in the US; his relationship to the young Iraqi boy nicknamed Beckham suggests both paternalism and compassion, yet ultimately James is unable to connect. Towards the end of the film Sanborn confesses emotionally on his desire to father a son, having earlier suggested that he was not ready to take this step. Sanborn’s conversation with James seems to conflate the “risk” of death with the “risk” of parenting; to die without an heir is to risk obliteration. This emotional outburst – “I want a son Will; I want a little boy” - follows directly upon a scene in which an Iraqi man, forced to wear a bomb, pleads for help, insisting that he “has a family.”

Ultimately the team are not able to defuse the device; Will James can only repeat that he is “sorry” before running from the blast, once more suggesting the inability to act.

In these ways *The Hurt Locker* is clearly preoccupied with masculinity, although the film is far from offering a coherent vision in this respect. Domesticity and fatherhood are simultaneously desirable and impossible, with war an ironic refuge to which James returns but which renders him ever more distant from home. The script never pinpoints the origins of James’s addiction to war, but it is clear from the outset that life has meaning for this man only when he is in the vicinity of death. James’ attempts to track down Beckham are both furtive and ineffectual; his confusion on being called a “guest” when he enters an Iraqi home armed suggests not only that he is deeply uncomfortable in domestic spaces but that the military are anything but guests in this environment. James’ “hurt locker” is a literal footlocker holding components from bombs that “almost” killed him (Alleva, 2009). His wedding ring is included amongst the assortment, reinforcing the conflation of relationships and death. The sort of “damaged” masculinity presented in *The Hurt Locker* is something of a cliché within the genre, one which the film relies upon rather than interrogates. The juxtaposition of Sanborn’s tearful desire for parenthood with James’ rejection of domesticity suggests that men have to make choices. Yet while Sanborn looks for meaning in fatherhood, the film’s intense identification with James hardly acts as an endorsement of this sentiment. Though the risks of fatherhood and bomb disposal are rhetorically conflated, James himself is happy to go back to the bombs. Reconciled to the possibility of death, James is both fearless and somehow blank.

“The time has come!” *The Hurt Locker*: A Kathryn Bigelow Film

“There’s really no difference between what I do and what a male filmmaker might do. I mean we all try to make our days, we all try to give the best performances we can, we try to make our budget, we try to make the best movie we possibly can... On the other hand, I think the journey for women, no matter what venue it is - politics, business, film - it’s a long journey” (Bigelow cited in Stahl, 2010).

Kathryn Bigelow’s 2010 awards season, in which she became the first woman to take the Director’s Guild of America and the Academy Award for Best Direction, renewed critical and scholarly interest in the position of women filmmakers and the sorts of films for which they do (and do not) receive acclaim. The run up to the Oscars made much of Bigelow as a filmmaker contending against ex-husband and former collaborator James Cameron, not the first time that coverage of her career has foregrounded his (see Lane, 2000). The melodramatic terms in which this run-off was covered was attributed by some media pundits to a desire to reinvigorate falling ratings for the once must-see ceremony. Ironically enough, while Bigelow had long had admirers for her action-oriented movies such as *Blue Steel* (1990), *Point Break* (1991), and

Strange Days (1995), the terms of this particular opposition managed to suggest a generic opposition between *Avatar*'s mega-budget fantasy adventure and *The Hurt Locker* as an Iraq war movie with a very different budget and aesthetic. *The Hurt Locker* was effectively framed in opposition to *Avatar*'s innovative 3D technology as something of a realist movie, a positioning which its contemporary setting and the documentary feel of its camerawork no doubt exacerbated. Of course, as we have argued above, *The Hurt Locker* is also very much an action movie, albeit coupled with masculine melodrama. Indeed the two movies suggest the very different visual possibilities for the cinematic rendition of combat in other lands.

Revealing Bigelow as winner of the best director Academy Award, Barbra Streisand (herself a director) placed her hand on her heart, declaring "The time has come!" Inevitably critical and popular attention has highlighted Bigelow's directorial "firsts." Although reviews celebrated her achievement, thoughts on the relevance of her gender are divided. While at an earlier stage of her career reviewers frequently expressed themselves perplexed by Bigelow's work in supposedly "masculine" genres, some contemporary critics affirm her seeming gender neutrality. Others like Nochimson (2010), who provocatively labelled Bigelow a "hyper-macho bad boy" in her Salon.com essay, detect double standards in the fact that it is such an intensely male-oriented movie that netted this particular directorial first. Titling her essay "Kathryn Bigelow: Feminist pioneer or tough guy in drag?" Nochimson argues that Bigelow is "...masquerading as the baddest boy on the block to win the respect of an industry still so hobbled by gender-specific tunnel vision that it has trouble admiring anything but filmmaking soaked in a reduced notion of masculinity." Labels such as feminist or woman filmmaker have indeed proven problematic for many women filmmakers who look to forge a career in Hollywood or indeed the shrinking independent sector (Lane, 2005).

The mismatch between Bigelow's often bold, always accomplished, generic movies and a critical category of feminist filmmaking highlights the difficulties of an assumption that women filmmakers will do gender in predictable political ways. Indeed the 2010 US media furore over the legitimacy or otherwise of right wing women's claim to the term "feminist" indicates the wider resonance of this point (for contrasting views see Traister, 2010 and Douthat, 2010). As both cases suggest, feminism is not just about the success of high profile individual women. While the involvement of more women in male-dominated arenas such as politics and filmmaking suggests movement in gender hierarchies, neither feminist policies nor feminist movies simply happen because women are involved.

Bigelow does not tend to promote a feminist, or even a feminine, sensibility in her films; neither does she introduce herself as a feminist or a feminist filmmaker. Rather she engages in what Nochimson calls "muscular filmmaking". This idea of muscular filmmaking is also central for Barry Keith Grant (2004) who explores Bigelow's films in relation to action as a genre. For Grant, her films attempt to negotiate a place for women both in front of and behind the camera within traditionally masculine discourses whilst at the same time mobilising "a range of the genres traditionally regarded as 'male' precisely

to interrogate that term specifically, as well as the politics and pleasures of gendered representations in genre films more generally” (Grant, 2004, p. 372). Similarly Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, editors of the volume *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*, emphasise both terms in that clause, arguing that “her work partly falls within and partly infringes the parameters of Hollywood cinema” (Jermyn & Redmond, 2003, p. 3). In addition, as Jermyn appositely observes, “Bigelow’s refusal to be easily compartmentalised, to be labelled a ‘female director’ or to work within the confines of a given genre, has often made the concept of a Bigelow film a slippery one” (Jermyn, 2003, p. 126). Drawing together formal and narrative devices from both generic and art cinema has allowed Bigelow to produce films that foreground sensation – central to the action genre since the 1980s – and a visual style that simultaneously participates in a range of genres. While *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002) is a military movie, *The Hurt Locker* is Bigelow’s first war film. Its visceral, at times deeply sentimental, evocation of men at war - yet not in combat – figures male intimacy and masculine heroism in familiar generic terms.

Conclusion

As an Iraq war movie and as a Kathryn Bigelow movie, *The Hurt Locker* – and critical responses to it following its awards season success – foregrounds gender in a number of fascinating ways. We argue here that, in common with many other Hollywood representations of the Iraq war, the film converts the lack of clarity widely associated with the US mission, foregrounding the military men’s experience of combat as confusing, and their uncertainty when it comes to traditional areas of male performance such as fatherhood. *The Hurt Locker*, we argue, combines a number of styles and genres in the process, the intense melodrama of male intimacy and anxiety sitting at times awkwardly alongside the film’s more realist impulses which are visually expressed in its use of documentary conventions. In framing *The Hurt Locker* as a Bigelow film we suggest potential connections with her earlier work – often within genres characterised in one way or another as “masculine” or “male.” Overall we draw attention to the traditional presentation of men and masculinity in the film – the focus on male bonding through violence, military paternalism and biological fatherhood, for example – and the various ways in which *The Hurt Locker* renders these familiar identities fragile and uncertain. Finally we seek to acknowledge both the widespread sense of achievement which accompanied Bigelow’s breakthrough as a female director in an industry which has to date been archly conservative in such awards, and to question the undue emphasis on women filmmakers working in Hollywood as the ones who are required to innovate and challenge when it comes to gender norms.

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