

**Katarzyna Paszkiewicz**  
**Universitat de Barcelona**

## **Hollywood Transgressor or Hollywood Transvestite: The Reception of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008)**

I don't think I've read the words women and film and feminism in the same sentence as much in the last few months since "Thelma and Louise" rocked the culture nearly two decades ago.  
(Manohla Dargis, New York Times, 2010)

How insulting that a woman is celebrated for a typically violent all-male war movie.  
(John Pilger, New Statesman, 2010)

The aim of this paper, entitled "Hollywood Transgressor or Hollywood Transvestite: The Reception of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008)" is to explore some of the critical discourses that circulate around this war film, which in 2009 won six Oscars including Best Picture and Best Director for Kathryn Bigelow, the first women to win this award. The term "Hollywood Transgressor" is derived from the subtitle of the monograph *The cinema of Kathryn Bigelow* (2003), edited by Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, whereas "Hollywood Transvestite" refers to a review of *The Hurt Locker* written by Martha Nochimson entitled *Kathryn Bigelow: Feminist pioneer or tough guy in drag?* (2010). These two terms stand for polar opposites in what actually is, as will be argued, a spectrum of ways in which Bigelow's status is being negotiated: on the one hand she is classified as a European-inspired *auteur* working within the Hollywood system who breaks gender roles and genre traditions (Jermyn and Redmond, 2003: 2-3), and on the other, she is perceived as a mainstream 'action director' who disguises as a man to earn the respect of the cinematic industry (Nochimson, 2010).

Nochimson and other critics resentful of *The Hurt Locker*, read it as "anti-feminist", using several arguments. Firstly, they argued that Bigelow betrays women, as she "masquerades as a hyper-macho bad boy" (Nochimson, 2010) and sells her out to join the "big boy's club" (Muir, 2010). Secondly, the film was criticized for the fact that there were no positive images of women in it. As Richard Adams wrote, "there's a small irony that Bigelow is lauded for being the first woman to win 'best director' for a movie that has scarcely any speaking roles for women. *The Hurt Locker* is a very 'male' movie in that sense" (2010). Finally, Nochimson deplored the fact that Hollywood

privileges “the military landscape” over “the domestic landscape” and dismisses women genres as romantic comedy (2010).

It will be argued that such postures are based on the paradigm of “mass culture”, as described by Stuart Hall, and later discussed by Joanne Hollows in *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (2000). This paradigm is one of four ways of conceptualizing popular culture which, as Hollows shows, imply particular feminist politics. Within this paradigm, popular culture is something imposed on the passive mass of “cultural idiots”. From this perspective, not only is the commercially produced popular culture degraded, but also “those who consume and enjoy it” (Hall in Hollows, 2005: 20). In some forms of feminism, a distinction between mass patriarchal culture and avant-garde feminist culture is established. Such distinction can be observed especially in feminist film criticism, which, according to Hollows, creates an opposition between the feminist “cinema of resistance” – “not narrative, difficult, even boring” – and the degraded “other”, the patriarchal mainstream cinema, which is realist and narrative (Hollows, 2005: 22)<sup>1</sup>. Bigelow, whose films can not be easily classified as mainstream or art-house, does not easily fit in those categories.

As was previously mentioned, some reviewers criticize Bigelow for not representing women in her film, which resembles the debate over the “images of women”, also discussed by Hollows. In the seventies, when women studies centered mostly on the analysis of the “content” of media production and the “effects” of its messages, it was postulated that the stereotyped images of women should be replaced by the “positive” ones. Hollows rightly points out that this type of analysis presents various difficulties. Firstly, they are based on the assumption that media act as a “window on the world” and that the images they offer represent, or *should* represent, society. The search for “real” images of femininity also assumes that being a man or a woman is simple, self-evident and invariable. The contents are considered transparent and not subject to various interpretations. Finally, this approach centers on “what media represent” and not “how they represent it” (Hollows, 2005:19).

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<sup>1</sup> Hollows was not the first critic to question this puritanical distrust of entertainment and spectacle. In her introduction to *Notes on Women's Cinema* Claire Johnston observed: “The analysis of Hollywood as a ‘dream machine’ producing a monolithic product is in fact a very conventional view which has been held by reactionary film critics for decades. It expresses a distaste for ‘the masses’, and an elitism which sees in the growth of the great popular art of the twentieth century the danger of the ‘erosion’ of ‘artistic values’ (1973: 3)”.

The reviewers mentioned earlier assume that masculinity and femininity are fixed categories and that cinematographic genres can be divided into “male” and “female” ones. Not only do such postures ignore the fact that a woman director may simply want to make a war film, but they also fail to notice that there are women receivers who enjoy watching “typically male films”. As Priscilla McClay observed in her review for the *Guardian*, “going on and on about how Bigelow has made a ‘man's film’ will only emphasize this view, by ensuring that she is seen as the exception, rather than the rule” (2010).

In order to transcend the dichotomies implied in the “mass culture” paradigm, and to problematize the reception of *The Hurt Locker*, I will adopt three cultural paradigms: realism, modernism and postmodernism. My analysis draws on the article by Nicholas Abercrombie, Scott Lash and Brian Longhurst: *Popular Representation: Recasting realism*, in which the authors consider realism, modernism and postmodernism “cultural paradigms” or “regimes of signification”, present in the modern Western culture (1992:118). It is noteworthy that, according to these authors, the three systems must be understood as ideal-types which are not found in today’s culture in its pristine form (1992:117). In this study, realism, modernism and postmodernism will be adopted to examine not the film itself, but the extensive critique around *The Hurt Locker*. To show how these modes of signification might particularly contribute to an understanding of fascinating reception of the film, I made textual analyses of reviews of both film critics and amateurs’ posts, drawing largely on reviews garnered from websites accessed between November 2010 and March 2011, such as Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic, among others.

I will start by discussing the realism which, as Abercrombie, Lash and Longhurst argue, offers a window between the eye and the referent, conceals the authorship and disguises the production process of a text (1992:119). Realism is important for two reasons: first of all, according to the authors, “all three modes of signification are backed by aesthetic *discourses* of realism, in which correspondence to reality (...) is an important criterion of validity” (1992: 118-119); second of all, “realism is still probably the most pervasive regime of signification” (1992:115).

What is it that unites all these critics under the banner of realism? The “realist reviews” of *The Hurt Locker* focus mostly on the plot and the characters, rising the question of transparency. “Realist” critics assume that the film aspires to represent

reality. According to Roger Ebert, Bigelow “creates a convincing portrayal of the conditions a man like James faces” (2009). Richard Corliss wrote: “Later I may think of a better depiction of the helplessness and heroism attending the U.S. presence in the war on terrorism, but for now I'll say this one's the tops” (2008). “It's so real it's scary”, said Paul Chambers in CNN (20/12/2009, source: Rotten Tomatoes). Peter Bradshaw in the *Guardian* reckoned it “says more about the agony and wrong and tragedy of war than all those earnest well-meaning movies” (2009). Lisa Schwartzbaum described the film as an “intense, action-driven war pic, (...) that conveys the feeling of combat from within as well as what it looks like on the ground”. She argued: “This ain't no war videogame, no flashy, cinematic art piece; there's nothing virtual about this reality” (2009). And finally, one of the reviewers wrote in Metacritic:

I am a Marine combat veteran and I rate this movie as the most realistic war movie I've ever seen. (...) Movies like Full Metal Jacket and Apocalypse Now and even Saving Private Ryan are cartoons - Hollywood director's fantasies of what war and conflict are. (ForrestL., 3/02/2010)

The question of reality was also important for critics who blamed Bigelow for not providing a deep insight into the nature of war in Iraq. They perceived *The Hurt Locker* as “not realistic enough”, plausible action movie with no message. Another Metacritic reviewer wrote:

I have completed 2 tours in Iraq and Afghanistan with the US ARMY. (...) Nothing in this movie is the way things are done over there. (TimC., 3/02/2010)

Photographer Michael Kamber accused Bigelow of glamorizing the war and said that the protagonist “appears to be fighting the war alone”. He wrote:

I've covered a number of conflicts and Iraq was the least romantic, the one that looked the least like the war movies I grew up on. Yet Ms. Bigelow pulls one out for Hollywood. (Kamber, 2010)

In the reading privileging the modernist paradigm, the role of Bigelow as an *auteur* was emphasized. In particular, it was accentuated that the film refuses to adopt a traditional narrative arc, speaking the language of contingency rather than that of order (see: Abercrombie et al., 1992:119-120). The world is depicted as fragmented; the narrative becomes episodic and “difficult”. Amy Taubin described *The Hurt Locker* as

“a structuralist war movie”, and applauded “brilliant” cinematography with “multiple viewpoints and quick and nervous editing” (2009). In her review of the film for the *New York Times*, A.O. Scott also praised *The Hurt Locker*’s episodic structure, whereas Anne Thompson wrote that “this movie is intellectually rigorous and stylishly crafted” (2009). Douglas A. Cunningham focused on its “overall disruption—even explosion—of mainstream narrative drive”, and “its successful integration of form with a larger theme of physical, mental, and social fragmentation” (2009).

Most of these critics point out the director’s relation with modernist tradition. According to Cunningham, the film has “roots in a modernist impulse that emerged in response to World War I”, more broadly in the works of Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf. He asserts that “the innovative narrative trends initiated by these writers cleared a path for similar trends in cinema, appropriated first (...) by the cinematic avant-garde, but later embraced by international feature filmmakers whose works heavily influenced Bigelow’s own style and philosophy”. It is observed, therefore, that Bigelow’s work draws on the influence of art-house cinema, sharing with her predecessors “a commitment to tone, character psychology, and larger thematic questionings” (Cunningham, 2009).

In a similar manner, but in less academic tone, a website fan associated the film with “high art”:

Masterclass, truly wonderful cinema. The detractors of this movie don't get it, and I pity them for not being able to appreciate the genius of this production. To those that see and enjoy movies as high art, I envy you the thrill you are about to experience. (EtienneW, 27/01/2010, source: Metacritic)

It is noteworthy that the film was considered “boring” by some reviewers because of its modernist aesthetics:

Please, oh please, stop shaking the camera. I don't mind it in an action scene, but what you guys are doing to films today is making me sick (...) And the unnecessary zooms... (...)You're making films look like they are made by amateurs. (FrankM, 18/04/2010, source: Metacritic)

In the modernist reviews, Bigelow’s biography is often mentioned, in particular her studies at the San Francisco Art Institute and her scholarship at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City, in order to show her training in ‘high art’ and intellectual background. In addition, critics produce some sort of dichotomy between Cameron’s *Avatar* and Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*, a Hollywood mega-blockbuster vs.

a smaller scale art-house film, ignoring the fact that Bigelow's film contains a considerable amount of explosions, characteristic of big-budget Hollywood filmmaking.

In contrast to the modernist readings, the "postmodernist" reviews do notice Bigelow's fascination with popular genre cinema. In these reviews, the film is often depicted as transcending the binary opposition between high and popular culture, as "neither simply subversive nor easily classifiable as commercial" (Benson-Allott 2010: 33). Robert Alpert compares Bigelow with other genre directors:

Like the best of the old-school, U.S. directors who preceded her and have also worked in the area of action films — such as Sam Fuller, Anthony Mann, and Sam Peckinpah — or in disparate genres — such as Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock — Bigelow's films strikingly reiterate plots in different settings and thereby engage us in her most personal concerns, both her ideals and her demons. (Alpert, 2010)

Alpert contextualizes Bigelow as a popular auteur, with a distinct visual style, who returns to the same themes and obsessions. Another feature that "postmodernist" critics emphasize is the self-consciousness of her work. According to Abercrombie, Lash and Longhurst, postmodernism is a combination of formal transparency and distortions of perspective. Postmodernist works do not conceal their fictional nature, revealing their stitches or lead frames instead. Through camera movements and editing, Bigelow creates a critical distance between spectator and narrative. Her film, like a stained-glass window reveals the lead frames:

Bigelow's movie is self-consciously about herself and the limits of her moviemaking. It is no coincidence that many of the film's scenes resemble the making of a movie (...) (Alpert, 2010).

What is more, *The Hurt Locker* is also described as a self-conscious rethinking of the war genre itself. A sense of postmodern nostalgia permeates the film, arising from viewing the war story through the lens of the of Western, in which the protagonist, striving to be a cowboy, wanders the streets in a dead-end small town. As Alejandro Villalba observes:

Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* is a rather impressive feature that reimagines the Iraq War sub-genre as a Western genre film, with celebrated cowboys dressed as admired soldiers, the Middle East cities used as Old West towns. Bigelow tries to reinvent this modern war film by flirting with the realism of the Iraq War and the Wild West mythologies, blurring the film's identification between them in the intent to create a picture that contains both veracity and romanticism; the shake-cam filmmaking with the adrenaline situations of a ranger in the middle of the deserted town (Villalba, 2009).

Aware of a long history of the war genre, Bigelow mixes it with other genres and changes its seemingly fixed rules, offering a more complex view not only of the war film itself, but also of its relation to other genres. At the same time, it is observed that she deconstructs the heroic myth of the West, engaging the viewer to rethink the idealized Western masculinity. As the critic Amy Taubin noticed, Bigelow is a "daughter" of Peckinpah, specifically because her "double-faced critique of — and infatuation with — the codes of masculinity" (2009).

Finally, as some critics point out, in terms of narrative the film merges the modernist, fragmented narrative with the mainstream filmmaking of action cinema, which is a feature characteristic of postmodernism. According to Abercrombie, Lash and Longhurst, all cultural paradigms can be described in terms of their specific modes of organization of time and space. In realism, time and space are organized along lines of order and stability and the "assumptions of a single viewing eye" (1992: 120). On the one hand, Bigelow's work implies a story and does not disrupt the 'rational' construction of cause and effect. On the other, as the modernist interpretations showed, in terms of time Bigelow avoids making her narrative move along, while spatially, she refuses to give the viewers only one viewpoint:

Throughout the film Bigelow shows us all perspectives — a shot from behind Iraqi snipers or a videographer taking pictures of Eldridge, a close-up of the eye of the cab driver focusing on James holding a pistol on him, a long shot of James' squad from behind the bars of a window, a foreshortened close-up of a white building seen through the scope of a rifle, or a helicopter seen high above through the visor to Thompson's helmet. "There's lots of eyes on us," at one point Sanborn says with fear in his voice. (Alpert, 2010)

To conclude, there are multiple inter-related discourses that circulate around Bigelow and *The Hurt Locker* in the critical dissemination of her work. It is clear that Bigelow's status is under continuous negotiation. Jermyn and Redmond put it this way: "As one of the few high-profile female directors in contemporary Hollywood cinema,

and one who has distinguished herself in the action genre at that, she has become a curiosity, an oddity and object of fascination, whom critics and academics struggle to place” (2003: 127). Bigelow’s recent success renewed critical and scholarly interest in women filmmakers and women authorship, which prove to be intensely problematic categories, especially for those women directors who gain entrance into Hollywood<sup>2</sup>. As was illustrated at the beginning of this paper, some of the reviewers did not feel comfortable with Bigelow’s making supposedly “masculine” genres, which, as was argued, might be regarded as a part of specific feminist politics, which deplores the mainstream, commercial, narrative cinema. The use of realism, modernism and postmodernism as modes of reception might help to transcend the binary oppositions of “mass culture” paradigm discussed by Hollows, and reveal a fascinating critical reception with respect to, for example, the film’s representation of reality: a number of critics applauded it as a “realistic” image of war, some of them praised it for its formal aesthetics, and others read it as a postmodernist work which challenges dominant cinematic codes and transcends the gender boundaries.

Claire Johnston claimed that mainstream films may function counter-hegemonically if they contain enough ideological contradictions (1975: 3). The analysis of critical responses to Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* shows that it permits multiple, often contradictory readings, which should be taken into consideration when contextualizing the complex and heterogeneous work of this woman director.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Lane, Christina (2000), *Feminist Hollywood: From Born in Flames to Point Break*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

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