

A close-up portrait of Kathryn Bigelow on a film set. She has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a black leather jacket over a grey t-shirt. The background is filled with out-of-focus film equipment and bright studio lights.

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KATHRYN BIGELOW

HOLLYWOOD'S WARRIOR

Directed by Michèle Dominici
Produced by Arte France and Les Batelières Productions



Pitch

American society is becoming increasingly tense. Violence is on the rise. Until now, it was confined to the screens. Now it seems to be overflowing, invading reality. One filmmaker has highlighted this phenomenon before her peers. A filmmaker in a class of her own, the first woman to win the Oscar for best director: Kathryn Bigelow. Through her work, we will tell the story of violence in the United States.



Note of intent

Of the hundred most popular films at the world box office since the birth of cinema, ninety-two are American productions. Hollywood's influence is ubiquitous and the vast majority of the stories that these blockbusters tell us are very violent ones: crime, torture, war, rape and murder abound in our cultural representations. Death is cinematic. And Kathryn Bigelow's work reflects this. She has made this theme the raw material of her work. But for the filmmaker, violence is not just a simple narrative, spectacular or aesthetic tool. It is her obsession. Present in all her films, it takes different and contradictory forms. Her use of it seems to be part of this long tradition.

The fight

In 1978, Kathryn Bigelow made her first film. A 17-minute short film written as part of her thesis at Columbia University in New York. In *The Set-Up*, two men fight to the death. "I knew exactly what I wanted. But I didn't know that you just pretend to hit each other, and then you add sound effects afterwards. The guys were losing an alarming amount of blood. They stayed in bed for the next two weeks. I almost killed them." During the 17 minutes of the fight, we hear two philosophers coldly analysing what is going on, commenting on the different aspects of the evolution of the fight and underlining their political connections to fascism.

The obsession

But unlike Quentin Tarantino, who plays with violence, aesthetises it, detaches it from reality, and overuses it; in Bigelow's films, it seems that every time, the violence is heavy with meaning. It is never there for entertainment. It is never absent, of course, as it is the inescapable grammar of American cinema, and perhaps even of Western culture; but with Bigelow, it is a subject in itself.

The violence

Kathryn Bigelow does not use violence as an outlet. It is never portrayed positively. Over the years and with each film, her vision has sharpened. Bigelow's first films are based on very precise genre codes: the vampire film, the road movie, the buddy movie, the thriller... Each time, the filmmaker enjoys dissecting the power relationships between people, between communities, taking small jabs at her country here and there. The second part of her career is marked by the entry of the United States into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (the first conflicts involving young soldiers by the hundred thousand since Vietnam). Bigelow asserts her critique and clearly tells us how violence is no longer just an everyday feature of American life, but that America itself is responsible for it.



Note of intent

The turn

In 2005, intrigued by an article that war reporter Mark Boal had written, Kathryn Bigelow contacted him. The result of their meeting was *The Hurt Locker*, the film that put her in the spotlight. She won an Oscar for this film, which appears to be extremely macho at first sight. But her approach was different: "The dirty truth is that some men love war. I try to understand why, to look at what it means to be a hero in the 21st century." She offers a careful analysis of the death drive. Without complacency, without emphasis, without fascination or lyricism.

She follows up with *Zero Dark Thirty*, in which she addresses burning topics. The script was written and approved less than 18 months after the assassination of Bin Laden. The film is a hit. A success in theatres, but a polarizing work for the critics: some finally indulge in praising her as a "virtuoso"; but Naomie Wolf, in the *Guardian*, compares her to Leni Riefenstahl, criticising her for what she considered to be "an apology for torture". Regardless, she moves on with *Detroit*. An impressive dive into the racist madness of an outrageous police blunder during the Detroit riots in 1967. Bigelow and Boal did not want to tell the audience a story but to immerse them in an experience and give them a glimpse of the other side of the Summer of Love. Once again, her critics do not hold anything back. This time, she is accused of speaking on behalf of black people. She laconically replies: "I did my duty."ushes it off.

The mystery

Little is known about her private life. "Anything a woman says will be held against her." Kathryn Bigelow is a woman in Hollywood. Journalists often try to remind her of this, and she systematically brushes it off. To her, being a woman director and the first to win an Oscar is not even a topic for discussion. Or at least not publicly, as if it were a dangerous subject; or to try and make people forget her gender in an industry that is almost entirely male on that side of the camera... The question arises, however, precisely in how she approaches violence. Her male peers are like a fish in water with this theme. In Bigelow's cinema, violence is not there to frighten, but to make you think.

So we will delve with her into the history of violence in the last forty years in the United States. Kathryn Bigelow's career began at the very moment her country surrendered in Vietnam. By looking at her ten feature films, using excerpts from interviews she has given, drawing on the reflections of American researchers on cinema and violence, and illustrating the whole thing with archives that echo Bigelow's intentions, we are going to tell what has happened since.



Development review

The archives, interviews and making-of

The difficulty we have had in getting in touch with her for months makes our task more difficult. Fortunately, her career now spans decades, and she has already allowed herself to be interviewed by a few journalists and directors. Taken together, all the interviews we have found make for a fascinating experience.

The archives are both rich and insufficient. Rich, because they take us back to different eras, different shoots, and give us a glimpse of the evolution of a woman who has become one of the most captivating directors in Hollywood. Insufficient because certain anecdotes are missing, certain stages of her life and above all the elephant in the room: the violence in American cinema that neither Kathryn Bigelow nor anyone else fully addresses as a theme for reflection. This is the very topic we want to explore through her journey. We have identified the people who will be able to complete this story with us. Below is the list of witnesses we wish to interview.

Those who knew her as a student or a beginning director, those who co-wrote her stories or acted in her films, those who have been observing her cinema for decades, those who finally analyse this penchant of American cinema for violence, so omnipresent and yet so little thought about, it seems, by those who make it.

All her films put together thus form an unprecedented and pioneering vision of violence in the United States. Bigelow shows us that the cinematic image is no longer a distant object that separates us from the world, that shields us from reality; but that it instead brings us closer to the rest of society, violently if need be. Thanks to images from the 70s to today, we will tell this story through a thought-out mix of clips from her films and archives that marked their time (the Vietnam War, the Detroit riots, Rodney King, the war in Iraq, the assassination of Bin Laden, George Floyd, to name but a few). This back and forth between historical events and clips from her films will help us better understand what Kathryn Bigelow wants to tell us about violence in the United States, and the history of its representation on the screen.

We will also use making-of footage to take a step back and analyse Bigelow's choices in depth.



Production note

A major figure in American cinema, Kathryn Bigelow is the first woman filmmaker to have won the Oscar for best director, but also the only one to study violence as a subject in and of itself. However, no documentary has been made about her or this issue, which is so pivotal in American cinema.

The film *Kathryn Bigelow*, written and directed by Michèle Dominici, will first of all examine, through an intimate portrait and through this extraordinary filmmaker's work, her relationship with violence. The aim is to question the filmmaker and her entourage about her work, in an attempt to understand the origins but also and above all the expressions of this pictorial representation of violence.

To also understand the woman behind the work, a director of international renown, about whom little is known. Michèle Dominici has often been interested in the question of the place of women and the strong female figures who have, throughout history, imposed themselves on the patriarchal world.



Speakers

The speakers

We will detail this evolution by using Kathryn Bigelow's own words, of course, given in various interviews since her debut in the 1970s. We will also search the archives for testimonies from her collaborators (actors and actresses, screenwriters, producers, cinematographers) on the occasion of the release of each of her ten films. Her voice and their views will punctuate the film with memories, observations and comments on her approach.

Editing

In order to give full life to the directorial intention, the role of editing will be central, the objective being to no longer look at the archives as an album of old pictures, but to make reality collide with fiction and vice versa, as Kathryn Bigelow does in *Detroit*. We will give editing a real narrative function and not just an illustrative one.

The voice

The narrative will rely on a voice over which will have the function of smoothing the narrative and providing simple elements of synthesis. Its texture will be soft in order to highlight the harshness and violence of the images.



Witnesses

WILLEM DAFOE To whom she offered the leading part in *The Loveless*, which was also her very first feature film. A violent story of lost bikers.

ANGELA BASSETT Who participates in one of Bigelow's most visionary films, *Strange Days*, and who explains why Kathryn Bigelow "makes better action films than men".

JAMES CAMERON Who was her colleague, co-writer, co-producer, co-writer and companion.

MICHAEL OBLowitz College buddy, member of Cine-Virus, now a genre and B-movie director himself.

EDWARD PRESSMAN Producer of *Blue Steel*, considered one of the most important producers in launching Kathryn Bigelow's career.

JAMIE LEE CURTIS Heroine of *Blue Steel*, the first thriller to feature a female cop.

JESSICA CHASTAIN Starring role in the controversial *Zero Dark Thirty*, about the American pursuit and assassination of Osama bin Laden.

ANTHONY MACKIE Shared the lead role in *The Hurt Locker* with Jeremy Renner and worked with Bigelow again for *Detroit*.

MARK BOAL Writer of Kathryn Bigelow's last three films, which marked her shift from genre to political films.

BARRY ACKROYD Ken Loach's historical director of photography, and chosen by Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurt Locker* and *Detroit*; both for his documentary style and the fact that his images exude truth.

AMY TAUBIN Film critic who has followed Kathryn Bigelow since her debut. Editor of *American Film Comment* and *British Sound & Sight*.

MANOHLA DARGIS One of the leading film critics at *The New York Times*. Very knowledgeable about Kathryn Bigelow's films.

BETTE GORDON Researcher, director and professor at Columbia University, known for her radical views on sex, violence and power.

JAMES KENDRICK Professor at Baylor University, author of *Film Violence*, an introduction to the role of violence in cinema from silent films to the present day.

HILARY NERONI Professor at the University of Vermont, has specialized in exploring the role of violence in film, with a particular focus on women's films.

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