

The Audience as Embodied Voyeurs in Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel*

Laura Hebert

Music thunders to the pumping of a beating heart, footsteps fall in time with the quickening inhale of breaths, and shadows linger uncomfortably. In Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990), the bodily excess displayed through the images on the screen shocks the viewer into a push-pull relationship that is essential to the film's design and content. The harrowing acts and the moments of disturbing perversion draw the audience into a tense, embodied relationship to Bigelow's film. Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis), the focus of the film, is a female police officer, showcasing strength and challenging gender norms as she negotiates a society obsessing over her power. After taking down a robber in a convenience store, Megan finds herself in the role of muse for an unknown killer ravaging the city. This essay focuses on the materiality of Bigelow's filming techniques, such as the use of the telephoto lens, to establish a relational viewership between the viewer and Turner's body that demonstrates the critical potential of voyeurism. Bigelow encourages a productive voyeurism as a template to foreground the issues of power asymmetries under patriarchy, especially through the movement of Megan's body through space and frame.

Blue Steel confronts viewers bluntly with the trials of Megan Turner by fixating on her body and by capturing the conflicts Turner faces with her colleagues, her family and her nemesis, Eugene, as they all question her abilities and obsess over her power. Bigelow brings the audience into the film by creating different planes of focus in the film's imagery, at times forcing Turner's body to the foreground by actively diminishing background detail when she is onscreen. Background characters and landscape therefore are intentionally blurred compared to the crisp definition of the essential presence of Turner. Her surroundings are blurred into submission and she stands dominant within the

Laura Hebert is a graduate of John Abbott College's Honour's Science program and is now studying Bioengineering at McGill University. While at CEGEP, Laura also had the opportunity to study in Mario Bellemare's Cinematic Body class. Despite having chosen a scientific career path, Laura has a deep-rooted love for film, writing, music and the outdoors. She hopes to continue to balance her passion for the arts and for science in the years to come.

frame. The viewer cannot help but track her movements through the frame and experience her actions alongside her, as her every motion is emphasised through the intensity of Bigelow's focus. The technique forces the viewer to become more implicated in Turner's world of violence, crime and perversion, and experience the struggles with her. The only thing separating the audience from the foregrounding of Turner's harrowing experiences, is the screen, yet this small degree of separation still prevents the viewer from reaching out to aid and comfort her. It is in part this heightened sense of helplessness experienced by the viewer that forces them to become aware of the film medium itself. *Blue Steel* thus plays up the cinema's ability to "convince spectators that the moving image [is], in fact, palpable and dangerous" (1989, 115), as Tom Gunning has argued about the first motion pictures which startled the viewer through the novelty of the medium. *Blue Steel* renews this sense of novelty by highlighting the relationship between viewer and spectator. As the focus of the film, Turner's character is isolated from what is around her. She is one of the only women on the police force and the target of Eugene's disturbed affection, further singling her out from the rest of the characters and drawing the audience's focus, a factor highlighted by Bigelow's obsessive hewing to her. This film demands that the audience members surrender their own control and give in to the voyeuristic fascination that the filming techniques encompass. The viewer cannot act on their desire to aid Turner in her continual isolation (in both content and style) and must instead sit back and endure the experience in the only way they can, through watching her body's movements.

Bigelow's use of tracking shots, matched with her focus on the movement of the characters as they witness moments of surprise, fear and perversion, serve to limit the viewer's experience of a scene. These tracking shots create a sort of tunnel vision for the audience, preventing them from seeing beyond the perspective of a given character, typically Turner. Limiting the audience's knowledge of their surroundings induces the feeling of being trapped, a cinematic claustrophobia that implicates the viewer in the scene's rush of adrenaline. The viewer thus becomes so deeply connected with movement in these scenes because they are not allowed to participate from a cool cognitive distance, but instead become physically invested in the outcome of a given scene. In *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener explain that in newer approaches of understanding a more embodied spectatorship, "the spectator is no longer passively receiving optical information, but exists as a bodily being, enmeshed acoustically, sensorily, somatically and affectively in the film's visual texture and soundscape" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 10). This is true in *Blue Steel*, as the

audience is no longer limited to an experience where images merely support narrative and character, but rather is invited to experience the tactility and sensorial stimulus of the images. Bigelow's filming techniques invite audiences to succumb to a full-body experience filled with tension and anticipation. The film's excessive style leaves the audience with recognizable bodily energy as if they too were packed full of adrenaline on a police chase through New York City.

The lasting effects of *Blue Steel's* viewing experience are heightened by the excessive use of these techniques and the key themes they display, such as the film's investigation of gender dynamics. For example, when a man enters a scene with Turner, he too becomes enmeshed in the film's acute focus on Turner's world. Additionally, this close adherence to Turner becomes an invasion into Turner's space (in life and in the frame), offsetting Turner's place as the only source of strength in the image; she is now challenged by a male perspective in a power struggle. Along with Eugene, Turner's father and co-workers all confront Turner through abuse, power and control. Bigelow uses a telephoto lens in these scenes to demonstrate an overpowering male perspective. Turner is constantly under the surveillance of the lens's flattened, long distance effect, making her a body under obsessive study. The use of tracking shots both upsets and highlights this power dynamic as well, as it cues the viewer to consider shifts in which character is making the decisions. For example, multiple times throughout the film, Turner leaves a static position in a scene where she occupies the frame with a male character. As she separates herself from the other character, the shot follows her, demonstrating the power she has over the image by forcing it into movement. Bigelow employs this technique to grant primacy of power to Turner, even with the recurring masculine threats of power that enter the frame with her. The film's blocking, camera movement and framing thus challenge the conclusions of traditional gaze theory which see the camera as serving to strip power away to give it to a masculine-identified observer. Philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi states that "power comes up into us from the field of potential" (2015, 20). This 'field of potential' is evident in these scenes as Bigelow assigns Turner the potential to separate herself from the male control trying to dominate her choices, freeing her to make decisions for herself. Bigelow's filming style ensures that the viewer experiences this power struggle alongside Turner, in understanding how she must stay in control of her own situation. Through her telephoto and tracking shots, Bigelow compels the viewer to share in the gendered power dynamics experienced by Turner. While these elements of Bigelow's style are very effective, the planes of focus and perspective used in

this film are not the only techniques used to engage the audience; Bigelow also employs close-up shots inventively to unsettle and disrupt the viewing experience.

Bigelow uses close-ups pervasively throughout the film to establish unsettling, shocking, excessive intimacy with the images. In the opening credit sequence of the film, Bigelow's close-ups fetishize the gun, pointing to the deceptive beauty and power of the phallic object. Bigelow's obsessive focus on the weapon forces it to reveal its excess: it is too sleek, too beautiful, its materiality too perfect. Already, the concepts of control, power and voyeurism are embodied by the images of the gun and announce some of the themes to be further addressed throughout the film. The opening's excessive use of gun footage spawns discomfort. It is rare that an object be so closely and obsessively examined—and instructive in that the opening scene cues the viewer to contemplate the unusual intensity with which the film's images are, and will later be portrayed. This is evident during the sex scene with Turner and one of her colleagues, where close-up images are used to hue closely to the bodies on screen. The uncomfortable closeness of skin and sweat in this scene forces viewers into an acute awareness of their voyeuristic position, which invades the privacy of intimacy and nakedness. The viewer's discomfort during these scenes is created in close-up imagery that recalls the way Bigelow's camera lingers on the gun in the opening sequence. The dynamic relationships between sex, violence, and power all become clear here.

Stephen Shaviro, in a chapter on *Blue Steel*, writes that “such a hypertrophy of the visual” in such moments “is Bigelow's way of undoing the security and possessiveness that have conventionally been associated with the ‘male gaze’” (1993, 8). For Shaviro, Bigelow thus “pushes fetishism and voyeuristic fascination to the point where they explode” (Shaviro 1993, 8). This dynamic can be understood thematically as well through the ‘fetishism and voyeuristic fascination’ that both Eugene and the police force share for Turner, as their interest comes from a position of male perspective and power: Turner is the subject of their relentlessly “male gaze.” The visual techniques employed during the film accentuate this fascination and force it upon the spectator as a way to render the power of this gaze suspect. This technique effectively places the viewer in a position of understanding the implications of possessiveness as they experience the events Turner faces alongside her. As I argue above, Bigelow's use of telephoto lensing and tracking shots that force them into Turner's perspective already are working to unsettle and reveal such power dynamics; the visual fascination at play in these scenes makes the viewer think critically about the film's investigation of gendered forms of power. Bigelow's

style makes viewers hyper-aware that they have agreed to be submitted to an experience that demands they give their power not just to Turner's perspective, but also to the images themselves. This experience can be defined as cinemasochism, which Patricia MacCormack explains requires that "all spectators relinquish their place of power" (2010, 164) and allow for the images to "use" them. The film's disturbing rape scene for example, is difficult to watch and yet the images are so bursting with a visceral magnetism that attracts the attention of the viewer even as the events of the scene repulse. Bigelow refuses the viewer a conventional, comfortable distance from the screen. The movement of characters and the sounds associated with the struggle entangle to prevent the viewer from escaping their presence and present-ness. Whether they cover their eyes or plug their ears in an effort to escape the events on screen, or offer their unimpeded attention, spectators realize they are in a position of vulnerability as witnesses to relentless, disturbing visuality and aurality. The scene thus not only portrays images of Eugene and Turner in a violent struggle for control, but also takes the control away from the viewer.

Just as the gun is fetishized during the opening sequence, Turner's character traits of courage, strength, and independence are also obsessively in focus in the way the gun becomes a potential source of power for her to wield throughout the film. On many occasions, Turner's position as a police officer is critiqued by the men in her life. The resulting doubt Turner feels with regard to her capabilities illustrates an issue of gender within the film. The gun—an embodiment of systemic (masculine) power—is constantly in and out of Turner's possession, it having been taken away from and given to her by men. Thus, Turner's power is restricted, controlled—and defined—by the men around her. A key indicator of this comes when Eugene asks Turner to take out her gun for his own pleasure. Eugene's response to Turner wielding a gun is obsessive and is rooted in a place of heterosexual male fantasy surrounding female power. This scene in the film is a turning point for Turner as it also comes with her realization that Eugene is an obsessed murderer. The wielding of Turner's gun is initially in loose, shaky hands and controlled by Eugene's desires. However, as Turner's understanding of her situation shifts so does her intention in wielding the gun. Turner takes back control of the scene, holding the gun in a position of strength and power, without wavering. But it is more in her posture than in the weapon itself that power can be sourced in this moment. The gun becomes a tool that is merely a conduit for Turner's power. The very stature of Turner's body in these images reveals to the viewer the ability that the body holds in conveying potential. Linda Williams explains this type of scene to allow for the shifting of "viewer identification [...] from an 'object terror

gendered feminine’ to an active power with bisexual components” (Williams 1991, 7). This change in Turner’s posture and treatment of the gun can be seen as her mastery of both the female and male powers in the film. As *Blue Steel* progresses, Turner retains this sense of “active power” as she dedicates her time to convicting Eugene.

Horror films, which Williams explains are a type of body genre, generally depict an excess of violence and “the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (1991, 4). This can be seen in the last sequence of *Blue Steel*, where Turner finally captures Eugene and shoots him. Turner is fulfilling the role of the “final girl—which (in a bit of allusive, intertextual casting) Jamie Lee Curtis herself played in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978)—where a female character finds revenge on a male abuser in a Western-like face off. Curtis was one of the original “final girls” and became an icon for female power in film as she continued to emulate this character type throughout her career in works such as *Blue Steel*. The final scenes of this film essentially grant Turner with the power she has been fighting for throughout the narrative. After Eugene’s death, Turner experiences a sudden deflation of energy, her emotions having been so intense throughout the film that her body collapses from an overdose of sensation. Bigelow demonstrates the effect through the slow-motion, close-up drop of the gun Turner used to kill Eugene onto the car seat beside her. The gun is finally out of Turner’s grasp and whatever power that came along with it has exited her body, leaving her to succumb to the pain she has endured. The final images of the film show Turner slumped in her seat, with her head bowed and her eyes lowered as she is carried out of the car in an epilogue that continues in slow-motion.

The shocking events of violence, murder, rape and abuse that take place throughout *Blue Steel* startle the spectator and produce affect, the capacity to be affected and to affect something else in return (Massumi, 2015). When spectators watch a film, they are relationally affected by its materiality; they are being shocked audio-visually. When Turner is shot by Eugene, the materiality of the gunshot wound alarms the spectator. Turner’s body is thrown backwards in excessive slow motion as blood sprays excessively from the bullet wound in her shoulder. The slow motion used in this scene painfully lengthens the duration for which the spectator must witness Turner’s pain. The effect draws out the potential for the audience to feel elongated stress with the female protagonist, as their perspective is intertwined with hers. Another example of this extended duration of affect is when Turner is being choked by Eugene as he shoots her friend. Once again, the scene is portrayed through slow-motion, highlighting the power struggle, and accentuating the viewer’s experience of

helplessness and anger at witnessing such a disturbing action taking place. Moreover, the camera accentuates Eugene's control over Turner by shooting at an upward angle on Turner's anguished face. There is the sense of Eugene as an unstoppable murderer towering over Turner as the gun he wields is pointed directly at the camera, violating the audience's safety in both their alignment with Turner and in directly addressing them, exposing their position as witnesses in the dark. Again, the viewer has agreed to be submitted to an experience that demands they give their power to the images themselves, highlighting the voyeuristic excesses of the film once more. Neither of these scenes features any dialogue; it is rather the camera angles, movement, close-ups and blocking of the scene that produces affect.

Through excessive slow-motion, whether it be the spraying of blood or the reaching for a gun in an image, Bigelow's film encourages spectators to respond viscerally to what they are witnessing, as their attention is fixed on the onscreen bodies and materiality of the medium. As Shaviro notes, it can be understood that "the disjunction between speech and image" in such moments "reflects the incapacity of language [...] to abolish and replace appearance" (Shaviro 1993, 29). The body experiences knowledge that language often fails to express. In such scenes, more can be inferred through a reaction to a visceral stimulus than one solely expressed through language. Bigelow's images are most effective at affectively immersing spectators in the materiality of the film, rather than allowing them the comfortable oblivion that they are watching from a distance. The movement of red blood spewing from a gun wound demands the spectator's attention. Similarly, the clawing of desperate hands and the writhing of bodies calls for focus on the screen itself. Excess in violence, pleasure and emotions are typical of body genres such as horror, pornography and melodrama (Williams 1991, 12). In *Blue Steel*, excess in the violence associated with horror focuses on the bodies on the screen and stimulates the audience's senses. An example of the horror body genre coming to life in this film is during the scene where Eugene is bathing in the blood of one of his victims. In a shockingly slow, close-up image, Eugene smears the crimson fluid across his naked body in a disturbing act of sadism that, once again, the audience is forced to experience in uncomfortable proximity. This scene appeals directly to all the senses, as the colour of the blood, the eerie music and the imagined iron-like scent of blood induce feelings of disgust and fear within the audience. In terms of body genres, this scene is successful as horror, because it can be "measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen" (Williams 1991, 4). In this scene, the viewer may gag or shudder due to the complete disregard for human life and the sanctity of the body. The viewer

may even experience an itching sensation of blood running over their own skin, the smooth, rich fluid dripping across their bare flesh. This sensation supports the theories discussed by Elsaesser and Hagener that “skin is a sense organ and touch is a means of perception, from which follows an understanding of cinema as a tactile experience [and] one that grants the eye ‘haptic’ faculties” (2010, 10). This scene succeeds in invading the vulnerability of the spectators’ skin by invoking this unpleasant response to the horror on screen.¹

Another grotesque example of the capacity of blood to affect the audience is when Eugene pulls out the bullet from his arm. Again, close-up shots are used to focus on the blood and gore while a slurping, sucking sound rushes into the eardrums of the spectators as the bullet is removed. The pairing of disturbing sounds and vivid visuals of the breaking of skin creates a traumatic sensorial experience for the audience. These examples of excessive violence may be vexing and difficult to watch; however, their images are presented in such a way that one cannot help but become hypnotized by the combination of sound and motion on screen. The events are so startling and disturbing that a reaction of the spectator to the actions of the bodies on screen, forces a deep relationship and understanding to be formed between film and viewer. Tom Gunning explains that at the core of early attraction cinema there lies “a series of visual shocks” (Gunning 1989, 116), understood by the “uncanny and agitating power they [early films] exerted on the audience” (1989, 116). In early cinema, these moments were central to grabbing the audience’s attention and pulling them into the film far more than language, yet genres such as horror sustain this shocking aspect of early films. Bigelow relies on distressing and horrific events to affect the audience in a similar way. The visual shocks within *Blue Steel* force discomfort to be experienced by the audience members. This in turn strengthens the relationship between film and spectator, creating sympathy for the victims, respect for Turner and fear for Eugene.

Bigelow’s film *Blue Steel* invokes a visual fascination within the audience in its inventive use of lenses, focus, camera movement and speed, and emphasis on materiality within the scene. This fascination is presented through excess of such stylistic features, and a close adherence to bodies that startles the viewer into experiencing new perspectives and new understandings of the essence of the film’s themes, including the challenging of gender stereotypes. Voyeurism—

¹ Blood is displayed in excess in this scene, and the display of violence in slow-motion underlines the development of the horror genre alongside the western. This slow-motion dance of violence is exemplified by the shooting style in Sam Peckinpah’s *Wild Bunch* (1969), for example.

and the viewers' awareness of their own role in it—stirs discomfort and curiosity within the audience as images are examined in intense detail, accentuated by close-up imagery, augmented planes of focus, and extended slow-motion. Bigelow keeps focus, perspective and materiality in constant motion to highlight the power dynamics between Turner's body and those of the masculine bodies around her. The film appeals to all of the senses, its images of violence and terror stimulating unpleasant bodily reactions in the spectator. *Blue Steel* is thus a film embodying the search for female power in a patriarchal society, where strength is found within the movement and central placement of Megan Turner's body.²

References

- Elsaesser, Thomas, and Malte Hagener. 2010. *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gunning, Tom. 1989. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." In *Early Film*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker, 1-10. London: British Film Institute.
- MacCormack, Patricia. 2010. "Cinemasochism: Submissive Spectatorship as Unthought." *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy*, edited by D. N. Rodowick. 157-176. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Massumi, Brian. 2015. *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . 2002. *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Shaviro, Stephen. 1993. *The Cinematic Body*. St-Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Williams, Linda. 2004. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" (1991). In *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 727-741. New York: Oxford University Press.

² This essay was written for the course, "The Cinematic Body," taught by Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare at John Abbott College in the fall of 2019.

- 2020/2021 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Intellectual rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).