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Video essay

Heightened Genre and Women's Filmmaking in Hollywood: Embodying History in Detroit (Kathryn Bigelow, 2017)

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ABSTRACT

This video essay explores Kathryn Bigelow's 2017 film Detroit from the perspective of heightened genericity. While the film is overtly docudramatic, the essay explores the various fictional genres which it tends not merely to deploy but rather to explicitly cite, with varying degrees of self-awareness. It argues that embracing artificial storytelling offers an ideal means to stage the film's central concern with how highly constructed narratives inform everyday behaviours. This conviction plays out here first and foremost in the domain of excessively violent white masculinity – state-endorsed and vigilante – which is situated in a long history of US representations. At the same time, the essay demonstrates that the generic self-consciousness of Detroit instantiates rather than eliding Bigelow as director, which has ideological implications when it comes to a white woman representing Black suffering. It finally suggests that the deliberate emphasis on both identities apparent both in Detroit's narrative and meta-textually works to model and invite empathy and communion across identity categories.

Keywords: women's filmmaking, intertextual pastiche, genre memory, Hollywood cinema, emotion

Video link: https://vimeo.com/1058216302/c8945ef0db?share=copy

ACCOMPANYING COMMENTARY

Deriving from my book on Heightened Genre and Women's Filmmaking in Hollywood (Harrod, 2021), this is the second in a series of video essays staging its key claim: that a significant group of female filmmakers in Hollywood have since around 1990 been making films that are at once highly self-conscious yet highly emotionally affecting[1]. Such self-reflexivity relies on intertextual allusion and so it felt impact is best evoked by juxtaposing different genre films to recreate case studies' layered address. In the case of Detroit (Kathryn Bigelow, 2017), I further argue that the film's aesthetic articulation of meaning through a palimpsestic approach to historical genres mirrors its thematic exploration of the history of emotions, and specifically of race hate in the USA.

The essay thus opens by citing part of Sara Ahmed's statement:

[1] Relevant filmmakers in addition to Kathryn Bigelow include Sofia Coppola and Greta Gerwig (who have received growing critical attention since the start of this project in the late 2010s) as well as Nora Ephron, Amy Heckerling, Catherine Hardwicke (see also Harrod, 2022), Nancy Meyers and Kimberly Peirce (who have still received relatively little). For a full discussion of *Detroit*, see pp. 184-209.

> *I would argue that a politics that acts without reaction is impossible: such a possibility depends on the erasure and concealment of histories that come before the subject. There is no pure or originary action, which is outside such a history of 'reaction', whereby bodies come to be 'impressed upon' by the surfaces of others. (Ahmed, 2004: 174)*

Ahmed's insight expresses the way in which individuals are preconditioned to adopt certain attitudes by their circumstances, which are in turn embedded in the legacy of earlier generations – including representational ones. It informs what follows: a prologue précising Bigelow's earlier films, both independent and more ostentatiously generic, establishing Detroit's status as a clear continuation of existing tendencies. Part of the aim here is to counteract the myth of 'authenticity' once attached to docudramatic films such as this, for – as a synopsis and intratextual title card from Detroit go on to explain – the film is based on a real incident of police brutality at the Algiers Motel during Detroit's 1967 race riots, in which several innocent African Americans were killed or injured after police jumped to erroneous conclusions about the firing of a gun (in fact a toy pistol).

The main body of the essay emphasises Detroit's visceral address through an appeal to fictional genres including the horror film and, perhaps less obviously, the war film and the Western. It emphasises how the mixing of realist and more ostentatiously contrived modes (itself typical of post-Iraq war films [Tasker and Atakav, 2010]) undermines the ontological veracity of anyone 'data stream', instead favouring what Steven N. Lipkin calls 'emotional logic' in the service of a kind of 'moral truth' (Lipkin, 1999: 82). Opposing the argument that depicting any suffering invites voyeurism (e.g. Hollywood, 2002: 93), the essay champions the power of engrossing genre fictions to promote empathy. It implicitly defends Bigelow's engagement with Black histories specifically as serving an evidentiary function. In other words, the film contributes to rescuing such precarious subjects from being written out of histories, textual and beyond, by the same token correcting the tendency of the genres in which Detroit participates to cast racial 'others' as at worst villains and at best secondary characters. Instead, Detroit draws on the generic cultural iconicity of suffering male bodies to elevate African American characters to the – classically white male – status of sacrificial trauma victims: protagonists of an allegorical cinema that inscribes nationally-accented ideological scars through individual stories (see King 2011). The essay argues that, combined with an approach to camerawork typified by a sometimes disorienting proximity apt for its themes of misperception rather than mastery of the gaze or 'a purifying coherence' (Westwell in Purse, 2017: 138), and a self-consciousness about the status of the artwork as a constructed, subjective response, this strategy is propitious for delivering 'humane insight' (Baker, 2015).

For Jaimie Baron (2021: 161-164), the real justification for displeasure at what is sometimes perceived as theft of someone else's history concerns many white Americans' inability to share the sheer sense of physical threat experienced frequently by Black subjects. As we see in the footage from Detroit reproduced here, the film goes out of its way to capture this experience by using camerawork that combines a 'sensorially textured rendering of [victims'] physical degradation [that] might evoke pity' (Purse 2017: 140) with, crucially, spending time close to them to register reactions, and maintaining their humanity as subjects who articulate human responses such as professions of innocence and pleas to be let go[2]. Not only that, but it is my contention that the 'feeling shapes' created by genres can further facilitate access to such ethical empathy, bearing in mind that neurological research has shown how in spectatorial 'involuntary mimicry' an embodied response immediately precipitates an emotional one (see Purse, 2011: 44). If Jennifer Barker has built on such phenomenological arguments to claim that viewers' bodily (and therefore emotional) responses might take in mimicry of the film itself, 'whole cinematic structures – textural spatial, or temporal structures, for example – that somehow resonate with their own textual, spatial, and temporal structures' (Barker, 2009: 74, cited in Purse, 2011: 53), I suggest that when it comes to genre cinema, a host of other films of the archive may make their presence felt in this dynamic interaction. Thus, genre narratives hold enhanced power to make us feel a certain way about the different figures featuring in their constellations, by virtue of overall formal design. On the other hand, recalling that psychological studies also show definitively that humans still find it easier to identify with those who are physically similar to them, I also underline Bigelow's staging of white female characters alongside Black men as victims of police brutality (albeit less serious) to promote variegated imaginative paths to empathy through adjacency for a diverse mass audience. Finally, I demonstrate Bigelow's depiction of white ego embodied by the policemen on screen, from whom we are definitively distanced by the tragic dramatic irony that shapes their devastatingly harmful but also utterly futile endeavours to produce a

[2] This citation is taken from Lisa Purse's partial defence of Bigelow's shooting of CIA torture scenes in *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow, 2012), where an overall potentially celebratory retelling of the controversial events leading up to the capture of Osama bin Laden is mitigated by traces of legible 'felt ambivalence' thanks to moments where we are spatio-temporally aligned with and have access to the subjectivity of the otherwise largely dehumanised torture victim. While these remain fleeting in that film, they are much more extensive in *Detroit* – not to mention that it is structured entirely differently, aligning us narratively from early on with the Black characters as subjects animated by complex lives and dreams. My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer who directed me to Purse's discussion.

confession at any cost. This is a further means identified by Baron (2019) to invite a humane rather than voyeuristic stance towards racialised atrocities[3].

In sum, the essay shows that Detroit exemplifies well Ahmed's argument that 'it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the "I" and the "we" are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others [...] emotions create the very effect of an inside and an outside' (2004: p.10).The film thus suggests how socially constructed, individually experienced emotions engendering material realities are shaped by allegiances that are in part aesthetically determined. The final frames of the essay underline the acute importance of viewing the cultural politics of emotion with critical distance in a contemporary society where identitarian retrenchment is mushrooming.

Disclaimer/Publisher's note

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[3] Nevertheless, the essay for its part avoids as far as possible reproducing *Detroit*'s most graphically violent sequences within its discursive reflections, whose principal purpose is more intellectual than itself emotive in address (though this is hardly an absolute opposition), and where I therefore judge such *decontextualised* representations potentially gratuitous.

