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Female Auteurs and Their Perceptions of Gender, Sexuality, and National Identity.

by Elizabeth Chesley

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Introduction

Auteur Theory: A History

Introduced in the 1950's by French film critic Alexandre Astruc, auteur theory places the director as one of the paramount creative voices throughout the production of a film. Astruc argued that film did give individuals the opportunity to express their own thoughts and craft a new worldview to impart on their audience. Proposed in the mist of post-World War II upheaval, Astruc's theory highlighted the importance of an individual rather than a collective in producing a creative endeavor. The impact of this new frame of thinking was immediately felt. While production company seals had previously been used as forms of quality insurance, select directors began having the same impact, and as film theorist Pam Cook argues, was one of the first "attempts to break down the barrier between art cinema and commercial cinema by establishing the presence of artists in the apparently monolithic commodity production of Hollywood" (389). Astruc's article would set up the groundwork for a new French cinema, dubbed French New Wave, but it also wasn't without serious criticism. Fellow film critic André Bazin was quick to present a more cultural argument in his essay *La Politique des Auteurs*, arguing that film is "an art which is both popular and industrial" (251) making it almost impossible for a singular voice to remain completely pure of outside influence. Bazin argued for the importance of calculating the influence of historical and sociological impacts on a director's work, as these directors were simultaneously recreating and participating in a society through their bodies of work. Bazin further argues that the "conception of the author is not compatible with the auteur/subject distinction, because it is of greater importance to find out if a director is worthy of entering the select group of auteurs than

it is to judge how well he has used his material [as] the auteur is a subject to himself; whatever the scenario, he always tells the same story, [...] he has the same attitude and passes the same moral judgments on the action and on the characters.” (255). While Bazin’s argument illustrates the impossibility for an auteur to present an unbiased picture of society, it does emphasize the role that auteurs have in creating a specific set of ideologies throughout their entire body of work, and their ability to use cinema to spread these beliefs. That isn’t to say that the scope of auteur theory is simply limited to how directors engage and replicate cinematic conventions. As film theorist Peter Wollen argues, it is crucial to “comprehend [auteur theory as] a systems of differences and oppositions” (93). How directors chose to compliment or differentiate their work from previous endeavors also serves as a reflection of their engagement with the medium. Auteur theory allows for the study of a singular director in attempts to look at how these directors engage with the larger social expectations that are reproduced through cinematic representation.

Establishing a director as an auteur can be difficult because the title is given in part by film critics and viewers, and in part by the directors themselves. Auteur theory inherently relies on a hierarchy of directors: the top tier dubbed the ‘pantheon’ directors with members like Kubrick and Hitchcock, and working it’s way down to miscellaneous directors with little to no name recognition. Films are ranked on a similar scale, and are separated into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ film. This ranking quickly proves to be problematic, as the judgments passed in ranking a film or director is a completely subjective act, and is completely reliant on the same social norms that Bazin argued devalued a directors ability to present an unbiased truth. This can make establishing the line between a

director and an auteur particularly difficult. As film theorists Noël King and Toby Miller argue, “the identification of directors as auteurs is a move critics make based on a retrospective account of a body of work “ (478) and requires a significant amount of analysis and hindsight. Furthermore, with the introduction of structuralism based film criticism, where the emphasis is on the impact of societal structures on language and the disavowal of the notion of an individual, Auteur theory became even harder to define. It became increasingly clearer that simple judgments of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ films and directors were limiting.

While both Bazin and Astruc point out that an auteur relies on a single shared worldview throughout their work, it’s American film theorist Andrew Sarris who presents a more succinct framework for the delineation between director and auteur. Sarris argues that there are three main levels of competence that an auteur must reach in order to be distinguished as such. The first is technical competence. Deemed the outermost circle in Sarris’s description, in order to be even considered a good director, one must have a good grasp of the technical aspects of film. These tools, such as being able to frame, light a scene, and construct a *mise-en-scène* are pivotal to establishing an auteur. As Sarris states in his essay *Notes on Auteur Theory*, establishing concrete examples of what is needed to direct can be remarkably convoluted, but also necessary. He says, “a badly or an undirected has no importance on a critical scale of values [...] a great director must be a good director” (562). Auteur theory demands not only a greater understanding of the interworking relationships between a director and all other creative counterparts, but also for directors to have a strong command of all technicalities of film production. Without understanding these basic technical steps, a director is not only limiting her ability to

manipulate these key aspects to their advantage, but also prevents them from being able to portray a succinct singular worldview through their films.

Sarris's second requirement is a distinguished directorial style through a director's body of work. Created by establishing reoccurring technical manipulations and characteristics, this aesthetic signature is the middle circle of auteurship. Sarris argues that American cinema has the advantage as the Hollywood industry commissions films to be produced, and insures that "a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of material rather than through the literary content of the material" (562). This insures that a director must utilize her technical command to invoke a shared sense of style. These signatures become important facets of each directors identity, insuring the audience that each film directed by a specific director will carry some, if not all, of this artistic signature. Not only does this serve as a form of quality insurance, but also creates a sense of stability for the viewer. For example, a Wes Anderson movie will always have whimsical colors and a remarkably symmetrical mise-en-scène, while an Alfred Hitchcock film will always involve a chase and a beautiful blonde. Each auteur's signature allows for a set of expected plot devices and aesthetic choices, which simultaneously help market the film and define the filmmaker's artistic vision.

Sarris's final requirement was the ability to create an interior meaning through a director's body of work. This inner circle in Sarris's diagram represents the director's ability to craft a single constant ideology or worldview throughout their work. As both Bazin and Astruc emphasize the importance of an auteur using their film as a means for social commentary, this interior meaning is where an auteur gains their strength over a good director. Sarris himself attributes this meaning to "the tensions between a director's

personality and his material [...] it is not quite the vision of the world as director projects nor quite his attitude towards life” (562). While the act of producing, marketing, and selling a film inherently prevents the director from expressing her true worldview, it does offer an auteur an elevated status above other directors. Sarris claims that it is only through the construction of a fully well rounded *mise-en-scène* that directors are able to cultivate this continuity. Introduced by Astruc, the term *mise-en-scène* signifies every choice a director makes in order to foster a sense of alternative reality within the film. This includes costumes, sound, lighting, casting, cinematography, and countless other small details that a director constantly manipulates. A director has constructed a successful *mise-en-scène* when he or she is able to completely simulate a reality, with all of the small details, despite the artificial nature of film production. The *mise-en-scène* supports whatever interior meaning the director is attempting to express by providing a reality where the idea can be processed and expressed.

Yet despite this clear structure, Sarris is quick to point out the flexibility within establishing an auteur, claiming that the theory itself “is in constant flux” (563). Because of the interconnectivity between all members of the production team within a film, it is certainly possible to have a director with an internal meaning but lacking the technical experience. Likewise, there are highly stylized filmmakers who fail to achieve any internal meaning at all. What is crucial to establishing an auteur is that all three of these goals are met and maintained. This allows for some space within a specific directors filmography, giving them license to expand and try new technological techniques as long as their internal worldview remains consistent.

The Female Auteur: Does She Exist?

With the understanding that an auteur's main purpose is to represent a worldview, it is worth establishing the role of an auteur whose simple presence goes against the mainstream cinematic representation. In the case of female directors, the affect is immediately evident. According to the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, women comprised only 19% of all directors, writers, editors, producers, cinematographers and executive producers across the top 250 domestic films in 2015. With only 9% of these top 250 films directed by women, the film industry had as much gender diversity across the top 250 films as it did in 1998. As of 2017, only four women have ever been nominated for Best Director at the academy awards, and only one has won. A survey run by the Los Angeles Times after the controversial 2016 nominations illustrated showed the Oscar voting populous that 97% of the voters are Caucasian and 77% are male, which might account for the lack of female nominees.

This is not a unique phenomenon to mainstream cinema. International and independent film fall into a similar pattern. The French based Cannes Film Festival mirrors the Academy Awards rate of success for female directors. This international and prestigious film festival serves as an international arena to show new films of all genres and styles, offering a wider platform for films to be shown and appreciated. The festival awards the Palme d'Or to the top film. Cannes range far surpasses that of the Academy Awards, as it offers space for filmmakers in and outside of the Hollywood mainstream. Yet, even despite this internationality, in 2012 only men were nominated for the Palme d'Or. Over the past 12 years, only 24 women have been nominated for this award, and

over the 61 years that the Palme d'Or has been awarded, only Jane Campion's *The Piano* has been able to actually take home the award.

These staggering statistics point out a more plaguing issue across all of the film industry. Feminist film theorists attribute this staggering difference to the inherent counter-culture view female directed cinema holds. As film theorist Christina Lane explains in her book *Feminist Hollywood*, “women directors who enter the Hollywood industry, which has traditionally functioned as a male institution, inevitably (though sometimes subconsciously) conform the question of whether or not to reclaim that supposedly male vision” (11). This leaves female directors with a particularly difficult decision to make. While women directors could find more of a market in independent cinema, where conventions are more readily broken and the effort applauded, this leaves these directors with the choice of remaining small and keeping control over their film, or handing back some level of control and hope for more success within mainstream cinema markets.

With Laura Mulvey's critical article *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* introducing the concept of the male gaze being the central point of view in modern cinema, feminist film theorists such as Claire Johnson were able to extrapolate the argument that female cinema inherently was counter-cinema. Mulvey cited scopophilia, or the pleasure that is derived from a voyeuristic gaze, served as one of the main pleasures that cinema relied on. Mulvey argues that the cinematic gaze is separated between the active male and the passive female. This positions women as little more than sexual objects, whose portrayal is heavily indexed as inherently erotic and objectified. As feminist film theorist Anneke Smelik argues “classic cinema stimulates the desire to look

by integrating structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the story and image.

Voyeuristic visual pleasure is produced by looking at another (character, figure, situation) as an object, whereas narcissistic visual pleasure can be derived from self-identification with the (figure in the) image” (491), women are subjected to several layers of masculine gaze, that ultimately reduces them to a simple ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ form of entertainment. Mulvey argues that women represent both a commodification of the female form and a masculine fear of femininity, as “the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line” (62). Women serve as a physical representation of anxiety surrounding concepts of masculinity and inadequacy. As their simple presence challenges the importance of masculinity, women characters serve as constant reminders of the fragility of masculinity.

In order to alleviate some of this anxiety, films rely on a very specific form that places the viewer in a place in which he or she inevitably identifies with the male protagonists struggle. By doing this, the viewer is aligned with the male gaze, and women are resigned to objects, which the viewer gains pleasure from watching. Mulvey argues that this is done in three ways: through the camera, the character, and the spectator themselves. The camera and the characterization serve as technical ways in which the male gaze can be reproduced, and then placed upon the spectator, insuring that, as film theorist Claire Johnson argues “woman is presented as what she represents for man” (33) rather than what she represents to herself. The role of the spectator isn’t black and white, and Mulvey’s essay was met with a fair amount of criticism due to its divisive nature surrounding the role of a female spectator. The female spectator is asked to engage in an

act of gender masquerade, in which they are placed within the structural frame of the male gaze but without the assimilation, While, as Smelik argues that it is “a general assumption of feminist film theory that female spectators are more fluid in their capacity to identify with the other gender” (494) they lack the space from the subject that voyeurism requires because they themselves are the image. While ‘Women’s films’ such as the melodrama do provide a female centric narrative, the reliance of a hetero-normative reductive plot arc that relies on stereotypes of the ‘hysteric’ or ‘psychotic’ woman do little to address this imbalance. With the industry being run primarily by men, Smelik argues that films are produced in which ‘the female subject [...] is made to bear the burden of the lack [...] to provide the male subject with the illusion of wholeness and unity’ (496) female directors are asked to reproduce their experience as the female subject in a medium that relies on a highly constructed sense of the female identity to succeed.

Identifying and analyzing female auteurs helps to address the concept of a sustainable female subject or female gaze within cinema. While it would be easy to label the few female directors who have reached critical acclaim in Hollywood as some form of anti-feminist sell-outs, an in-depth and comparative analysis of female directors serves as an illuminating process to the roles that gender and sexuality play within their auteurship. As Cook argues, Hollywood is “monolithically closed to intervention by women filmmakers, [...] the work of those few women directors who had managed to build up a body of work in the Hollywood system was of interest to feminist precisely because of the ways in which their unconscious preoccupations could be seen to turn sexist ideology on its head, manipulating mainstream cinema in order to criticize it.” (468). Female

auteurs are distinct disruptions to the narrative process because they inherently cannot reproduce the same worldview as their masculine counterparts. Yet, female auteurs exist, and while their success is as commercialized as their male counterparts, their ability to command a medium that relies on their marginalization is crucial to understanding the role of gender in film production and marketing.

The Directors:

In order to best establish what a female auteurship might look like in modern day cinema, I have chosen to study three different prominent directors who have had varying levels of commercial success. In the following pages, I will establish each of these directors specific auteur styles, as well as investigate and see if there are shared aspects throughout all three world views that would contribute to the intense disparity between female and male directed films.

First, I plan to look at American director Kathryn Bigelow. As the only female to ever win an Academy award for Best Director, Kathryn Bigelow stands out as the exception to the structural sexism that is seemingly preventing women from succeeding within Hollywood. Her auteurship has been remarkably stable throughout her career, with her earliest short film *The Set-Up* (1978) dealing with the same themes of masculinity and violence as her Oscar winning movie *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Bigelow is an interesting case, as “her work partly falls within and partly infringes the parameters of Hollywood cinema” (Jermyn and Redmond 3) leaving her as an often debated member

of the feminist cinema canon. Her work isn't as overtly feminist as Campion and Denis; she works within the stereotypical 'male' genres of action and war movies and centers her films around aspects of the female experience less frequently. Instead, her films focus on the "complex relationship between genre and gender" (Lane 99) using aspects of the action genre viewers have now come to expect to challenge their concepts of masculinity, humanity, and extreme ideological thinking.

Secondly, I will analyze famous New Zealand director Jane Campion. Born to a theater director father and an actress mother, Campion originally wanted nothing to do with the arts. Before transitioning to film, Campion pursued her studies in anthropology, which, as film theorist Kathleen McHugh credits as a main aspect of her autuership, with her films examining "how power and violence permeate sexual and familial relationships, confound women's self-expression, and reify and distort gender roles" (2). Campion would find enormous success early; her film *Peel* (1982) won a Palme d'Or in the Short Films category. During the four years Campion attended the Australian Film Television and Radio School, she would produce four short films; bodies of work that McHugh argues that "demonstrated a remarkable if complex consistency of narrative, thematic, and stylistic concerns" (17) and began to establish her template for her later works. In 1993, her film *The Piano* (1993) would garner an enormous amount of praise, making her the second out of four females ever nominated for Best Director at the Academy Awards and the first female director to ever win a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Aesthetically, Campion favors aspects of surrealism, using innovative experimentation of the medium, which as McHugh argues, "both represent and blur the

lines between objective and subjective” (18). Campion gains her strength as an auteur by blending these character driven narratives with unique and inventive cinematic depictions.

Lastly, I will look at the French director Claire Denis. Influenced heavily by her own childhood spent in several African countries, Denis is best known for tackling concepts of post colonialism, race, and gender. Born in 1946, Denis spent her formative years traveling around colonial French Africa (Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Cameroon respectively) during a time when the concept and legitimacy of colonial rule was being called into question. The racial implications of this would become a crucial aspect of Denis’s auteur style. Her first movie *Chocolat* (1988), for example, addressed the anxiety felt by France, a young French girl living with her family in colonial Cameroon. Throughout the film France struggled with the clear boundaries and racial divisions within the town. This film was nominated for the Palme d'Or award at the Cannes Film Festival and firmly cemented Denis as a crucial female director. Narratively, Denis's work focuses on the periphery of typical narrative structure, as Feminist theorist Judith Mayne explains "the plots of her films never lead in a single direction [...] and while every detail matters, it isn't always clear how" (1). There is a clear emphasis on the image throughout Denis's work. Denis's auteurship blends these themes of racial tension with a unique mastery of the cinematic form.

Chapter 1

Violence, Gender, and Genre: Kathryn Bigelow's Transgressive Auteurship

By refusing almost every aspect of categorization, Kathryn Bigelow straddles the line between an independent and Hollywood director. With her film *The Hurt Locker* (2008) winning both Best Picture, but also being the only female directed film to ever win Best Director at the Academy awards, Bigelow's presence within the action genre was unprecedented. While refusing to limit her films to a specific 'female' lens often ascribed to female directors, Bigelow's films uniquely blend aspects of both melodrama and action to form commentaries on the social constructs that seemingly bind expression and identity. As film theorist Caetlin Benson-Allott argues "Bigelow's repeated engagement with Hollywood genres can best be understood as a challenge to hegemonic temporalities, to narrative orders that only engage some people's experiences of desire, violence, and death" (43). Bigelow's films carve out spaces of spectatorship that challenge her viewers more mainstream beliefs. Bigelow has a complete control of her medium; her educational background in both theory and technical aspects of film production and heavy roots in the independent film scene of 1970's gives her a uniquely well-rounded background in all aspects of film. This competence is reflected by her constant reinvention of cinematic techniques that allow for the rhythm of her films to be manipulated in distinct ways. While a 'Bigelow' film is often synonymous with an action film, limiting Bigelow's auteur status to a single genre serves as an extreme disservice to the dynamic nature of her gender and genre bending films. Currently, Bigelow has directed 9 feature lengths films: *The Loveless* (1982), *Near Dark* (1987), *Blue Steel* (1989), *Point Break* (1991), *Strange Days*, *The Weight of Water*, *K-19: The Widowmaker*

(2002), *The Hurt Locker*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Her latest films *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* have garnered the most critical acclaim, with each nominated for Best Picture. Yet Bigelow's themes of violence, a constructed masculine identity, and the symbolic representations of power are visible throughout her entire filmography. Bigelow's success within the more mainstream aspects of cinema makes her an interesting case study for the role of female auteurship.

The Androgynous Woman

As a female director working in the stereotypical 'masculine' genre of an action film, Bigelow's films are immediately set up as refusals to abide by mainstream cinematic expectations. The action genre is coded as both a typically male produced and male consumed genre. With cop films and buddy films often playing on the homoerotic tension in male-to-male friendship, female characters are resigned to sexual conquests for excessive masculine feats of valor. While any female director in commercial cinema is inherently viewed as more of an outsider, Bigelow's choice to work within the most masculine driven genre places her in an even more isolated position. This sense of gendered isolation and otherness is visible throughout her work by the presence of an androgynous female character throughout most of her films. Her first feature length film *The Loveless* dives into the relationship between masculinity and hedonistic violence illustrated by a young chain and leather clad biker gang who drives through an antiquated southern town, leaving a trail of violence behind them. *The Loveless* also first introduces an androgynous female character, a trope that would become common throughout Bigelow's later films. Telena (Marin Kanter), the young female with short cut hair and round baby face lacks the ideologically acceptable sexuality of the other female

characters throughout *The Loveless*'s iconic visual representation of this 1960's subculture. Telenova's characterization illustrates what theorist Brenda Wilson argues Bigelow's main themes of "unresolved anxiety about sexual identity and power, guilt" (2) represent.

This androgynous female lead would have numerous reproductions throughout Bigelow's film: Mae (Jenny Wright) serving as a simultaneous androgynous and mother figure in *Near Dark* and cumulating in Bigelow's cop thriller *Blue Steel* which documents a young Megan (Jaime Lee Curtis) navigating the gendered expectations of the police force all the while being hunted down by an obsessed psychopath. In the opening scene of *Blue Steel*, the viewer watches as Megan buttons her cop uniform, revealing a lacy bra underneath. The stark visual difference between the two items of clothing represents the two conflicting aspects of Megan's identity. It's this clash that garners her the attention to Megan's need to carve out a space that can support both the feminine and masculine aspects in her personality. The androgynous characterization of these female characters in masculine space illustrates the implications of expressed femininity in masculine spaces. While these women are clearly female subjects, their ability to engage in these masculine areas of influence is directly linked to a need to surrender aspects of stereotypical feminine representation. While female characters do exist within these masculine spaces, they are forced to give up aspects of typical female coded traits, in turn forming a third, non-gendered, alternative of their feminine form. The presence of these seemingly non-gendered others serve as a way for Bigelow to carve out a cinematic space in typical masculine spheres of influence and expression.

By employing these androgynous figures, Bigelow reveals the restrictions on

femininity when acting in a more masculine environment with her latest film *Zero Dark Thirty* where the viewer watches as the main character Maya (Jessica Chastain) struggles to not only navigate the political turmoil surrounding the United States' relationship with torturing, but also the expectation that due to her gender, she might not be suited for such morally challenging work. Throughout the film Maya struggles to get those she works with to believe her theories surrounding the location of Osama Bin Laden. While Maya's persistence in asserting her dominance around her male colleagues leads to a sense of pseudo madness, Bigelow also uses Maya's character as an example of the impact for women in male dominated industries. As the film progresses, the viewer watches as Maya continually disregards the dismissive comments, only to become more aggressive and violent in her own convictions. . The film ends with the capture of Bin Laden as a result of Maya's hard work and dedication to the mission, however, the final scene reveals a crying Maya. In the arduous, time consuming process of making herself heard and vindicated, she lost her sense of self and identity. When Maya's job is finished, she is left to process the impact her work in a masculine driven field has had on her personal femininity and self-understanding.

Genre and Masculinity

This creation of a non-gendered female subject has direct implications on expressions of masculinity. As film theorist Robynn Stilwell argues, Bigelow's films are constantly "subverting or inverting [...] patriarchal expectation of gender and sexuality" (53). This subversion is crucial when regarding Bigelow's work within the action film genre. With their excessive violence, action films reflect the performative nature of the current understanding of masculinity. Her genre-bending *Point Break* serves as perhaps

the most pivotal example of Bigelow's criticism of modern masculinity. *Point Break* blends aspects of action films, surfer films, and the buddy genre to tell the story of FBI agent Johnny Utah's (Keanu Reeves) investigation into a bank-robbing surfer group named the Ex-Presidents. In his assimilation into the counter culture surfer group lead by the charismatic and spiritually fluid Bodhi (Patrick Swayze), Utah's rigid and more corporate understanding of masculinity is challenged. As the film progresses, Utah becomes even more enamored with Bodhi and his way of life, and begins pushing back against the rigid FBI constructs he at first represented. While Bodhi might represent a more fluid definition of masculinity, even his portrayal isn't without some of the performative aspects of Bigelow's understanding of masculinity. The Ex-Presidents engage in a series of high risk, adrenalin-producing activities. While these activities, like skydiving or Bodhi's desire to surf the biggest wave, are coded as acts of counter cultural deviance, they also illustrate how even Bodhi's understanding of masculinity relies on acts of performance to prove worth to other members of the group. Just as Utah had to pass a test to prove to the FBI that he was masculine enough to work, he must also engage in Bodhi's high-risk lifestyle to prove his masculinity. In the climax of the film when both Bodhi and Utah's ulterior identities are revealed, Bodhi forces Utah to jump out of the plane without a parachute. When Utah does latch on to Bodhi in midair, Bodhi refuses to pull the line for his parachute, leaving the action to Utah. Yet, in order to do this, Utah must let go of his gun, a clear phallic symbol for his masculine power. By tossing his gun and pulling the parachute, Utah again illustrates not only the performative aspect of masculinity, but also the types of masculine relationships and how they're constructed. These hyper masculine figures reappear as Bigelow's leather clad bikers in

The Loveless, the submarine men in *K-19: The Widowmaker* or the soldiers in *The Hurt Locker*. Bigelow uses these familiar masculine characters to comment on the role of masculinity in the understanding of the American national identity. Bigelow directly ties masculinity, violence, and power as a way to illustrate the dangerous power masculinity holds in America's cultural identity. Not only does it seem that the current structure leads to a replication of a rather toxic form of masculinity, but also directly limits female expression and reinforces the gender binary.

Feminist Challenges to Narrative

With an extensive background in both theoretical and technical aspects of cinema making, Bigelow holds a unique level of mastery over her craft. As most female directors, Bigelow started her work in the independent sphere, and while she had transitioned to more mainstream avenues of production by the time her film *Point Break* was released, Bigelow's manipulation of genre and narrative expectations stays true to her independent roots. This technical mastery and manipulation is a key aspect of Bigelow's auteurship, as Lane argues, Bigelow "produces a marketable product, but she also engages in a heavy narrational style (which is one criterion by which an auteur is judged) and she capitalizes on genre tensions by revealing their ideological excesses" (100). Bigelow is cited with the creation of several camera models that allowed for her filming of dynamic action scenes, like the creation of a pogo cam used in the extensive chase scene between Bodhi and Utah that allowed for both a more dynamic action scene, but also for a greater sense of involvement for the viewer. Bigelow's involvement with the technical aspects of film production is no small feat. According to the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, as of 2013 only 3% of all cinematographers are

women. While women's involvement across all aspects of cinema is relatively bleak, this only further compounds when looking at their role in cinematic technology development. Bigelow's creation of a new form of camera not only highlights a Bigelow's role as a feminist filmmaker, but also significant advancement in her storytelling. With this technological advancement, Bigelow is able to manipulate the rhythm of her films to further aid her subversion of genre expectations.

While this manipulation of filmic rhythm is a key stylistic thread throughout all of Bigelow's films, it becomes more present in her later works. The transition from studying the aesthetics and effects of violence to the creation of unforgiving narrative tension is best seen in the stylistic transitions from *K-19* and *The Weight of Water* to her Oscar winning *The Hurt Locker*. Bigelow first begins this manipulation with her melodrama *The Weight of Water*. As the film follows two intertwining murder stories based 100 years apart on the Isle of Shoals, the viewers watch as these two different narratives wind together, and as Benson-Allott states, "illustrates how complex inquiry into women's relationships to violence, interweaving the stories of two women who respond violently to family crises and showing how gender roles contributed to their breakdowns" (40). This film is a sharp departure from Bigelow's more standard action film, the narrative structure allowed for her to begin experimenting with more prolonged sense of anxiety and tension that had been foregone in her previous works due to their focus on the aesthetics behind violence and power. Bigelow would continue this sense of slow burning tension in her film *K-19*, where the viewer is placed in a continual state of anxiety as they watch a Nazi submarine navigate a potential nuclear explosion. Bigelow is able to achieve this state of total unrest through constantly subjecting her viewers to an

endless cycle of stress and recovery. Bigelow uses rapid quick shots throughout the film to keep her viewer in a state of suspense and fear.

Yet, it's Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* that is best able to use these technological advances to fully create what Benson-Allott deems "a complete environment of danger" (41). While a main tenant of auteur theory is the presence of common themes throughout the entirety of their filmography, Bigelow develops her narrative technique in order to explore concepts of violence and performativity and push forward her interests in the links between excessive violence and masculine self-expression. With a series of experimental uses of slow motion and rough handheld shots, Bigelow is able not only to recreate the overwhelming sense of paranoia that exists throughout the Explosive Ordinance Disposal team, but also alienate the viewer from the characters themselves. Without this base connection, the viewer instead is forced to face the violence without any form of ideological background, therefore causing them to process the brutal reality of the amount of violence found throughout the military.

Bigelow's art-house sensibility isn't limited just to her technical manipulation of cinema, but also extends to her manipulation of genre expectations. As Wilson argues, Bigelow is an active member in crafting her own auteur status "by deliberately choosing film projects that depart from her previous works. She not only blends film genres within any given film, she also subverts audience expectations of the kind of film she will make" (5). In doing this, Bigelow not only constantly deconstructs her own auteurship, but also reminds her viewers of the limitations of genre by deconstructing them. This genre subversion is a key aspect in understanding Bigelow's auteurship, because it allows space for Bigelow to actively critique aspects of mainstream cinematic representation.

As genres serve as a way for directors to easily package films into a format that viewers have come to expect, and in turn, enjoy, Bigelow's blatant manipulation of them serves a mechanism of critique. Despite being labeled as an action director early in her career, theorists Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond argue that at the heart of every Bigelow film are themes of investigating the "sordid secrets of the dysfunctional patriarchal family" (8). As the action genre doesn't inherently make space for these themes to be explored, Bigelow in turn creates the space herself. This is most present in her Vampire Western thriller *Near Dark*, where Bigelow relies on classic imagery from the Western to serve as a criticism on the American identity. As film theorist Sara Gwenllian Jones argues "the classic western has played a central role in white America's narrativisation of its history and its imaginative construction of its national identity" (58). Tied to the ideologies behind manifest destiny and general American greatness, the Western often uses images of the Wild West to reaffirm the United States sense of masculinity and strength. *Near Dark* immediately subverts this with the introduction of vampires, who are better known for their gothic stylization and arguably least rooted in American identity. With the main character Caleb, an all American cowboy being turned by Mae, the androgynous vampire, it is clear that Bigelow is subverting her viewer's expectations and understanding of the American cowboy.

Conclusion

While at first glance Kathryn Bigelow's work doesn't inherently present itself as part of the larger feminist film canon, an intense analysis of her entire body of work illustrates a constant manipulation of gender expectations and limitations that often work in stark contrast with more mainstream understandings of cinematic representation. By

working within the male dominated action genre, Bigelow actively criticizes the genre's implications on aspects of gender expression and identity. As the only female to have currently ever won Best Director at the Academy Awards, Kathryn Bigelow serves as the closest example to a mainstream female director cinema has ever seen. The correlation between Bigelow's entrance into the most stereotypical and patriarchal male genre cannot go unnoticed. Bigelow's links of violence to gender and power serve as crucial social commentaries on the limitations of both Hollywood cinema and American sensibility, calling out the role that toxic masculinity plays in the construction of an American national identity.

Chapter 2

Sex, Storytelling, and Spirituality: Jane Campion's Auteurship

Introduction

After winning the Palme d'Or for her short film *Peel* during her second year at the Australian Film Television and Radio school, Jane Campion's work was soon held in high regard among independent directors. This level of acclaim is unusual for young independent artists, and all the more unprecedented in young female directors. Campion's style is unmistakable, mixing aspects of independent and art house techniques to discuss sex, colonialism, and the mythic drive behind humanity. As an auteur, Campion deals consistently with themes of family, femininity, and sexual repression throughout the entirety of her filmography, presenting some of the same arguments surrounding female drive in her first film *Sweetie* (1989) as her later ones. Her third feature length film *The Piano* (1993) that would not only win a second Palme d'Or and a nomination for Best Director, but also launch her into, as American film theorist Andrew Sarris calls them, the 'pantheon of great directors.' Currently, Campion is one of the four women who have ever been nominated for Best Director. She has directed 7 feature length films, 6 short films, a television show, and numerous other short pieces. Throughout all of her feature length films, Campion consciously melds aspects of surrealism, the antipodean industry, feminism, and mainstream cinematic expectations to create her own auteurship. As film theorist Kathleen McHugh argues, "Campion's originality or distinction derives from her deft synthesis of the multiple influences" (48). This allows her to not only cross from an art-house based cinema to a more mainstream audience, but also establish herself as a

unique and powerful directorial voice. In order to establish what Jane Campion's auteurship looks like, I will analyze all of her feature length films: *Sweetie*, *Angel at My Table* (1990), *The Piano*, *Portrait of a Lady* (1996), *Holy Smoke* (1999), *In The Cut* (2003), and *Bright Star* (2009). While Campion's short films are also equally rich with thematic trends and thus express her auteurship, limiting my analysis to her feature length films will help to define what it means to be a female auteur within modern cinema.

Narration and Expression: Representing the 'Female' Experience

Perhaps what is most notable throughout Campion's body of work is her manipulation of her films to critique the stereotypical female genre melodrama. As a genre, melodramas serve as key social critiques that film theorist Christine Gledhill argues illustrates "the centrality of the bourgeois family to the ascendancy and continued dominance of that class" (317). Melodramas serve somewhat of a dual purpose in feminist film theory, as they are both critiqued and lauded by feminist film scholars for their women centered plots. While these films often presented reductive characterizations of females, they also served as one of the first staged female narratives. The plots of these films were based within domestic life, and often aestheticized and promoted gender roles. This focus on the everyday serves as a way to dramatize normalcy, and as Gledhill argues, "the intensity and the significance of the drama [...] are not carried in what the characters say, or in the articulation of inner struggle in a tragedy: rather it is the *mise-en-scène* of melodrama, providing an 'aesthetics of the domestic' that tells us what is at stake. The 'pressure generated by things crossing in on the characters... by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the of the bourgeois home/and or small town setting

is intensified through the demand of the 90-minute feature film” (318). This focus on drama based within mise-en-scene helped reestablish the role of capitalism and the patriarchy within the nuclear family. While Campion’s films aren’t melodramas in the traditional sense, they work in direct conversation with the conventions of the genre to serve as critique of traditional gender representation.

It’s this anxiety around family that Campion often exploits throughout her work. With the exception of *In The Cut*, which serves as a better example of the neo-noir genre, Campion’s films fall well within the description of a melodrama. Her first film *Sweetie* is completely centered on a family falling apart from the pressure to be ‘normal’. A similar anxiety is portrayed in her film *An Angel at My Table* and *Holy Smoke* (1999) where the protagonist’s inability to connect with those around her is isolating. Campion’s *The Piano*, *Portrait of a Lady* and *Bright Star* are all period pieces surrounding a female main character’s attempt at engaging in the intricacies of everyday life while still remaining true to their core beliefs. Even *In The Cut* relies in part on these character tropes, as the story equally focuses on the murder plot and the dating life of the female main character. With the exception of *In the Cut* and *Holy Smoke*, these films lack the traditional linear plot that most films follow. Rather, they wander freely, documenting both the intricate and mundane aspects of the characters everyday life. Campion consciously plays on these genre expectations, as McHugh argues, “she resolutely forgoes the moral judgments of melodrama and refuses to portray her protagonists as victims [...] they noticeably refuse the conventional relations usually articulated between past and present in these milieux. Instead, chronicling her characters’ struggles with and attitudes toward adversity, she mixes an almost documentary curiosity with surrealist wit and tragic irony” (194).

Campion gains her strength as an auteur by manipulating the melodrama genre to present an inherently countercultural feminist argument about her female leads.

In order to accomplish this, Campion manipulates gender roles and expectations by refusing to portray her female characters as representations of victimhood. Instead, Campion crafts her narratives so that her women and children characters are often seen as counterpoints to the equally vulnerable masculine subjects. As McHugh argues, Campion's films "feature men as well as women in pain, cuckolded, humiliated, or abject" (49). In doing this, Campion insures her male and female characters are equal in what they lack, challenging any abject truth that a melodrama might typically support. This theme of vulnerability is seen throughout all of her films. In *The Piano*, it is Ada, not her husband who presents the stereotypical masculine traits of dominance, stubbornness, and power in regards to her sexual agency. It is Ada's husband that seeks out a romantic relationship, flipping the expectations of a stereotypical romantic and sexual drive between male and female characters. Campion is also quick to remind us of the power dynamic between genders. Baines can initially force Ada into intimacy because he owns her piano, which due to Ada's muteness, serves as a tool for her communication and expression. Similarly, when Stewart learns that Ada has been intimate with another man, he cuts off her finger, in an attempt to render her vulnerable and speechless.

Similar trends of vulnerability and constriction carry throughout all of Campion's work. Both *Portrait of a Lady* and *Bright Star* take a critical look at women's sexual agency. Both films (notably period pieces where female sexuality is even more repressed than current standards) follow the story of women navigating marriage expectations.

These two films serve as counterpoints to the same narrative. While both films document young women falling for men of limited social status, *Bright Star* ends with the controversial union between the affluent protagonist Fanny and her suitor John Keats being halted by Keats' death. The viewer watches as Fanny falls into despair, and the audience realizes that true fulfillment of female desire isn't possible. Campion's narration in *Portrait of a Lady* reinforces this idea, with the protagonist Isabel fulfilling her original desire and marrying Osmond, only to find herself trapped in an emotionally abusive relationship. In this film, Campion again illustrates the impossibility of female desire due to the inherent power hierarchy. While the female characters are painted as agents within their own narrative who actively challenge gender expectations and express sexual desires more freely, they are still subject to the extensive power dichotomy. While Campion's films often center on a victim, her careful storytelling insures that they are not victimized. Instead, Campion uses an ethnographic approach (influenced directly from her previous studies in Anthropology) to portray a well rounded, while still clear image of society hierarchies and its implications.

Campion is able to accomplish this feat through a careful use of both embodied and constructive narration throughout all of her films. With an equal focus on the story being told and the act of storytelling itself, Campion constructs her films around the concept of female narration. This formal narration structure is most visible in her earlier works. In her first film *Sweetie*, Campion begins her film with a monologue from the film's protagonist Kay. The monologue lists all of Kay's fears, from darkness to tree roots. This disembodied voice serves as a somewhat skewed point of identification. Campion cuts the monologue with uniquely framed shots of isolated limbs shot at odd

angles, complementing not only the strangeness of the beginning narrative, but setting up the rest of the film's aesthetic and narrative focus on the obscene and the off-kilter.

Campion offers a similar setup in *The Piano* where she uses voice over narration in order to communicate what the otherwise mute Ada is thinking. The voice over is only used twice, once in the beginning where Ada briefly introduces her muteness, and at the end, where we see Ada begins to teach herself how to speak. Narrating the beginning and end of Ada's muteness serves as an interesting framing of the female narration. As film theorist Jaime Bihlmeyer argues, "Ada's nonvocal state deconstructs the dominance of spoken language in the Symbolic Order" (70). By Ada choosing not to speak outside of the beginning frame and the ending frame, it is clear that Ada is constructing some form of agency within her otherwise restricted social status, letting the audience know that she speaks when she wants to, despite expectations. Campion uses these formal techniques in *An Angel at My Table* as well. By utilizing both a three-act structure and voice over narration, Campion is able to delineate the protagonist's entrance into adulthood. By introducing a voice over in the second and third acts, the viewer is able to watch as Janet moves throughout her state of isolation through her creative process, allowing the viewer to not only identify with Janet's psychic state, but also giving Janet the opportunity to narrate her own existence completely on her own terms. By giving voiceovers to otherwise marginalized narrators, Campion gives back agency to these subjective persons.

Formal narration is only one tool Campion uses to create a 'female' narration. She also accomplishes this feat in more subtle ways through her characters embodied narration. Embodied narration focuses on the more emotional implications of a subject's

experience, presenting a more emotionally driven character narrative. As philosophy critic Richard Menary argues, “embodied experiences [have] a pre-narrative quality that constitutes ‘a demand for narrative’” (63) that contribute to the surrounding narrative of the film. Campion shows all aspects of her characters lives, often even blurring her character’s objective and subjective perspectives. This allows for Campion to fully express any doubts or insecurities that these characters might experience, presenting a more character focused narrative arch. In *Holy Smoke*, Campion uses dream like sequences to mirror the state of disconnect felt by the film’s protagonists Ruth (Kate Winslet) and P.J. (Harvey Keitel). The film follows Ruth’s ‘deprogramming’ and reentrance into Western culture after falling prey to a Hindi cult when visiting India. Viewers watch as Ruth’s sense of identity is picked apart by P.J. Waters, a hyper masculine cult deprogrammer. Yet, Ruth’s sense of self is so unforgiving, that it’s P.J. who ends up torn apart. Campion supplements this sense of delusion with a dream sequence from P.J.’s perspective of a Hindi god with Ruth’s face; a personification of the raw sensuality and spirituality that P.J. has been trying to get Ruth to abandon for more Western centered ideals. With the use of bright colors and a blurred frame, the viewer is placed in a similar sense of dissociation as P.J., allowing them to feel his anxiety first hand, and visually representing the impacts and limitations of western concepts of masculinity on all members of society.

Campion uses similar strategies in her film *In The Cut* to express the anxiety surrounding concepts of monogamy and relationships. In *In The Cut*, Campion structures a neo-noir around the juxtaposition of the relationship between a female teacher Frannie (Meg Ryan) and a local policeman Malloy (Mark Ruffalo) and a murder case of several

young women. Frannie is a stereotypical Campion main character: a strong female with a somewhat obscure passion of collecting slang phrases. Frannie's obsession with words mirrors the passion of numerous Campion characters: hobbies done not to be successful, but just to be done. This concept comes in direct conflict with more patriarchal, capitalist ideologies of success, because Frannie's work doesn't produce any form of an end result. The tension of defying the stereotypical social standards is felt throughout the film. The film begins with a scene of Frannie witnessing a stranger receive oral sex from a woman in a bar bathroom. When the woman is later revealed to be the first murder victim, the viewer watches as Frannie becomes more obsessed, leading her to sleep with the Detective on the case itself. While Frannie is drawn to Detective Malloy due to his raw sexual drive, it also serves as a main source of her anxiety, as she believes that Malloy is in fact the murderer. Campion mirrors this anxiety by manipulating Frannie's reoccurring dream to express her fears surrounding monogamy. The dream; a sepia toned idyllic picture of two figures ice-skating (later revealed to be Frannie's parents) has a marked tranquil and antiquated property to it. Yet, as the film progresses, the dream reoccurs, but this time the male skater runs over the female skater, killing her. This flash back marks the heightening of her paranoia, brought on by her relationship with Malloy and the brutal murder of her sister. The dream occurs a third time when Frannie finally makes contact with the murderer, Malloy's partner Rodriguez (Nick Damici), as he tries to kill her. As Rodriguez grabs her to kiss her and shoot her, the film does a quick jump cut to Frannie's father embracing her mother in a similar way. The film then flashes back to reality, where Frannie lies with a dead Rodriguez on top of her in the snow, having been able to kill him before he killed her. The intimacy of these frames coupled with the

violent nature of the narration serves as a direct look into Frannie's psyche. As *In The Cut* was an adaptation from a novel, Campion had much less freedom in structuring the narrative. While the film is presented as a crime film, a deeper analysis with Campion's auteur style in mind illustrates that *In the Cut* also serves as a critique of societal understandings of monogamy. These dream like sequences illustrate Frannie's anxiety not about the murder, but the overwhelming burden and repression that heterosexual monogamy places on its female counterparts in regards to marriage, and in turn, production.

The Finger Films: Campion's Reproduction of the Female Experience

By aligning her films with an embodied female narrator, Campion opens her films up to dealing with a series of themes that are otherwise glossed over in mainstream cinema. Perhaps what makes Campion stand out the most is her constant investigation into the complex web of female experience. As McHugh argues, "Campion's works are key paradoxes concerning affect and embodiment" (2). Here McHugh specifically refers to of her subjects' experiences in terms of the hegemonic structures that surround them. With Campion's commitment to representing the complex themes surrounding female experience, her films tackle the intense topics of sexual agency, spirituality, repression, and desire. With her ethnographic style of storytelling, Campion presents these experiences wholly, without any moral judgment or impunity attached. Instead, by presenting her films without many of the narrative hegemonic subtexts that most Hollywood films utilize, her audience is allowed to witness the complex implications of femininity in the modern world.

Campion's third, fourth, and fifth films, dubbed "The Finger Series" by critics, delves into the concept of a more singular female experience by presenting similar themes of touch, the female body, and repression, through three different narratives. While all of Campion's films deal with similar themes, these three use reoccurring symbolic imagery to document the historical passage of women through colonialism. *The Piano*, *Portrait of a Lady*, and *Holy Smoke* track the progression of the power of touch, and its links to female sexuality, tying in the concept of spirituality, romance, and the subjugation of the female form into a simple physical being. By aligning these films throughout the timeline of European colonialism, Campion highlights the intense power dynamic present not only between her male and female counterparts, but also the power that affluence and race hold as well.

Campion first sets up these themes in her film *The Piano*. *The Piano* follows the forced marriage between mute and willful Ada (Holly Hunter), and Stewart (Sam Neill), an English man living in the untamed wild of a colonized New Zealand. As McHugh argues, *The Piano* looks at how "civil pretensions and romantic imaginings founder within the historical materiality of the colonial state" (109). She goes on to argue that this happens through the romantic relationships between the colonizers and their limited relationship with the colonized. Throughout the film, Ada actively pushes back against Stewart from refusing to engage with him. Instead, Ada seeks comfort in her piano, her tool for communication and expression. When Baines (Harvey Keitel), another Englishman who has adapted some of the native tribe's customs, offers for Ada to come visit her piano in his home, she quickly jumps at the chance at being able to communicate freely again. Yet, upon seeing Ada use the piano, Baines is overpowered by Ada's raw

connection and drive. Baines finds this amount of agency and expression both intimidating and intriguing, so he begins to blackmail Ada into acts of intimacy in order to see her piano again. While these acts end with sexual intimacy, they begin with simple acts of touching, with Baines begging Ada to simply hold him. Ada and Baines's relationship clearly illustrates the power behind touch and desire; Campion drives this point in with Stewart's act of revenge. After watching Baines and Ada engage in sexual intercourse, Stewart descends into a state of pure mania, ending with him cutting off Ada's finger. As Ada's fingers are her main way of communication and garnering affection, Stewart has handicapped her in attempts to limit the power of her touch and her speech. The violent act also illustrates the implications of a female being seen as an individual subject within a narrative. The film ends with Ada having a metal finger made by Baines in attempts for her to gain some of her agency back, but the hard metal sound of her finger hitting the piano keys throughout her song shatter the illusion of a pure female touch or voice.

A Portrait of a Lady picks up right where *The Piano* left off, with the beginning sequence sampling a selection of different women's understanding of love and relationships, before cutting to a title slide featuring a woman's hand with *A Portrait of A Lady* written across her finger. This imagery immediately sets up the film to be within a similar vein as *The Piano*, relying on the same imagery. The importance of fingers and hands is brought up again when Isabel, the film's protagonist, says that she once would have 'give[n] her little finger' to marry somebody of a high social class. As both of these films are period pieces centered on a female outsider (Isabel is American visiting her uncle in England, and Ada is an active force in the colonization of New Zealand), *The*

Piano and *A Portrait of a Lady* serve as counterpoints to the impact of female desire and touch. As McHugh argues, these films serve to illustrate the dangers and implications of female desire, as “Ada McGrath and Isabel Archer [...] mirror one another, albeit inversely, in their fingers and acts of refusal: if Ada gave up her literal finger rather than sacrifice her desire, Isabel would have given her figurative finger in order to feel it” (95). To further emphasize this, Campion continuously links acts of sexual pleasure and fantasy with imagery of hands and fingers. After turning a suitor away, Isabel slips into a sexual fantasy where the viewer watches as the hands of all three of her suitors trace her body. This act of intimacy serves as a unique example of Campion’s subversion of gender roles. While modern media often presents females as little more than their physical bodies, Campion does the exact opposite, giving Isabel the central narrative and marginalizing these men to disembodied hands. With touch being so closely linked to intimacy, Isabel’s focus on hands symbolizes emotional and sexual repression. With Isabel’s search for desire ultimately leading her into a mentally abusive relationship with Osmond, Campion sets up *A Portrait of a Lady* as a statement surrounding the expected repression of female desire and its implications on the human psyche.

Lastly, Campion’s film *Holy Smoke* delves into the ties between spiritual touching and physical touching, presenting a protagonist who chases after one form while rejecting the other. *Holy Smoke* does part aesthetically from the previous two films, and instead looks into the impacts of post colonialism and neo-colonialism that McHugh argues “testifies to a certain form of pop orientalism that locates spirituality in ‘the East’” (112). Campion purposefully structures Ruth’s spiritual awakening as a blatant consumption of select eastern traditions in attempts to ‘free’ oneself from Western capitalist ideology.

While the representation of eastern religious practices relies heavily on more westernized ideas of these traditions, the focus on spirituality is still pivotal to the narrative. Campion uses Ruth's spiritual awakening as an example of the close ties between sexual and spiritual touching, implying that Ruth actively seeks spirituality over sexual desire. Ruth is forced to engage in a new form of spiritual repression through her interactions with P.J., the middle-aged cult deprogrammer who she engages sexually. Despite Ruth being held against her will, it is P.J who chastises her for using her physical beauty to overpower him; calling her ruthless and mean for not engaging in the emotional intimacy that he has come to expect after sexual intimacy. Yet, because Ruth has removed herself from most Western cultural expectations, she simply begins to mock P.J for his vanity, highlighting the insecurities that run throughout Western culture's concept of masculinity and its implications on the expression of femininity and feminine desire. In the film's climax, Ruth dresses up P.J as a girl, signaling a complete ideological power shift. The overwhelming implications of the female touch alter the power dynamic, placing Ruth in control despite her status. Though even this power is short lived, as when Ruth sees that P.J has written the words "Be Kind" on her forehead, her sudden awareness of the power her touch holds sends her into a state of revulsion. When Ruth then begins to run away, P.J violently attacks her, again reestablishing his physical ability and attempting to shield his masculine insecurities. P.J himself then slips into a state of delusion, and begins to envision a Hindu goddess similar to the one that Ruth had seen in the beginning of the film. As the image gets clearer, it becomes apparent that the goddess is Ruth herself; her sexual agency being deified by P.J. Campion uses this interaction to illustrate the impacts of a truly unrepressed female touch, linking its unbridled power to a state of

transcendence not unlike a spiritual awakening.

Conclusion:

Campion's unique approach to storytelling and narrative structure defines her as an auteur. By focusing on projecting complete images of her subjects, Campion is able to present more complex themes without coming across as too heavy handed or contrived. While at first glance her narratives don't appear to take any formal structure, this allows for the narration to be completely embodied by the protagonist, blurring the line between those who look and those who are looked at, and allowing for the audience to experience all facets of their psyche. Campion consciously blends technical conventions throughout her films, constantly challenging cinematic expectations around the visual portrayal of her female subjects. Yet, Campion does not limit her films to a strictly feminist read. By refusing to portray her female subjects as total victims despite the trauma they face, Campion uses their narratives as counterpoints to critique masculinity, the patriarchy, and the implications of colonialism on female sexual expression. Campion's films serve as dynamic criticism against the pervasive hegemonic structures that greatly limit all members of society. While all of Campion's films have not all gained the same mainstream success as *The Piano* has, it is clear that as a director, she is dedicated to establishing and portraying the complicated female experience, including its strengths, weaknesses, and place within today's mainstream.

Chapter 3

Identity and Intimacy: Claire Denis's Auteur

Introduction

With an extensive background in New Wave French cinema, independent French director Claire Denis serves as a crucial final director to analyze. While born in France, Denis lived in a series of colonial outposts in French colonized Africa throughout most of her youth. After returning to France to finish her schooling, Denis studied film, and began working with well-established filmmakers such as Jacques Rivette, Robert Enrico, Wim Wenders, and Jim Jarmusch. The release of her semi- autobiographical breakout film *Chocolat* (1988) both garnered her a nomination for the coveted Palme d'Or, and established key aspects of her auteur style. Denis's childhood spent during the end of the colonialist era has had lasting implications on her directorial style. As film theorist Martine Beugnet states, Denis's cinema tackles the "uncertain relationship between time and narration, identity and truth" (5). Denis relies on a distinct visual style that often highlights the role of human physicality in communication. While Denis has directed 11 feature length films, I have chosen to analyze some of her more accessible works: *Chocolat*, *I Can't Sleep* (1994), *Beau Travail* (1999), *35 Shots of Rum* (2008), and *White Material* (2009), in order to analyze how Denis subverts the stereotypical reproduction of spectatorship within cinema.

Nationality and Narrative

One of the most distinguishing aspects of Denis's work as a director is the wide variety of projects under her name. Her filmography is extensive, including horror films, family dramas, thrillers, and political pieces. While Bigelow and Campion have consistently stayed true to a specific genre throughout their work, Denis's work is ever changing. While this mobility might seem to go against the necessary predictability in a director's work to be an auteur, Denis's work gains its strength in its variety and fragmentation of narration. Denis's films all convey how dynamic and often-incomplete key moments in life often are. As film theorist Marjorie Vecchio argues "to compare any of her films to wholeness would be the denial of life force" (xiv). While Denis's films do not ascribe to a single genre, her careful use of subjects regarding identity and race link all her films together into one cohesive argument on the role of colonialism and its implications on the creation of identity.

Denis's direct experience with the construction and fall of a colonized nation state boundary is immediately present throughout her work. Although only three of her films deal with France's role in the colonization of Africa directly, Denis's unique storytelling allows her to tackle the issues of colonialism's impact on the French identity. By using the technique of a fragmented narrative, Denis highlights the processes used in creating a distinct binary between a concept of self and a concept of the other. As Vecchio argues, "Denis has created film after film that exposes the cracks between

identity, circumstance, and action” (xiv). This ability is rather unique to Denis. Due to both her gender and her choice of subject matter, Denis’s films subvert traditional objectification and voyeuristic roles challenging the viewers understanding of spectator and subject. While it’s not to say that Denis’s films depart from a voyeuristic look at African men found in most white directed cinema, Denis uses society’s simultaneous obsession and fear of these marginalized subjects to comment on the implications of the creation of a distinct personal and nation state identity. In this way, she reveals the cracks in the traditional relations of looking and begins to unravel them.

Denis’s first film *Chocolat* sets up these themes of constructing a national identity by interweaving the present narrative and an extensive flashback. The film follows France (Mireille Perrier), a young white woman visiting the area of Cameroon where she grew up. This film is a semi autobiographical look into Denis’s own childhood spent traveling around colonized Africa. Denis herself states that the film was driven by “a desire to express a certain guilt I felt as a child raised in a colonial world” (Mayne 36). The film begins when Mungo and his young son offer France a ride. Upon entering into his car, the passing African landscape of Cameroon triggers an intense flashback of France’s childhood spent in the colonial outpost. It’s in this flashback that the viewer watches as France’s mother interacts with Protée, the African man who works for France’s family as a servant. While France serves as the viewers’ main point of entrance into the narrative, the film lacks any sense of childhood nostalgia. Instead, the film works to deconstruct the stereotypical colonial narrative that is rooted in the consumption of the African other. Denis accomplishes this by highlighting the impossibility of a sexual relationship between Protée and France’s young mother, Aimée. Protée serves a key role

in the colonial family fantasy that France's family represents. Protée is France's closest companion, and subject of restricted desire from France's mother Aimée. While Aimée seeks out Protée's attention, he turns her away, and is eventually banished from the house and sent to work in the garage. Protée's refusal of Aimée's sexual advances is a multilayered critique of France's role in these colonialized countries, and reflects how French colonialism has eroded French national identity. Aimée's ability to penalize Protée for his denial illustrates the blatant objectification and consumption of the African subject that colonialism depends on. The volatile nature of refusal also highlights the unsustainability of any relationship formed underneath colonialism. This argument is further supported when France visits Protée after his banishment to the garage. Protée tricks her into touching a hot pipe, which in turn, burns her palms. The burn on France's hand serves as a tangible mark of the impact colonialism has held on her concept of self. The burn permanently scars her. When Mungo asks if he can read France's palm, the burn obscures any palm lines on France's hand, leading him to announce that France has no past and no future. This burn mark serves as a symbol for the impossibility of identity in a colonial space, highlighting what film theorist Judith Mayne argues is "a reflection on the ways in which French colonial identity leaves its mark on those who travel in its wake "(34).

This instability is only further highlighted in Denis's 2009 film *White Material*. Set in an unidentified African country in the middle of a coup, *White Material* tracks white plantation owner Maria as she fights to keep control of her land. Leading the rebellion is the Boxer, an enigmatic radio host that motivated the vagabond child warriors who are leading the coup. As the film progresses, the viewer watches as Maria, motivated

by a false sense of ownership and familial relationship with the land, struggles to hold onto her plantation despite government warning and threat of rebellion. Her ex husband André is motivated to sell the farm and leave, though it comes to light that this might be a more fiscal move, as the plantation is in a serious amount of debt. As in *Chocolat*, these characters all serve as key parts in the colonial fantasy that Denis critiques. Yet while Maria and the Boxer illustrate both 'the colonizer' and 'the colonized', it's Maria's son Manuel that illustrates the instability that occurs when these two titles meet. Born in the colony to French parents, Manuel holds a unique status of neither wholly French nor African. Unlike Maria, who desperately holds onto her identity, Manuel is remarkably apathetic to his surroundings. He only becomes engaged in the rebellion after being brutally assaulted by a group of child warriors. This attack leads to a mental break in Manuel, who later goes and brutally attacks the maid and mother of his biracial stepbrother, before going to join the child army. Manuel brings the children back to his house to find the Boxer, who his mother had found wounded in her barn and fed the night before. Manuel and the children loot the house, eating everything and taking all of the pills they had previously stolen. This act of gluttonous consumption knocks the army out, and when French Government forces find them later, they kill all of the soldiers including Manuel. This death symbolizes two key aspects of Denis's argument. Again Denis criticizes France's colonial impact. The death by excessive consumption critiques the consumption practices of colonialist France, and highlights the instability of the greed it creates. The relationship between Manuel and the child soldiers is also crucial to consider. Manuel and these child soldiers are victims of the same circumstance. Both are

products of colonial Africa; stripped of any sense of a singular identity and left to band together to form a new, though extremely violent, grouping.

Denis's focus on the tensions felt in these cross-cultural communities is further explored in her family drama *35 Shots of Rum*. The film follows Lionel and his daughter Josephine. Lionel and Josephine lead a secluded life, and interact with only a few select people within their apartment. While their life is pictured as somewhat idyllic, their isolation is challenged as Josephine goes through college. The film presents a series of intimate moments between Lionel, Josephine, and their neighbors Gabrielle and Noé. These characters have all bonded over their status as members of the societal margin to form a pseudo familial structure. Despite their disengaged nature with the greater French culture, these characters are also seemingly constantly in motion. Lionel and Gabrielle both work in transit as a train and a cab driver. Notably both people of color, both Gabrielle and Lionel make a living supporting France's infrastructure and moving the country forward. Yet, these characters are seemingly stuck in the same loop. Eventually the characters begin to separate from each other. Denis reveals this happening through small mundane moments. The pace of the film drastically changes when Lionel and Josephine go to visit her mother's grave in Germany. As one of the few times the film departs from the area directly surrounding the apartment, the repetitive nature of the film is broken. This visit highlights the anxiety surrounding the reconstruction of the nuclear family unit. The scene then cuts to what the audience perceives to be Josephine and Noé's wedding, signaling yet again the breaking down of the family like unit they have all made for themselves. This breaking down and reshaping of family and community structures illustrates Denis's thematic focus on the transient line between groupings.

Lionel's family represents not only the melding and dissolving of colonial identities experienced by France, but also illustrates how identities are in constant flux

Human Form and The Alternate Voyeur

One hallmark of Denis's auteur style is a focus on the visual representations of the small moments in narrative structures. As Mayne states, "the small moment, the brief moment of connection is never taken for granted" (xi). As dialogue between characters is sparse, Denis instead relies on the use of visual images to convey her message. This focus on the visual representation is a crucial aspect of breaking down borders between her subjects and her audience. This allows for a sense of unprecedented intimacy to form between her audience and her subject, allowing for the viewer to enter the position of the voyeur with relative ease. While film inherently relies on voyeuristic pleasure to engage its audience, Denis utilizes this intimate relationship with her viewers to give them access to narratives that would otherwise remain closed off. Yet this intimacy also has direct implications on our understanding of how voyeurism in film works.

Denis films focus almost exclusively on the masculine subject. While female characters serve dynamic roles, Denis often delves into the implications of masculinity on relationships. Denis's most critically acclaimed film *Beau Travail* tackles both the concept of relationships between hyper masculine figures and the ties between masculinity and colonialism. The film follows Chief Galoup of the French Foreign Legion as he reflects on his time in Djibouti. Galoup enjoys his structured life, and harbors great respect for his Lieutenant Forestier. Yet, this all changes when a new

soldier Sentain joins the Legion. Sentain is smart, talented, and beautiful and Galoup immediately becomes jealous. The relationship is heavy with homoerotic tension. Denis supplements the limited dialogue of the film with a blatant hyper focus on the male bodies of the soldiers. As the film opens up with a scene in a nightclub, the inherent sexual tension is made clear from the beginning. Yet, Denis follows this shot with a long scene of these soldiers performing a graceful, ballet like Tai Chi. While the contrast between the two dance scenes is jarring, the blatant objectification of the male body ties the scenes together and is unique in films about the military. Traditionally films rely on the voyeuristic pleasure that arises from watching the female subject. Yet, *Beau Travail* focuses solely on the masculine subject. The film is filled with scenes of men training and fighting. These moments of physical contact that are not inherently sexual, yet they are remarkably sensual and intimate. Denis frames her films through the objecting view of Galoup, a narrator, who film theorist Gwendolyn Audrey Foster argues has a “mental landscape rife with homoeroticized images of faces and bodies.” In doing this, Denis has reassigned the position of voyeur, and drastically challenged cinematic conventions. As Galoup’s homoerotic focus removes him from the standard narrative of heteronormativity, Denis’s choice to use him as the main point of entrance into the narrative causes the viewer to question who truly holds the power to look at other bodies in the way that cinematic demands.

Galoup is only one of Denis’s characters that represent a subversion of the stereotypical voyeur position. Denis tackles this concept again in her film *I Can’t Sleep*. In classic Denis style, *I Can’t Sleep* uses three intertwining narratives to illustrate a larger point on French identity. The film begins with the introduction of Daiga, a young

Lithuanian woman who has immigrated to Paris with the hopes of making it as an actress. Daiga speaks almost no French, and relies on the help of her great aunt to attempt to support herself. Denis intertwines the main narrative with another narrative surrounding Theo. Theo is a black musician who longs to leave Paris with his young son, despite his estranged wife wanting him to stay in the city. Theo is frequently visited by his brother Camille, a gay man who performs at drag shows in the city. In the background of these narratives is a general sense of anxiety, due to a string of murders targeting elderly women. About half way into the film, Denis reveals that Camille and his lover are in fact the serial killers terrorizing the neighborhood. Yet, it is only after Daiga, who is a maid in the hotel where Camille lives, recognizes a sketch of the assailants, is Camille caught and arrested. By giving this ultimate moment of seeing to Daiga, Denis again makes a comment on the role of spectatorship in cinema. As a character, she often does not speak. Instead, she serves as more of a passive observer of her surroundings. Reminiscent of the stoic nature of her protagonist France in *Chocolat*, Daiga is a constant but quiet figure throughout the narrative. While Denis gives Theo a complex character arch based on identity tensions and a sense of nostalgic self-understanding, Daiga's story isn't nearly as developed. Daiga is the viewer's entrance into the narrative, and serves as the main voyeur throughout the film. This reassignment of the stereotypical voyeur position again breaks free of cinematic conventions.

These subtle acts of reassigning the main point of identification partnered with a focus on the cross section between masculinity, sexuality, and desire allow for Denis to deconstruct mainstream conventions of spectatorship. Despite Denis's films often focusing on the masculine body, she frames the subject through the lens of a

marginalized viewer. By using characters like Daiga, France, and Galoup as main observers, Denis actively challenges the mainstream expectation that the voyeuristic pleasure belongs solely to the masculine subject. As Mayne argues, Denis “has associated spectatorship with women, and even though this is an indirect connection (as many connections tend to be in Claire Denis’s work) she echoes many arguments [...] about the contradictory identities embodied by the women in relationship to the cinema” (27). Denis constant deconstruction of her viewers’ expectations of cultural identities helps her to further reconstruct our ability to engage in the act of looking.

Conclusion

While Denis’s films do not adhere to a single genre, their strong visual structure and thematic similarities link them together as a cohesive filmography. Denis’s artistic vision is dedicated to the deconstruction of her audience’s understanding of identity as it is formed by spectatorship. As film inherently relies on the joy that comes from looking at another subject, this deconstruction is a direct challenge not only to the traditional structures in Western cinema, but also the hegemonic ideas that frame our everyday ways of thinking and understanding. Denis’s films explore her understanding of France’s identity, along with the impact of France’s role in colonialism by the racist implications that the structure left behind. Denis’s films look to tackle and subvert themes of identity and representation. Her films clearly challenge mainstream depictions of the male and female subject. While Denis’s films do often focus more on male characters, her manipulation of the cinematic gaze ensures that these films do more than just reaffirm the standard understanding of masculinity. Instead, by presenting her films with a non-

mainstream voyeur, her films look to see how marginalized groups of individuals interact with society as a whole.

Conclusion

Auteurism Now

Throughout my research and analysis of auteur theory, numerous strengths and weaknesses of this form of analysis have become apparent. With film scholarship focusing more on the division of labor needed throughout a film's production, for example, the ability to assign a singular paramount creative voice becomes increasingly challenging. While directors serve as key decision makers within a film, the collaborative structure of film production makes it impossible to delineate any true hierarchy. Additionally, the form of analysis required in auteur theory can be rather limiting. In order to truly label a director as an auteur, a comprehensive study of the director's entire filmography is needed. This limits the analysis to directors who have had the fiscal and social support to produce numerous films. Auteur theory also fails to highlight how the changing social expectations and cultural influences might affect a film's final outcome. Yet, the retrospective nature of analysis can also be beneficial. Auteur theory gains its strength in its ability to track a single director's success and failures. King and Miller argue auteur theory should not be used to "rank any individuals as a priority for film theory, [but rather] go looking for the social impact of and on the cinema and the intertextual and industrial interconnections of films upon one another" (478). Auteur theory, when looked at contingently with other supporting film theories such as feminist film theory or genre studies, can help to illustrate how marginalized

directors utilize the medium to express their own understanding of subject and story telling.

Studying auteurs Bigelow, Campion, and Denis, throughout their careers has illustrated not only the strength and viability of each of their own artistic visions, but also how each director constantly used the medium to challenge expectations of gender representation and representations of the subject. Each director's auteur style interacts with larger contexts of genre, mainstream cinema, and feminism in dynamic and unique ways. American director Kathryn Bigelow works in one of the most stereotypical masculine genres. Working in the action genre, Bigelow uses concepts of violence, sex, and femininity to analyze how masculinity is formed and maintained. Having worked her way from low budget independent films to larger mainstream films, Bigelow has successfully navigated both realms of production. As Cook argues, Bigelow's success "can be put down to a number of strategic factors: her earlier films were deliberately controversial in their graphic portrayals of sex and violence, and in interviews Bigelow asserted her interest in controversy and in breaking the boundaries of what was considered suitable form and subject matter for female directors" (480). Bigelow's roles in the technical aspects of her filmmaking are also crucial to note. Her creation of a new form of camera called the 'pogo-cam' allowed for a technological and stylistic upgrade in her film *Point Break*. Bigelow weaves themes of performativity and masculinity throughout her films. While her films often don't center on female characters, her hyper focus on how masculinity is represented in genre films illustrates her argument that gender is in fact performed, and that females must often give up aspects of their gender identity to succeed in these male driven films.

Campion also works directly with genre to express her understanding of the role of narration in the ties between systems of belief, sex, and expression. Campion is a key member of Australian cinema, where film theorist Brian McFarlane argues she is best known for the “tenacious trickle of genre films” (173). This stylistic choice is immediately recognizable in Campion’s work. Just as Bigelow utilized the action genre to critique gender identity construction, Campion roots her artistic vision in the melodrama genre. Campion does not follow the traditional expectations of a melodrama. For example, Campion uses a heavy focus on the Australian landscape to replace the stereotypical presentation of a more traditionally constructed *mise-en-scène*. Thematically, Campion’s auteur style has been consistent from the beginning. Her films highlight the struggle of a female character interacting with the world around them. These characters are all remarkably driven, but their passions often don’t present themselves in the stereotypical way. Instead of each character producing some end product, Campion instead highlights the act of producing itself. This emphasis on the process of production serves as a symbol for female expression. With a heavy focus on the deconstruction of the stereotypical family structure, Campion’s films offer her viewers female characters that are vulnerable without being victimized. This allows for Campion to deal with more taboo subjects such as faith and sexuality with a more critical lens. She purposefully structures her characters to have more agency than traditional cinema often allows.

While Bigelow and Campion use genre as grounding for their auteurs, Claire Denis’s filmography is extremely diverse. As a French director, Denis’s films are clearly influenced by art house and New Wave film making techniques. Her films are squarely

positioned within the independent genre with no move to enter into Hollywood. Denis has directed 11 feature length films, including horror films, family dramas, thrillers, and colonial period pieces. Yet, despite her diverse filmography, Denis constantly intertwines themes of identity, community, and national identity throughout her work. Influenced by her childhood spent in colonized Africa, Denis's films deal both with the construction, but also the deconstruction of identity. By having films that look to deconstruct the binary between it's subjects, Denis purposefully engages her viewers understanding of how identity is both formed and perceived, challenging them to change the way they might look at other subjects. Denis's films are linked together by her strong focus on the visual aspect of cinema. With a heavy focus on the human body, Denis often frames her films to further play into the aspects of spectatorship that film relies on. Yet, by directing this attention to her male subjects, Denis is reassigning the position of voyeur from a masculine audience to a non-traditional one. This active deconstruction of the stereotypical understanding of the role of the masculine gaze in cinema is one of the most important aspects of Denis's artistic vision. While Bigelow and Campion do subvert genre expectations slightly, they still remain true enough to form to be recognized. Denis's auteur style completely challenges those more formal structures that the other two directors somewhat abide by.

In comparing these three directors, the role that their artistic vision plays in subverting cinematic expectations becomes clear. While these three directors used different techniques of forming a cohesive body of work, all three auteurs have an intense focus on the role that cinema has had on constructing and maintaining a sense of self. As cinema has historically been linked to more patriarchal understandings of representation,

female representation is often reductive. This leaves female directors with the challenge to utilize conventions that often reduce their sense of identity, while still using the medium to better represent their understanding of reality. It is clear that there is no set way to tackle this gap. Campion delves into this full force, utilizing the stereotypical women lead melodrama to further critique her viewers understanding of female sexuality and expression. Yet, neither Bigelow nor Denis's films often center on the female experience. Bigelow's choice to work within the action genre allows her to delve into our understanding of the performativity behind cinematic representations of the masculine subject, and it's implications on female expression. Denis further challenges mainstream ideology, stating that the spectatorship that film relies on isn't inherently masculine at all, but rather belongs to women and other marginalized identities.

While it is impossible to say quite why any of these women haven't had as much commercial success as some of their male counterparts, it is clear that there are serious limitations that these women face. Funding opportunities can also greatly limit an artist's exposure and success. While Australia and France have governmental funding dedicated to the support of national cinema that Denis and Campion were able to tap into, Bigelow had to rely on more mainstream forms of fundraising. As women are less likely to have had the background in mainstream cinema, their ability to get funding from mainstream outlets is reduced. This forms somewhat of a self-enclosed circuit, which strengthens the glass ceiling that prevents women from entering into the industry easily. Partnered with the fact that women directed films are often labeled controversial, independent pieces, few women are able to bridge the gap between art film and mainstream film. As Bigelow's ultra masculine film *The Hurt Locker* has been the only female-directed film

to win, it would seem that under current Hollywood standards, female directors must be willing to engage in hyper-masculine films in order to be considered talented. While Denis, Bigelow, and Campion have all broken through the mold in some way, it is clear that mainstream cinema has a long way to go before being inclusive.

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