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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN
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"RE-INVENTING NOIR"
THE FILMS OF KATHRYN BIGELOW

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"Re-inventing Noir"
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF PLATES

INTRODUCTION

"I'm a huge fan of film Noir, but I'm less interested in updating it than in re-inventing it or perhaps just using it as a point of departure" Kathryn Bigelow (Kerr & Rowland, 1990, p. 313).

The primary aim of this thesis is to examine the films of Kathryn Bigelow in the light of this claim. Secondly, to explore the post-modern elements in these works, elements defined by Frederic Jameson: the phenomena of nostalgia, pastiche and a sense of "schizophrenia" and temporal dislocation.

The first chapter will include a brief presentation of the director, her background and a short outline of the films to be analysed. This chapter will also briefly define Film Noir and science fiction and will examine the appeal of Noir to the post-modern condition.

The second chapter will examine the role of women in Bigelow's films by considering traditional Noir types, (the "femme fatale," etc.) and how these roles have evolved in her work. This chapter will also briefly examine some aspects of the female "action hero" that are found to be problematic, particularly across the feminist spectrum.

The third chapter will discuss the post-modern phenomena of nostalgia, pastiche and the cross-generic film. It will include an exploration of "Tech Noir" through the future visions of *Strange Days* (Bigelow, 1995*)* and, by way of secondary contrast, *Bladerunner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). These visions of a quintessentially post-modern city explore themes of urban disintegration and alienation, memory and a sense of temporal confusion. Finally, it will examine how Classic Noir heroes: "the hard-boiled detective" and "the fall guy / patsy" are brought into the future through the characters of

Deckard (Harrison Ford) in Bladerunner and Lenny Nero (Ralph Feinnes) in *Strange Days*. In conclusion, I will assess how successful she has been in her attempt to "re-invent Noir."

CHAPTER 1

This chapter gives an outline of the terms that are the parameters of this thesis: "science fiction," post-modernism" "Film Noir" and Neo Noir." I also give here a brief outline of the career of Kathryn Bigelow and the films I will be discussing in greater detail.

"Film Noir" is the title coined in 1946 by French film critics to describe a certain body of films that emerged from Hollywood during the 1940's and early 50's. Many of these were adaptations of works by pulp crime fiction writers, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, etc. Although it is not necessarily a requirement of the classification that these films be based on such works, nor that they be depictions of urban crime featuring "hard-boiled detectives" and "femmes fatales," these are key elements of many of them. Film Noir is more subtly a description of a style: the unusual composition of shots and use of expressionistic lighting, the use of narration and flashbacks to tell the story. There is a characteristic mood of pessimism and increasing paranoia, a sense of loss and nostalgia for the past, disillusionment with the present and fear of the future. If these terms seem rather general, that is because there are no clear cut definitions of Film Noir.

To give an example of two opposing views of Film Noir, consider Notes on Film Noir (Shrader, Paul, 1972, p. 8-13) and Film Noir on the Edge of Doom (Vernet, Marc, 1993, p. 1-31). Whereas Shrader attempts to categorise Film Noir in terms of influences, themes and stylistic elements, and breaks it down into three distinct phases, Vernet refutes almost all of Shrader's definition, pointing out that the desire for there to be a category called "Film Noir" leads to exclusions and dismissal of details for the sake of convenience:

7

"The result is a sort of imaginary enclosure in which what appears to be evident to spectators becomes a venerable concept for feminists and historians and in which the resulting critical work ends up occulting the films themselves and their production. As an object or corpus of films, "Film Noir" does not belong to the history of cinema; it belongs as a notion to the history of film criticism" (Vernet,1993, p.26).

However, it is worth examining the enduring appeal of classic Noir and the emergence of Neo Noir, as more recent productions considered to have "Noirish" qualities which have been labelled.

According to Fredric Jameson, one of the major elements of post-modern culture is pastiche: "...the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in dead language...without the satirical impulse...a kind of blank irony" (Jameson, 1983, p.114). Other important elements include "the death of the subject," the end of the concept of individualism and a kind of "schizophrenic" experience of a mixed and fragmented temporality. This lack of temporal continuity condemns the schizophrenic "...to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon" (Jameson, 1983, p.119).

Accepting these theories, it is hardly surprising that Hollywood has a continuing fascination with Film Noir and Neo Noir. Indeed, Jameson describes the phenomenon of Hollywood "nostalgia film" in his analysis of pastiche. Movie makers wanting to create a stunning visual image, could do worse than re-create the stylistic qualities of Film Noir. Twisted tales of crime, corruption and betrayal and characters like the "hard-boiled detective" and the "femme fatale" have lasting popularity with film audiences. Noir has proved extremely flexible, having survived transition from its original post-war era, through to the present and successfully crossing with other genres.

It is worth noting the part that television has played in the survival of Film Noir. Through frequent re-runs and seasons of old movies, new generations, much younger than the movie goers of the 40's and 50's feel nostalgic about Film Noir, not only as a reflection of the era in which they were made, but also as part of their own lives. The phenomenon of its continuing popularity is explained by Slavoj Žižek as:

> "...the most notorious case of nostalgic fascination in the domain of cinema... what fascinates us is precisely a certain gaze, the gaze of the "other" the hypothetical, mystic spectator from the 40's who was supposedly still able to identify immediately with the universe of Film Noir ...for this reason our relation to Film Noir is always divided, split between fascination and ironic distance" (Žižek, 1989, p. 39).

However, other possibilities have been examined. B. Ruby Rich suggests that there are certain parallels to be made between post-war conditions and 1990's America:

> "The end of the Cold War seems to have thrown the U.S. into as much of a dither as its beginnings; old ideological formations are once again destined for the junk heap and faith has gone missing. Whenever nobody can be trusted, society may disintegrate, but Noir can flourish" (Rich, 1995, p. 8).

Rich also points to America's continuing problem with xenophobia and the growing dissatisfaction with the government among armed militia groups, that has led to situations like the siege at Waco and the Oklahoma bombing. These circumstances can be compared with the sense of malaise and disillusionment in the post-war era and ironically, with fears of the communist threat and the rise of McCarthyism.

Rich believes that Neo Noir draws particularly from the last phase of Film Noir (approximately 1949-1953) - the "B" picture Noir. This is the phase that Bigelow is most interested in. She cites *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1949) and *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulnar, 1945) as two of her particular favourites.

> "I find B-movies inspiring because they delve into a darkness and talk about the demons that exist in all of us. I stumbled on to Noir films and couldn't get enough of them" (Kerr & Rowland, 1990, p. 313).

9

"Neo Noir picks up on the irrational universe embedded in these demonic narratives as fertile ground for the post-modern cultivation of our own fin-de-siecle nightmares" (Rich, 1995, p. 8).

Science fiction could be simplistically, though not inaccurately, described as "what if?" fiction. It concerns itself with possibilities and probabilities, generally with a bias towards technology. Many definitions have been attempted, including that of Brian Aldiss in his history of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree:*

> "Science fiction is the search for a definition of man and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science) and is characteristically cast in the gothic or post-gothic mould" (Aldiss, 1973, p. 8)

Its attractions for the film maker are obvious as technical innovation equates to special effects, to novelty and, ultimately, to profit. Because science fiction's visions of the future are so often apocalyptic or dystopian, its attraction for Neo Noir directors is also obvious. "Tech Noir" is the title often given to this combination of science fiction and Noir. Characters are as much types as individuals. It is, possibly, the quintessential post-modern genre. The film *Bladerunner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) is often cited as the ideal model of a post-modern film. Parenthetically, *Bladerunner* and Fredric Jameson's first essay on post-modernism appeared in the same year. H.L Gold editor of *Galaxy Science Fiction* has said:

> "Few things reveal so sharply as science fiction the wishes, hopes, fears and inner stresses of an era, or define its limitations with such exactness" (quoted by Amis, 1961, p.64).

This genre is obsessed with how it looks. It borrows story-lines from other sources and transplants them into the future: at time frame outside our historical/temporal experience. As far back as 1956, *Forbidden Planet* was based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the similarities between Westerns and "Space Operas" (Star Wars, etc.) have often been commented upon.

THE DIRECTOR:

Kathryn Bigelow studied painting at the San Francisco Art Institute before enrolling in

the Whitney Museum Independent Study Programme in New Your in 1972. She first

experimented with film while she was assistant to the artist Vico Acconci. As a student

at Columbia Graduate Film School, she made her first short film. *Set Up* (Bigelow,

1978). She graduated in 1979 and made her first feature, *The Loveless* (Bigelow, 1981).

She became "...dissatisfied with the art world" (Hultkrans, 1995, p. 79). In another

interview she said:

> "Art requires the audience to have some information to enable it to appreciate
> fairly arcane material. Whereas for film there are no such requirements, except
> merely that it works on more than just the level of entertainment, yet must
> succeed in that respect as well. Art also works on many different levels, so I
> think the transition for me is fairly direct" (Kerr & Rowland, 1990, p. 313).

In 1997, a survey of film directors in Hollywood found only 12 female directors to

200 men (D'Amico, W.W.W. 1997). This of itself would make Kathryn Bigelow an

interesting subject, but what makes her practically unique is that she works in the

traditionally male domain of the "action movie."

Near Dark (Bigelow, 1987) is a Vampire/Western movie. The hero, Caleb (Adrian

Pasdar), a young cowboy, innocently picks up a girl Mae (Jenny Wright) who is a

vampire. She returns his advances by biting him. Caleb, trying to get back home, is

then kidnapped by Mae's vampire family, led by father and mother figures,

Jesse (Lance Henrickson) and Diamondback (Jenette Goldstein). Reluctantly, they

accept him. Caleb, finding himself unable to kill, has to survive by drinking Mae's

blood. He redeems his uneasy position with his new family by an act of courage,

risking combustion in daylight to save them. Eventually his real family track him down,

confront the vampires and escape with Caleb,. who is "cured" by blood transfusion. The vampires then kidnap Caleb's little sister, whom they wish to initiate. In classic Western fashion, Caleb rides out on a white horse to the final showdown. The vampires, with the exception of Mae, are slain, his sister is saved, and he returns home with Mae, who is then "cured" with a transfusion.

Blue Steel (Bigelow, 1990). Rookie cop Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) shoots an armed man in the course of a robbery. In the ensuing panic the gun disappears and she is suspended from the force on suspicion of shooting an unarmed man. In fact, the gun has been taken by Eugene Hunt (Ron Silver), a bystander at the scene. Outwardly a respectable businessman, Eugene is clearly psychotic and becomes fixated on Megan. He embarks on a series of murders using the gun, with Megan's name engraved on the bullets. Megan is re-instated, given a new partner, Nick Mann (Clancy Brown) and sets out to catch the killer. Eugene, meanwhile, engineers a meeting with Megan. Initially, she is attracted to him but soon realises he is insane, fixated on her and her gun and is the killer she has been hunting. Without proof, however, he can not be arrested. In the ensuing game of cat and mouse, Eugene appears untouchable. He murders Megan's best friend, appears menacingly at her parents house, shoots her partner, Nick, and rapes Megan. Megan has to confront Eugene and deal with her own violent urges towards her abusive father and her problems with her own identity, which she has masked with a police uniform and a gun. Eventually, she is forced to go outside the law to hunt Eugene down and after a lengthy gun battle, finally kills him.

Strange Days (Bigelow, 1995) is set in L.A. days before the new millennium begins. Tensions are running high. Race riots and martial law seem imminent. Lenny Nero

(Ralph Feinnes) is an ex-cop turned street hustler, selling psychologically addictive "clips," a new technology allowing experiences to be recorded and then re-experienced through a set of electrodes. Lenny supplies his clients with "clips" of their fantasies. However, he is addicted to what he supplies, constantly replaying "clips" he made with his ex-girlfriend, Faith (Juliette Lewis) an aspiring rock singer who has since left him for record producer, Philo Gant. When Lenny is anonymously sent a "clip" of the rape and murder of Iris, an old friend of his and Faith's, he investigates with the help of his friends, Max (Tom Sizemore), another ex-cop, and Mace (Angela Bassett), a tough limo-driver and martial arts expert, who protects and secretly loves Lenny. He discovers that Iris was killed because she had made a "clip" of the murder of Jericho One - a rap singer and political activist - by two rogue cops. As Iris was working for Gant, Lenny believes that Faith is in danger. Lenny gives the "clip" to Mace, who passes it on to the police commissioner. He then tries to save Faith, to discover that Faith and Max are lovers, that Max killed Iris and now Gant and that he plans to set Lenny up to take the "fall." Max and Lenny fight, and Max is killed. Meanwhile, Mace is being pursued through the New Year's Eve revellers in the streets by the two rogue cops. A riot almost breaks out, but the two villains are caught, and chaos is averted. The millennium dawns, and Mace and Lenny reveal their feelings for each other.

CHAPTER 2

Roles for women in classic Noir films fall into two main categories: "the femme fatale" and "the good woman." This chapter discusses how these roles have evolved in Bigelow's work and the types of female roles that occur in her films.

The emergence of the "femme fatale" may be seen as a manifestation of post-World War paranoia and disillusionment. Men, returning from the war, found that the roles of the sexes had changed. Women had taken over their traditional place in the workforce and were disinclined to surrender their new-found freedoms and sense of empowerment.

"Femme Fatales" are tough and sexually liberated. They are childless and are usually attempting to free themselves from an unwanted husband or lover. They are portrayed as ambitious, devious, ruthless and often psychotic. They are also deeply unpredictable, although this is primarily a plot device in order to keep the hero and the audience unsure about their true nature. "Femmes Fatales" invariably use their guile and sexual allure to enmesh the heroes in their schemes and set them up to take the "fall". In *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) for example, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) is a bored housewife who becomes involved with Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), an insurance salesman, and persuades him to take part in the murder of her husband in order to claim on his substantial life insurance. When they are about to be discovered, she shoots and mortally wounds Neff, who then kills her.

Significantly Neff, like almost all Noir heroes, is aware from the start that he could be involved with a dangerous woman but is completely captivated by her. The question arises: Why are these women so irresistible?

14

"Phyllis Dietrichson, as with any of the other Film Noir women who function as sexual commodities, is, in the magic world of the movies, held up as a tempting means of escape from the boredom and frustration of a routinised and alienated existence. (Sylvia Harvey, 1978, p. 26).

In Classic Noir films there is often, in a much less prominent female role, " the good woman." She is the embodiment of wholesomeness, the nurturing female - the antithesis of the "female fatale." She is the woman who would forgive and redeem the hero, if only he were capable of returning to her. The character of Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) - and note the diminutive, inconsequential name - is a classic example of this archetype (the one James Stewart should be with instead of chasing after Kim Novak).

These characters are, almost invariably, bland. After all, there is little dramatic possibility in cosy domesticity. They are passive rather than active participants in the drama being played out, victims rather than victimisers. They represent, perhaps, the distance the "femme fatale" has travelled from "acceptable" womanly behaviour.

Both these views of women can be seen as misogynistic. While the "femme fatale" is invariably punished, often paying for her deviant behaviour with her life, the state of marriage is usually portrayed as terminally boring.

In examining how these archetypes have evolved in Bigelow's work, one can look at the characters of Faith and Mace in *Strange Days*: Faith as the "femme fatale" and Mace as the "good woman." The character of Megan in *Blue Steel* is more complex and will be dealt with separately.

Faith (Figure 1) is the less interesting of the two. As with most similar roles in Neo Noir, here the "femme fatale" has not evolved considerably. The phenomenon of "dumbing down" is a significant feature across all areas of post-modern culture, but it is interesting that this has not happened to the "femme fatale." While the men around her have been reduced to "dumb lugs" the "femme fatale" remains as sharp as ever:

> *"These dumb heroes are ennobled by their idiocy, with the women in turn, demonised (big surprise) by their intelligence...these "dumb lugs" are all accorded a morality denied to the women... as though you can only achieve realness if you don't know any better and so are too stupid for cynicism"* (Rich, B. Ruby, 1995, p. 9 and 10).

However, occasionally there are films which allow the "femme fatale" to break out of the stereotype. A notable example of this is Faye Dunaway's character in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974). Initially appearing as the classic "femme fatale" she emerges as having been acting from the noblest of motives, trying to protect her sister/daughter from her father's incestuous designs.

Mace (Figure 2) in *Strange Days* is, in essence, the "good", nurturing woman. She represents Lenny's hope, his only hope, of redemption. Bigelow describes her as the films *"moral centre...the film's unblemished hero"* (Hultkrans, 1995, p. 104). Mace vigorously disapproves of Lenny's business dealings. However, she is a long way from the dull "good" girls of Classic Noir. Far from being meek and bland, she is a tough, independent woman, trying to raise her son alone under difficult circumstances. Her masculine image is emphasised by her muscular body and the masculine clothes she wears: her chauffeur's uniform and black leather jacket. However, in the flashback scene, we see a very different Mace. She is running towards her home as her husband is being arrested. She is wearing a pink, waitress's uniform and has a softer, more feminine hairstyle. This is the scene where she first meets Lenny, still a policeman at

16

Fig.1 Faith (Juliette Lewis)   Fig.2 Mace (Angela Bassett)

this stage. She finds him sitting in the bedroom, talking with her son. This not only shows Lenny in a more sympathetic light, in better times, but presumably indicates the root of Mace's feelings for him. More significantly, it indicates how much her life has changed since her husband's arrest. She has now become both a mother and a father figure. This assumption of dual roles is asserted throughout. Along with her masculine appearance, physical toughness and familiarity with firearms, she is also a mother, although most of her maternal instincts within the film are realised in the way she "mothers" Lenny. She protects him, pulls him out of trouble, scolds him, bathes his wounds. She even holds him like a child, letting him fall asleep with his head on her lap. It is unusual for the male hero of an action film to be seen to have such a child-like dependency on a mother figure, particularly as she becomes his love interest. In such a traditionally "macho" genre it seriously undercuts the hero's masculinity. In addition to this, more conservative American audiences may have had problems with the inter-racial relationship between Mace, a black woman, and the Caucasian Lenny, as many still find "miscegenation" unpalatable.

Their relationship closely echoes that of Caleb and Mae (Figure 3) in *Near Dark* (1987). They begin as young lovers, Caleb naively assuming the dominant role. When Mae bites him and initiates his vampiric transformation, their relationship changes. In one sense, she becomes his "mother," having created a new vampire. However, the vital sustenance obtained by her sucking his blood is strongly suggestive of the suckling of a baby. In addition, the ambiguity of the vampiric mouth: *"...a promise of red softness but delivering instead the piercing bone"* (Craft, 1984, p. 109) leads to the traditional boundaries between masculine and feminine, mother and child becoming extremely blurred. When Caleb is transformed into a vampire, he changes from lover to child,

Fig.3 Caleb & Mae (Adrian Pasdar & Jenny Wright)

regressing to an infantile state. Unable to feed himself, he is completely dependent on Mae allowing him to feed from her body.

In his interview with Bigelow, Hultkrans surmises that these infantalised males, Lenny and Caleb, suggest that a subtext of her films is the weaning process. Bigelow replies:

> *"In order to have self-realisation. It's weaning, but it's also searching for androgyny. Man and woman become fused...taking advantage of the catharsis that union provides"* (Hultkrans, 1995, p. 112).

Jamie Lee Curtis, as Megan (Figure 4) in *Blue Steel* (1990), assumes the traditional male classic Noir role of the hero, trying to catch a psychotic killer and, finding the law impotent against him, eventually having to take the law into her own hands. Bigelow uses this Neo Noir thriller to examine issues of identity, sexual stereotyping and the controversial theme of the violent woman.

> *"I wanted to do a 'woman's action film,' putting a woman at the centre of a movie predominantly occupied by men"* Kathryn Bigelow (Kerr & Rowland, 1990, p. 313).

Megan is clearly a woman in search of her identity. In one of the opening scenes, we see her proudly donning her police uniform and strapping on her holster and her gun.

Anna Powell (1994, p. 146) describes this as the *"adoption of the phallus."* She points to the buttoning up of her police shirt over her lacy, white bra as the merging of masculine and feminine and describes how Megan seems to enjoy the *"fetishistic play"* surrounding this dressing process and the androgynous nature of Jamie Lee Curtis's features.

Fig.4 Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis)

If it seems that too much is being made of the gun as a phallic substitute, it should be considered that the title of the film, *Blue Steel*, apart from being an obvious reference to a gun, is also U.S. slang for an erection. Even in the credit sequence, the camera, in extreme close-up, probes the gun with intense detail. Bigelow had to have a special camera designed for this sequence alone. So there are very strong indications that this is how Bigelow wants us to read these images.

> *"What some critics found disturbing was the fact that Blue Steel not only explores the relationship between sexuality, gender and the imagery surrounding guns in Hollywood cinema but that the film takes an obvious pleasure in the images that this generates. Thus, the disturbing implications surrounding women and guns are drawn out at the same time as we are invited to share in it"* (Tasker, 1993, p. 159).

Megan is seen joining the ranks of the police cadets. Filing into the graduation ceremony, she is indistinguishable from all the others. She takes the oath with her eyes filled with tears. This is far more than a career to her; it is more like a desire to be subsumed into this powerful authoritarian body.

Walking home in her new uniform, she draws admiring glances from two passing girls. She evidently likes this. It is very ambiguous. Are they lesbians or heterosexuals who have mistaken her for a man? It does not seem to matter to Megan. The pleasure for her is being looked at in her new uniform. She is clearly delighted with her new identity.

However, most people seem to find her new look problematic. She meets a man she knows on the steps of her apartment block. "Look at you," he says, but then is lost for words, unsure of what to make of her. Megan's mother says exactly the same thing the first time she sees her in uniform. There is a strong suggestion in this film that it is

unusual for a woman to want to join the police. No one seems to understand. She is asked several times why she became a cop. Usually she answers glibly that she wants to shoot people or smash their heads into walls. Clearly she is tired of answering the question. However, when her partner, Nick, asks it of her, she answers: "Him." It could be assumed that she means Eugene, the psychotic killer, or others like him, but logically, since she did not encounter Eugene until she had joined the force, the "him" to whom she is referring may be inferred to be her abusive father. This casts her remarks about wanting to commit acts of violence in a new light. It suggests that she became a cop to get revenge on her father or that she may have genuine, violent urges towards him. This is plausible, considering that she arrests her father when she discovers bruises on her mother's arm, only relenting on the way to the station and letting him off with a warning. This indicates that she saw becoming a cop as a way of righting past wrongs.

Although it is not as overtly obvious in the case of Megan as it is with Sara Connors (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 1* and *Terminator 2* (James Cameron) or Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in the *Alien* films or even with Mace in *Strange Days*, this assumption of a "masculine" role could be seen as a direct reaction to the brutality of her surroundings - presumably, in Megan's case, after years of watching her father's abusive behaviour. When she tells her friend, Tracey how envious she is of her "normal" life - husband and children, etc., she, like Mace in the flashback scene, appears in a softer, more feminine, light.

On the other hand, Eugene believes that Megan has violent tendencies. He believes she enjoyed killing the robber in the supermarket; after all, she did not have to shoot him so many times. "You didn't even blink," he says with admiration. He tells her that they

20

"are two halves of the same person" and that he believes she will kill again, given the encouragement. However, in goading Megan, it is himself he is pushing her to kill. He says: "Death is the greatest kick of all" and later: "Megan is the greatest kick of all." Clearly, he connects sex and death and connects Megan with death, since he has seen her kill; but he also sees her as the agent of his own death. For all the acts of violence he commits on others, it is ultimately his own death that he longs to experience.

Bigelow says of this movie and the character of Megan:

> *"I was interested in creating a person at the centre of an action film who represents an Everyman that both women and men could identify with...some men found themselves for the first time in their lives identifying with a woman. I found this very interesting because finally the notion of self-preservation is universal. I wanted to create a very strong, capable person who just happened to be a woman, using the context of the police genre"* (Kerr & Rowland, 1990, p. 313).

It is interesting to consider why the character of Megan allowed some men to identify for the first time with a female role. As she is occupying traditionally male roles as a member of the police force and as the "hero" of an action film, it is possible that men are reacting to a familiar role in a familiar genre, regardless of the gender of the character. The masculinity of the role is further emphasised by her androgynous looks and the masking of her identity under a police uniform.

However, it is also possible that men are empathising with the ambiguity of Megan's position. As a female cop, she is depicted by the film as caught between traditional notions of male and female roles. She is regarded with suspicion by her male co-workers but also set apart from her family, friends and neighbours because she is a cop. She is shown to occupy the position of "outsider," isolated from both women and men. She could be seen as a representation of the social and cultural difficulties that

21

arise as traditional male and female boundaries shift. Many men may feel that the traditional security of their roles is being eroded, placing them in an uncertain position, which ironically echoes Megan's difficulties.

However, Bigelow's notion of an "Everyman" character that can be identified with regardless of gender is one that has proven extremely problematic for some feminist critics.

Suzanne Moore quotes the film critic Laura Mulvey's phrase "psychic transvestism" to describe the process whereby a woman spectator identifies with a male hero and suggests that it is somehow inauthentic.

On the other hand, Bigelow describes how a woman going to see *Lethal Weapon* will identify with Mel Gibson (Kerr & Rowland, 1990, p. 313). It seems obvious that our experience of the thrills and excitements of the role of the hero is non-gender specific.

> *"I think that this notion that there is a woman's aesthetic, a woman's eye, is really debilitating. It ghettoises women"* (Bigelow, 1988).

Indeed, it would seem extremely problematic to attempt to single out an essential, uniquely female aesthetic, given the diversity of feminist views and the impossible task of finding a complete "empirical" view.

Consider the spectrum of feminist debate on the female action hero and the aggressive or violent woman. This ranges from Orla Walsh's article on *Blue Steel*, where she quotes from Nell McCafferty's *Mother Ireland:*

"Feminists throughout the world have no great text that has been written on the position of feminism and physical force. I don't think that it's an inherent form of feminism that women should be pacifist" (Walsh, 1991).

To the view that feminism is about *"the disempowerment of men, not the empowerment of women"* (Botcherly & Garland, 1991).

They also express concern over Megan's role as a police officer. As such, she is working in a male-dominated system, that upholds a patriarchal society.

In contrast, Christine Holmund describes the view, held by some, that a woman assuming a traditional, aggressive male role is not really a woman but a man in drag because they hold that violence is *a priori* male. This view, ironically, echoes James Cameron's original screenplay description of "Vita Mihn," (Figure 5) one of Philo Gant's henchmen in *Strange Days:*

> *"She is a massively built body-builder who contrasts her hulking frame with a low-cut dress and pearls. Like a woman imitating a drag queen...and somehow sexy and terrifying"* (Cameron, 1996, p. 65).

"Vita" is very reminiscent of another of Cameron's female characters, "Vasquez," the ultra-tough marine in *Aliens* (1986), played by Jenette Goldstein, who was also "Diamondback" in *Near Dark.* At one point in the film, another marine, a male, asks: "Hey, Vasquez, have you ever been mistaken for a man?" She replies, "No. Have you?" The role of "Ripley" in the first *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) was originally intended as a male role. Although the gender changed, the role remained essentially the same. Indeed, this is very similar to what George Miller describes doing in his *Mad Max* films (1981 and 1985). He goes as far as saying that in his view of a post-apocalyptic world, *"Men and women are simply interchangeable"* (Peary, 1984, p. 383).

23

Fig.5 "Vita Mihn"

To summarise: there is a whole cross section of feminist views at odds with Bigelow. They disagree with her views on gender identification. They express concerns over depictions of violent women and the "fetishisation" of guns. They believe that Bigelow is contributing to the "eroticisation" of violence, creating more male fantasy images surrounding women and guns.

On the other hand, Bigelow would see herself as using traditional genre structures to subvert stereotypical female roles. By creating strong, independent female characters, combining masculine and feminine elements, she sees herself as producing "Everyman" characters that have universal recognition.

Directors such as Bigelow, Cameron, Scott and Miller choose to work within specific genres and hybrid genres which have formulaic narratives and archetypes. The emphasis is placed on visual imagery and visceral spectacle rather than narrative innovations or characterisation for a post-modern audience that is equally aware of the conventions and stereotypes of all these genres. Indeed, these gender reversals and anti-stereotypes could simply be seen as a way of introducing novelty into an overly familiar form.

John G. Cawelti describes the phenomenon of cross-generic transformation in Hollywood movies. Two of its key elements are: the use of traditional genre structures as a means of de-mythologisation and the re-affirmation of the myth by acknowledging that it is a myth and its significance.

CHAPTER 3

This chapter will discuss *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) in the light of the preceding *Bladerunner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). Both are set in Los Angeles in the near and very near future, respectively; and both share many common Noir and science fiction themes. Firstly, I will examine how the city is depicted in both these films, secondly the common elements they share, the significance of memory and the shared connections with Film Noir. Lastly, I will examine the post-modern elements in both films.

Bladerunner is set in 2019. It is a vision of L.A. where current trends of social and economic excesses continue. It is a society in a state of post-industrial decay (Figure 6) - a neglected city where rubbish fills the streets. Those with the means to leave have gone to explore the new frontier: the "Off World" colonies, leaving the less fortunate behind. The cityscape is a pastiche of different styles: part Chinatown, part eastern bazaar, part New York, 1930, and part futuristic city, with the all-powerful Tyrell Corporation's headquarters rising up like a giant Mayan pyramid.

The population of this city reflects its diverse architectural styles. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural mix, without any dominant trends in street fashions - a blend of borrowed styles and recycled looks. In some ways, it depicts the worst elements of city life, hopelessly overcrowded but with everyone living in seemingly total isolation. However, in spite of its dystopian view of the future, its depictions of urban disintegration and alienation, it is a quite elegantly wasted environment, exotic and exciting and sometimes quite beautiful - at least visually. Consider the stunning flight sequences: Airborne vehicles soar high above the city streets among the huge
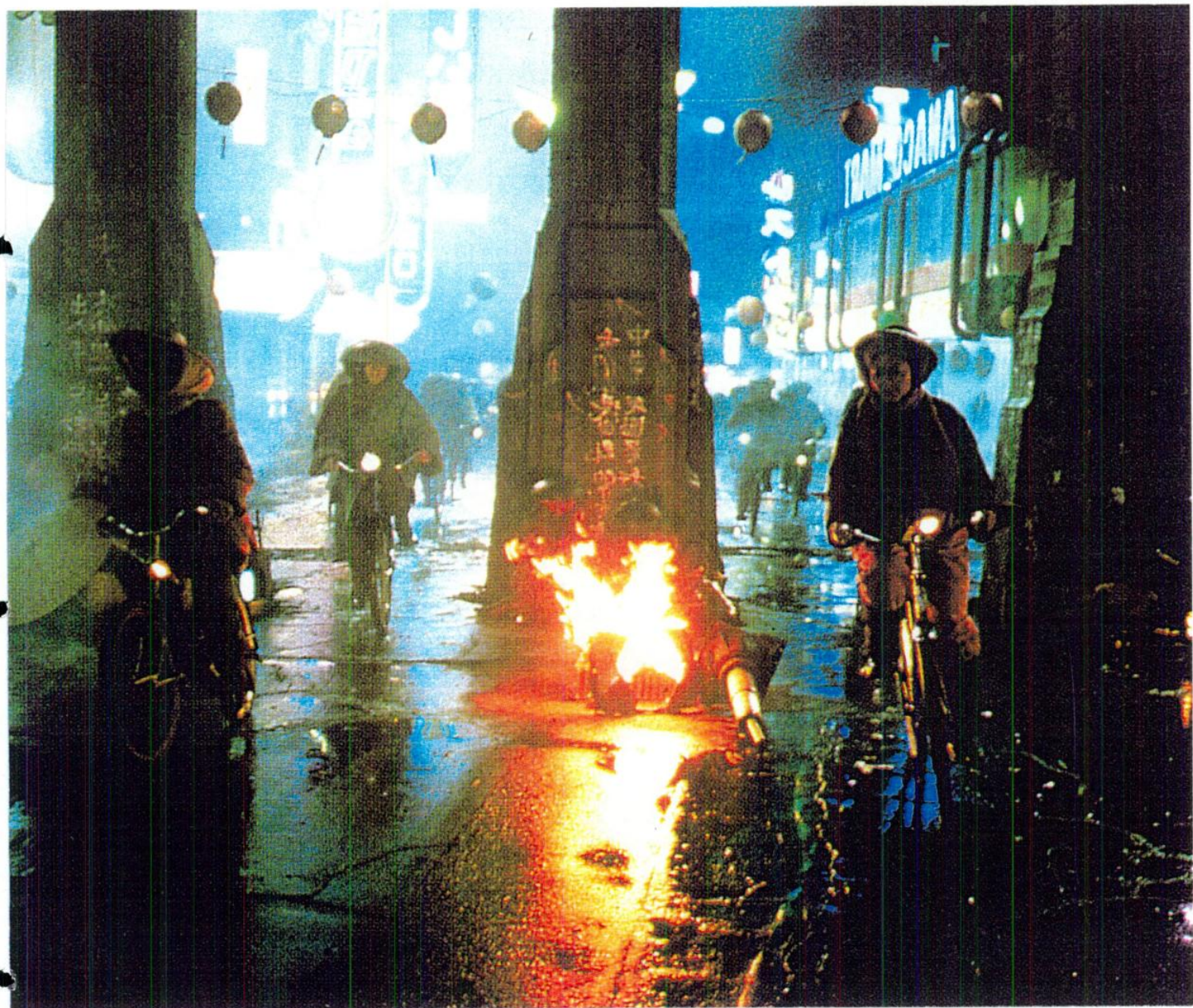
Fig.6 A view of Los Angeles (Bladerunner)

pyramidal structures with their thousands of little lights, set against a burnt orange sky (Figure 7).

> *"...for although this is a hell where we would never want to live, it is also, as repeat viewers of the film can attest, a hell of a nice place to visit"* (Bukatman, 1997, p. 52).

A significant contribution to the visual style of the film was made by Syd Mead. In the credits, he is titled "Visual Futurist." He employed a method known as "retro-fitting" in his design, which he describes as *"...upgrading old machinery or structures by slapping new add-ons to them"* (Sammon, 1996, p. 376).

The main set for the film was a converted New York street scene built in 1929 at the Burbank Studios. It had featured in many Noir and crime films.

> *"Retro-fitted detailing was laid over backlot facades....The New York street set was loaded with neon, and the street was filled with what the publicity notes called 'a variety of mechanical stuff'"* (Bukatman, 1997, p. 21).

Considering that Mead based much of his pre-production designs on the Manhattan skyline and the acknowledged influence of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), it is not surprising that many have observed that this version of L.A. bears a far greater resemblance to New York than the L.A. of the present. So why not simply base the film in New York? After all, the setting in the original story *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Dick, 1968) was San Francisco, and Scott evidently felt no necessity to retain the original setting. It is quite common to view a shift of setting from New York to L.A. as a shift from modernism to post-modernism (Bukatman, 1997, p. 61). Also, both *Bladerunner* and *Strange Days* are regarded by some commentators as a distorted reflection or caricature of the L.A. of the present (Cameron, et al., 1996). When

Fig.7 The Tyrell Corporation Building (Bladerunner)
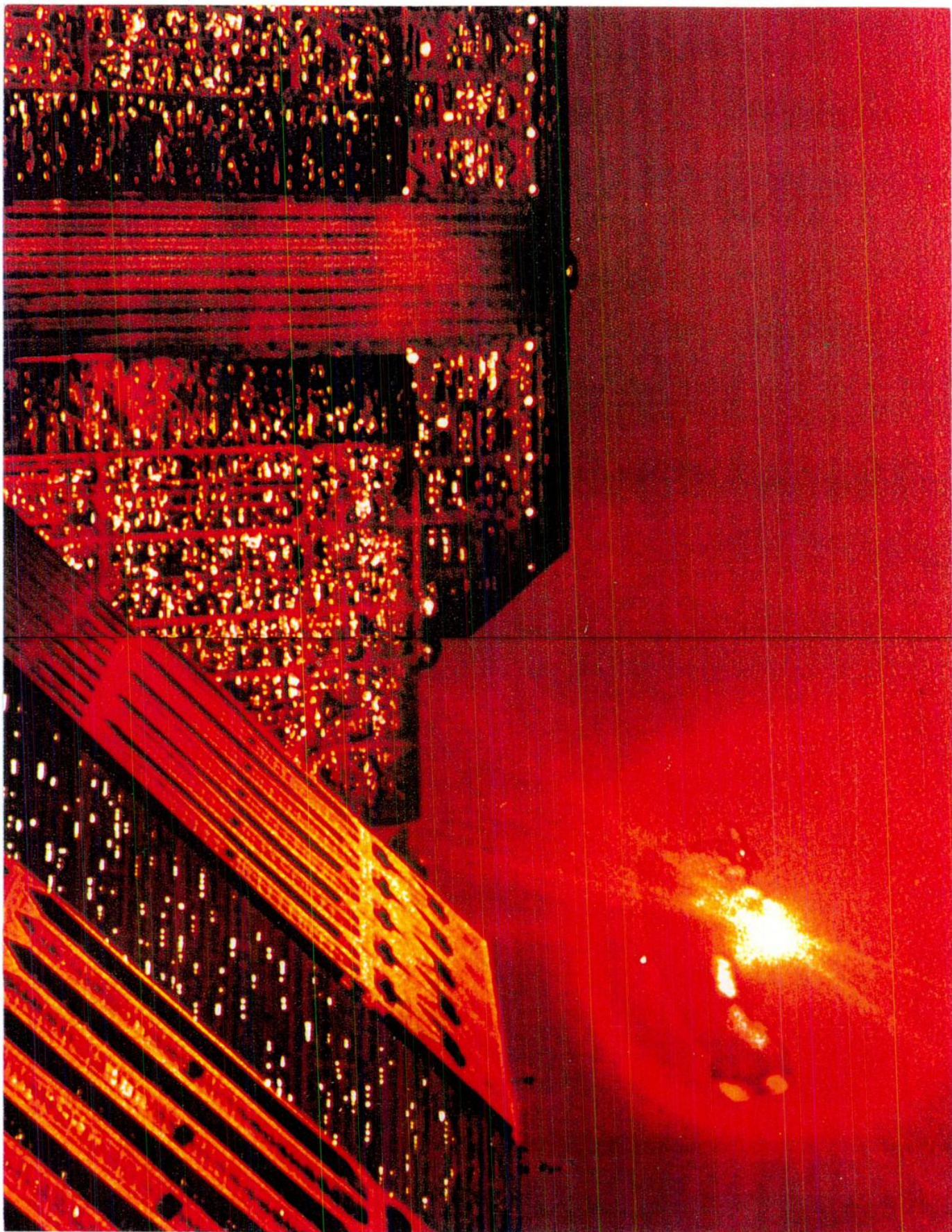
Bigelow was asked why L.A. is so often used as a pre- and post-apocalyptic setting, she replied:

> *"It's the template, isn't it? Perhaps because there is so little history here; there's a fragile balance, an inherent tension. Also, it is not a city. There is no centre. And in its lack of identity, it has a kind of pseudo-identity; it is whatever you project onto it, a faceless place that harbours a multitude of identities, all blurred into one"* (Hultkrans, 1995, p. 80).

Unlike the L.A. of *Bladerunner*, it is difficult to imagine anyone wanting to visit Bigelow's vision of the "hell" of L.A. at the approach of the new millennium in *Strange Days*. It is almost a war zone. There are a massive police and army presence on the streets, armed troops, tanks and checkpoints, lootings and burning cars and civilians openly carrying guns. It is a society on the verge of total collapse. Racial tensions are running so high that race riots seem unavoidable (Figure 8 and Figure 9).

The Rodney King incident and the riots of 1992 had a very significant influence on *Strange Days*, occurring while the treatment of the film was being developed. Bigelow comments:

> *The riots were a really emotional time for anyone living here, and I participated in the clean up. Being on the streets with burned-out shells of buildings and the National Guard milling around suggested a lot of the film's visual basis. You become inured to it very quickly"* (Hultkrans, 1995, p. 104).

As in *Strange Days*, life goes on in the midst of all this devastation. Whereas Deckard in *Bladerunner* hovers far above the city to the strains of Vangelis's soundtrack, Lenny cruises the streets in a car, listening to the callers to a radio show predict the end of the world. Obviously so familiar with the scenes of mayhem outside, he does not register a response. Only when Mace loses her temper and throws him out of the car, when he is threatened with being stranded does he begin to panic. To be left alone, without the safety of a car, seems like a death sentence.

27

Fig.8 Two armed civilians on the streets (Strange Days)

Fig.9 Riot Police (Strange Days)

As there is only a five-year gap between the making of the film and the projected

events, there are very few changes necessary in terms of architecture and street fashions.

James Cameron's assertion: *"This is not some wild Bladerunner future but our future"*

(1995, p. 20) is an overstatement. The fact that this version of L.A. is more

recognisable and familiar than the city in *Bladerunner* does not ultimately make it any

more plausible or probable. Indeed, with its very noticeable references to events like the

1992 riots, etc., *Strange Days* already seems a rather "dated" future, which *Bladerunner*,

with its mixture of historical reference points, is not burdened with.

The most overt developments in *Strange Days* are technological, specifically the

development of SQUID technology: "Superconducting, Quantum, Interference Device,"

a title borrowed from cyberpunk writer William Gibson. Developed by law

enforcement agencies as a surveillance device, it allows the wearer to record everything

they see, hear and feel onto a disc. Using "playback 'trodes" the experience can be

delivered directly into the user's cerebral cortex and "re-lived." Unlike with other

recording devices, the information, once stored, cannot be interfered with.

Memory plays an extremely significant role in both films. The artificial "Replicants" in

Bladerunner are aware that they are machines, but as they were created to be as

"human" as possible, they find themselves developing "human" emotions without the

comfort of memories or past experience to help them develop a sense of identity in their

short, pre-determined life-spans.

> *Memory as a function of the living personality can be understood only as a
> capacity for the organisation and reconstruction of past experiences and
> impressions in the service of present needs, fears and interests....Just as there is
> no such thing as impersonal perception or impersonal experience, there is also
> no impersonal memory"* (Schactel, 1956, cited in Sacks, 1995, p. 175).

The Replicants' attempts to "service present needs" are indicated by their fascination with photographs. Leon, a Replicant on the run, risks termination to try and reclaim his photographs of his Replicant family. In order to try to avert the crisis suffered by other Replicants, "Rachel" is created. She has been implanted with "human" memories - she has been given a past, an identity. She is unaware that she is a machine and is devastated when Deckard reveals some of her most intimate memories, proving that they are not her own. She shows him a photograph that she believes is of her mother and herself as a child, as if this were some kind of proof of her "authentic human" existence.

> *The photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents....Every photograph is a certificate of presence"* (Barthes, 1981, p. 85, p. 87).

Just like the schizophrenic who experiences a fragmented and mixed temporal continuity, Replicants are *"condemned to live in a perpetual present"* (Jameson, 1982, p. 186). Significantly, as the last rogue Replicant, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) is dying, he mourns the loss of all his past memories *"like tears in the rain,"* not the fact that he has no future.

In a sense, *Strange Days* could be seen as the antithesis of *Bladerunner*. Lenny's problem is that he is mired in the past; he is unable to get over the break-up of his relationship with Faith, constantly reliving the "good times" they had through the SQUID machine. It is obvious that he will not survive emotionally, psychologically and probably physically, if he does not abandon the past. Mace desperately tries to make him understand *"Memories were meant to fade. They're designed that way for a reason."* However, in the world of *Strange Days*, this does not necessarily happen. Undeteriorated memories can survive indefinitely - often, it seems, outliving their

originators. Far from being the essence of a personal identity, they have become commodities to be exploited on the black market. Having been removed from any context and without references, they become meaningless, a purely visceral experience. Hence their tendency to be transgressive acts - participating in a crime, or indulging in a sexual fantasy, the opportunity to commit the sin without the guilt or the ultimate act of narcissistic voyeurism, watching yourself through others' eyes.

Bigelow had a special camera made to mimic the human eye, just as a camera had to be made for her in *Blue Steel*. Her attempt to create a more realistic impression of vision indicates her desire to eliminate the distance between the camera eye and the human eye, both in the depiction of the narrative and the experience of the audience watching the film. Within the film, this desire is fully realised through SQUID technology. Bigelow is also commenting on current appetites for visceral spectacle and modern action films.

> *"The desire to watch, to experience vicariously - it's pure escapism, but it seems fundamental. What else is the appetite for cinema?...Audiences are demanding increasingly more intense experiences, so there is a necessary extrapolation to make: to break the fourth wall, to go that extra step to the truly experiential"* (Hultkrans, 1995, p. 81).

Laura Roscaroli analysed Bigelow's work as *"a discourse on vision"* (1992, p. 232), drawing on examples from the first short *Set Up*, from *Blue Steel* and from *Strange Days*. From the latter, she describes the combination of man and machine through the SQUID device as the creation of *"Cyborgs of perception."*

Although Bigelow appears to be striving to remove that "fourth wall" within her movies, she portrays the SQUID technology as a dangerous addictive drug, with misuse leading to permanent brain damage. While on the one hand, we are invited to marvel at

the authenticity of these vicarious experiences, there is also the implication that this is going "too far" and that those who indulge pay a very high price for the ultimate cinematic experience.

There are numerous Noirish elements, combined with science fiction elements in both *Bladerunner* and *Strange Days* in terms of character, narrative and visual style. In one sense, they are classic Noir tales transposed into futuristic settings. Both Deckard and Lenny are classic Noir heroes or, more accurately, anti-heroes. Deckard (Figure 10) is "a hard boiled detective," coerced by the police into doing "one last job." However, he is not plunged into a web of corruption and betrayal like his earlier counterparts. Through his contact with the replicants, he is forced to confront questions about the nature of human existence and what it is that separates man from machine. The classic Noir element of paranoia here reaches an existential level. If Rachel is a machine who thinks she is human, could Deckard be similarly misled? The question of whether Deckard is a Replicant or not is not fully answered in either the original film or "The Director's Cut," although the latter implies more strongly that he may be than the original.

Lenny (Figure 11), on the other hand, is a loser, a "patsy" obsessed with a woman who no longer cares for him but who is unaware of the feelings of the woman who truly loves him. He is even betrayed by his best friend who tries to kill him and frame him for murder. He is not so much on a "downward spiral" as caught in a "tape loop" that allows him to indulge endlessly in what must be the ultimate Noir flashback. Although he seems doomed, he is finally saved through the "moral guidance" of Mace.

Fig.10 Deckard (Harrison Ford) pursued a "replicant" through crowded streets.
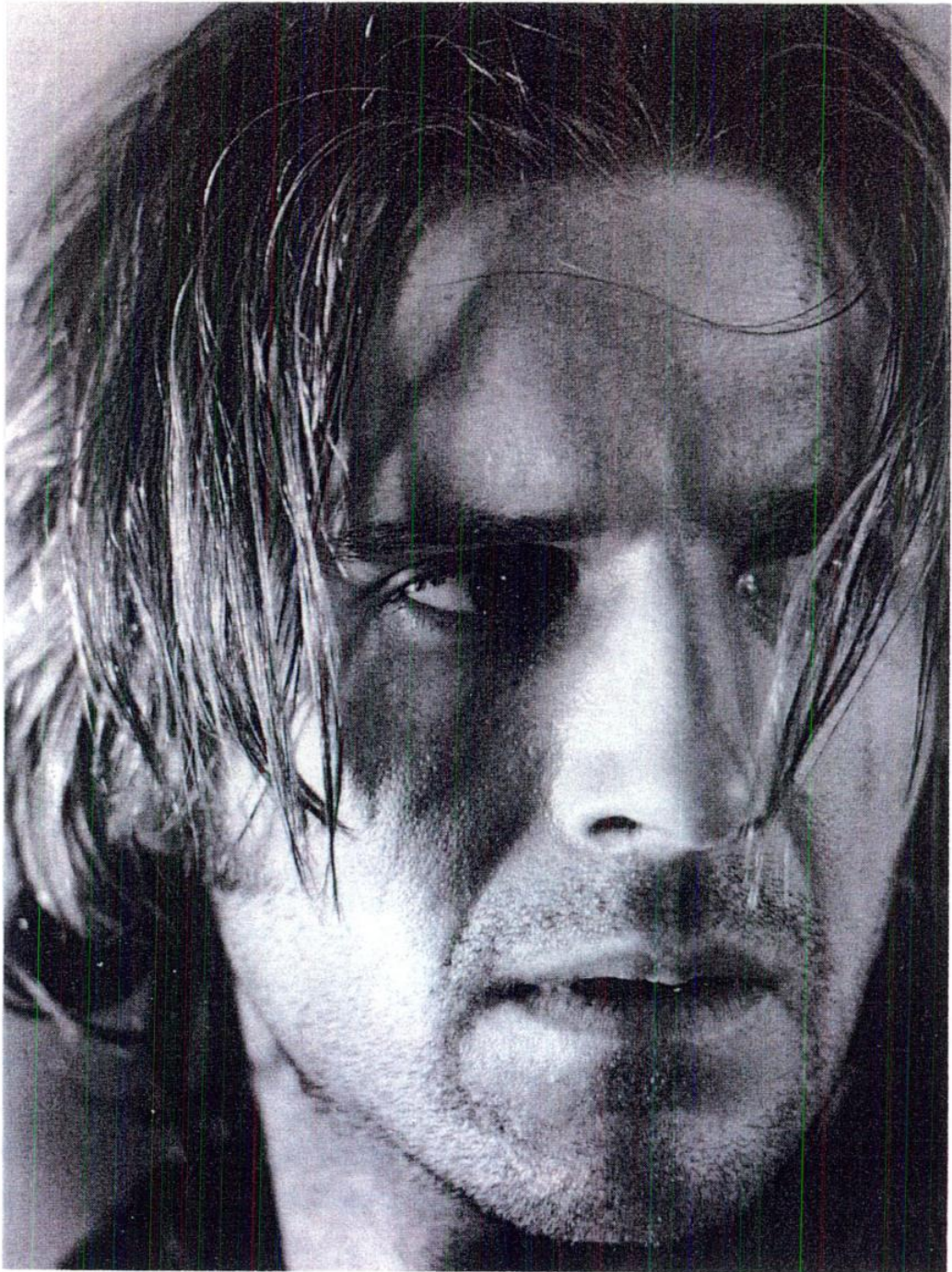
Fig.11 Lenny (Ralph Fiennes)

Ultimately, he "does the right thing," a massive riot is averted, and Lenny and Mace survive into the new millennium.

Innumerable science fiction movies have been sited at the turn of the millennium, and it is in many ways the ideal temporal location for a Noir story. Apocalyptic fears and apprehensions about the future based around this hugely anticipated historical landmark reflect much of Noir's paranoia and gloom. It seems appropriate that Tech Noir films, hybrids of science fiction, and Noir should be situated around this event. As Max in *Strange Days* puts it, *"The issue is not whether you are paranoid but whether you are paranoid enough."*

Post-modern elements such as nostalgia and pastiche permeate both films in terms of visual style and design, in the narratives and characters portrayed and in the merging of different genres.

Jameson's description of the "schizophrenic" post-modern condition can be applied to the "lives" of the replicants in *Bladerunner* and to the "clips" in *Strange Days*, which exist purely as experiences without past references to give them a functional place as memories. This "schizophrenic" experience is extended to the viewer through the mixed temporal references in these movies.

Both "replicants" and "clips" also function as simulcra: *"An operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes"* (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 146). As "perfect"

reproductions of humans and recordings of experience, they then destroy all the uniqueness and authenticity of the "originals."

Both films challenge the notion of the individual. *Bladerunner* asks the question: What are the marks of humanity that set us apart from machines? In *Strange Days* the individuality of our own perspective, what sets us apart from others, is eroded with the ability to record, replay and distribute the memories that comprise the individual self.

These depictions of the "death of the individual" reinforce post-modern theories that the age of the individual is over, or the more extreme "post-structuralist" position (Jameson, 1992, p. 115) that the very idea of an individual existence has always been a mythic construct.

CONCLUSION

"Max: There's no new ideas. Everything's been done. Doesn't it feel like everything's been tried? Whaddya do that's new? Something new in art? Forget it. Somebody somewhere has done it. Clothes, music...it's all been done. How you gonna make it another thousand years?" (*Strange Days*, screenplay, p. 50).

Post-modern theory suggests that all cultural effluvia are equally interesting, and this implies that the popular film audience and the "Art House" audience are both equally knowing - after all, one chooses the films one goes to see. Bigelow's films, however, sit uneasily between the two. While it is not entirely appropriate to regard them as purely visual/visceral spectacles, the genres she chooses to work in have certain limitations. Characters tend to be drawn in the broadest possible terms. For example, Mace's strength of character is heavily underlined by her physical toughness and combat skills. Lenny, on the other hand, is morally and physically weaker. Even if they have been re-drawn or "re-invented," these characters are still stereotypes.

Although Bigelow creates new roles for women in her cross-generic constructs, moving her female characters from their traditional peripheral positions to the centre of these narratives, many feminist critics would argue that she is ultimately creating more stereotypes that are as essentially misogynistic as the "femme fatale" and the "good woman."

It must also be considered that in commercial terms, her most successful film to date has been *Point Break* (1991), which is also her most "conventional" action movie, which possibly indicates that "mainstream" film audiences may find her films too experimental.

Bigelow's attempt to "re-invent Noir" has been achieved mainly through cross-generic hybrids. In assessing how successful she has been in so doing, one must consider the idea that Noir itself is not necessarily a genre but a collection of moods and tones into which the modern film maker can dip and choose. Hence the ability to combine a vampire and western movie with a careful draining of colour, to produce a kind of "Blue Noir" that she achieved in *Near Dark* - a similar visual effect she created in *Blue Steel*. The desire to "re-invent Noir" is itself a post-modern aspiration and perhaps can only be achieved by these kinds of cross-generic transformations in a post-modern culture.

EPILOGUE

Bigelow continues to be interested in archetypal female roles. Her projected film of the life of Joan of Arc, to be called *Company of Angels*, ran into difficulties when she refused to cast in the title role Milla Jovovich, the girl friend of French film director Luc Besson, who was securing funding for the project. Besson is now intending to make his own film on the subject and is being sued by Bigelow for stealing her project. It would have been interesting to see what she would have brought to such a film, being yet another genre, the historical epic. Perhaps we would have seen the first "Medieval Noir." It is also interesting that the Joan of Arc story is set in the 15th century, at another time of tension and change in human history. Perhaps the quintessential Neo Noir film from Bigelow is still to come.

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38