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Reality bytes - interview with Hollywood director Kathryn Bigelow - Interview

Andrew Hultkrans

A painter who enrolled in the Whitney Program before migrating to Columbia Film School, Kathryn Bigelow is something of an anomaly in Planet Hollywood. Combining an affinity for the frenetic rhythms of the thriller with a taste for subversive genre-bending that recalls her "high art" beginnings, Bigelow is a consummate technician whose balletic action sequences remind us how cinematically pure the language of violence can be. Her latest film, *Strange Days*, is a tech-noir set in a Los Angeles on the brink of the millennium, where conflicting visions of rapture and revolution divide the collective psyche, and the apolitical insulate themselves by getting high on other people's lives.

With a script by director James Cameron (*True Lies*) and writer Jay Cocks (*The Age of innocence*; *The Last Temptation of Christ*), *Strange Days* - a cyberpunk extrapolation of the archetypal noir - recasts Chandler's mean streets as paramilitarized zones where tanks roll by impassively while wasted youth bludgeon Santa Claus on the curb. Scurrying through the back alleys of a decadent underground like an oiled rat, Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) peddles other people's realities preserved on MiniDiscs through the magic of SQUID (Superconducting Quantum Interference Device), a technology that records and plays back human experience "straight from the cerebral cortex," allowing the user to be anyone this time around, for a price.

Nero has broken the first commandment of the Dealer's Credo - "never get high off your own supply" - and has become a memory addict, hooked on a feedback loop of happier times with a femme fatale who has gutted his life by the time the film begins. When he gets a snuff clip of his friend's murder, he reluctantly assumes the mantle of Philip Marlowe, and enlisting the aid of Mace (Angela Bassett), an Amazon Warrior moonlighting as a chauffeur, becomes embroiled in a conspiratorial web with enough red herrings to rival *The Big Sleep*.

Like Polanski's *Chinatown*, *Strange Days* is no less noir for being in color. Bigelow's blacks are black, and her light, what there is of it, is dark cyan, a visual correlative to the creeping rot eating away at her characters. And, as in her last three studio releases (*Near Dark*, 1987; *Blue Steel*, 1989; *Point Break*, 1991), Bigelow is no slave to the fast cut. *Strange Days*, her best film to date, closes with a sequence that leaves us rattled long after the credits roll. the camera lingers on the bloody face of a racist cop. Gun drawn, he drags his suicided partner along by his own handcuffs, attempting, one last time, to effect his Final Solution as confetti falls from the night sky like acid snow. ANDREW HULTKRANS: It's quite a leap from Conceptual art to the culture industry. KATHRYN BIGELOW: It does seem like a departure. I was studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute and one of my teachers put me up for the Whitney Program, so I went. This was '73 or '74, when Conceptual art really came to the fore. I did a couple of videos with Lawrence Weiner, and I worked with Art & Language, an artists, group who were critiquing the commodification of culture. So I was very influenced by them, and my concerns moved from the plastic arts to Conceptual art and a more politicized framework. And I became dissatisfied with the art world - the fact that it requires a certain amount of knowledge to appreciate abstract material.

Film, of course, does not demand this kind of knowledge. Film was this incredible social tool that required nothing of you besides twenty minutes to two hours of your time. I felt that film was more politically correct, and I challenged myself to try to make something accessible using film, but with a conscience. I still work off that foundation. So I shot this short piece called *Set Up* [1978].

I was matriculating in film history and criticism. I was reading Freud, which led me to the philosophy department. I was working on Semiotext(e). I had Peter Wollen as a teacher, and Edward Said - extraordinary thinkers. So naturally I was influenced by them, which ironically pulled me back into the art world. Structuralist thought is hopelessly out of fashion now, but it's what led me to *The Loveless* [1981], my first feature-length narrative film. I was still resisting narrative; that film is more like a meditation.

Then I ran out of money again and got a teaching job at Cal Arts, out here. I was forced to move for economic reasons; I had no intention of *The Loveless* being a calling card to the industry. Working in the art world, of course, you have nothing but disdain for Hollywood. AH: *The Loveless* is a series of period tableaux; there are scenes where there's hardly any sound, certainly no dialogue. Most of your films contain visceral action sequences, but also these contemplative pauses to examine the *mise-en-scène*. Is this something you retain from your intellectual roots, or is it your natural rhythm? KB: Well, I don't see *Strange Days* as a pure action genre piece. I think of it as a character-driven piece. It's got a tremendous amount of dialogue and story - at one point we thought of it as science fiction as if written by David Mamet. The pauses in *Strange Days* are motivated more by story and character than by the need to linger on the *mise-en-scène*. That's not to say we don't fill every frame; your eye wanders outward to this complex environment that the principal characters don't bother to acknowledge. They take it for granted that there's an ad hoc revolution taking place, a civil war. AH: A police state. KB: Exactly, yet life still goes on, the hustle is still happening, the clubs are still open, and you gotta eat dinner. AH: Though the social ills extrapolated in *Strange Days* are all too real in today's L.A., your version of the city is also an interzone between the L.A. of the present and the future L.A. of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. What is it about this town that makes it such a primary source text for pre- and postapocalyptic urban environments? KB: It's the template, isn't it? Perhaps because there's so little history here, there's a fragile balance, an inherent tension. Also, it's not a city. There is no center. And in its lack of identity it has a kind of poly-identity: it's whatever you project onto it, a faceless place that harbors a multitude of identities, all blurred into one. That's not to say the city isn't a microcosm for the rest of the country. L.A.'s culturally polyglot society is critical to the flashpoint world of *Strange Days*, but I don't think it's atypical of the U.S. it's just in sharper relief here. AH: Prowling the grim precincts of L.A. 1999, *Strange Days* gives us a damaged antihero, Lenny Nero [Ralph Fiennes], who is fiddling - jacking off, or in, as the case may be - while L.A. burns. He caters to a populace that has given up on changing social reality; instead, it withdraws into solipsism through his SQUID disks - slices of people's personal experience recorded through a new technology and offered for sale. More than a satire on escapist entertainment, your SQUID idea involves a commentary on cinema, on scopophilia, on addiction to the image, on the notion of a truly "captive" audience. KB: Yes, and Jim Cameron, the piece's originator, has been thinking about those ideas for a long time too. The desire to watch, to experience vicariously - as our environment is increasingly mediated, so are all of our experiences. There's a tremendous glut for images right now; that hunger to experience somebody else's life instead of our own is so palpable. It's pure escapism, but it seems fundamental. What else is the appetite for cinema? AH: But in *Strange Days*, the environment is getting too real, and really brutal. You'd think that people living in such an environment wouldn't want experience, they'd want cinema as we know it today: true escapism, in which nothing can affect you viscerally, at least not literally. The disks, though, deliver the real thing - real experience. KB: The disks deliver pure sensation, but it's risk-free sensation. You're allowed to have the experience without the experience's potential limitations and dangers. Cinema audiences are demanding increasingly more intense experiences, so it's a necessary extrapolation to make: to break that fourth wall, to go that extra step to the truly experiential. The direction is well paved. We're obviously not there yet, but once you have it, what is the future of cinema? Ultimately it becomes - AH: Experience. KB: Then cinema becomes obsolete. AH: Although, as Faith [Juliette Lewis] says in *Strange Days*, movies are better because you know when they're over. Except that you do know when the disks are over, and that's the problem: they pixelate out and you're back in your grim apartment. KB: But they offer you this window into another world, this tear in society's fabric, which cinema also offers. That's what's so attractive, because, as you say, our own realities seem so grim or pedestrian by comparison. We're all looking for out-of-body experiences, which is what the disks provide. AH: But a lot of the disks the film shows us are not typical Hollywood fantasies. They're set in the kind of urban milieu that people generally try to escape. KB: You go from one grim reality to another grim reality, but one of them is safer. And the disks don't have to be grim; it's just in the nature of the thriller genre that grimness is what we focus on. Certainly whatever you ask Lenny for, he will provide. AH: Except death. KB: Except death, because he doesn't deal in death. Death is a way out, and Lenny's mired in his past, he's caught in a feedback loop. AH: "Like a gerbil on a wheel," as Max [Tom Sizemore] says. The ultimate noir fall guy. KB: But the noir fall guy is an inexorable downward spiral. Lenny's stuck in a loop. And unlike the noir hero, he taps into a redemption motif, with the help of Mace [Angela Bassett]. AH: You don't ridicule the media in *Strange Days* - there are no parodies of ads or news. You're critiquing not a society of the spectacle but a postspectacular society that places a primacy on real experience. Yet the film's crucial SQUID disc - the record of a slaying - takes us back to the power of mass broadcast, because there is the threat of riots if it is released to the public. KB: The SQUID disks offer pure

experience, unmediated. They're "pure and uncut, straight from the cerebral cortex"; you can't get more unmediated than that. It's important how they're used; there's no such thing as neutral technology, it's all in its application. But that still brings us back to the individual, as opposed to the media. Ultimately *Strange Days* addresses the question of responsibility to the truth. I'm sure five years from the time frame of the movie there would be a technology by which you could adulterate the contents of a disk and have anything happen, but certainly the murder disk is a smoking gun, and it's critical how that information is disseminated. It's pure and truthful information, and as such it reveals the inadequacies of the media and the news. AH: So do the disks make the media irrelevant.? The media are marginal in *Strange Days* there's a little talk radio, a couple of TV news clips, but they seem like today's news and talk shows. KB: Except for the information they're talking about. Bear in mind, it's only four years from now. Think back four years, what's different? Your computer has gotten smaller and more people have cellular phones. You think that in the year 2000 there'll be this radical transformation, but the most that will happen is your computer will sit in the palm of your hand and you'll be able to speak to it.

On the other hand, I do think the turn of the millennium is going to be a huge cultural event, a merchandising and media extravaganza of nightmarish proportions. I also think there'll be a spiritual component, because you'll have a lot of people expecting the Rapture. You'll have this need to embrace the unknown. AH: What's the history, of *Strange Days*? KB: Jim Cameron had been working on the idea for nine or ten years. He presented it to me almost four years ago, and I thought it was tremendous. These two characters on the eve of the millennium, with one character trying to get the woman who loves him to help him save the woman he loves. It's this great emotional matrix. And then, through a series of dialogues, we developed the political element, this particular society. The edginess, the grit, was something I kept striving for; ironically, Jim's thrust was the romantic element and mine was the harder edge, so it was kind of reverse gender. Jim wrote a treatment as a result of our dialogues, and then he and Jay Cocks turned it into a script. AH: You incorporated the Rodney, King incident, through both the subplot of racist cops and a beating that quotes the King video. KB: That story was unfolding as we were working on the treatment, and I thought it was part of the cultural history of the landscape here. So there's a character in the film who's brought down not by what he says but by the misuse of power and a traffic stop - a purely random event that causes a catastrophe. Also, the riots were a real emotional time for anybody living here, and I participated in the cleanup. 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 became injured to it very quickly. AH: Both Mace and Lenny have personal tragedy in their pasts. How does Mace resist the urge to withdraw into solipsism, to use the disks.? KB: Mace is the narrative's moral center, so she's simply capable of resisting. Whereas Lenny, being morally decentered, is floundering in his own narcissistic tide pool, which he doesn't seem able to escape. It's not until two-thirds of the way through the movie that we realize his potential for change. Mace is the film's unblemished hero; Lenny is an antihero. That's interesting in an action context, where the heroes are often inarticulate but glib. It's different to have a hero who evinces feeling and is therefore construed as weak. These are clichés that desperately need subverting. AH: Race is heavily coded in the film; of the two main characters, one is black and one is white. And disk abuse seems to be largely a white pursuit; African-Americans aren't into it. Does this have anything to do with the way the African-American community often bears the burden of representing the "real" in American culture? THE discourse of the real is incredibly overdetermined in hip-hop, for instance. In the film, black characters advocate reality, while the white community represented by Lenny and Max signifies - KB: Escape and fantasy and duplicity and hidden agendas. The racial component was conscious in the film, and Mace's earthbound tendency was fundamental to it, and a nice sharp contrast to Lenny. She does represent a hard-edged, reality-based component, whereas Lenny is in fantasy. You could look at it from a gender viewpoint as well, because the SQUID disks tend to highlight male fantasies, not female ones. AH: Another race-based issue: the white characters seem stuck in the past, like Lenny, or nihilistically, concerned with the present, like Max. But the African-Americans are concerned with a revolution in the future. We hear a black talk-radio caller who's saying "2K [the year 2000] is coming, its going to be revolution." So you get opposing views of the millennium: all the black voices are saying 2K is a new beginning, and all the white voices are saying its the end of the world, the Rapture, judgment Day. KB: The white characters aren't forward-looking like Jeriko [Glenn Plummer]. Jeriko and Max are the film's ad hoc philosophers. Max's philosophy is nihilistic and cynical and present-day; Jeriko's rhetoric is black revolutionary. That was certainly intentional but it was by no means intended as an indictment of American white males. AH: We see thrill-seeking adrenaline addicts

in all your films. KB: Thrill-seeking adrenaline addicts have always fascinated me. The idea seems to be that its not until you risk your humanness that you feel most human. Not until you risk all awareness do you gain awareness. It's about peak experience. For me, also, its about cinema as a cathartic medium. In order for cinema to be cathartic, you need to create a crucible by which a character comes to define himself. In Point Break [1991], trial by fire became part of the subject. AH: Anther trope you use is the infantilized male who depends on a woman for emotional, psychological, and, in the case of Caleb in Near Dark [1987], even physical sustenance. One of the subtexts of your films, I think, is the weaning process. KB: In order to have self-realization. Its weaning, but its also searching for androgyny. Man and woman become fused. AH: The man takes the woman into himself? KB: Exactly. Or the strength that the relationship provides. I think of it as a fusion, a taking advantage of the catharsis that union provides, quite literally in Near Dark and psychologically in Strange Days, where, as opposed to having Mace's blood coursing through Lenny's veins, she helps him realize that he lives in real time, not playback. AH: Do you see Strange Days as a genre film? KB: Playing with genre is both conscious and unconscious, because I don't think you're ever immune to genre. Even if you choose not to use it, that's a loaded decision in and of itself. But I have a desire to subvert and redefine. Genre exists for that purpose. It's a so a great interlocutor with the audience, a way in, a language they understand and that makes them comfortable. Once you touch base in a genre you can go in any direction. It's interesting to do a vampire western like Near Dark, to create a hybrid, but I'm not always cross-pollinating genres strategically. AH" It's not, "I'm going to do a tech noir today"? KB: [Laughter] Ironically, as we started to develop Strange Days, we did talk about it as a tech noir. AH: So you're a fan of film noir? KB: Are you kidding? Film noir is probably my favorite genre. That's how I moved from art to film, so to speak: I went through Fassbinder on my way to noir.

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