Film and Feminist Theology

Deconstructing and Reconstructing Gender Stereotypes

Gaye Williams Ortiz

Film sits alongside religion as a transmitter of and conduit for ideological values and meanings. Taking Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman to win an Academy Award for Best Director, the author explores what dominant cultural texts and gender stereotypes Bigelow interrogates in her films through the lenses of feminist theology and feminist film theory.

In a *New York Times* article on March 14, 2010, titled “How Oscar Found Ms. Right,” film critic Manola Dargis wrote:

Kathryn Bigelow’s two-fisted win at the Academy Awards for best director and best film for *The Hurt Locker* didn’t just punch through the American movie industry’s seemingly shatterproof glass ceiling; it has also helped dismantle stereotypes about what types of films women can and should direct. (Dargis, AR1)

In the 1970s feminist writer Shulasmith Firestone argued, in relating women to cultural representation and production, that “the tool for representing, for objectifying one’s experience in order to deal with it, culture, is so saturated with male bias that women almost never have a chance to see themselves culturally through their own eyes” (Thornham, 10). Now that female filmmakers like Bigelow are

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indeed in the mainstream of cinematic production, respected, and awarded for their creativity and skill across the globe, can this argument still hold?

Perhaps we can begin to explore this question by analyzing the work of Kathryn Bigelow, who after eighty years is the first woman to win an Academy Award for Best Director. It might be instructive if we attempt to find out what dominant cultural texts and gender stereotypes she is interrogating through her films and explore those issues, as well as how Bigelow addresses them, through the lenses of feminist theology and feminist film theory. Film sits alongside religion as a transmitter of and conduit for ideological values and meanings. Both of these cultural sites incited highly theoretical debates as feminism evolved, but even now host contentious issues of representation, spectatorship, and consumption where women are—in the wider area of popular culture.

**Kathryn Bigelow: Feminist Filmmaker?**

Kathryn Bigelow studied under Susan Sontag after training as a painter but switched to filmmaking when she recognized cinema’s potential as a ‘social tool’ that has the ability to reach a broad range of people (Francke, 9). Her films include *Near Dark* (1987), *Blue Steel* (1989), *Point Break* (1991), *Strange Days* (1995), *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002), and *The Hurt Locker* (2009). The latter received Oscars for Best Director and Best Picture in 2010. Bigelow is known as a Hollywood director whose edgy, independent films have led to an increasing identification with themes of masculinity and war. In addition to the questions above, we could add a slightly different question in regards to Bigelow: can a female director make mainstream Hollywood films without relying upon conventional gender stereotypes, owing nothing to either the patriarchal film industry or to the vaunted feminist ideal of resistance to the main/malestream?

Manola Dargis describes the pre-Oscar buzz about Kathryn Bigelow by saying:

> . . . Ms. Bigelow . . . doesn’t like to talk about being a feminist touchstone—she doesn’t need to, she has been one for decades—much less her role as a female director. Her refusal, along with the types of movies she makes, have not always sat well with some. (Dargis, AR1)

Kathryn Bigelow maintains an understated presence in interviews, Dargis continues:

> Her insistence on keeping the focus on her movies is a quiet yet profound form of rebellion. She might be a female director, but by refusing to accept that gendered designation—or even engage with it—she is asserting her right to be simply a director. (Dargis, AR1)
Is Bigelow refusing to be designated as the gendered Other in the patriarchal halls of Hollywood? And will she succeed in trying to assert a commonality with other filmmakers based on craft and skill and not on gender? Do women who make films need to appeal to their ‘natural’ audience (i.e., women who want to watch ‘women’s films’) or are their films able to cross genres and even critique dominant readings of themes such as gender and violence?

It is not as though women are newcomers to the directing scene; a delve into the vaults of filmmaking exposes a wealth of early female pioneers who wrote and directed films. Ally Acker’s 1993 book *Reel Women*, an amazing archaeological excavation of those women, tells us that in the silent era of film women dominated the industry. Marc Wanamaker is quoted as saying, “. . . more women worked in decision-making positions in film before 1920 than at any other time in history” (Acker, xviii). So—two further questions—why do we act like women are only now being noticed for their work in the film industry? And why is it important that women are included in the storytelling business of cinema?

**Women, Stereotypes, and the Main/malestream**

The answer to this last question is easy for me to give: it is important that we hear women’s voices in the stories our culture tells. If men dominate the creation, direction, and production of stories for the multibillion dollar movie industry, there is a noticeable gap in—or, at the least, a misrepresentation of—stories that come from a female perspective.

Much of my academic work as a theologian and writer on theology and film has centered upon the intersection of women, theology, and film, and in particular the influence of feminism on theology and film theory. To quote Susan Thornham:

Feminism has . . . taken as an object of both analysis and intervention the construction of image, meanings and representations. It has also been concerned with the struggle to find a voice through which such knowledge might be expressed. (Thornham, 2)

So when I state that there is a noticeable lack of representation of women in the film industry I am reminded too of a similar gap in the history of religion: men have been the ones to formulate beliefs and write and transmit sacred writings and have for the most part been the sole authorized interpreters of them. They have created and controlled religious institutions, worship, and rituals. Elizabeth Cady Stanton reminded us that the sacred texts, creeds, and ecclesiastical laws of the leading religions ‘bear the impress of fallible man’ (Stanton, 13).

Although the two academic disciplines of theology and film theory are very different, they have been affected and critiqued by the feminist movement in many
In seeking to deconstruct, reconstruct, and revise these disciplines of theology and film, it has been important to mount a challenge to them at many levels. So whether we are talking about the female presence in or contribution to the stories we tell in the cultural discourses of religion and film, a feminist critique that grew out of the women’s civil rights struggle and has evolved along several parallel paths in theology and film. I will highlight only three.

First, there is a critique that stimulates an awareness of male authorship of cultural and religious narratives and control of institutional structures, contributing to the debate over whether women should remain in the mainstream/“malestream.” In both disciplines of theology and film women have often had to make the choice of whether to remain within the male-dominated culture or whether to be an alternative voice of protest. One attempt to introduce an experiential element to serious theological writing by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock has offered a powerful ‘inside’ critique of traditional theology, such as the doctrine of atonement framed by “malestream” concepts of violence and sacrifice. However, Carol Christ made the decision to step away from traditional Christian theology to develop a body of work around “Goddess thealogy.” The same dilemma of remaining inside the system faced the female filmmakers of the 1960s and 70s, many of whom continue to work outside the studio system, so as to be free of its profit-driven culture while expressing their feminist ideas through documentary and short films. Marjorie Rosen complains that “the few women directors who have worked in Hollywood have been ‘token’ women, imprisoned by its structure” (Thornham, 15).

The film industry, of course, has undergone tremendous change since then: studios are still powerful, but the independent film sector of the world market has recently begun to provide opportunities for many female filmmakers who stood no chance of commercial success or who refused to play studio politics. Some of them now prefer instead to broaden out their identity politics and recognize many sources of empowerment in their work besides that of their experience of being female.

Second, there has been a parallel encouragement to recover women’s contributions to tradition and history. Without the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Parker, and Carol Christ among many others, the fuller picture of theology and religion would never be realized. The recovery of the work of early female filmmakers undertaken by cinema historian Ally Acker

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suggests that these filmmakers should be heralded as pioneers who were steadfast in establishing film as an innovative art form.

Third, women have an increasing opportunity to study and research, critique and interpret in the traditionally male-dominated disciplines of religion and film. This has led to an increase in women’s influence in, and setting of, the mainstream agenda of both film studies and theology, an engagement that is not only correcting distorted meanings but framing new ones.

All this sounds very promising; but even with the changes to the theological and filmic landscapes through which these parallel paths have led, some would say that there has still not been enough movement toward a gender-inclusive or even gender-neutral vision of the future. Although one goal of feminist theology is to “raise up women amid the daily business of life” (Parsons, xiii), that in itself is not enough to ensure a transformation of society. The extent of change in the “construction of image, meanings and representations” within theology and film is what specifically is addressed in this article, with a view to assessing the impact of feminism on the promotion of the full humanity of women, which Rosemary Radford Ruether claims is the “critical principle of feminist theology” (Ruether, 19). Whatever affirms the full humanity of women alongside that of men is seen by Ruether to be confirming “the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community” (19); both women and men, she declares, need to affirm themselves as imago dei, the theological paradigm that reflects the divine in authentic humanity. In order to affirm the full humanity of both sexes, women and men must refute and change the pervasive androcentric practice of making males the norm and females the Other.

Can we determine whether Kathryn Bigleow’s work, dealing thematically across her career with issues of violence and masculinity, shows any signs of challenging the construction of images of men and violence? Has it attempted to influence the dominant meanings and interpretation of these themes? And could it show the way past cultural division along imposed lines of gender and power to a future unhindered by distrust or fear of the Other?

Reading the early writings of 70s film theorists one sees a concern with the roles and stereotypes imposed upon women in popular culture and in particular, in the movies. Perhaps the most widely discussed theory arising from this time concerns

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woman as spectacle, articulated in Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay on the male gaze entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey based her theory on Freud’s association of scopophilia (or pleasure in looking) with objectifying people by subjecting them to a controlling gaze. The way in which a viewer looks at women in film may quite often be through an identification of woman as the Other. When we observe the Other, we see difference first and similarity—if any—secondarily. Men watching women of course will see the difference in gender terms, but women too can also experience a reaction to the Other if they cannot identify with the female character they see on the screen.

Strange Days and the Gaze

A look at Kathryn Bigelow’s 1995 film Strange Days may give some insight into her approach to the male gaze. Rather than force a sense of voyeuristic identification onto the viewer, it interrogates the voyeuristic desire and the cinematic link to violence that male filmmakers often employ but rarely critique. The film is a disturbing vision of the last two days of 1999, in which a deliberate police execution of a Los Angeles black community leader might easily tip the new millennium into an apocalyptic race riot bloodbath. The assassination is captured not on video but by a device, originally invented for surveillance to replace the undercover ‘wire’, called a SQUID (Superconducting Quantum Interference Device), which taps into the cerebral cortex to record sensations that another brain can then experience. Strange Days begins by positioning us as viewers of one of these clips—a false beginning technique that Bigelow also employs in Blue Steel and Near Dark—and plays, Grant claims, “on the look of the viewer as conditioned by generic expectations and conventions of traditional action films” (Grant, 372).

A black market supplier of the SQUID software named Lenny finds himself embroiled in the attempts by several parties to gain possession of the police execution playback and also to kill any witnesses who have already seen/experienced it. The implications of this software’s playback capability for voyeuristic and sadomasochistic behaviors is sickeningly obvious: described by Lenny as giving customers “a slice of life,” it is later more soberly described by his friend Mace as “porno for wireheads.” The scene that exemplifies this shows the sole surviving witness to the police killing (whose name symbolically is Iris) being tracked down by a hooded assailant in a hotel room and then brutally raped and strangled. Before assaulting her, the attacker puts on a SQUID to record the sensation of his act, but then places a SQUID on Iris’ head. This sends his feelings of violent arousal to her, heightening her fear and his excitement as he senses her fear. When she is dead, he opens her eyes and frames her face with his hands as if checking that the camera will center on her just so—and the audience’s view becomes a close-up drawing in on her left eye, so that we see the reflection of the attacker in it.
It is a frightening scene, made all the more shocking by the knowledge that Iris’s experience goes beyond what we know to be, until now, the maximum pain and trauma inflicted in such an attack. The murderer takes a visceral pleasure in re-experiencing the emotional sensation of fear transmitted by the victim. It is an assault on conventional seeing and recreates Laura Mulvey’s scenario of “sadistic voyeurism,” in which the spectator and camera join together in “an act of phallic violence toward women” (Clover, 177).

Critics were disturbed by Strange Days, saying it was the most violent film ever directed by a woman in Hollywood. Cynthia Baron does not share their concern because, she argues, in Bigelow’s films “the spectator is [consistently] given the opportunity to pursue voyeuristic pleasure but in a context so discomforting that Bigelow seems to be exposing the tawdriness of the [patriarchal] gaze” (Baron, 457).

Bigelow’s admirers feel that in this film she carries out an important investigation into the roots of violence and the attraction that violence has as a cinematic aesthetic. If we analyze the female character of Mace, perhaps we can regard her as the embodiment of Bigelow’s visual examination of the power of film. Lizzie Francke calls Mace the “moral center” of Strange Days who, by her refusal to experience the rape/murder playback, has the clearest vision of all the characters. Mace forces us, after we have witnessed the effect of the playback on Lenny and his friend Max, to confront the reality of how we are both repelled and fascinated by the moving image. Mace reminds Lenny, “Memories were meant to fade—they’re designed that way for a reason.” She is the prophetic voice in the film, calling people to right behavior and leading as an example in making ethical choices. Mace takes the opportunity to use the execution playback for good, saying that it is a “lightning bolt from God” which can change things. Mace is therefore the focus of the fight against injustice, and she puts her own life at risk in order to place the evidence literally before the eyes of the police commissioner. The ending of Strange Days, as Francke notes, could be construed as offering a tentative utopia, a resolution to millennium fever in which the passionate kiss between Mace and Lenny signals interracial harmony.

The Hurt Locker:
Interrogating the Male Hero Stereotype

Strange Days was not a box office success like Bigelow’s best-known film, Point Break, which gave her a reputation for being “one of the boys” when it comes to action films. Her biggest success—and Oscar breakthrough—was The Hurt Locker. After taking on surfing, bank robbery, vampirism, murder, and nuclear disaster, Bigelow’s foray into the Iraq war seems to reinforce Barry Keith Grant’s assertion that “Bigelow’s films mobilize a range of the genres traditionally regarded
as ‘male’ precisely to interrogate that term specifically, as well as the politics and pleasures of gendered representations in genre films more generally” (Grant, 372). Grant says that her films “often reverse generic expectation . . . [and] also employ a variety of stylistic means to question the gendered values that animate action film genres” (Grant, 374). One may notice in Bigelow’s characters an ironic lack of visual evidence of exaggerated masculinity often seen in action films: Jean Claude van Damme, Steve Segal, and Bruce Willis display muscular bodies and undergo tremendous physical exertion and punishment in their action films. Contrast this with Sergeant First Class William James, the bomb disposal expert who is encased in protective gear as he performs his heroic work against the timing mechanism of the detonator. Even when he impetuously discards his helmet and bodysuit (“If I’m going to die, I’m going to die comfortable”), he is revealed as a fresh-faced young man, not an action hero in the league of Chuck Norris. What is more, Sgt. James is perceived to be reckless and even called a “wild man,” someone so unpredictably erratic that another soldier predicts, “He’s gonna get me killed.”

A hint of his deeper inability to cope with the ordinary and mundane life away from war comes when Sgt. James and his comrade look through a box of bomb parts (“stuff that almost killed me”), which also contains his wedding ring on a chain. He explains why it is there by echoing his comment about stuff that almost killed him. One of the most telling scenes to this effect is when he is back in his hometown at the grocery store, standing, bewildered, in the cereal aisle, frozen in action as he never was in the war zone’s depths of danger. The fact that Sgt. James gets sent back to the war to “roll the dice” once again proves he needs that adrenaline rush in order to feel human; his willingness to sacrifice family life for war is transparent in its desperation. The gendered values that we expect to see in an American hero—of love of family and country, caring husband and father—are made problematic here in a character who clearly cannot balance those demands or give us a “happy ending.” The audience is not explicitly manipulated one way or another to cheer him on or to disapprove of his obsession with defusing bombs; however, the explosions and firefights are exciting and paced to keep our interest in the action as well as in the compelling character study. Although The Hurt Locker is a film that portrays masculine behavior, attitudes, and a masculine war, it asks us to consider the psychological and even spiritual makeup of the hero in a way that we are never asked to do with those heroes played by Bruce Willis or Steven Segal.

Film critics were amazed at the lack of an identifiably feminine touch in the directing of this film. Peter Bradshaw remarks:

Everything about this film is intensely male; there is a sweaty, sour and defeatedly masculine tang seeping out of every frame. Perhaps, in retrospect, it was not so startling for a woman director to have made it, and to have provided the shrewd perspective on this maleness. (Bradshaw, 2008)
It seems that Bigelow discounts the need to display her gender in filmmaking. Katherine Barscay quotes Bigelow as saying that there is not a “feminine eye or a feminine voice. You have two eyes, and you can look in three dimensions and in a full range of color. So can everybody” (Barscay, paragraph 2).

Perhaps it is a sign of gender equality, not that Bigelow is concealing, but rather transcending (or resisting display of) her gender identification, instead foregrounding the quality of filmmaking at which she is so obviously expert. Grant declares that “Kathryn Bigelow’s embrace of the action genre’s pleasures while simultaneously critiquing them demonstrates a mastery of the master’s own language” (Grant, 382). Perhaps there will always be gender differences, but the stereotypes that perpetuate the power imbalance between genders can be confronted and critically interrogated.

By refusing to validate the perpetuation of stereotypical dualities, in her own way Bigelow is acting in a skeptical, albeit feminist, fashion by disarming the weaponry of gender binaries, which the feminist critique sees as failing “. . . to describe the complex reality of women’s and men’s lives” (Jones, 29). Barscay asserts:

These films are very much about blurring boundaries, especially those that surround gender and genre. . . . This does not necessarily make the films explicitly feminist, as they are more concerned with refusing traditional means of classification than explicitly engaging with a feminist polemic. By blurring the boundaries of both . . . she emphasizes the inconsequentiality of classification. (Barscay, paragraph 1)

Bigelow takes on this blurring of boundaries in the masculine arenas of action, not just through cinematic storytelling with its traditional gendered themes and genres, but in the very tough arena of the film industry.

**Empowering Creativity**

Theologian Ursula King says that more and more women from all social and religious backgrounds around the world are “speaking up and making their voices heard” (King, 223). If some are sounding a cautious note about the door being opened to other women filmmakers by Kathryn Bigelow’s success then maybe we can be encouraged by the fact that looking outward from Hollywood, there are hundreds of women making movies across the world.

The task of re-visioning in the twenty-first century certainly needs to continue to take on the bastions of the entertainment industry, the church, and the academy, which in the past have imposed dominant readings upon Western culture of what it means to be a woman. I am confident that there will never be another time when
people will lament the “lives of unsung heroines”; never again will the expertise and experience of women, whether in popular culture or religion and theology, be excavated for a new generation that did not know of past accomplishments and histories.

Leaders of our religious communities can not only continue to educate themselves in the rethinking of traditional theology by feminist theologians, they can widen their consumption of popular culture and be open to its trend toward more diverse and inclusive representations of humanity. It is liberating for both women and men when the tools of deconstruction and reconstruction are used to dismantle boundaries and to empower creativity. My wish for all of us is to continue the work for the full humanity of all people, women and men, as Rosemary Radford Ruether challenges us to do. We can make a point of paying attention to talented people like Kathryn Bigelow, whose work it is to tell stories for our society. Through our understanding and appreciation of the power of images, we can help to transform stereotypes and to offer a liberating alternative to how we see and treat the Other in our midst.

References


