

The Hurt Locker

Study Notes



Directed by: Kathryn Bigelow

Certificate: 15

Running time: 126 mins

Release date: 28 August 2009

Synopsis

An intense action thriller set in Iraq, *The Hurt Locker* concerns the actions of three soldiers responsible for one of the most dangerous and unpredictable jobs in war: bomb disposal. Sergeant Sanborn and Specialist Eldridge are under intense pressure to make the area safer for civilians and their fellow soldiers, but when Sergeant James arrives to take charge of their unit, the three find themselves split because of their radically different approaches to combat. While Sanborn and Eldridge are 'by-the-book', James reveals himself to be a renegade who puts the thrilling adrenaline rush of bomb disposal before the safety of his colleagues. On top of this, the soldiers are thrown into increasingly dangerous situations where anything, or anyone, could be a bomb.

Before Viewing

Director Kathryn Bigelow is renowned for making action-packed thrillers that are big and glossy. Issues of gender and identity underpin many of her films and aside from *The Hurt Locker*, *Point Break* is probably her most famous film. Like *The Hurt Locker*, *Point Break* features characters that put themselves in mortal danger in order to experience an adrenaline rush (in the case of *Point Break*, bank robbers who risk their lives and freedom in order to fund their skydiving and surfing lifestyles).

- Watch a trailer or sequence from *Point Break*. How does Bigelow represent men?
- How might these representations be different if the film were directed by a male?
- Now watch the trailer for *The Hurt Locker*. Are there any themes, representations or style that remind you of *Point Break*? How is *Point Break* alluded to in the new film's promotion?

Kathryn Bigelow: Auteur or Action Director?

Check out the trailers for Bigelow's key works: *Near Dark* (1987), *Blue Steel* (1989), *Point Break* (1991), *Strange Days* (1995) & *K-11: The Widowmaker* (2002)

- What ties Bigelow's films together? Can you identify any stylistic or thematic motifs?
- There are few other female film directors who have worked so successfully in the action genre. Can you think of any exceptions? Look at some articles or reviews of Bigelow's films. Has her gender been highlighted in any of the writings? How?
- Argue for or against the notion of Kathryn Bigelow as an auteur.
- Consider the following statement: 'Bigelow's films often focus on small groups/tribes/teams of people (often, but crucially not always, men) who are somehow restricted or constricted by the situation they are in'. How far is this statement true of each of her films listed above?

After Viewing

Genre, Narrative and Casting

While *The Hurt Locker* has been celebrated for its incredibly tense action set pieces, like *Saving Private Ryan* it has been suggested that the story and dialogue surrounding these sequences are formulaic and adhere to genre conventions.

- Do you feel the narrative follows a traditional framework (equilibrium – disruption – resolution etc.)? If not, how would you describe the film's structure and where have you seen such a structure before?
- What genres and sub-genres do you think *The Hurt Locker* could be categorised in?
- *The Hurt Locker* uses generally unknown actors in the three main roles, but uses far more recognisable stars (Guy Pearce, David Morse, Ralph Fiennes) in supporting roles and cameos. Some of the film's big stars are killed off within a few minutes of appearing. Did this make the film more unpredictable or did a predictable pattern begin to emerge? Think about which actors are listed on the promotional posters.

Film Language and Tension

The Hurt Locker won several Oscars, including directing, editing, sound and sound editing as well as nominations for cinematography and original screenplay. These filmmaking disciplines merge in the film's numerous bomb disposal sequences.

- Recall the key bomb disposal sequences (such as the opening sequence, the car bomb and the human bomb). How effectively are the following film language devices deployed in order to create tension:
 - sound effects
 - music
 - acting (and use of big-name actors)
 - camera angles and movement
 - editing and effects
 - pyrotechnics
 - dialogue

Reception Study: Activities and Discussion Starters

Even though it is a war film, *The Hurt Locker* does not overtly address the arguments for or against America's presence in Iraq. This has led to the film being both praised and criticised.

- Go to IMDB.com for this title and look at the 'user reviews' towards the bottom of the page. Choose several examples of users who rate the film highly (give it a high number of stars) and several who give it a very low star rating. What are the main issues that people have with the film?
- Detractors of the film have claimed that the depiction of Sergeant James as an 'adrenaline junkie' who has little regard for Army protocol or the welfare of those around him is unrealistic and diminishes the efforts of real soldiers in the field. Do you agree with this viewpoint?
- To what extent does *The Hurt Locker* condone or support military intervention? Use textual examples to support your answer.
- 'All war movies are inherently anti-war.' Discuss this statement. Draw on other war movies to illustrate your response.
- In groups, film a one-minute sequence that uses no dialogue. Can you create tension, and show what is happening, through images alone?

Written by: Gareth C Evans