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blue steel disturbing image of violence and sex

by Jeannine Amber

Blue Steel
directed by Kathryn Bigelow
MGM/UA

A new film starring Jamie Lee Curtis (*Halloween*, *A Fish Called Wanda*) opens tomorrow and it is sure to raise the ire of those concerned with the amount of violence on the cinematic screen.

Written and directed by Kathryn Bigelow (*Near Dark*, *The Loveless*), *Blue Steel* is the story of rookie cop Megan Turner (Curtis) who fatally shoots an armed robber in a hold up attempt. The gunman's weapon is never found and witnesses at the scene, apparently panicked into blindness, are unable to corroborate her story.

Consequently, Turner is suspended from the force. The gun in question has fallen into the hands of Eugene Hunt, a successful, and psychotic, commodities broker who was at the scene of the hold up. This is all established in the first 15 minutes of the film.

The remainder of the movie is Hunt stalking Turner and Turner stalking Hunt. The whole thing culminates in a relentless shootout on Wall Street. Like most action films, the premise is not particularly complex and since the essentials of the plot are disclosed almost immediately, what tension is created is through the violence on the screen.

Bigelow is sure to come under heavy criticism for this film; particularly given that she is a woman and these types of films are often seen as directly or indirectly contributing to the violence perpetrated on women in today's society.

Bigelow explained, at a recent press conference, that although some people may be adversely affected by the film, as a director this is not her responsibility. According to Bigelow, "The question of morality lies with the human being — the ability to differentiate between right and wrong. Unless it's a truly disturbed individual and then that person will be sensitive to anything. (For example) the news."

Bigelow believes these films are cathartic for many people, seeing them as "great social tools." She explained, "It's wonderful in the safe confines in a beautiful room . . . to experience a certain type of violent tendency . . . [to] live out that aspect of your imagination or your subconscious in a safe environment."

Curtis echoed this sentiment, saying that although she hopes no one will be motivated to engage in violence because of her film, "it is still entertainment and you [the film-makers] still have the right [to produce such films]. There is a large audience who, in fact, totally enjoys, on a very positive level, this experience."

Bigelow is offering the disturbing message that, for some, violence, power and sex are inextricably connected. Hunt is obsessed by the image of Turner as a woman with the power to kill. He demands, in a moment of passion, "Take out your gun and hold it." Bigelow does not, however, address this phenomenon in any critical manner as something that is particular to the psy-



Jamie Lee Curtis plays a cop who is stalked by a psychopath in *Blue Steel*

chopath. Turner is shown caressing her gun [as a phallus] and enjoying the power it gives her.

In *Blue Steel*, Bigelow has created the scenario of a woman entering a traditionally male-dominated sphere, attaining a traditional form of male power and consequently eliciting the attention of a deranged man. The similarities with recent violence against women is shocking and disturbing, but nowhere near as disturbing as Bigelow's reluctance to deal with these issues either on or off the screen.

Bigelow maintains, "It is not a gender thing, she [Turner] is fighting for her life." Bigelow insists that in writing the film, she was more concerned with creating a kind of "anyman." But Turner is not and cannot be an "anyman." She is a woman being stalked by a man. The fact that she is a woman is hardly as incidental to the plot as Bigelow seems to be suggesting. In this film, Bigelow demonstrates a marked lack of ability to deal with issues pertaining to women in a responsible manner.

This is further underscored by the inclusion of a wife abuse subplot. Turner's father beats her extremely passive mother and has apparently been doing so since Turner was a child. Bigelow said she included this subplot to help explain why the Turner character wants so badly to become a police officer. This is a fair enough premise and Bigelow does right by grounding the motives of Turner's character. However, what Bigelow chooses to do with this subplot is appalling.

When Turner has the opportunity to use her power as a police officer to protect her mother and arrest her father, she sheepishly backs down. Although Turner is able to attain a certain amount of power outside the family, she is still emotionally ill-equipped to deal with the patriarchal power of

the family.

Bigelow, when asked why she didn't follow through with the arrest, said she felt, "there was real love and compassion there." In other words, Bigelow is suggesting that if a daughter (or wife or mother) loves her abusive father (or husband or son) enough, she will not take available recourse to deal with his abusive behaviour.

This sub-plot that Bigelow sees as merely giving motivation to the character, becomes one of the most distressing aspects of the film due to Bigelow's inability to comprehend the implications of her own work.

The metaphor that Bigelow's film creates about women finding their power in a traditionally male sphere mirrors the development of Bigelow as a female director. Her work has always been violent and she has always worked in traditionally male genres (her last two films were about bikers and vampires) but, up until now, her work was always intelligent, original and inspired. *Blue Steel* is by far her most commercial film and the most 'macho.' It is also the most disappointing.

As a woman working in a genre as traditionally male-dominated as the 'action film,' one wonders what Bigelow, as a woman, has to bring to a film like this. Unfortunately we will never learn this from Bigelow herself. Bigelow adamantly denies the importance of her gender. She says, "To be honest, I think it's irrelevant. Who? What directed it? The important thing is you either respond to it or you don't and I would love for it not to be gender specific."

If a man had made this film, he surely would be the target of cries of sexism. Bigelow has proven that women are just as capable of working in a traditionally male-dominated genre. She has also shown that women are also just as capable of making the same mistakes.