

WORLDWIDE

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By DAN YAKIR

strange days

Director Kathryn Bigelow's new SF thriller aims for the heart in cyberspace.

Movies that explore cyberspace have no qualms about placing hardware at center stage and the humans in quasi-supporting roles. In many of these movies, the heroes are androids; in the better ones, they even have emotions. But all this isn't quite enough for Kathryn Bigelow, a filmmaker who has consistently manifested her own dazzling visual style in thrillers such as *Near Dark*, *Blue Steel* and *Point Break*. In her work, she constantly explores the abyss between reality and illusion, between true sentiment and masquerade, and between the objective and the subjective.

Bigelow's new futuristic noir thriller *Strange Days*, written by Jay Cocks and James Cameron (Bigelow's former husband

and veteran genre director), is set in a desolate Los Angeles 48 hours before the advent of the next millennium, but its characters have little in common with the almost zombified protagonists of such movies as *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*. Instead, the hero, Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes), will survive the old century thanks to neither brawn nor brains—but rather because of his emotions.

Despite the fact that Nero is a seller of black market computerized personal experiences—actual memories and experiences recorded from the brain cortex of individuals and peddled to others for amusement and a touch of “virtual reality”—he isn't a dried-out, hopeless heel who can't be surprised anymore. According to Bigelow, “he has a

heart, and what the film is saying is that heart and feeling will endure. Lenny retains his capacity to feel and so does Mace [Angela Bassett],” a security agent and personal friend to whom he turns when the heat is on. While most post-apocalyptic nightmares show the survival of the strong, in this pre-apocalyptic landscape, it's strength itself that's redefined. “The strong,” says Bigelow, “are the ones who have heart.”

Slick and sleazy, handsome and charming, Lenny is an ex-L.A.P.D. vice squad cop who makes a living on the edge, hustling semi-legal life experiences. These SQUIDS (Superconducting Quantum Interference Device recordings) enable their users to experience *exactly* what they wish. They can be bank robbers, gender benders, sexual outlaws—whatever. And the experience is as

real as if they themselves have gone through it. As Mace says to Lenny, "Face it, you sell porno to wireheads." When one of his associates is brutally murdered and Lenny witnesses her death via the killer's recording, he starts hunting for the assassin, which gives the movie its quota of action thrills.

What exactly made this project attractive to the filmmaker? "I thought *Strange Days*

was an incredibly clever, great concept," enthuses Bigelow. "It's a truly multi-layered project that operates on many levels. The way I see it, it's the story of a character who is quite unusual, somebody who has great feelings yet functions in a world that's cynical and devoid of feeling, and it's his ability to keep his emotions alive in this environment that is the genesis of his redemption.

The environmental landscape is LA at the turn of the century, culminating in New Year's Eve 1999."

Strange Style

The SF component is one of the movie's most obvious elements, and Bigelow finds it a helpful tool to convey her vision. "Its great strength is its ability to comment or extrapolate on many current social

In a near-future filled with violence and borrowed emotions, Ralph Fiennes' Lenny Nero struggles to maintain his true feelings during these *Strange Days*.

dilemmas without being condescending or condescending," she explains. "It's inherently a comment on society and its

form. It's a genre that enables you to go quite far, serving as a social tool. That's very important to me."

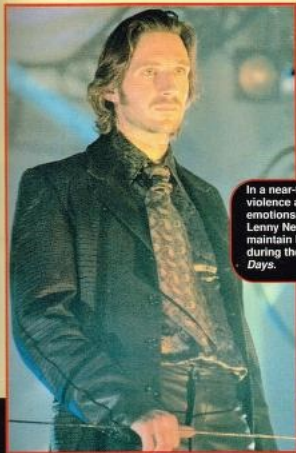
While Bigelow herself isn't actually expressing her own nightmares about a bleak future in this



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film, she is nevertheless concerned about the serious socio-cultural situation in which we find ourselves. *Strange Days*, she says, "has a fairly grim view which is not an unrealistic extrapolation if nothing is done to correct

"The strong," notes Bigelow, "are the ones who have heart." Angela Bassett's Mace must have a heck of a lot of heart.



Partying like it's
1999—because it is
1999—is Juliette
Lewis as rocker
Faith Justin.



beautifully lit universe, very luminous, a noir with plenty of light in sharp contrast. But it doesn't shy away from color, offering very rich-looking photography. It's a color version of strong, rich black and white.

"For example, to create New Year's Eve 1999, we have an outdoor block party with literally hundreds of thousands of people, and we have these huge video screens that project the event as it takes place around the world—in Prague, Moscow, London, Madrid, Vietnam, Kenya—it has a lot of scope."

Strange Society

Despite its spectacular style, *Strange Days* focuses on a few individuals. Moreover, the nature of experiencing somebody else's personal life is very intimate. It's also voyeuristic, even perverse, begging the question: Have we become just absorbers of input

rather than individuals who can live our own lives?

"That's a very interesting question," says Bigelow. "That, in a way, is the premise the film operates on. As our environment and society creates a gap between our ability to have a genuine experience and the risks that that creates, we still need to have the stimulation of that experience in some other way—vicariously or through cinema or literature, or in this case, through actually living or experiencing somebody else's life for a few minutes or hours, recorded directly off the cerebral cortex.

"It's based on a culture, not unlike our own, that likes to watch—but is also watched. It's a watched society that feeds off the need to see other people lives. It's an escape that prevents people from having experiences of their own. It's kind of a drug

things in a social environment that's threatened, a social fabric that's breaking apart. It's a real threat, a real concern—the state of our society, culture, education and race relations.

"Max [Tom Sizemore], a cynical sage and another pal of Lenny's who is also an ex-cop, asks how we're going to make it for another thousand years. He says, 'We've used it all up; every government has been tried; every hair style has been tested; every bubble gum has been sampled.'"

When she had to zero in on the look and texture of the future depicted in *Strange Days*, Bigelow was "aware of *Total Recall* and *Blade Runner*," and "sensitive to the visuals they established. But this is not so far into the future," the director points out. "The reach is not so great, and in some ways, it's more insidious, because it feels much more immediate—we create a world that feels very much like today, only more so. Those movies were more of a fantasy, reaching into the far future, whereas mine is a hyperkinetic, darker version of today. The level of realism is perhaps what makes it most unique. It's a future that we're almost living in."

To conceive this future—our universe in less than five years' time—"you take what we have now and what's breaking down in society, and compound it in a half a decade's span—and the way to do that is to look back five years and ask, 'What's the difference in the past five years?' The answer is: computers, cellular phones, etc. The creation of a flashpoint society, I'm really keen on looking back to the past in order to look ahead."

The movie looks dark, yet somehow bright at the same time. "It all takes place at night," explains the director. "We shot five-and-a-half months at night. *Near Dark* was also shot at night and was a relentlessly dark landscape. I really enjoyed shooting at night and I was prepared for it. *Strange Days* has a dark feel in content but not in look—it's a

"She's like a backbone, the moral fiber that Lenny relies on and requires in a world devoid of that kind of strength," Bigelow says of Mace.



metaphor as well. And using the medium of film and its power—film as a great social tool—as a vehicle through which the story is told is yet another whole layer.”

Since the SQUID experiences are the film’s main metaphor, it’s crucial that they be expressed in a way that distinguishes them from the rest of the narrative. Instead of giving these images a hazy or monochromatic look, Bigelow opted for a subjective camera.

“They’re very, very experiential, solid points of view—there’s no objective camera whatsoever,” she explains. “We had to build a camera for these effects. There was nothing that existed that could enable us to mechanically capture it. It’s a very small camera and it gave us the lightness and versatility to do these extraordinarily diverse and highly choreographed takes.”

“There’s the sequence that opens the film, in which you get out from the back of a car and into the back of a restaurant. You hold other people at gun point and rob the cash register and run back, while all the people inside a freezer locker realize the police are

“What the film is saying is that heart and feeling will endure.”

there. One of your buddies runs outside and into certain death, and we—with the police officers giving chase—decide to escape and run up seven flights of stairs to the roof, where a police helicopter is already hovering above us and shining one of those xenons down on us and we’re running on the roof, jumping onto another rooftop, not making it. I won’t tell you the end.”

Strange Sequences

Shooting those sequences with a subjective camera lends them the feeling of “real life,” and the use of the 2:35 aspect ratio allows “far more peripheral vision in these sequences than another aspect ratio would allow.”

“Since the filmmaker insists her picture is about character, why didn’t she use the more intimate 1:85 format? “I’m really drawn to

Tom Sizemore portrays Max Peleiter, a cynical but wise ex-cop friend of Nero’s.



Bassett was Bigelow’s choice for security agent Lornette Mason—from the moment she read the script.

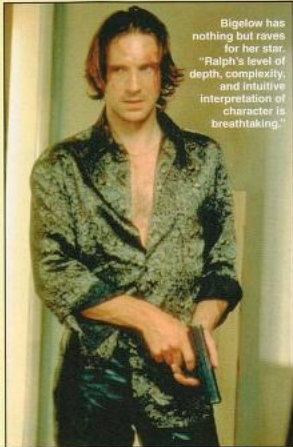
the 2:35 format for the scope it gives you. It’s a beautiful frame that enables you to create exquisite choreography,” says Bigelow.

Given the film’s scope and design, some technical challenges seemed likely to loom up on the set sooner or later. But Bigelow considers “character and performance” to be the major challenge at hand. “I was blessed with the greatest actors working in the business today,” she says, smiling with pleasure. “That, to me, was the most inspiring component of the film.”

“Ralph Fiennes is amazing, and the beauty of him playing a character like Lenny Nero is that it’s a real departure, just as his characters in *Schindler’s List* and *Quiz Show* were very different from all of his previous characters. It allows you to have an actor who comes to the role with very few preconceptions. He hasn’t played this part before, which created a virgin territory.

For a director, that’s pure gold. Ralph’s level of depth, complexity, and intuitive interpretation of character is breathtaking. He’s exquisite—a perfect collaborator. He gives the material all a human could. He enhanced what was in the script, giving it a kind of heart and vulnerability and strength of purpose that I find very rare.

“Angela Bassett, too, is one of a kind. The minute I read the script I was only thinking of her for the part, and luckily she loved it and wanted to play it. She also has so much heart



Bigelow has nothing but raves for her star. “Ralph’s level of depth, complexity, and intuitive interpretation of character is breathtaking.”

and a tremendous strength that she brings to the screen. She’s like a backbone, the moral fiber that the Lenny relies on and requires in a world devoid of that kind of strength.

“And Juliette Lewis, who plays a rock singer, is fearless. She’s an actress who truly works with tremendous courage. She’s also someone I wanted to work with—very talented and extraordinary. She actually sings in the movie. I didn’t have to lip-synch her.

“All in all,” Kathryn Bigelow concludes, “I was incredibly lucky.”