

The Hurt Locker

(Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2007)

Component 1: Key Developments in US Film
Focus Area: Specialist Writing on Film (see separate resource for set Specialist Writing passages)

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1 - 'First day on the job': 00:10:51-00:26:31

Sequence 2 - 'Lost in the supermarket': 2:01:32-2:03:05

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- Sequence 1: Bird's eye LS of Sgt James surrounded by partially buried bombs. Establishes sense of extreme danger. In opening scene, we saw James' predecessor killed by just one of these IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device), and now that level of danger has been multiplied. Symbolism: James deactivated one IED then discovered wires leading to these hidden bombs - is this symbolic of the US invasion of Iraq i.e. recklessly rush into a situation to neutralise one obvious threat (Saddam Hussein) only to uncover hidden threats on all sides?
- Virtually all the scenes in Iraq are shot and edited in a *verité* style similar to news or documentary footage. Barry Ackroyd, the cinematographer, shot each scene using four handheld HD cameras, with operators shooting numerous extreme CU and CU of character's faces, as well as extreme LS (often to show the POV of James' increasingly frustrated support team or civilians). The camera movement is jerky and 'nervy', often using 'crash zooms' and 'zip pans' to create an agitated, anxious atmosphere as well as a sense of immersion (one critic said the camera and editing makes the viewer the "4th member" of the team). The use

of extreme CU is often in shadow and uses very shallow focus to reflect the intense concentration of the soldiers and the clarity (despite the danger) they need to complete their task.

- Sequence 2: The scenes set back in the USA contrast with those set in Iraq, especially the scene in the supermarket. Deep focus is used, as well as lots of wide LS to show the abundance of products (compared to the poverty of Baghdad) and to make James look small and dwarfed by the location. He seems lost in the vastness of this store, the LS (especially of the seemingly endless cereal aisle) reflecting his aimlessness and bewilderment compared to the simplicity and clarity of his task in Iraq.

Mise-en-Scène

- Sequence 1: Introduction to Sgt James: sat in the dark, smoking, he pulls the protective screen from window. Set dressing and lighting is used to establish James as a 'maverick'. Colour scheme of browns and oranges conveys the oppressive heat; the fine dust that covers every surface complements this and creates a sense of discomfort. The shots of litter and rubbish on the streets and of Iraqi bystanders, creates a sense of threat; especially after the opening sequence where we see how both could be sources of danger.
- The bomb disposal suit resembles a spaceman's suit, emphasising the sense that the soldiers are in a hostile, 'alien' world.
- Sequence 2: The supermarket is bright white, the products garishly coloured, in total contrast to the almost sepia colour scheme used in the scenes in Iraq. The scenes at his family home are darker, but seem damp and chilly, in contrast with the warm, dry atmosphere of the desert - again conveying James' sense of discomfort.

Editing

- Sequence 1: The film opens with an epigram about "war as a drug." This is an insight into Sgt James' character, who does seem 'addicted' to the adrenaline rush of his job - but could also have wider political meaning about US foreign

policy, especially during the years post-9/11.

- Throughout the bomb disposal scenes, Bigelow cuts between four cameras, further creating a ‘nervy’, anxious atmosphere - but also establishing a sense of space and character’s positioning in each scene and the sense of ‘360 degree threat’. During these sequences (and the extended, ‘real time’ sniper shoot out in the desert 00:55:27-1:10:03, there is also cross-cutting between the US soldiers and the Iraqis. This inclusion of the enemies’ POV prevents them from being a faceless, dehumanised foe. It also suggests that both sides are engaged in a deadly ‘game’ with each other. (After one insurgent is killed in the shoot-out James even says “Thank you for playing”).
- Sequence 2: The transition between the scene in the Humvee in Iraq and the supermarket in the US is almost like a jump cut: we don’t see James finish his ‘rotation’, pack his clothes or catch a flight. The transition is a straight cut and is jarring, conveying the character’s sense of dislocation.

Sound

- Sequence 1: The sound design for the bomb disposal scenes compliments the immersive use of cameras and editing: loud heavy breathing and whispered curses contrasting with the yelled commands and orders during long shots.
- Dialogue in the film is minimal and naturalistic (there are no grandstanding speeches like in other war films). Eldridge’s brief speech at the start of the sequence to “scare the new guy” adds to the sense of threat, and his comments about the uselessness of the tanks in this situation suggest that this war is very different to the kind fought in the past. Note also the change of the army base name from “Camp Liberty” to “Camp Victory” (another sly criticism of US foreign policy?)
- Sequence 2: “Can you pick up some cereal?” asks James’ wife, the pedestrian request then followed by his wordless confusion as he gazes at the huge array of possible products. In the later scene, James recounts an incident in Baghdad as he does domestic chores, indicating this is where his thoughts remain, not with his family.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Gender:

Kathryn Bigelow has made a career from films that focus on male ‘tribes’ (from the surfer-bank robbers in *Point Break* to the Russian submariners in *K9: The Widowmaker*), on codes of masculinity (honour, endurance, friendship) and on the seductive nature of violent action for both her adrenaline-addicted characters and for the audience. She does not merely present this for our enjoyment - like in most action cinema - but explores and questions it. The epigram that opens the film about “war as a drug” could apply as much to the audiences of the action genre.

Historical:

- *The Hurt Locker* could be seen as a traditional war movie, and as an ‘anti-war’ film. Many critics identified its lack of political positioning, however most war movies focus on the heroism of the soldiers rather than the motivations of the politicians and generals. Many ex-service men and women applauded its ‘honouring’ of soldiers and the difficult job they do. The exploration of the psychological effects of combat is also familiar in the ‘anti-war’ tradition of films like *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon*. Watch the trailers for these films - how are the portrayal of war and soldiers similar or different to that in *The Hurt Locker*?

Political:

- Though the film appears staunchly apolitical, some critics (esp. Paul Tallisville at UnRealityMag.com) suggested that Sgt James was like a personification of the US approach to Middle East. He seems to get a narcotic rush from danger, charging recklessly into complex situations he doesn’t understand, convinced he is doing the right thing and saving lives, whilst actually putting his fellow soldiers at risk. A key scene that supports this is his insistence on the team hunting Baghdad backstreets for the oil tanker bombers (which results in the kidnap and near death of Eldridge). This action is based on a combination of wounded pride (“Those guys are watching us, laughing at us”) and no real information beyond a hunch. This could be symbolic of the Bush/Blair invasion based on the false intelligence that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. The scene, in which James goes solo to try to track down the bombers behind the death of ‘Beckham’, the Iraqi boy, could also reflect this. These scenes, as well as James’ foolhardy, ‘gung-

- ho' bravery also attracted criticism from Iraq veterans who attacked the character as being unrealistic amongst highly trained professionals.
- Further discussion: What do you think? Is the film just an immersive, thrilling action film - or does it have deeper political significance? Also: Mark Boal, the screenwriter, based his script on the time he spent embedded with a real EOD unit in Baghdad. Some in the military suggested that the film reflects more the psychology of the war *journalist* (who chooses to return to conflict zones and may be 'addicted' to the danger) than actual soldiers. Read war correspondent Michael Hasting's piece at <https://goo.gl/4k1jpH> for more on this.