Kathryn Bigelow’s directing Oscar for *The Hurt Locker* has been duly honored, but usually without much consideration of her steps along the way. Does she have a career that can be equally celebrated, or is this film somehow an anomaly, the result of the Academy members wanting to pay tribute to a woman director, while cocking a snook at her ex-husband James Cameron and the blockbuster *Avatar*? In fact, so much commentary focused on the lack of business done by *The Hurt Locker* compared to the other nominees that a whole set of extraneous reasons for its Best Picture prize seemed almost explicit, despite awards as well for editing, sound, sound editing, and original screenplay.

I have to admit that I enjoyed *The Hurt Locker*, but was not really a great fan of it. Primarily because it seemed to me to be too simple, too much of a paring down of what I like best in Bigelow’s work, the sense of nuance and depth that she has brought to much of her genre storytelling. *The Hurt Locker* to me is in essence a small-scale story given full-scale production. It is a virtuoso articulation of the ability of a director to create and the ability of the audience to experience situations of extreme tension, when you don’t know exactly what will happen but know that it will certainly be, literally and figuratively, explosive.

Nevertheless, an auteurist case can be made for Bigelow, especially in terms that characterize so many of the more prominent directors of the New Hollywood—a later generation mixture of auteur personal vision with an abiding interest in and complex awareness of the pressures and necessities of genre. Somewhat older directors such as Coppola, Spielberg, Lucas, and Scorsese similarly shape their own auteurist imaginations through the lens of genre revisionism. Two themes seem prominent in Bigelow’s earlier films that permeate *The Hurt Locker* as well: the exploration of the style of masculinity that seeks adrenaline-charged borderline risk situations, and the potential and actual threat to any group when it depends on one of these hotdog berserkers. This friction between an extreme version of the conventional hero and the needs of a larger group seems to me to be a constant element in the plots that attract Bigelow. In *The Hurt Locker* it’s a theme that also carries a social charge through a behind-the-camera irony about the relative value of stars and supporting actors: the way in which the virtual unknown Jeremy Renner manages to survive all his foolhardiness, while the more famous Guy Pearce and Ralph Fiennes get killed off with dispatch.

But rather than do a step-by-step through Bigelow’s career, I want to focus particularly on one of her earliest films, *Near Dark*, a film that I have a great fondness for, and one that, for all its preoccupation with the ostensibly lowly vampire genre, is more nuanced and subtle than *The Hurt Locker*.

Bigelow’s first feature was *The Loveless* (1982), which was co-written and co-directed with Monty Montgomery. Her next films, *Near Dark* (1987) and *Blue Steel* (1990), were written with Eric Red, who a year before *Near Dark* had written the script for another film with a similar mood and setting, *The Hitcher*. They also collaborated on the script for *Undertow*, which was finally produced for television in 1996, with Red directing.

*The Loveless*, *The Hitcher*, and *Near Dark* share a fascination with the open spaces of American highways, the diners, rundown garages, and eccentric walk-on characters of a road movie. *The Loveless* especially is more like a noirish road poem than a story, with a rambling plot narrated by Willem Dafoe, who plays the main character, an enigmatic biker who knows the other biker gangs but doesn’t have much to do with them. Its interest is more in the discontented mood of the road with its haphazard encounters and its tenuously related situations. As Bigelow has said on the 2002 two-disc DVD edition, she and Montgomery tried to stay away from
conventional screenwriting structure in making the film. Dafoe’s voiceover is the only real coherence that the film has. But that voice and his onscreen presence is often enough to create a more melancholic tribute to the grindhouse biker films of earlier decades than Tarantino’s more frenetic, action-oriented homages.

The Hitcher, directed by Robert Harmon, amps up the conflict with the frantic efforts of Jim Halsey (C. Thomas Howell) to find out why the charming psychopath John Ryder (Rutger Hauer) has chosen him to draw into his ring of death and destruction. The only significant woman in the story, the androgynously named Nash (Jennifer Jason Leigh), is a waitress who believes Howell’s story when he’s being chased by police for crimes committed by Ryder. Her later death by being pulled apart between two trucks (it happens offscreen) increases the over-the-top violence at the same time that it suggests a homoerotic resonance to Halsey’s constant questioning of Ryder about why he’s the target. As a cop in the film later says, “There’s something strange going on between the two of you. I don’t know what it is, and I don’t want to know.” This is less the love that can’t speak its name, than the love that better not, since it would reduce the whole story, the androgynously named Nash (Jennifer Jason Leigh), is a waitress who believes Howell’s story when he’s being chased by police for crimes committed by Ryder. Her later death by being pulled apart between two trucks (it happens offscreen) increases the over-the-top violence at the same time that it suggests a homoerotic resonance to Halsey’s constant questioning of Ryder about why he’s the target. As a cop in the film later says, “There’s something strange going on between the two of you. I don’t know what it is, and I don’t want to know.” This is less the love that can’t speak its name, than the love that better not, since it would reduce the whole plot to a psychological cliché. Clearly in debt to early 1970s plot to a psychological cliché. Clearly in debt to early 1970s

The first shots of the film are disorienting—a closeup of a mosquito inserting its proboscis into the flesh of a man in a cowboy hat, while twangy electronic music by Tangerine Dream plays on the soundtrack. What kind of movie is this, the unclued-in observer might ask. The familiar genre signs aren’t obviously there, although in retrospect they stand out boldly. The story proper begins in a small town, somewhere in the Great Plains, where Caleb (Adrian Pasdar) and two friends are hanging out at a local motel, sporting cowboy boots and jeans, with nothing to do. They spot a girl eating each was once like you and me. At the same time she daringly stages such complex scenes of violence as a disturbing battle with potential victims in a roadhouse, and a spectacular action sequence when the vampires are trapped by state police in a ramshackle motel. Much of the film’s visual power also comes from the play between light and dark, especially those night scenes in which isolated sources of light are exploited by Adam Greenberg, the director of photography (who did both The Terminator and Terminator 2), to create an eerie luminosity around action that still remains recognizably normal, the preternatural glow bringing together the worlds of the natural setting and the supernatural abilities of the characters.

Although producer Steven-Charles Jaffe on the DVD refers to Near Dark as “the first non-Gothic vampire film,” there are several other contenders for that honor, from the 1950s rarity The Return of Dracula to George Romero’s great analysis of the logic of vampire assumptions in Martin, released in 1977. Especially in the 1970s, while some writers were trying to historicize Dracula and connect him to the fifteenth-century Wallachian ruler Vlad the Impaler, and Anne Rice was beginning her series of vampire novels with Interview with the Vampire, various films treated the figure comically (Love at First Bite), updated the Lugosi film (John Badham’s Dracula with Frank Langella), or went back to roots (Werner Herzog’s Nosferatu).

To a certain extent, then, Near Dark is a latecomer in this self-conscious but fertile rethinking of the vampire genre. But while The Loveless and The Hitcher are still interesting to watch for their sense of visual mood, Near Dark meditates on the elements of its genre past and enriches them to create a genre landmark. Whereas Romero in Martin takes out his scalpel and pares away virtually everything that signifies vampire until he has the story down to what seem to be its basics, Bigelow infuses Red’s script with a sense of longing and nostalgia that makes one recall the promise that Dracula always proffered his chosen (rather than casual) victims of escaping a dreary normality to gain eternal life.
an ice cream cone, and Caleb makes his move. It seems like a normal, even boring world, with few possibilities and less future. But below the surface lurks the subtext, expressed in innuendo as blatant as Dracula’s but more seemingly normal.

“Can I have a bite?” asks Caleb flirtatiously. “Bite?” she answers.

“Dying for a cone,” he continues. “Dying?”

Soon enough Caleb will be entangled in the life of a vampire “family” on the road, of which the girl, Mae (Jenny Wright), is a part. But instead of the tuxedoed Draculas of the past or even the well-dressed Renfields and Minna Harkers, these are world-weary vampires in blue denim, sweatshirts, Jesse James-like dusters, and a whole array of other retro clothing. Immortal perhaps, but like the genre itself, fallen, forced to wander over the plains, stealing cars, staying out of daylight, and looking for victims. There’s a tremendous sense of nostalgia permeating *Near Dark* that springs directly from viewing the vampire story through the lens of the genre of the belated Western, in which young boys hankering to be cowboys hang out desperately in dead-end small towns, the old heroic myth of the West long vanished.

The vampire family (Lance Henriksen, Jenette Goldstein, Bill Paxton, Wright, and Joshua John Miller) at first wants to kill Caleb, but then at Mac’s urging (she has already “turned” him) gives him a series of chances to prove himself as a new member. This array of parents and children bears some analogy to the monster families of the 1970s in such films as *The
Texas Chain Saw Massacre and The Hills Have Eyes. But they are more richly and psychologically imagined: the parental indulgences and romantic bond of Jesse (Henriksen) and Diamondback (Goldstein), the boyish exuberance of Severen (Paxton—a surprise if all you know of him is the somber and harried Bill Henrickson of True Love), the budding young womanhood of Mae, and the aggressive teenager Homer (Miller). The fact that Henriksen, Paxton, and Goldstein had been part of the cast of Aliens the year before further confirms the depth of their relationship, bolstering the basic intertextuality of a genre film with the behind-the-scenes bond of casting.

But Caleb has another family as well, intriguingly without a mother, his father a veterinarian, whose profession will become crucial to the story, and a young sister, who will become the prey of Homer, the youngest in the vampire family, who often sports a William S. Burroughs T-shirt. The conflict between these two families is at the core of the story as well, and it’s not so obvious which is preferable: the violent, risky world of the “evil” vampires whose sense of adventure lures Caleb out of his small-town doldrums; or the bucolic, pleasant, but ultimately bland and boring world of his real family.

When do we in the audience decide what kind of film this is? How do we read it? There are few obvious special effects, and the use of wipes and the ending freeze frame ties it less to the uncanny than to more time-honored techniques of movie storytelling. I’ve tried to convey something of the richly mixed allegiances of Near Dark to its genre forebears. To these might also be added an aspect of the Dracula story already there in Stoker, but which has become a staple of the current round of “new” vampire films. I call this the Ondine motif, because it celebrates the effort to cross the boundaries between the outwardly human and the ostensibly other, giving up the world of immortality and choosing the finite world of human love.

Taking a codified genre, mixing it with other allied genres, and changing its seemingly fixed rules raises the intriguing question of genre development over time. In an often-reprinted article (“Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Film”) John G. Cawelti, faced with the many 1970s films that spun traditional genres in different directions, outlined four ways he thought the changes could go: burlesque, inversion, nostalgia, and demythologizing. All these possibilities deconstruct the genre and reveal its assumptions as artificial and in need of either reaffirmation or dismissal. But, I would add, even devastating attacks against the genre’s basic view of the world (as in, say, Kiss Me Deadly or Martin) do not necessarily kill it off. What Near Dark and so many vampire films up to the present reveal is that meditation on a genre’s “code” may also re-energize it, enabling a more complex view not just of the genre itself but also its relation to other genres and other stories, as the pure form and its variations play fruitfully against one another. In Near Dark particularly, this new source of energy comes from an explicit awareness of the long history of the form that, like the immortality of the vampires themselves, has become attenuated and in need of fresh blood.

Finally, to return to Kathryn Bigelow, how does she as director oversee and implement these issues? How does her fascination with the vampire story and its possibilities express her personal vision, collapsing the otherwise seemingly contradictory categories of repetitive genre and original auteur? Lance Henriksen in the DVD discussion talks about his preference for Bigelow’s matriarchal style in directing rather than the patriarchal he had previously experienced. It was more nurturing, he explains, leaving room for improvisation and more accepting of suggestions from cast and crew. How this collaborative atmosphere may have contributed to the ambiance of real and unreal families in the film seems obvious. But without going into the question of male versus female directing traits, let me suggest a transgender analogy: among other directors, Bigelow reminds me most of Howard Hawks, another filmmaker traditionally celebrated as an auteur who was yet fascinated by genre storytelling, the dynamics of groups, and the grounding of genre artifice in a palpable, often expansive reality. What I miss in The Hurt Locker is what I believe to be the strengths of Near Dark, the nuances and shadings, both visual and verbal, that create a complex world. Near Dark came out virtually the same day as The Lost Boys, and was for the moment swamped by that film’s success. But its audience has grown over the years—a tribute to its lasting power.