

IN THIS MOMENT

EMBRACING THE INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE AND SEXUALITY IN KATHRYN BIGELOW'S STRANGE DAYS

JOSHUA BIA

LENNY You see?

MACE I see.

(trembling) I see the earth opening up and swallowing us all.

Kathryn Bigelow's 1995 film, *Strange Days*, offers one of the most graphic rape scenes ever incorporated into mainstream American cinema. Not only is the scene exceptionally disturbing due to its content, it is accentuated by graphically personal cinematography. Bigelow takes the audience to view the scene through the eyes of the rapist (by using a point-of-view style {POV} camera angle). The audience must partake in the rape with no indication that the scene is a staged re-creation made for a movie. This type of viewing experience is at the heart of the *Strange Days* world, a place where real experiences are bought and sold on tiny mini-discs, later to be played back by a customer with a device that will provide the full sensations of actually being in the place and moment they purchased on the disc.

The film's main character, Lenny Nero, is a dealer in these experiences, crawling through the underbelly of a distorted Los Angeles. Early in the film the audience learns Lenny's golden rule. He will not sell "blackjack" film, a label that encompasses any sort of snuff, torture or rape experience. *Strange Days* celebrates Lenny; making him a hero, however the movie does that which its main character will not, namely offer the general public extremely graphic murder and rape sequences. This paradox contributed to why the film initially performed poorly in the box office. Now, with 16 years of technological advancements, *Strange Days* has a cult following. This new audience recognizes that the film makes a powerful commentary on the rapidly growing world of visual and interactive media through highlighting the consequences of a reality replaced by virtuality, a term that connotes higher levels of

integration than virtual reality.

The concept of having a film offer an audience traumatic incidents that the film's characters and creators ultimately condemn, yet need to include in order successfully to create the story's narration is nothing unique. It is a technique that can be found in a great number, and perhaps even a majority, of films as well as various other forms of artistic expression. For example, it would seem silly to find anything extraordinary about having a crime film in which the main character hates murder, yet the film is filled with it. The uniqueness of this trope in *Strange Days* is the ability of the film's fantasy SQUID (Superconducting Quantum Interference Device) technology to deliver an all-encompassing physical and emotional recreation of human experience. The film's primary trailer explains the technology best. Lenny, played by Ralph Fiennes, stares into the camera and gives a sales pitch for the wares he has to offer, "Look, I want you to know what we're talking about here. This isn't like TV only better. This is life. It's a piece of somebody's life. Pure and uncut, straight from the cerebral cortex. You're there. You're doing it, seeing it, hearing it... feeling it."

The ability to make the audience see, hear and feel has been one goal of the cinema industry since its inception. *Strange Days* alters this concept with a postmodern twist by transforming real experience into something that can be bought and sold like any other commodity (commodification). These experiences, often excessive, thus become replacements for reality, harkening to postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard's notion of a 'hyperreality'. By incorporating SQUID Technology *Strange Days* inevitably makes a commentary on itself and the entire realm of visual media. The film questions the true desire of the hegemonic norm, defined as the realm of normalcy from which all deviations are vulnerable to being attacked as undesirable abnormalities. *Strange Days* hints that a closer examination of the individual may prove that the hegemonic norm does not even exist. By offering the exact thing that Lenny despises, the film draws parallels to the manner in which television news stations are inevitably condescending towards a criminal, or deeply sympathetic towards a tragedy, yet depend on these troubling events in order to survive.

Strange Days had all the ingredients necessary and available to create a blockbuster hit. Movie giant James Cameron co-wrote the screenplay, Ralph Fiennes was an immensely popular choice for the lead roll and a major budget from 20th Century Fox heavily backed the film. Yet in the opening year of its release, the film grossed only \$7.9 million in the United States; a flop when considering the estimated budget cost was \$30 million. In her essay, "Strange Days: A Case History Of Production and Distribution Practices in Hollywood" Romi Stepovich notes how films of similar genre were bringing in massive profits that same year; *Independence Day* raked in \$306.2 million and *The Fifth Element* took in \$63.5 million.

Critics often credit the failure to achieve a massive success with *Strange Days* to the films hyper-violence and the racial tensions surrounding the film's release. Los Angeles had just gone through a series of race riots awakened by a videotape of Rodney King being beaten by the LAPD. The riot dominated national headlines, and some say *Strange Days* echoed this reality too closely at a time when moviegoers were looking for an escape rather than a recreation. The advertising campaign also seems to have missed a strong potential target audience. The primary trailer consisted of leading actor Ralph Fiennes closing with the line, "You know you want it." In the midst of the confusion as to how to market *Strange Days*, the promotion team chose to simply "sell sex" (Stepovich 156). This clichéd avenue of marketing often proves successful, yet may have come across too ambiguously in this particular instance.

James Cameron, a writer and director notorious for experimentations in fantasy technology, had been working on the pre-script for *Strange Days* over a decade, describing it as an erotic suspense thriller set in the very near future. Originally Cameron had planned to do only a treatment of the story, however as his involvement with Bigelow grew, his treatment expanded into what Cameron describes as a "scriptment." Cameron had created somewhat of a novel, which Jay Cocks transformed into a screenplay. Although Cameron originally angled the story towards the genre of science fiction, when Bigelow took over as the director she rejected this concept and geared the project towards a suspense genre.

Strange Days is a postmodern film, often categorized in the world of cyberpunk, a postmodern sub-category that places technology and commodities highly above the existence of nature. The term was originally coined in reference to William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. At the heart of the cyberpunk genre is a concentration on the interface between humans and radical technologies, both real and imagined. In recent years cyberpunk films have drawn an audience of feminist theorists looking to the realm of cyberspace in order "to explore gender reconstructions, relations and the capacity for virtual disembodiment" (Sims 219).

The value *Strange Days* places on selling experiences proposes the idea that the time spent between these purchased experiences, the majority of one's daily life, is filled primarily with nothingness. This is not the sort of nothingness that results in a peaceful connectivity, but rather a nothingness that is uncomfortable with itself, stemming from an isolation from real human experience.

In relation to Baudrillard's theory of 4 stages of hyperreality, one must question whether *Strange Days* contains elements of the first or second stages, and possibly both. Baudrillard argues that the first stage indicates that a sign is an indication of an underlying beauty; or rather that something more or less gives the appearance of what it could be. In the second stage a sign is a distortion of what lies

beneath. Within the movie itself, the city of Los Angeles contains destruction in every crevice, just as its outward appearance would imply. As for the Los Angeles that exists outside of *Strange Days*, Bigelow appears to be indicating that the world she has created in the film has extremely strong parallels to the real city. The equivalences exist in the way Bigelow portrays radio and television media throughout the film. The news stories that appear in the film are no different than the ones that occur daily on local and national television networks. The news is often an exaggerated version of what is actually occurring in the city; however there is often a failure to report a crime that is incongruent with whatever trends they are trying to depict at the time. *Strange Days* uses its narrative to imply that no matter how chaotically mainstream media depicts societal fractures, the underlying causes hold even darker connotations.

Regardless of how often the violence in cinema, media and reality parallel, all these mediums underscore and avoid sexual violence due to its uncomfortable nature. Part of this discomfort stems from an inability to stop treating violence and sexuality as innately separate entities. Bigelow's choice to keep the rape scene in its graphic entirety was a daring move. In the creation of any art, the creator will eventually lose control of their work's intended meaning by revealing it to an audience that will have its own perspective and reaction to it. On a very basic level, the rape/murder scene works as an extremely evil action, which in turn creates an unknown super-villain and transforms Lenny into the hero who must take on the quest of stopping him. In another sense, one not as openly discussed in the theatre lobby debate following a film, the scene could potentially satisfy the desire of those who gain pleasure from viewing, "blackjack" style films. It would be a mistake to assume that Cocks, Cameron & Bigelow did not take this into account.

When the character of Iris is raped, her attacker attaches a live-action SQUID deck to her, forcing her to experience her attacker's perception and emotions, thus simultaneously experiencing her own fear with his exhilaration. In her essay, "The Strange Days of Kathryn Bigelow and James Cameron", Cristina Lane notes the difficulty this situation creates from a feminist perspective as, "the rapist's pleasure cannot be extracted from the victim position" (Lane 183). In her book *Public Rape*, author Tanya Horeck discusses the manner in which feminist writers employ images of rape in order to communicate women's identification with other women through a shared traumatic experience. Two years following the release of *Strange Days*, Sarah Dunant's 1997 novel *Transgressions* caused uproar as Dunant, a feminist writer, included a scene in which a rape victim is aroused by her experience. The Iris rape scene creates a similar paradox; however any joy felt from the experience stems from the rapist's emotions, not feelings that are innately within Iris. The manner in which both a situation and its accompanying feelings forcibly enter Iris is extremely sinister, and it appears Bigelow is not only

commenting on the existence of male to female sexual violence, she is highlighting the way media and film report and portray male to female sexual violence in a society where it will inevitably be contaminated by a masculine viewpoint.

The roles Angela Basset typically plays involve her being a source of feminine strength in societies dominated by men. Her role in the highly acclaimed 1991 film *Boyz In the Hood* undoubtedly influenced her casting in *Strange Days*. In *Strange Days* she plays another strong single mother struggling to provide the best for her son, while combatting with an outside world whose violence threatens both the well-being of herself and that of her family. Her powerful performance as Mace in *Strange Days* creates a supporting female character that is ultimately stronger than the film's male hero. Bigelow uses Mace as a counterbalance to the scenes of Iris being murdered and raped. Bigelow's films such as *Blue Steel* and *Near Dark* have effectively violent female protagonists displayed against ineffectual male protagonists.

Lenny behaves as a lightning rod for mixed perspectives when he receives and views the Iris rape tape. The reaction shots of Lenny viewing the clip show him in extreme pain and horrified, signaling that he is identifying with Iris over the rapist's perspective. Lenny becomes both a woman being raped and a rapist simultaneously. In some ways this mirrors the confusion of emotion that can exist for the audience, that is paying to be successfully entertained and at the same time horrified. When Lenny is searching the Iris tape for clues about her rape and murder, he connects the SQUID deck to a custom amplifier that he cranks the gain up on. Mace warns him that he will fry himself, but he continues regardless. The images from Lenny's point of view appear in strobe bursts separated by static, overpowering Lenny. Mace eventually rips the deck off, leaving Lenny to see ghostly afterimages that are burned into his visual cortex. Lenny refers to the aftershock as "ghosting." Iris's terrified face literally floats on his wall before fading away slowly. Even for the common non blackjack hunting audience member the scene is absorbing due to its excruciatingly high level of suffering. Just as Lenny takes the clip and intensifies it through his custom amplifier, Bigelow takes it and projects it onto a massive movie screen in surround sound, forcing the audience to have the very same "ghosting" effect that Lenny suffers, thus becoming both rapist and victim.

In *Public Rape* Horeck explores the ethics of watching depictions of rape in mainstream media. She forces consideration of whether the role of the audience is one of bearing witness to a horrific crime or participating in an exceptionally taboo voyeuristic activity. The book addresses numerous films and media events, including *Strange Days*. Horeck quotes Bigelow's defenses in reference to her decision to include the scene. *Strange Days* was initially premiered at both the London and New York film festivals, where a number of audience members reportedly walked out the film during the Iris rape scene. Since the initial premier, a large amount of the criticism about the film continues to stem from those who have

felt overly disturbed by the scene, to the point where they argued that its unnerving imagery ruined the movie. In defense, Bigelow states, “I think the film has held a mirror up to society. And you can’t fault the mirror, it’s just a mirror” (‘Kathryn Bigelow’ 1995). She also claims, “One of the things the film is about is watching, the consequences of watching, the political consequences of experiencing someone else’s life vicariously” (‘Kathryn Bigelow’ 1995).

Bigelow’s concept of a movie behaving as a mirror for the outside world inevitably enters the continuing debate as to what extent media influences the actions of a society, particularly the concept of portraying violence influencing real-world violent crime. Cameron and Cocks leave a disturbing note in the screenplay during the Iris rape scene. “IN POV we see the Wearer pull his jogging pants down below his knees (R-rated please) and reach for Iris” (Cameron 52). This request to keep the content R-rated is simply asking that the man’s penis not be shown because it would push the scene into a level of extremity that would deny *Strange Days* a spot in major theatres. This speaks volumes of the type of content that the movie industry considers appropriate. They deem it safe to show the reaction of a girl forced to watch her own rape from the rapists perspective, then see her strangled to death, yet if the man’s penis is included the scene becomes too obscene for an R rating. This initiates a discussion of why certain material is allowed in popular culture and other types of material are not. In this example, as with a majority of media, the movie industry deems violence acceptable long before they would approve of some forms of sexuality. A PG-13 rated movie could easily have a scene in which someone gets killed with a gunshot, yet showing someone getting ejaculated upon would instantly result in a loss of the acceptable rating. From a developmental standpoint, this teaches children to place murder before sex.

Strange Days is immensely more popular now than it was during its release. This is partially due to the growth of the Internet, which has allowed for more of an interactive experience with visual media than ever before. This has created an avenue for the technology of *Strange Days* to be a more appropriate tool for social commentary than it was in 1995. In many ways the viral videos of the web draw similarities to a SQUID tape, allowing for the sharing of an experience, often from a bystander’s POV. The sinister categories of these videos sometimes become more popular than the rest. This trend confirms Bigelow’s argument that *Strange Days* acts as a mirror for society in an unusual way. Not only is society filled with hyper-cruelty, the statistics revealing the popularity of graphic videos reflect the population’s voyeuristic appetite for cruelty.

The primary streaming video site on the net is *YouTube*. Beneath each video is a range of tools that allow users to indicate a like or dislike for the video or comment on it. Then there is the ultimate symbol viral status, the view count. In many ways this view count acts as a form of online currency. This can transform into literal monetary value if the view count is high enough that the user who uploaded

the video gets paid through advertisements. *YouTube* is filled with an exceptionally wide range of video content and is a source of entertainment for hundreds of millions of users. *YouTube* does not allow any form of pornographic content on its site, though there are countless home videos of beating and murders that may or may not eventually be taken down.

THE KILLER IN *Strange Days* heightens his excitement by sharing his rush with others, as he wires his victims and sends the tape to Lenny. P2P networks, torrent sites & tube sites are all extremely popular ways in which a person can share a video with countless users. This creates an ever-present audience with which to share any sort of feeling. In April of 2008, there was an incident in which a girl was being brutally attacked in a Florida home by a group of six of her fellow high school peers. The case received a large amount of media attention due to the motivation of the attack, which was apparently to post the video on *YouTube* and embarrass the girl. Even after authorities charged and convicted the attackers the video itself still circulates in cyberspace, creating a crime that will continue to be successful in its intended result long into the future.

Within *Strange Days* itself there appears to be a conversation surrounding the Iris rape scene, with two scenes featuring the character Faith. The first occurs early in the film during the playback of Faith and Lenny's rollerblade date/sex in which Lenny strokes Faith's hair while telling her she looks beautiful. Faith then looks directly into the POV camera and says, "I love your eyes Lenny... I love the way they see." This scene both parallels and contrasts itself to the Iris rape scene; forcing a direct comparison. In reference to Faith's comment, the intimate concept of enjoying a lover's interpretation of what he sees foreshadows the horrific manner in which Iris must watch herself be raped through the eyes of her attacker. In each playback there is a direct build-up: a lovely date on California beach versus an attacker silently breaking and entering an apartment in the night. In his article "Straight from the Cerebral Cortex: Vision and Affect in *Strange Days*" Steven Shaviro labels Iris's rape scene a, "sadistic objectification and commodification of the female image, with a vengeance" (Shaviro 168). Seeing as both experiences are recorded onto minidisks with the potential to be distributed, it is fair to say that they are both commodifications of the female image, both within the movie and for the outside audience viewing *Strange Days*.

A second scene that appears to address the Iris rape occurs near the end of the film when Lenny watches a playback of Faith being raped, though it turns out she is actually involved in a role-playing scenario that she enjoys a great deal. In some ways these scenes are not simply a commodification of the female image, they are commodifications of desire. *Strange Days*' incorporation of these two opposing rape commodifications, one experienced torturously and the other pleurably, harkens back to the Feminist Sex Wars begun in the 1970s and that are still continuing today. The Barnard Conference of

1982 was a pinnacle moment highlighting the divide between feminists who were looking to expand a dialogue over sexuality previously muted in the feminist community, and those who opposed more radical forms of sexual expression that blurred boundaries of pleasure and danger such as sadomasochism, claiming it enforced a patriarchal control over female sexuality. The issue of pornography itself was also a major source of conflict.

In her essay, “Political is Personal: Scholarly Manifestations of the Feminist Sex Wars” author Jenna Basiliere comments on how the Barnard Conference forced sexuality to be discussed as an entity integral to feminist discourse and not something that could be on the peripheral. Basiliere notes how both the radical feminists and the sex-radical feminists each communicated with each other in such a way that each side felt misunderstood and in isolation. Jessica Benjamin’s 1980 essay, “The Bonds of Love: Rational Violence and Erotic Domination” highlights the numerous levels of duality that can exist in any given sexual encounter. She states, “Further, and crucially, male rationality and violence are linked with institutions that appear to be sexless and genderless, but which exhibit the same tendencies to control and objectify the other out of existence that we find in the erotic form of domination” (Benjamin 196). This paradoxical enjoyment based off a force that can alternatively be a malicious victimization is the basis for much of the confusion that occurs around aggressive forms of male sexuality accompanied by female submission.

The commentary that *Strange Days* holds on this issue is not decipherable to a point that makes it appear to be on one side or another. The female representative of sadomasochist enjoyment, Faith, is not a character that exists with any sort of moral fiber. She is dating a serial killer, and is nothing more than an addictive drug and source of problems for Lenny.

The opening scene of the *Strange Days* is arguably the most successful aspect of the film. The audience witnesses a robbery filmed and viewed using SQUID technology. The difficulty of this scenario is attempting to use a conventional medium, film, to convey a type of technology that is something greater. The scene took two years to complete and required some innovative camerawork, such as attaching cameras to actors’ helmets. The ultimate result is a scene that appears completely fluid and unedited, capturing the essence of a live experience. In 1995, watching this scene and the other POV sequences in the film were arguably the closest thing to “wiring in”, a term used to describe using SQUID tapes, that a person could do. Bigelow is able to move the audience actively through a scene, rather than just view it.

While the scene does an excellent job of pulling in the audience, it does so in an unconventional manner by using high levels of anonymity and detachment. The scene is instantly identified as a recording, as the words “boot it” are heard before the sequence begins with an out-of-focus cut into the

robbery. The person viewing the recording is unidentifiable, as the audience only sees his eye, and all of the robbers in the clip are wearing masks. Neither the observer nor the doer is identifiable. It is only after the dramatic death of the person whose POV Lenny is watching that characters are introduced.

In this manner Bigelow is working with an interesting concept, affect that comes before or after the subject. Conventionally, emotions are described as properties of one's self. A person feels a certain way, thus the feeling falls into the arena of phenomenology. In reference to *Strange Days*, author Steven Shaviro offers the possibility that feeling can take a person outside of one's self. He states that a feeling can be, "alien to me: something from outside, from far away, that has somehow managed to insinuate itself within me" (Shaviro 164). Using the word "affect" rather than "emotion" to describe a feeling implies something that can exist without the presence of the subject, and can cause affect without being integrated.

Shaviro argues that the POV SQUID sequences of *Strange Days* operate in this manner. There is no establishing shot; instead the audience enters directly into the sequence. The nature of SQUID recordings requires that they be played outside of their original context. There is a high level of intimacy with the person whose POV the audience is seeing, though that person is ultimately unidentifiable. This shifts the focus completely to the actual sequence that is happening, rather than to whom the sequence is happening. This unorthodox method of detachment allows for the POVs to be viewed as something that is outside of the realm of traditional film. First person shots such as these are most commonly found in slasher or thriller films, where the audience is able to see what the killer is doing without being able to identify who the killer is. One of the most clichéd examples would be in the film *Jaws*, where the audience sees through the eyes of the shark as it approaches its next victim. *Strange Days* is fairly unique in the way that it sometimes incorporates this technique into simple relationship moments that aren't hyper sexual nor suspenseful. When Lenny views the tapes he saves of his ex-girlfriend Faith, he experiences them much in the same way anybody else who was watching the tapes would. There is a clear differentiation between the person Lenny used to be, and the person who is wired on his bed trying to reconnect with the images that he sees.

This particular scene is prophetic in the way it eerily foreshadows some of the darker possibilities that exist using a combination of visual and social media on the Internet. Using contemporary technology like this as a lens to view *Strange Days* questions the unprecedented capability people have to save, share and relive their experiences. It should be noted however that being able to capture these experiences in picture, text and video format might not necessarily imply that the memories are better saved. In fact, by saving memories in one particular format they may begin to transform from their original nature, thus becoming everlasting distortions of that which they truly are. This process of

distortion amplifies with the ability to pick out only selective memories; a process the human brain already does a fair amount of on its own.

For example, the social networking website *Facebook.com* has managed to incorporate itself into the life of the typical teen and young adult living in the United States. This website accumulates a collection of images, videos and communications that involve a given person, and will remain on the website indefinitely as long as the person allows them to be there. The difference between this sort of technology and a standard photo album is that the website builds into higher levels of self-identification. There is the possibility for a user to thumb through old experiences, and become somewhat lost in the concept of who they are and who they used to be. The fact that other users have the ability to view these experiences at any time heightens the confusion, thus confirming this past identification from an outside perspective. It is a way to relive one's past through proxy. The character Mace, played by Angela Basset, tells Lenny, "Memories were meant to fade, Lenny; they're designed that way for a reason." As she says this, she physically destroys Lenny's squid deck.

Mace's comment can be taken as a commentary on the way the film handles its POV sequences, particularly the Iris rape scene. The experience of living vicariously through someone is a concept Bigelow wanted to explore when making *Strange Days*. A person's ownership of memories that are not their own instantly transforms the original personality of the experience, due the nature of an individual's perception. In a larger context this offers a commentary on the transfer of any art from its creator to the audience. Numerous postmodern theorists focus on the opposite end of this spectrum, in which a person receiving information or media does not create an interpretation; rather the information becomes an embodiment of the person.

One of the most notable of these theorists is Donna Haraway. Just as *Strange Days* holds a weightier commentary now than it did during the film's initial release, the same can be said for Haraway's 1985 book chapter, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In relation to socialist-feminism she states, "At the center of my faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg" (Haraway 149) Haraway defines a cyborg as a creature that simultaneously exists in social relations and political construction while also prevailing in a realm of crafted fiction. SQUID technology encapsulates this notion of the cyborg. The trend of contemporary technology is coming ever closer to a complete integration of human and machine; to quote Haraway, "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 149).

In her essay, "Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere" N. Katherine Hayles claims that Haraway's notion of the cyborg is no longer as applicable as it once was due to the flux of modern technology creating net-worked connectivity; thus replacing the individual cyborg with distributed

cultural cognitions. Hayles shares Haraway's intent, and by expanding the cyborg theory from individual to societal she argues that there is a shift underway from human to posthuman. Hayles states the most powerful degree of this posthuman transition occurs when the natural essence of being is replaced by patterns of information that are instantiated in a biological substrate. This conversion highlights the manner in which a centralization of knowledge has the potential to standardize human behavior, thus forming a computational existence, one where people have unconsciously lost control of their actions due to the absence of individualism.

Strange Day's functions as a midpoint between Haraway and Hayles both temporally and theoretically. The seemingly growing trend of SQUID use in the film harkens to Haraway's individual combination of human and machine, however an interesting complication is that the machine ultimately connects back to a real human experience, creating a cyclical relationship that eventually blurs the notion of a tangible reality. This blurring inevitably manifests itself in a larger societal context, a trend Hayles highlights through the development of the Internet and programmable media. *Strange Days* initially uses this technological connectivity to portray a world where chaos feeds on itself, as seen in the use of *mise-en-scene*. While Lenny drives through this distortion of Los Angeles there are fires exploding on the streets, people fighting one another and even three prostitutes robbing a Santa Claus. As Lenny scans through the radio stations in his car, one of the DJs asks a caller if he is excited for the upcoming New Year. The caller responds by highlighting disturbing truths, such as how young children are shooting each other in school, the economy is down and gasoline is over \$3.00 a gallon. These are events that were true in the United States when the film was created, and are still applicable signs of underlying chaos in today's America.

A subtle commentary Bigelow makes on both Lenny and the United States appears early in the film when Lenny wakes up in his bed after a lonely night of vodka and SQUID playback. He walks to his refrigerator and has a red, white & blue popsicle for breakfast. A popsicle, while delicious, offers no sustenance other than sugar water; the texture and use of food coloring are the primary appeals. Lenny's consumption of the popsicle highlights the manner in which he is surviving through a market that has no depth beyond aesthetics, and he can only offer his customers the externalized presence of a moment and never the true satisfaction of its incarnation. In response to a joke about his tie, Lenny responds, "It's the one thing that stands between me and the jungle." Lenny is making a clear distinction that he is not the same as the people he peddles his wares to. The truth of Lenny's assessment is debatable. He clearly uses SQUID technology for recreation in the scene where he relives his rollerblade date with Faith. However, it appears that he is addicted to Faith more than being "wired in." Still, it is impossible to separate a result from the means by which it is achieved. If something is only accessible through technology, then it

must take on characteristics of the technology itself. Faith is completely out of Lenny's reach due to her constant surveillance and protection by bodyguards. Thus Lenny must thumb through stacks of old minidiscs that contain recorded experiences he shared with Faith in the past. By doing this he is able to keep himself in a grey zone where he cannot achieve a real connection, yet he is not far enough away to heal from its absence.

Lenny abandons Faith by the end of the film, even though she appears to want him back in her life. Throughout *Strange Days* Bigelow parallels Lenny's blind obsession with Faith to Mace's unbreakable loyalty towards Lenny. Faith unequivocally wants no part of her life involved with Lenny, whereas Lenny does not reject Mace's love as much as he simply disregards the depths of her feelings for him. This parallel expands in the scene where Lenny explains to Mace his unquestionable promise to always, "be there" for Faith. He asks Mace if she has, "ever been in love someone who didn't return that love", followed by a reverse shot highlighting the visible pain and confusion in Mace's face. He justifies his unreciprocated loyalty to Faith by saying, "its not about what is in her head, its about what is in mine."

This brings about the notion of personal reality construction, and to what extent a person can control his or her own happiness internally, with the exclusion of that which functions outside of a person's own mind. Mace and Lenny take opposing courses of action in their construction. Mace internalizes her love for Lenny, appearing stoic and at times directly hostile towards him. Lenny aggressively pursues Faith, often risking his well being just to get the chance to speak with her.

Mace physically turns Lenny's face towards herself, so that his eyes can see the love that is truly before him, eliminating his ability to control how he "thinks" he wants to feel. Ultimately this is Bigelow's treatment of perception in *Strange Days*. She disrupts the typically escapist activity of movie watching by forcing the audience to view POV scenes that remove themselves from the realm of stereotypical entertainment by stripping the scenes of standard aestheticism. She, as a director, is thus no longer telling the audience how they should feel about these moments, placing that total power within the individual.

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