



Close to the Edge: The Films of Kathryn Bigelow

# Near Dark

## Near Dark

**Director:** Kathryn Bigelow  
**Production Companies:** Near Dark Joint Venture, F/M Entertainment  
**Executive Producers:** Edward S. Feldman, Charles R. Meeker  
**Producer:** Steven-Charles Jaffe  
**Co-producer:** Eric Red  
**Associate Producers:** Diane Nabatoff, Mark Allan  
**Production Co-ordinator:** Karen Altman Morgenstern  
**Production Manager:** Mark Allan  
**Location Managers:** George Herthel, Wallace Uchida  
**Post-production Supervisor:** Brent Sellstrom  
**Assistant Directors:** Guy Louthan, John J.C. Scherer, Chuck Williams  
**2nd Unit Assistant Director:** Ian McVey  
**Casting:** Karen Rea  
**Casting Associate:** Glenn F. Haines  
**Screenplay:** Eric Red, Kathryn Bigelow  
**Director of Photography:** Adam Greenberg  
**Assistant Photographers:** Vance Piper, Alicia Craft  
**2nd Unit Photographer:** Chuck Colwell  
**Time Lapse Footage:** MacGillivray-Freeman Films, Energy Productions  
**Fire Opticals:** Fantasy II Film Effects  
**Special Effects Co-ordinators:** Steve Galich, Dale Martin  
**Editor:** Howard Smith  
**Production Designer:** Stephen Altman  
**Art Director:** Dian Perryman  
**Costume Designer:** Joseph Porro  
**Wardrobe Supervisor:** Leslie Weir  
**Make-up:** Davida Simon  
**Special Effects Make-up:** Gordon J. Smith  
**Titles and Opticals:** Pacific Title  
**Music:** Tangerine Dream  
**Music Editor:** Jim Weidman  
**Sound Director:** Leo Chaloukian  
**Sound Design:** David Lewis Yewdall  
**Sound Recording:** Don Summer  
**Sound Re-recordings:** Ryder Sound Services, John 'Doc' Wilkinson, Richard Rogers, Grover Helsley  
**Supervising Sound Editor:** R.J. Palmer  
**Stunt Co-ordinator:** Everett Creach  
**Dog Wrangler:** Gary Jero  
**Horse Wrangler:** Stevie Myers  
**Cast:**  
Adrian Pasdar (*Caleb Colton*)  
Jenny Wright (*Mae*)  
Lance Henriksen (*Jesse*)  
Bill Paxton (*Severen*)  
Jenette Goldstein (*Diamondback*)  
Joshua Miller (*Homer*)  
Marcie Leeds (*Sarah Colton*)  
Tim Thomerson (*Loy Colton*)  
Kenny Call (*Deputy Sheriff*)  
Ed Corbett (*ticket seller*)  
Troy Evans (*plainclothes officer*)  
Bill Cross (*Sheriff Eakers*)  
Roger Aaron Brown (*Cajun truck driver*)  
Thomas Wagner (*bartender*)  
Robert Winley (*patron in bar*)  
James LeGros (*teenage cowboy*)  
Jan King (*waitress*)  
Danny Kopel (*biker in bar*)  
Billy Beck (*motel manager*)  
S.A. Griffin (*police officer at motel*)  
Bob Terhune, William T. Lane, Gary Littlejohn, Paul Michael Lane, Eddie Mulder (*state troopers*)  
Don Pugsley (*2nd truck driver*)

In 1988, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City singled out independent horror film *Near Dark*, made by up-and-coming director Kathryn Bigelow, for special attention. Recognising the film's originality and artistry, MOMA honoured the film by presenting it as part of their Cineprobe programme. Launched in 1968, Cineprobe was designed as a forum 'for independent and avant-garde filmmakers to present their work.' Films included in these seasons usually represented experimental and avant-garde cinema, 'as well as narratives with new and unusual strategies.' *Near Dark* was screened on the 25 and 26 April 1988 – six months after the film's theatrical release – accompanied by a mini-retrospective of Bigelow's earlier films, notably her short, *The Set Up* (1978), and her first feature, *The Loveless* (1981), co-directed by Monty Montgomery. The inclusion of *Near Dark* in MOMA's programme – as well as its acquisition into the MOMA collection – signals its position as a genre film that pushes boundaries and challenges conventions, while equally possessing a distinct narrative and aesthetic style. MOMA's retrospective also marked early recognition of Bigelow as a significant filmmaker and auteur.

*Near Dark* is a vampire film set largely in the contemporary Midwest of the USA that rejects established genre conventions in favour of its own hybrid approach. It skilfully merges the Gothic with the conventions of the western, road movie and *film noir* at a narrative and aesthetic level, while also introducing elements of the outlaw romance genre of *They Live by Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1948) and *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). *Near Dark* tells the story of Caleb, a half-vampire trying to decide whether to embrace his new nature or return to his human family. It is the family of vampires who lure him into their nocturnal existence that is of central importance to the film's innovation. They are defined by a nomadic lifestyle, anarchic behaviour, a passion for violence, an ambition for eternity, intense family bonds, and a gritty visual appearance. They are morally ambiguous and undermine the class structures that have historically defined stories of the undead. These are not aristocrats but instead they capture the allure and horror of the disenfranchised and the underclass.

The film is sumptuous in its aesthetic design, offering a nuanced and haunting presentation of its monstrous protagonists who stalk the backroads and desert landscape of the American Midwest. While it remains Bigelow's only foray into horror to date, its innovation showcases the creativity and artistic richness of the genre without sacrificing its visceral qualities. The film's reception by MOMA signals Bigelow's standing as a director of significance at an early point in her career, not simply because of her visual art background, something that would be in keeping with many of the artists featured in the Cineprobe series, but because of the way in which she would from *Near Dark* onward re-envision traditionally mainstream genres of filmmaking.

*Near Dark* was co-written with Eric Red, who also collaborated with Bigelow on *Blue Steel* (1990), as well as writing *The Hitcher* (Robert Harmon, 1986) and writing/directing *Body Parts* (1991) and *Bad Moon* (1996). *Near Dark* was their first collaboration and was part of an arrangement between Bigelow and Red designed to launch their careers as writer-directors. They agreed they would co-write two non-commissioned screenplays, which they would attempt to finance, with themselves attached as directors to help gain their foothold within the industry. They co-wrote *Near Dark* and *Undertow* with Bigelow attached to direct *Near Dark* and Red to direct *Undertow* (1996).

Neith Hunter, Theresa Randle (*ladies in car*)  
Tony Pierce, Gordon Haight (*highway youths*)  
Leo Geter, Gary Wayne Cunningham  
(*Caleb's friends*)  
USA 1987  
94 mins  
35mm

## Close to the Edge: The Films of Kathryn Bigelow

### The Loveless

Sun 1 Feb 18:30; Fri 20 Feb 21:10;  
Mon 2 Feb 18:20

### Near Dark

Tue 3 Feb 21:00; Sun 22 Feb 18:30

### Blue Steel

Sat 7 Feb 18:30; Mon 23 Feb 20:55

### Strange Days

Sun 8 Feb 18:00; Sun 15 Feb 18:00;  
Tue 24 Feb 20:10

### The Hurt Locker

Tue 10 Feb 20:25; Sat 21 Feb 17:20;  
Fri 6 Mar 20:20

### Point Break

Fri 13 Feb 17:50; Fri 27 Feb 20:30;  
Sat 14 Mar 20:30

### K-19: The Widowmaker

Fri 13 Feb 20:20; Sat 7 Mar 17:30

### The Weight of Water

Mon 16 Feb 20:30; Sat 28 Feb 18:00

### Zero Dark Thirty

Tue 3 Mar 20:00; Sun 8 Mar 14:30

### A House of Dynamite

Thu 5 Mar 17:50; Sat 14 Mar 18:15;  
Tue 17 Mar 20:40

### Detroit

Fri 13 Mar 20:15; Mon 16 Mar 17:45

*Near Dark* by Stacey Abbott is available to  
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**SIGHT  
AND  
SOUND**

While the box-office results were poor, *Near Dark* was generally well received by the critics, whose commentaries identified significant discourses that would surround Bigelow and the film as its cult standing developed. In particular, many critics saw its distinctive visual style and Bigelow's generic hybridity as its primary strengths. Following *Near Dark*'s premiere at the Toronto Film Festival, *Variety* praised the film for achieving 'a new look in vampire films. High-powered but pared down, slick but spare, this is something akin to a *Badlands* of the supernatural, a tale that introduces the unearthly into the banality of rural American existence.' The association with Malick's *Badlands* (1973) is further developed by David Edelstein of *The Village Voice* who, while recognising the film's kinship with films such as *The Lost Boys*, saw greater allegiance to a broader cinematic tradition, remarking:

'The terrain – and the messages about the sanctity of family – is not too distant from *Lost Boys*, but the approach is worlds apart. *Near Dark* borrows its form not from horror movies, but from classic sagas of outlaws on the lam.'

Pam Cook similarly recognised the kinship with outlaw films when she praised the film for how it imbues the vampire genre with a 'mythic dimension, as society's outcasts wander the land wreaking unholy vengeance.' John Powers of *L.A. Weekly* saw the film as a combination of 'Ray's fated romanticism with Peckinpah's poetic violence.' The reviews repeatedly compare Bigelow to both classical and New Hollywood filmmakers such as Nicholas Ray, Sam Peckinpah, Terrence Malick and Arthur Penn – filmmakers known for working within genre while also transcending its perceived limitations.

Not all of the reviews were positive and the film received criticism for its graphic violence, described by Victoria Mather of the *Daily Telegraph* as 'a repellent directorial debut by Kathryn Bigelow', concluding with the disclaimer 'I *would like to think* that we have got the worst film of 1988 out of the way in the first week.' Caryn James of the *New York Times* condemned the film for its seeming stylistic hybridity – a characteristic praised by many other critics – describing it as coming from the 'scattershot school of filmmaking' in which 'the result of being pushed and pulled through the confusing styles of *Near Dark* [...] is simple exhaustion.' Many critics took issue with the film's extreme violence – the roadhouse slaughter being mentioned repeatedly – but for some, such as Henry Sheehan, this was a testament to the film's power:

'This is a movie, that while not as dishearteningly bleak as Romero's work or as stomach-churning as Cronenberg's, projects a truly upsetting image of revulsion and horror, and its scenes of bloodletting [...] are not merely gross, but genuinely disturbing.'

Sue Heal criticised the film for its overkill in terms of violence, noting that she 'staggered out [of the film] praying for a *Bambi* revival', but she also cautioned the reader not to dismiss Bigelow's work, commenting that the film 'may contain disturbing and often unnecessary pints of haemoglobin but *Near Dark* has a beautiful, ethereal quality.' Despite poor box office, the critics took note of this distinctive film and filmmaker, with Bigelow's direction and genre innovation as the stand-out stars. By associating Bigelow with recognised directors from Hollywood and independent horror circles, these critics framed her as an auteur and *Near Dark* as a revisionist horror film. These factors underpinned her inclusion in the Cineprobe season at MOMA and contributed to *Near Dark*'s cult status and Bigelow's standing as a significant new American filmmaker.

Extracted from *Near Dark* by Stacey Abbott (BFI Film Classics, 2020).

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