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Watch:  
The Helicopter  
Dreams of  
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## I Like to Watch: The Helicopter Dreams of Kathryn Bigelow and Deborah Stratman

Beatrice Loayza

A cop and a Wall Street stockbroker cozy up in a helicopter cockpit and gaze over the majestic Manhattan skyline. The camera is balletic as it pans over a mix of slender glass towers and chunky steel monoliths, each draped in a curtain of lights. At such a distance, the buildings become beautiful abstractions. As for the people, “They’re just little specks,” says Eugene (Ron Silver), the wild-eyed broker, to the captivated Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis), an NYPD rookie with a jawline so chiseled it could poke an eye out. “It’s like they don’t matter much,” he continues. “It’s just the two of us. We’re the only people in the world.”

It sounds romantic. And yet this scene is *not*. For behind Eugene’s dreamy platitudes and courtship big-swings is a terrible, violent sickness. “Just the two of us” means the so-called “specks” can go to hell. *Blue Steel* (1990), Kathryn Bigelow’s third feature, is an erotic thriller full of these internal frictions, a bloody spectacle cut with the era’s fraught sexual politics. Megan, our heroine, has taken on a career in law enforcement to allay her feelings of feminine inferiority—a desire to be dominant that Bigelow and her co-screenwriter Eric Red treat with both ambivalence and empathy. The somewhat clichéd justification for this? Megan’s father physically abuses her mother, and as a cop, Megan can finally bite back. Residing in the lap of consumption that is 1980s New York City, Megan represents the threat of the unmarried careerwoman, pushed to its most literal extreme. In the minds of misogynists, the figure of the lady-cop could very well be the epitome of a powerthirsty feminist, armed and dangerous and unhinged. Megan’s attraction to the job is much simpler. As a pretty woman, she’s used to being fucked with—but “no one fucks with a cop,” she explains.

The Reaganite myth of infinite accumulation and cocaine-fueled invincibility echoes this woman’s flawed aspirations. Yet the more grotesque parallel comes courtesy of the affluent Eugene, who looks at our supposedly empowered heroine and sees a kindred spirit with a comparably exaggerated sense of entitlement. At the beginning of the film, when Megan unloads a full cartridge into a grocery-store burglar, the broker practically orgasms as he watches the scene unfold, mistaking the fear in her eyes for a kind of sadistic indulgence. Unbeknownst to Megan, Eugene scurries off with the robber’s gun and commits a string of murders inspired by what he witnessed. Regular people, they don’t matter much to the gods—and Eugene considers himself and Megan among them.

Like the helicopter date in *Blue Steel*, the hypnotic hum of spinning rotor blades infiltrates Deborah Stratman’s *In Order Not to Be Here* (2002), conjuring a similarly dissociative state. Taking place in what appears to be the American suburbs, this half-hour short is an unsettling kind of vigil, an ode to the surveillance state, made of crunchy aerial police footage and eerie static shots of empty parking lots, fortress-like business fronts, and gated communities. In the final act, the camera looks down from a chopper and captures a man as he runs to evade its near-omniscient gaze. This seven-minute sequence presents the images in the negative, which depersonalizes the runner. He’s a mere metabolic organism; his slightly decelerated movements are uncanny; his hair emits a white glow, like a flashing point on a GPS tracker.

The helicopter, a macho vehicle prevalent in US action-adventure shows and movies of the eighties, exudes a sense of tireless vigor, an insect’s endurance. Pair this with the camera’s menacing, mechanical eye, and the act of watching assumes a horrific quality, a blend of clinical indifference and superhuman skill.

Funny that the dream of having it all would find expression in our most banal delusions of power. The obsession with safety and control—the paranoia we exhibit by clutching our guns and ring cameras—creates a new kind of nightmare. We peer through our rose-coloured glasses and assume the helicopter’s righteous point of view. As the title of Stratman’s film suggests, our comfort and satisfaction are premised on maintaining a distance, and yet our fears fester and grow at such an alienated perspective. Megan discovers Eugene’s true nature when, in a moment of passion, he beckons toward her gun and entreats her to point it straight at him—and give him that feral, fervid look that turns him on so. By the end of *Blue Steel*, Megan braces for the kill with the look of Eugene’s dreams. Her eyes, anxious and quivering during her confrontation with the robber, are now sharp and squinted as she pulls the trigger on her ex-lover. Unflinching, her gaze turns him into a piece of meat well before the bullets tear through him. Once the baddie is wasted and Megan, sitting catatonic, is pulled off the scene, one wonders how the world will appear to her.