



□ Barker, Martin:

'Loving and Hating *Straw Dogs*: The Meanings of Audience Responses to a Controversial Film'

Particip@tions Volume 2, Issue 2 (December 2005)

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Loving and Hating *Straw Dogs*: The Meanings of Audience Responses to a Controversial Film

Abstract

This essay evaluates a recent BBFC-sponsored study of responses to the film *Straw Dogs* (among others), and compares its methods and findings with a research project conducted in Aberystwyth. Through the presentation of the Aberystwyth research, a model of audience responses is proposed, and the film itself reconsidered. This essay is presented in two parts. The second part will be published in the next issue of *Participations*.

Key words:

Audience research; *Straw Dogs*; research methods; controversial films

In late 2002, Sam Peckinpah's (1971) *Straw Dogs* was finally released on DVD, after a long period of unavailability. The film was one among a number which aroused considerable controversy in the late 1960s to early 1970s, over their presentation of (in particular sexual) violence. Often discussed in books and magazines as an exemplar of a troublesome film, *Straw Dogs* has mainly been remembered for one scene, in which Amy, a central character in the film, is raped by two local men. It was not merely that the scene is long that made it such an issue, it was that Amy apparently eventually derives pleasure from the first (although definitely not the second) rape. Given the news that a new film of the book on which it was based, Gordon Williams' *The Siege of Trencher's Farm*, is soon to be released, this is perhaps an opportune moment to report on some research into actual audience responses.^[1]

The British Board of Film Classification, having originally permitted its cinema release uncut, long withheld a video classification, on the grounds that the film might conceivably offer to some viewers a justification of the 'male myth of rape' – that women who say 'no' secretly mean 'yes', and can enjoy rape as rough sex. This judgement derived much of its logic from the BBFC's attachment to a particular style of media research and theorisation which derives from the United States mass communication tradition. Their

argument depended on two key steps. First, an authoritative body must find a potential 'message' in the film. Second, they identify an implied audience for that message – in this case, an audience combining two characteristics: they are 'weak' in the sense that they are prone to being aroused and persuaded simultaneously by an act of viewing; but they are also strong, in the sense that they are potentially dangerous. The third, implied step – the hunt to locate that audience – is virtually the history of this tradition of research.

Within film studies, the judgements were not much kinder. *Straw Dogs* suffered on the one hand from being treated as a 'typical Peckinpah film'. Peckinpah was until recently commonly tagged as 'bloody Sam', the choreographer of violence. Here was the man who hymns the decline of the West in *The Wild Bunch*, and in the course of that celebrates male violence. On this kind of reading, *Straw Dogs* has been judged as a para-Western, the women within it marginalised and victimised. In the same period, feminist critics have vilified – and then dismissed – Peckinpah's work as a whole, and *Straw Dogs* in particular. *Straw Dogs* exemplifies something worse than the normal sexual objectification perceived in the 'male gaze'. Here, it is active male revenge. The savage male conquers the initially unwilling, ultimately giving woman, and initiates her into sex. Implicit claims about the audience work as strongly here, albeit with a different speculative-theoretical base, as in the policy positions of the BBFC. Carol Clover's now-classic book on the role of women in horror films discusses *Straw Dogs* several times in passing, her longest comment on it being the following: 'The rape in *Straw Dogs* is a classic in the "asking for it" tradition: Amy goes bra-less and flaunts her body in front of the local men, and when they undertake to rape her, her "no, no" turns to a "yes, yes" (so during the first man's turn, in any case). Director Peckinpah is quoted as saying "there are women, and there's pussy", and his Amy is "pure pussy".^[2] This highly tendentious dismissive account of the film, attaining rhetorical force from that one-liner from Peckinpah^[3], typifies one major strand of judgement. More recently, a series of re-evaluations of Peckinpah's work have sought in different ways to reclaim *Straw Dogs* from such criticisms. Based on a combination of critical biography and textual criticism, these books are part of a wholesale reconsideration of his work. Although, as will become evident later, I see great virtue in these analyses, I am approaching the film from another direction altogether – from that of that 'missing' audience.

Of course alongside, and in complex ways connecting with, 'mainstream' concerns about rape on screen, is a history of feminist arguments about rape. Taking its distinctively modern shape through the work of writers such as Susan Brownmiller, Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, rape became a central motif of the development of the theory of 'patriarchy'. 'Patriarchy' is a notoriously slippery term, denoting at times little more than a catalogue of men's unfair treatment of women, at other times becoming a full-blown social theory, in which 'Rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in state of fear' (Brownmiller, p. 14). Although the actions of particular men at the moment it happens, every rape is a re-

invigoration of an overall male domination – therefore all men benefit, and are complicit in the act. This radical feminist theory famously extended itself from the act to the representation in Robin Morgan's 'Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice'. I do not intend here to try to survey the range of subsequent debates within feminism over these claims. I note one point only before taking as a case-study one very recent and thoughtful exploration of the complexities of the issues in here. The point I raise is that in Brownmiller's foundational argument is that required move: that from the dominating male sex in general, to the individual man. This feeds into the debates about representations of sex, and perhaps especially rape, in and through an assumed identity: between a 'male spectatorial position', and the individual male viewer. The substantial debates within feminist film theory, following Laura Mulvey's ridiculously over-influential essay, have of course addressed the implications of Mulvey's claim that women enjoying mainstream films are being 'masochistic'. It is hard to think of an equivalent argument over actual male viewers.

A very recent and thoughtful book provides an opportunity for revisiting this topic. Tanya Horeck has re-examined the history of feminist debates about rape, and has argued very effectively that within all formulations within the debate is an element which has not been made fully explicit – that rape is always and necessarily hermeneutically defined, and therefore has to involve representation. It involves it in the sense that it always involves an act of story-telling, an account of the relations between the involved males and the females. It involves an imagining, in Brownmiller, of a primordial encounter. It involves real court-room and other battles over whose 'story' will be accorded truth-status, and indeed what will count as 'truth' in a situation of structured sexual inequality. Most importantly, it increasingly involves multiplying layers of circulating stories. In her book, Horeck explores (among other cases) the complexities of representation involved in the moves from the events in Big Dan's store in New Bedford in 1984, which led to the world's first live televised rape trial, and four years later to the release of the film *The Accused* – all of which turned on the issue of the relations between raping and watching rape: issues of 'spectatorship'. Was it a crime to watch a woman being raped? Could the men who watched, then be 'witnesses' to the truth of the events? If we then watched the film version of it, were we as viewers implicated in *their* watching? Why else did we need to see the rape at the end of the film? In another rich, complex investigation Horeck examines the 1999 Florida fraternity house case, in which a group of students filmed themselves having sex with a young woman over several hours. Her subsequent charge of rape led to the release and wide circulation of their film, and ultimately to its incorporation within a documentary *Raw Deal* which was broadcast on British Channel 4.

Without engaging in much theoretical exposition, Horeck's book is nonetheless heavily dependent on – and pretty much assumes the validity of – psychoanalytic approaches, as of course does so much feminist work on textuality. Here, this shows particularly in two ways: first, in her frequent turn to the concepts of 'spectatorship', and 'voyeurism'. Horeck insistently, and rightly, asks the question: what does it mean to watch a rape? (Actually, she does also consider the issues in *reading about* rape, but like many other

theorists tends to regard to the act of viewing as somehow automatically special, and specially voyeuristic.) What I find interesting and curious in her generally excellent analysis, is that this question remains essentially rhetorical. It is something to be posed, and if answered at all, posed as a *textual* question, something to be answered by consideration of the positioning devices of the film, or whatever. At the end of her discussion of *The Accused*, Horeck writes:

Moving away from a generalized consideration of the film's depiction of rape as either 'positive' or 'negative', I have examined how its representation of sexual violence, as well as the commentaries on it, bring to light cultural unease concerning gender, race and ethnicity. The representation of rape continues to be one of the most highly charged issues in contemporary cinema. And while popular images of rape will undoubtedly continue to be decried for sensationalism and exploitation, what needs to be explored further is how these images open up wider questions about changing viewpoints on the relationship between audience and film. (p. 115)

These would be wise words if they did at least recognise the importance of doing *actual audience research*. In fact, Horeck stays firmly on the 'safe' terrain of talk about 'the spectator' and 'his' voyeurism – thus once more eliding the gap between the putative 'male' interest in rape, and actual men. I want to operate in this gap – and I want to do so provocatively by, precisely, considering what it means for a man to *enjoy* watching a film which includes rape.

This essay attempts a wide reconsideration of *Straw Dogs*, through a number of distinct but interrelated stages. I first contrast two recent pieces of research into audience responses to *Straw Dogs*: the first of which was carried out at the behest of the British Board of Film Classification; the second conducted by myself at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The latter deployed a methodology for investigating audience responses which, I argue, can be the basis of a distinctive re-examination of the film itself. From the findings of this audience research, I look at the film itself, drawing first on an approach proposed some years ago, in a different context, by John O Thompson.

How this study came to be

In late 2002, an opportunity arose to conduct a piece of research on audience responses to *Straw Dogs*, using concepts and methods deriving from an approach which I have been developing and testing for a number of years. This opportunity arose entirely by accident. Early on in our first year film course at Aberystwyth (which has just over 300 students) we screened *A Clockwork Orange*. This was partly in order to provoke a discussion around issues of morality on screen, and censorship, and partly to lay the basis for a year-long research project that we had proposed to our field's national Learning and Teaching Subject Centre. The aim of this was to carry out a piece of action

research on how students cope with the relations between vernacular and academic understandings of film. The intention had been to ask them to watch Kubrick's film twice – once just to garner their personal reactions, a second time guiding them into how academics have analysed and debated the film.^[4] However, we discovered that Film Four were due to screen it the same week as our intended second screening. Because of this, I asked the students to vote whether they would rather watch it the second time (knowing the brief) or if they would like to watch instead another film which has often been discussed in connection with *A Clockwork Orange*. *Straw Dogs*, I explained, had just been re-released after a long period in which it had been banned, and could provide an interesting further case for us to discuss. A class vote showed an overwhelming preference for watching *Straw Dogs*, with under 10 preferring to watch Kubrick's film again. I closed this session by warning that some people might find *Straw Dogs* difficult to watch (without specifying any particular reason), therefore making clear that attendance was entirely optional.

Although no count was taken, a very large number – probably in excess of 250 – attended the screening. I said very little by way of introduction, except to give a date to the film. I started the film, then left, as normal. However, it happened that I returned to the screening theatre some twenty minutes before the film's end, to find the room in uproar, with large numbers of people shouting out at the screen, occasionally laughing, sometimes yelling in shock. The reactions so fascinated me, that I decided to take a chance on telling them, as soon as the film ended, that I would like to hear their reactions to the film. I had realised, as I stood watching their reactions to the last few minutes of the film, that it would take very little to turn the questionnaire which we had just used with *A Clockwork Orange* to the purposes of *Straw Dogs*. However, having thought about the intensity of the reactions I observed, I chose to alter some questions to emphasise their potentially difficult and strictly personal character. Within a few hours I had emailed the group, with the questionnaire attached, asking if they would be willing to complete and return it via email, making clear that unlike the earlier questionnaire this was not part of their course, and guaranteeing that all responses would be immediately anonymised.

Ultimately, over a period of just over a week, exactly 60 responses came in^[5] – not a huge number, but enough to enable an exploration using a research methodology which I have been developing for some time.

It is not often that a chance arises to compare directly what kinds of knowledge and understanding two contrasting methodologies can deliver. In this case, it has happily arisen from a serendipitous coincidence. At the exact point when I was analysing the outcomes of my opportunistic research, I received a copy of the findings of a BBFC-funded project which also explores audience responses to *Straw Dogs*. From time to time, the BBFC commissions research to provide a basis for its judgements. On this occasion, it asked the Communications Research Group (headed by psychologist Guy Cumberbatch) to research the ways in which people wish the 'line drawn' for sexual violence on screen. Cumberbatch is a significant figure in this kind of research. A major

critic-from-within of psychological work on 'media effects'; he nonetheless shares a good deal of their methodological and epistemological assumptions. Cumberbatch's research is important enough, in my view, to warrant serious attention. Because of the comparison with my own study of audience responses, and because it can be a basis for observing a series of both substantive methodological issues, I have to examine it at considerable length.

The BBFC/CRG Research

The CRG's research^[6] is a very good example of the kind of research most commonly undertaken into media audiences. It is good, in the sense that it is very well done, but also in the sense that it thereby displays the inherent problems in this kind of work.^[7] Shaped by the need of the BBFC to be able to say how far it is 'mandated' by public opinion to continue regulating the availability of sexually explicit content on screen, the research sets out to discover the public's view on 'acceptable limits' [2002: 1]. We will see in a moment that there is a strange paradox within this goal, which infects the research in significant ways. The conclusions it offers fit with striking convenience with the general tendency of current BBFC thinking. The report concludes that people generally tolerate screened sexual violence 'so long as it was justified in the story-line and it was "in context"' [2002: 2], but at the same time there was widespread concern over who might get to see such videos, and a belief – which they report to have been strengthened as a result of taking part in the research – in the importance of restricting under-18s from seeing them. I am not interested in doing some 'hatchet job' on the research – the opposite. I hope to show that we can learn a great deal more by taking it seriously and seeing its qualities as research. That way, a number of issues emerge into clear view which allow us to see why this *kind* of research is doomed to missing the point.

Cumberbatch reports first on a survey of video renters, undertaken at 15 outlets and using a structured questionnaire. A total of 277 people (55:45 men to women) were classified by age, sex, frequency of video viewing, and by their attitudes to the current levels of control over film content either on video or in broadcast media. From this, a smaller sample of 50 was selected, with a deliberate slight skew in order to achieve a better gender balance, whom they interviewed by telephone. This was followed by a less-clearly explained selection of a few people to discuss the issues more fully in focus groups. Cumberbatch stresses that the people they studied are not entirely 'representative' of national opinion on issues such as sexual violence on screen. Wider research has shown that those who go to the cinema and rent videos tend to the 'liberal' end of the public opinion spectrum. From a quantitative analysis of the survey, some preliminary findings and relationships emerge – for instance, the assertion that 'the overwhelming support (by 75%) to protect children is impressive' [2002: 8].

The section on the survey closes by pointing to a series of 'promising attitude predictors regarding regulation and the right to see graphic material' [2002: 18]. These cluster around people's strength of interest in seeing the film-types for which they indicate a preference. With the one exception of 'Story-led' films (which reversed the trend in all other categories, and looks like it holds a high proportion of older respondents who tended to be more conservative), those with high interest in their preferred category of films, or indeed in knowing about the research's target range of films, veered quite strongly towards the 'right to see' position. What exactly this means, and how we might draw any conclusions from these results, is not at all clear.

Other interpretative work on the survey bears the same difficulties, for all that the findings look promising. For instance, the survey showed that 'heavy' film viewers and video renters were more likely to agree that adults have the right to see graphic portrayals of sexual violence; while in the other direction, viewers with strong religious views tended to assert that controls are currently too weak. These are hardly surprising findings, and of course beg interpretation. Are 'heavy viewers' numbed, or do they just know their films better? Are religious people saved by their moral frameworks, or are they more prone to want to determine the moral choices of others? On these, of course, such research cannot help. But there are dangers when the categories used seem to imply judgements. For instance, what is the difference between being a 'heavy', and being a 'frequent', or an 'experienced', film viewer? And what sly implications may accompany calling people 'risky' (as against, say, 'curious' or 'experimental') viewers because they will sometimes rent videos about whose content they know nothing? Albeit in small and deniable ways, judgements are implied by these category-names. The fact that these are inherited categories, widely used in for instance George Gerbner's 'cultivation analysis' research, does not relieve the problem; it merely indicates its depth.^[8] A small related problem arises from their account of the ethical dimensions of the research. They announce, with apparent pride, that they closed the whole research process by using professional counsellors to check whether any involved in the latter stages had been at all 'scarred' by participating. This is interesting – not wrong in itself, but it still presumes that the expected mode of effect is one of harm, as against, for instance, feeling better able to perform as citizens, or having enjoyed the opportunity to participate, or having discovered dimensions of film which had previously been closed to them, or etc. In such small pre-categorisations are the first indications of bias to be found.

The key research stage comes after the survey, when those 50 people representing a range from 'liberal' to 'conservative' were asked to view, on their own, three from among a series of films which the BBFC have found problematic: *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *I Spit On Your Grave* (1979), *Death Wish II* (1982), and *Baise Moi* (2000). Once the films had been viewed, people were telephoned and asked to give their responses to a checklist of questions about these films. The report presents the percentages of participants who take up different positions (eg, of *Straw Dogs* the proportions who believed that 'the film gives the message that

women might enjoy being raped'), and in the subsequent analysis cross-matches these in a variety of ways, often pointing up puzzles and apparent paradoxes among these results

It is important to point to some of the striking findings offered. The first half of the report offers a series of quantitative cross-tabulations of survey responses (for instance, the relations between film preferences, and attitudes to the right to see sexually violent materials). And some interesting findings do without question emerge – for instance, the strong 'predictive' relationship between high interest in seeing films within one's preference categories, and belief in adults' right to watch sexually violent materials if they choose to. Again, with the telephone interviews, the report presents the results of simple statistical analysis of responses. These are coupled with sample quotes illustrating the various positions adopted. What is striking is the report's attitude to some of these findings. While the support for protection of children is called 'impressive', as we have seen, the cases where results point in other, more complicated, directions are repeatedly called 'intriguing' or more often 'puzzling'.^[9] These 'puzzles' arise when the research appears to display *inconsistencies* or *contradictions* within people's thinking. For instance, despite strong support for the propositions that *Straw Dogs* gives messages 'that women might enjoy being raped', 'that when a woman says no to sex she might really mean yes', and 'that women like being knocked around a bit during sex', still, 77% believed that the film ought to be released uncut as an '18' on video (a figure curiously *not* labelled 'impressive' by Cumberbatch).

Let us reflect on what is happening here. The research is evidently working with a model which presumes that its respondents hold a series of equally-grounded 'opinions', and whose responses therefore *ought* to be consistent. This is the only ground on which it makes sense even to note apparent inconsistencies. The fact that at key points they are *not* so consistent poses a problem. Where to go next? One way would be to deny there is a problem in the first place, and see people's proffering of 'opinions' as essentially context-dependent. But that would undo the entire research programme to which CRG belongs, for it would see 'opinions' as research artefacts. A related response would be to enquire into the *status* of the several inconsistent assertions, to find out what they *mean* to people, and whether *they* seem them as inconsistent. Again, however, that way lies a different research regime. It is hardly surprising that Cumberbatch takes neither of these routes. In fact, *overtly*, he takes no route at all – appearing simply to note the inconsistencies, and leave them 'dangling'. But right at the end of the report comes an unargued 'solution', which turns apparent contradictions into marks of audience 'maturity' on the issues. Offering the overall conclusions to the research, Cumberbatch writes: 'A number of participants had said that they did not think there were any general features (such as famous director, art house) which would normally influence their judgements about a film's acceptability. Their sound advice was that decisions could only be made on a film-by-film basis. At first sight, this seemed to be so true of most members of the viewing sample that the variety of classification recommendations seemed to swamp the expected individual differences. Fortunately, the macro analysis of all of the viewing judgements revealed a far more consistent pattern where many of the expected

differences between groups emerged quite clearly. However, equally important was the *flexibility shown by individuals in their judgements about individual films. These demonstrate that few participants could be accused of following their beliefs to the point of prejudice*' [2002: 64 – my emphasis, MB]. Suddenly, what had begun as puzzling inconsistencies have become celebrated as flexibility and lack of dogmatism.

These points do matter. At several points during the presentation of the research, Cumberbatch offers readily quotable 'conclusions'. For instance, early on, he cites people's responses on the amount of regulation there is, and should be, for sex, violence, and sexual violence on screen. Cumberbatch comments on the finding that the last was seen differently by many: 'Evidently the mandate for more liberal policies over the portrayal of sex is not sustained for sexual violence'. The problems with the lurch to a mini-conclusion ought to be obvious: what *counts* as 'sexual violence' has not been addressed. It has yet to be established that any of these are coherent categories. And of course a great deal of the remainder of the research, if taken seriously, proceeds to undo just those assumptions. For if anything is meant by the finding that people tend to measure the appropriateness of acts *against their context of showing*, at the very least what we have here is an undoing of the cohesion of that category 'sexual violence'. What that high figure for regulation of 'sexual violence' almost certainly shows, is that *more people don't like the idea of appearing to consent to unbridled scenes of assault and rape on screen*. Therefore, almost certainly with fewer empirical examples to hand, many have played safe and criticised it. But even to admit that possibility is to undo the security of such 'mandates'.

Let's return to that notion that people are simply being asked their 'opinions'. In the telephone interviews, those who had viewed *Straw Dogs* were asked their reactions to the following propositions: 'The film gives the message that women might enjoy being raped'; 'The film gives the message that when a woman says no to sex she might really mean yes'; and 'The film gives the message that women like being knocked around a bit during sex'. My problem here is not that these are leading questions. It is that they can only be answered at all if one has taken up a very peculiar, indeed very 'British' orientation to this or any other film. To watch a film for its 'messages' is to watch in a very peculiar way. It is to the credit of the research that it does note the tensions that result. On each of the three questions, responses were sharply divided, with 60% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the second. Yet, as they themselves have noted, 77% felt it should be released on video, either uncut or with minor cuts.

In fact, the report does present some further materials which, looked at closely, run sharply contrary to the emphasis on 'messages'. Right at the end of the report, Cumberbatch reproduces a substantial chunk of the discussion from one of the two focus groups, which they held with the intention of gathering people of *opposite* tendencies in the hope that this might bring into the open and accentuate the positions which are generating disagreements. Cumberbatch reports that almost the opposite happened – discussants veered towards a point of agreement. The section quoted centred on a

discussion of *Straw Dogs*, which interested the research just because responses were so paradoxically opposite to what they might have expected. Here is a film which, on the BBFC's account, is particularly problematic, because of the scene in which Amy is raped and appears to respond with pleasure. The BBFC, operating within this 'find-the-message' framework, found plenty. But people discussing it didn't seem to want at all to talk in these terms. What interested them was to try to make sense of Amy's motivation, her relationship with Charlie, the man who rapes her, and how this scene contributes to our understanding of them.

What the CRG's methodology prevents them from seeing, is that here in this conversation is a *practical working example* of the ways in which people work in and through a 'context'; and that this very process cuts against looking for and finding 'messages'. These two belong to different discursive worlds. The first is an illustration of an everyday process of making meaning from a film. The second is an application of an external way of worrying about films, which frequently collides with people's vernacular talents for making sense.

As I've already said, I believe this research remains valuable, and am not wanting to dismiss it. But I am concerned at a number of levels with what it *doesn't* and *cannot* do – because the way its questions are posed, and the way its methodology is framed, actively discount other possibilities. And these possibilities are at the heart of the research which I have undertaken. I clearly have, therefore, to mount a critique of the self-imposed limits of this research.

The problems start at the outset. There is a singular oddity in the way in which the research question is posed, indeed in its very conception. What exactly do the BBFC hope to learn through this? The grounds on which they may make their judgements are two: taste and decency; and probable harm. These must be held separate, because they are entirely different *kinds* of proposition. The first depends upon good accounting with 'public opinion'. The second depends upon expert evidence.^[10] It is absolutely of no relevance if a large number of people believe, or indeed don't believe, that there is harm. Yet the research is framed around propositions that wholly conflates the two. And those propositions take us back to the problem we have already encountered – of seeing films as 'vehicles for messages'. Framing the report at the beginning, Cumberbatch reports that the BBFC 'has always maintained a strict policy on the portrayal of rape and sexual violence, most often insisting on cuts particularly to acts considered by their treatment to eroticise or endorse sexual assault' [2002: 3]. What would it mean to do research to check whether they had a mandate to continue this policy? This is to reach to the core of the issues here. Are the BBFC's methods for determining such eroticisation or endorsement *relevant* to the ways in which lay viewers of the films make meaning, gain enjoyment and understanding from such films? To find that out, the research would *have* to put at risk the very notion of 'messages'. Instead, this research spins uneasily between being a public opinion poll (do large numbers agree generally with the policy of

the BBFC? If they do, OK) and research into how people perceive and understand films containing sexual violence.

There is no way out of this conundrum without radically altering the nature of the research. It is to mapping and then illustrating an alternative that I now turn.

Methodological issues

Cumberbatch emphasises that while this is qualitative research, it has virtues that much of such research lacks: 'Most qualitative research does not show how representative the quoted views are and, indeed, may give undue weight to the most articulate voices' [2002: 23]. This is an important criticism, and one that others have made in different ways (see for instance Deacon et al.'s criticism that qualitative media researchers often embed para-quantitative claims in their accounts ('some', 'a good many', 'very few', etc), without going through the tests normally applied to quantitative research). But the criticism turns on what kinds of question we may want to answer, and what kinds of knowledge we may want to gain. The problem, I would argue, is not that qualitative researchers do not provide proper quantitative validation of their materials, but that they have not in general developed an *alternative* approach within which it becomes proper to choose for particular attention certain responses, and where there are checkable procedures for so choosing. In the absence of that, Cumberbatch's criticism can look strong.

But if that is so, then in the reverse direction it is appropriate to comment on problems in the analytic framework which Cumberbatch himself uses. Or rather, the *absence* of a clear analytic framework for listening to people's talk. He does, it is true, helpfully group all the elements of some responses – notably, all the occasions on which people uses one cluster of terms: 'gratuitous', 'pointless', and 'unnecessary'. But while this is interesting, it takes us very little further in understanding what people are *doing* when they use such words, or what is the *status* of such uses. A discourse analytic approach would have taken note of the ways in which terms like 'gratuitous' operate as conversation-closures. They do not attribute any particular quality to a film – they remove it from analytic attention.

I've said that Cumberbatch has no declared analytic framework for listening to how people talk. That is only partly true. There is one small, semi-detached indication of a methodology which is in fact quite troublesome. In his initial quotes of people's comments on the listed films, he introduces a distinction between 'restricted' and 'elaborated codes'. Here is his explanation of this:

Many of the film descriptions were quite clinical, with little evidence of abstraction or affective responses. In order to summarise the patterns, these accounts were classified in terms of the kind of language used: as essentially restricted code or essentially elaborated code. Those judged to

involve essentially restricted code language (37% of all descriptions) used basic vocabulary and mainly concrete descriptions (such as, '*and they went out, and they killed her*'). Those considered to show distinctively elaborated code (12% of all descriptions) tended to use more complex vocabulary, conceptual synthesis and evidence of abstraction. The remainder (50% of all descriptions) were not easily categorised and are referred to as 'average'. [2002: 24]

Why is this troublesome? In the actual research, little further use than this simple classification is made of these terms. Its effects, then, if any, are primarily *negative* – using this system forestalls others being used. But actually I think a little more is at work here than is at first evident. For a start, this distinction has a clear history, deriving from the highly controversial work of Basil Bernstein. Bernstein uses these terms to mark what he claimed was a distinction between two class-based styles of speech: a working class mode of speech which was essentially descriptive, and which limited the thought of its users to the concrete situation; and a middle class mode of speech which transcended the concrete and sustained abstract thought.

But there is a second problem, perhaps more immediately germane to the application of this distinction to responses to films. In calling descriptions of the film 'restricted', Cumberbatch is denying the possibility that the way in which a film is described may suggest, presume or directly indicate the nature of character motivations – and that this may be how, for those most involved in a film, meaning is made. By treating the more distanced judgemental responses as 'elaborated', with the hint of greater achievement that this carries with it, once again Cumberbatch is unwittingly validating an approach that goes 'looking for messages'. Simple involvement in the film, with responses that therefore simply adhere to the film's unfolding narrative, is not for his research worth much consideration.

The Aberystwyth Study

It is, for me. I have become interested precisely in how we may get inside the ways in which people, ordinarily, arrive at understandings and judgements on a film – of whatever kind.^[11] How *they* therefore find 'messages', if they do. Or indeed other modes of making a film meaningful to themselves.

The methodology I now use calls for a number of distinct stages (although in practice they may not be undertaken absolutely sequentially). The aim ultimately is to answer this set of questions:

1. to identify the interpretative 'moves' that different audience members deploy to generate a working understanding of a film, and how (far) these cohere into an overall account of the film – this is what I mean by the term 'viewing strategy';

2. to identify the range of such viewing strategies, with which different people approach and seek to engage with the film;
3. to identify the costs and benefits of each, upon encountering the film – what elements of the film become visible and salient, and what pleasures and understandings vs. frustrations and disappointments result from each kind of encounter;
4. to find out how far, and in what ways, different viewing strategies are mutually aware, and take account of each other;
5. from these, to what extent is it possible to identify and itemise the *conditions necessary for a wholeheartedly positive participation* in the film?

A large amount of conceptual work underpins these questions, some of which has been elaborated in previous work.^[12]

The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) first invited people to allocate their responses along two key dimensions (Enjoyment, and Admiration, of the film), but in each case inviting them to explain what they mean and intend by this self-allocation. This was followed by a series of open-ended questions, asking first what they knew about the film, how they might summarise it, and how they had personally felt about two (to me, key) parts of the film – the rape scene, and the ending. There followed an open question inviting them to say anything else that they felt was particularly important about the film that explained their reaction to it. Finally, there was a request for some minimal personal information (sex, age-bracket, the kind of area they had grown up in, and whether they had studied film before now). The self-allocation allowed me to group their responses, and thence to see to what extent common kinds of response unite a category; thence again to compare categories. The aim is to see how far it is possible to glean a sense of the modes of participation and the strategies of viewing that people adopt, and how these contribute to their eventual judgements on the film.

The requested demographic information is identical with what we sought for *A Clockwork Orange*. It was kept minimal, partly because it is not the centre of interest of this research, partly because I wanted to keep the questionnaire short and light. In one way, I was mainly interested in the sex of respondents, given the nature of the film. But I didn't want to ask only about that, not least since that might seem to presume that this is seen to be the only ground of discrimination of responses. But actually, given the themes and setting of *Straw Dogs*, the request for information on where people grew up (city, suburb, small town, or countryside) *might* have been very interesting. In the event, it hardly was. Finally, students were asked to compare *Straw Dogs* with *A Clockwork Orange*, and to say, on a simplified scale, how they had classified their own responses to the latter.

Among the 59 analysable responses, 36 were from men, 23 from women.

Overwhelmingly, the respondents were 17-21 (just 5 were in other age groups). The

figures for area of origin were: City = 11; Suburb = 13; Small town = 28; Countryside = 7 (a preponderance which fitted with our general sense of our recruitment profile). Previous experience of studying film produced 22 positives, 37 negatives. Asked their self-allocations for *A Clockwork Orange*, 41 had Enjoyed & Admired; 11 had Not Enjoyed but Admired; 3 had Enjoyed but not Admired; and 4 had neither Enjoyed nor Admired – an overall more positive rating than for *Straw Dogs*, as we will see.

Table 1 (below) shows the results of looking at self-allocations:

<p>Enjoy/Admire</p> <p>Total: 27</p> <p>Sex: M=22, F=5</p> <p>Ci=5, Sub=3, To=15, Co=4</p> <p>Previous film study: 10 / 17</p>	<p>Enjoy/Neutral</p> <p>Total: 4</p> <p>Sex: M=4, F=0</p> <p>Ci=2, Sub=1, To=1, Co=0</p> <p>Previous film study: 3 / 1</p>	<p>Enjoy/Not Admire</p> <p>Total: 2</p> <p>Sex: M=2, F=0</p> <p>Ci=0, Sub=2, To=0, Co=0</p> <p>Previous film study: 1 / 1</p>
<p>Neutral/Admire</p> <p>Total: 9</p> <p>Sex: M=2, F=7</p> <p>Ci=1, Sub=1, To=6; Co=1</p> <p>Previous film study: 2 / 7</p>	<p>Neutral/Neutral</p> <p>Total: 1</p> <p>Sex: M=0, F=1</p> <p>Ci=0, Sub=0, To=1, Co=0</p> <p>Previous film study: 0 / 1</p>	<p>Neutral/Not Admire</p> <p>Total: 1</p> <p>Sex: M=0, F=1</p> <p>Ci=0, Sub=0, To=1, Co=0</p> <p>Previous film study: 1 / 0</p>
<p>Not Enjoy/Admire</p> <p>Total: 3</p> <p>Sex: M=2, F=1</p> <p>Ci=1, Sub=2, To=0, Co=0</p> <p>Previous film study: 2 / 1</p>	<p>Not Enjoy/Neutral</p> <p>Total: 1</p> <p>Sex: M=0, F=1</p> <p>Ci=0, Sub=0, To=1, Co=0</p> <p>Previous film study: 1 / 0</p>	<p>Not Enjoy/Not Admire</p> <p>Total: 11</p> <p>Sex: M=2, F=9</p> <p>Ci=2, Sub=4, To=3, Co=2</p> <p>Previous film study: 2 / 9</p>

The overall figures are not large, and become smaller, even miniscule, with each subdivision, and must therefore be treated cautiously. They can, nonetheless, function indicatively as a ground for investigating the more discursive responses. The feature instantly commanding attention is the differential sex distribution. Men predominantly

Enjoyed and Admired the film, women predominantly rejected the film on both grounds. But there are exceptions in both directions. And just as interestingly, there is a preponderance of women (2/7) in the Neutral/Admire category – and of course since the overall number of women was smaller, that 7 constitutes over 30% of the group's responses. These three positions between them comprise just on 80% of responses.

On the other dimensions, while 37% overall had previously followed a film course of any kind, and in the most positive categories this proportion was exactly matched, in some others (albeit with very small numbers) the proportions vary considerably: perhaps most suggestively only 22% of the most negative (and interestingly 8 out of 9 (89%) of the women) had studied film before.

These numerical considerations can take us no further than some interesting questions to explore, as we consider people's expanded qualitative responses.

Illustrating the method

Let me begin by examining just one questionnaire – one which can nicely show up the difference between my methodology and that of the CRG – where, if you recall, the issue of 'consistency' was a considerable problem. **19**, a male 17-21, Enjoyed and Admired the film. He calls the film "amazing in its approach to the issues which appear within" it. He also sees it as addressing a "plethora of issues". Yet, responding to the question about the rape, he says that "the scene made me feel sickened and disgusted". We can respond to this in several ways. We could say that he is being self-contradictory, or that each answer must be contextually explained. This is not the approach favoured here. Rather, I seek to explore how, through other things that he says, we might see that to him these are *not* self-contradictory – and thus reveal interpretative processes at work which resolve and make sense of this apparent shift.

The first thing that would be noted on this approach is that **19** commits himself to enjoying something that, in his own twice-repeated terms, is "macabre, sinister, and bizarre". For him this works because he sees the film as working at different levels: a plot, and a "suggestive", therefore "sub-plot" level. He displays his view of the sub-plot, which he calls "explicit" (presumably implying that what goes on there is not difficult to find) at several points. First, "the film deals with man's ultimate instinct, that of a fight for survival". This explains David's ultimate battle with the gang. Then there is "vigilantism" – and **19** reveals a move in his thinking when he points out that the gang hunting Henry after the young girl goes missing do not in fact know that he has killed her. This hints that he sees the vigilantism as denied any possible justification by the film.

His second statement of the sub-plot comes within his response to the question: what is the film *about* to you? "I would say that the film is about the complexities of life and the nastiness of issues which have to be faced during life. How these horrific actions have far-reaching consequences which taint every aspect of everyday life. The film makes us

question our own actions and roots its ideas within us, and we think about the film's societal issues again and again." The film, then, is satisfying to him because it displays "retributive justice", and because the ending "clearly ties up all of the issues contained within the film" (and "his wife killing the first rapist is the ultimate act of retributive justice"). This is striking, since it means that **19** has interpreted the 'ending' of the film, about which he was asked and which he says is "of paramount importance", to mean David and Amy's defence of their house, ending in the gang's deaths. The potentially ambiguous final detail, of David leaving Amy to drive Henry home, then both of them realising that they 'don't know the way home' – a detail that to other viewers was very important – drops out of account. This is not to imply that he didn't notice or recall it, its salience is sufficiently low that he discounts it for the larger themes that he has found "amazing".

How does this construction of an overall thematic sub-plot affect other aspects of his relations with the film? The ending was so important to **19** because, in his own words, it not only has David win out over the gang, but as an act of retributive justice it "freed Amy from her burdens of the gang-rape and whatever the assailants had done to her in the past". This is a key move, and reveals something subtle but vital to his whole orientation to the film: the time-signature of his viewing. Immediately after his recognition that the rape scene left him sickened and disgusted, **19** continued: "The scene was there to show the power struggle between men and women and how in 1970s society the man invariably overcame the woman. The sexual inequality which existed, with the 1970s the sexual revolution was rife. The rape is the principle of male domination ... The way the scene was put to us was crucial as it shows the dark and degrading nature of rape." What is so striking to me is the recognition, repeated elsewhere in his answers, that this is a 1970s film dealing with what he perceives to be 1970s issues – which by implication have at least in part changed. This film embodies for him a narrative of that struggle. Being sickened and disgusted, and coming out the other end of it, is one way of assuring himself that he is not as the men in the film. Hence his comment that the film "makes us question our own actions". This can be enjoyable, admirable, and amazing because the film has done it so well, and because the film shows us a past he has at least to some extent in himself transcended.

The last and perhaps most telling component of this response to the film is his view of Amy herself. Explaining his admiration for the film, and following his remarks about the "instinct for survival", **19** remarks: "The relationship between Dustin Hoffman and his wife could be viewed as being incestuous, as Dustin Hoffman treats his wife in some instances like his daughter". It's not possible to be entirely clear where he is going with this remark, since he does not explicitly return to it. But it does suggest two things: first, that since this is one of his plethora of admirable issues, he has no problem with the notion that the film should deal in sexual ambiguities; second, that Amy's character in the film is considerably refracted through David/Hoffman's responses to her. And there are suggestions elsewhere that for him seeing and knowing her experiences of the rape provides a means to resolve things in his *own* head. So, in an interesting grammatical

shift, he writes, of the repeated flashbacks that Amy experiences after the rape, that these “shows us how such acts as molestation can have a paralysing effect on everyday life and it brings us more in tune with such issues, even if the viewer has had no personal experience of such an event”. As a man, he is unlikely to experience rape, and rape of a woman – as part of male domination – is clearly something he can only imagine. Seeing her survive it *educates* him – and that to him is amazing.

What I hope I am showing is that, in the case of someone to whom the experience of watching *Straw Dogs* was remarkable and important, we can trace a series of significant interpretative moves. Some things do not get noticed, or if noticed, are of less account – Amy’s apparent sexual pleasure in the first rape is counted out, as was the ambiguous ending, because **19** has no doubt that she did suffer massively from the rape – it hung its painful reminders in her everyday life, irrespective of her immediate reactions. The film thus takes on a wholeness where even the time-modality of watching it is important to the way he gains pleasure and understanding from it.

19’s enjoyment thus comes from operating on the film at two levels – the events *are* vital, but just because they embody those sub-plots that he perceives. The characters are *simultaneously* individuals with complexities and symbols. The film can speak to him *now* because precisely it encapsulates a struggle whose history is what has made him what he is.

All this has of course to be tentative, but it can become the more convincing, the more we find the same kinds of interpretative move, with the same outcomes, made by others. In some respects, in fact, **19** remains in my body of evidence unusual. His ‘override’ of Amy’s pleasure in the first rape, and of the very end of the film, remains his – as does, indeed, that way of making use of the date of the film.

Comparing two responses

Compare next two by-chance-contiguous responses, from questionnaires **13** and **14** – both from males, aged 17-21. **13** nicely illustrates a slightly withdrawn response, whose Enjoyment of the film was only ‘in parts’ from a film described as ‘a slow paced thriller with an exciting climax’. Expanding on this summary, **13** described ‘an excruciatingly slow first hour’, followed by a conclusion that was ‘extremely predictable’ but ‘with exciting moments’. Important in here is the ready placement of *Straw Dogs* in a generic category (thriller), whilst splitting it into two halves. There is an apparent paradox in his responses, which can be resolved only if we see this genre-placement as an operative device in his overall reactions. His account of the ending of the film (which he interprets to mean the whole of siege) illuminates his viewing strategy. David becomes incomprehensible to **13**: ‘I thought it was quite far-fetched and I couldn’t comprehend why Hoffman’s character didn’t just open the door and let the gang take the man away. It was a very tense last 20 mins though and certainly the best section of the film’. Here the

tension is action-led – and therefore it is at this level that he finds it ‘predictable’ but still exciting. Clearly, though, David’s *decision* was *not* predictable to him. But his primarily filmic orientation to *Straw Dogs* allows him to discount this, and attend to the action. **13**’s biggest problem with watching turned out, as a result, to be other people at the screening – he became ‘utterly disturbed’ at other people clapping and cheering at Charlie’s death in the man-trap. He was ‘disgusted’ at how ‘sick’ they were. This to him marked a kind of involvement in the film which he was not willing to consider.

The contrast with **14** is very marked. To him, the film was a ‘slow-burning film’ that came to a ‘satisfying climax of good vs evil’ – straightaway, a moral engagement with its narrative. **14**’s language for describing it is unusual – he calls it ‘a genuinely warm ... tale’ of a ‘couple’s fight against forces that are working against them’. In a telling expression of his admiration, he calls it ‘compulsive viewing with the plot, characters and general story being almost symbols of the darker side of human nature but with an emotional compassion that is rare’. The rape, he agrees, was the most crucial scene – because it ‘looks at her as a character in a more personal way’. Note: it is not simply the *event* of the rape, it is what it reveals about Amy. It almost completes her as a character: ‘Personally I responded to it with a kind of curious nature rather than one of shock or disbelief as you already knew that there was something there between the rapist and the victim’. Note the importance of back-story in this, and the inquiry this allows into her complex motives and responses. **14** rounds this off by commenting that this whole scene was ‘an important turning point’ – because she doesn’t tell David about the rape. Now, in strict narrative terms, this withholding has no consequences – David’s violence, his defence of the farm and of Henry is conducted in the absence of any knowledge that his wife has been raped. But seen in terms of the ways their characters contain and embody symbolic meanings, and our relations to her, Amy’s failure/refusal to tell David of the rape has great importance.

The contrast between these two viewing strategies, along with the singular response of **19**, enable us to note a number of things, on some of which we should need no reminding:

1. that audiences, in the act of arriving at their *judgements* on a film, are selecting and constructing *accounts* of what goes on in the film (explaining events to themselves (and to us), understanding characters and their motivations, seeing patterns and overall narrative relationships, among others) – here, **14**’s enjoyment of the film is inseparable from his location of a second layer of meanings in the film, which help to characterise both the film and his own relationship to what it shows, while **13**’s more marginal pleasure and engagement comes from his applying to it the standards and criteria of more mainstream film-making;
2. this should in return remind us of the simple inadequacy of terms like ‘entertainment’ and ‘escapism’ – not that they can never apply: rather, they describe *very particular* kinds of engagement with a film, but ones with their own patterns and consequences;

3. that people's engagements in a film work in association with their moral convictions – but not just as to whether acts are right or wrong: much more complexly than that, we can see how **19**'s judgements depend in part on his sense of *viewing a narrative from a particular past* and positioning his own moral beliefs as an outcome of this history. Less obviously, and in the opposite direction, both **13** and **14** place the film *in their present* – one, to judge it only partially effective *by today's cinematic standards*, the other to judge it by another of today's standards, the standard of 'wanting to be young again' – this, he can understand, and by that measure he can grasp what might have moved Amy in the rape scene.

Making sense of women's responses

I noted earlier that very few women Enjoyed and Admired *Straw Dogs* (I will look at the few who did so, later). But at the same time they constitute the bulk (7 from 9) of those who were Neutral/Ambivalent Enjoyers but Admired it. Here I want to look at the character of these women's reactions. Their responses are quite striking, especially if we examine the women alone. There is one recurrent theme in their responses: finding the rape 'confusing'. This occurs in 5 of the women's responses, and in a sixth we will see a move occur which effectively side-steps this confusion. Take **40** as an example: this 17-21 woman found the film not as shocking as she had expected, but equally that it did not 'grab' her. Summarising the film, she says it is an "in-bred" community's reaction to outsiders'. That is interesting, because to many it was important that Amy was *not* an outsider – recall that some interpreted the rape as their reasserting control or even 'ownership' of Amy. But to **40**, Amy is an outsider. Reading the film this way, she can admire it, tentatively. And the rape then takes on a particular meaning: 'I think the scene was included to show how ruthless and cruel the local men were, and how cunning in distracting David so the rape could be carried out'. But this leaves no space for Amy's ambiguous response to the rape, therefore to her it was 'confusing' that she appeared to end up enjoying the first rape. Because Amy has no back-story in the community – she is just an outsider – this becomes nonsensical. But her construction of the 'in-bred community' account was sufficiently strong that she found the ending, with David's ruthless revenge 'almost liberating' – because it is necessary but unexpected. And the ending, of course, is taken to mean the summative violence, not the aftermath.

These two themes – reading the film as simply a conflict between a community and outsiders, and finding Amy's response to the first rape 'confusing' – runs across these questionnaires. **41**, again, found herself 'gripped' and 'I felt I had to watch it to the end'. To her, the film is about a 'group of men who take advantage of situations to express their power ... especially with women'. Given this thematisation, she accepts that showing the rape had a purpose: 'it was done in this particular way so that the audience could get an exact knowledge of Amy's struggle'. But that redoubles the problem – how could it be pleasurable in any way? Again, she finds this 'confusing'. And once again, the ending

gripped and held her – but once again the ending is taken to mean the resolving violence, not the ambivalent aftermath.

Others found confusion at other points. **36** found it a good film, dealing with ‘good subjects’, but ‘not really the type of film I would enjoy’. She admires its ‘boldness’. As with the others, *Straw Dogs* is thematised as being about outsiders encountering a ‘close-knit but volatile community’. This respondent read the rape scene as an assertion by this hostile community of its ‘control’ over Amy – an idea introducing a note of ambiguity into her relationship with it. In this situation the issue is really not about whether or not she might take sexual pleasure during the rape – that is irrelevant to the fact that rape *per se* ‘strips her of her dignity and her rights as a woman’. Within this reading, she can accept even the discomfort of watching: ‘I personally felt quite uncomfortable whilst watching it as I am sure we are expected to do’. This marks the film’s *success*. But this interpretative strategy still had a cost – the cost now being a confusion over *David’s* responses. Given the clear wrongness associated with this community, and its use of sexual power to seek control, *David’s* saving Henry can’t make sense. ‘It’s uncertain why he decides to protect the pervert’. And because that means that he isn’t acting from what she would perceive as the *proper* motive of taking back their rights and controls, she has to invent an explanation of his violent response: ‘His retaliation is more a sense of his pent-up frustration and almost disregard for anything else around him’.

Let me consider one more example, a very curious one in that it works in a most unlikely way to resolve the potential confusion over Amy’s response. **35** reports a doubled reaction: ‘fascinated / disturbing’. Her summary of the film is a melange: ‘paedophilia perverts, rape, protection of what you believe in, child-like nature of women, and hunting and being hunted’. What is most striking in this whole questionnaire is the repeated discussion of women as ‘child-like’. Commenting (under Q10) on the characteristics that particularly influenced her, she writes: ‘At the beginning of the film suggestions are implied to portray Amy’s immaturity, and child-like characteristics. The film opens with children playing in a graveyard, Amy doesn’t wear a bra ... Amy plays naughty games like rubbing out her husband’s work to try to fool him’. This account of the opening poses an issue for the rest of the film. She found the ending ‘horrifically violent’, and ‘detached’ from the rest of the film – because the rest had other issues being dealt with. These issues were, again, Amy’s child-like behaviour. So her account of the rape scene takes on a very unusual cast. I quote it in full: ‘I felt that the first man who raped Amy was not as shocking as the second man who raped her. Both were highly disturbing, however the nature in which the second man approached Amy with the gun, and being behind her while raping her was more shocking than the first one. The noises Amy was making had an impact upon the scene too, at some points I felt they were almost child-like adding to Amy’s vulnerability and immaturity.’ This transformation of Amy’s sexual pleasure into ‘noises’ signifying vulnerable immaturity is striking only because it is a very unusual form of a process of putting a framework of interpretation onto screen events.

Understanding Dismay

What can we learn from those who were most Negative about *Straw Dogs*? There is a risk in looking at these that we will just see the condemnation. It seems to me that we have come to accept too readily the self-explanatory nature of dislike or rejection. When viewers complain that programmes or advertisements are ‘upsetting’, or ‘distasteful’, their complaints are seen as having a preliminary legitimacy whether or not the complaints are upheld. If they are not upheld it is because ‘other factors’ permit the materials, I have yet to read a commentary which queries the *grounds of the complaint*, except inasmuch as it may be suggested that the people affected are either not very many, or a bit too sensitive. That still leaves their ‘sensitivity’ as a brute fact. Whilst pleasures are subject to scrutiny until proven to be ‘harmless’, ‘just fun’ or whatever, distaste, disgust seems sufficient unto itself.^[13] Actually there is a striking pattern among the 10 of the 11 respondents in this position. For nearly all, the film was experienced as disorganised, unmotivated, and incoherent, and these very qualities made it deeply unpleasant and disturbing. Among the key words to be found in these questionnaires are the following: “pointless”, and “gratuitous”. As we’ve seen, Cumberbatch noted the prevalence of these kinds of words in his research, but I would argue that his lack of a discursive method led him to miss their most significant aspect: that judging a scene ‘pointless’, or ‘gratuitous’ is a way of marking its *greater power*. The presence of these words indicates that a particular reading-strategy is at work, one which sees a *possible* motivating link between events, but will not countenance it because it is too disturbing to contemplate. This leads, revealingly, not to a condemnation of the film’s makers for making a ‘bad film’, but as much if not more to a condemnation of the *characters*. Take two cases, **51** and **55**, to test this idea.

51, a 17-21 female, was one of those who found a radical disjunction between a “tedious” first and a “disturbing” second half to the film. For her, because of this, the characters were “2-dimensional”, and the film also failed to explore any of its ideas and events (which included for her the rape) which were potentially interesting. Her account of the rape scene displays a doubling quality:

I felt very uncomfortable, especially as with Charlie she said ‘no’ then accepted it and seemed to enjoy it. This seemed to send out a disturbing message to men – that when women say ‘no’ sometimes they mean ‘yes’. And she didn’t tell her husband – silly cow! I think that it’s there to show the brutality of the men but I don’t think it served any useful point in the film as a whole.

The scene *has* a point, to **51**, but it is an insufficient one, because the film as a whole lacks sufficient overall coherence. But instead of diminishing the power of the scene, that increases it – the scene becomes an ‘event-in-itself’, charged with its own dangerous ‘message’. This reflects not only on the director (who later in her questionnaire is criticised for a “loose and messy” ending which “resolves nothing”), but also on the

character Amy – how could she not tell her husband?! I call these doubling responses, since she could have judged the film a failure and ‘exited’ from it, but the film holds her in a way that she does not like. This same complex reaction is to be found in **55**, another 17-21 female, who also found the first half “slow, fairly boring”, but then felt that the very different end-section “didn’t gel” with the rest. Here, though, the mental moves that lead to her reaction are perhaps more overt:

The rape scene was disturbing because at first when [Charlie] was having sex with her she seemed to enjoy it which disgusted me to a certain extent. I didn’t wholly see the purpose of it in the film – I expected her to try and defend him against her husband but that didn’t occur. The juxtaposition of the rape scene with the shots of Dustin Hoffman sat on his own in a sense being tricked by the villagers made me feel angry towards Amy as she seemed to me to let it happen to her and had no concern for her husband’s feelings. I felt there was more she could have done to prevent the rape as her weak-willed ‘no’s’ had zero effect. The fact she didn’t tell her husband what had happened seemed not because she was afraid to do so but because she in my mind might have sex with her ex [Charlie] again. I really hated her character after the rape scene.^[14]

There is great strength to her reaction to Amy, and it comes from her imputing specific motives to her – motives which appal **55**. Amy’s behaviour, which is almost a betrayal of her husband, can’t be countenanced. This reaction is not reached lightly – she has read across the cross-cutting of Amy’s and David’s stories – but with the result that she has virtually attributed to Amy the knowledge that she herself has of David’s situation. This multiplies the condemnation. It would be hard to find any textual support for the imputed motive – that Amy might be thinking of continuing the sexual relations with Charlie – but that doesn’t much matter since, to **55**, the film lacks overall coherence.

In these two responses we see an outline of what constitutes a response as disgust. It is more complicated than simple rejection or refusal. It is the result of specific *strategies of understanding* the film, of imputing motives to people, and thereby giving meanings to the acts of violence within *Straw Dogs*.

A Difficult Comparison

Among the 60 responses I got, two came from women who made clear in the course of their answers that they themselves had suffered some kind of serious sexual assault – and that, inevitably, had relevance to how they personally felt about the film. What is so striking is that they take diametrically opposite views of the film and I want to close this discussion of audience responses to *Straw Dogs* by reflecting what extra insights might be gained by hearing what they wanted to say. I have to open this part by repeating what I have already said: in no way at all am I wishing to privilege one response over another.

That has been a general truth throughout, here is also a specific guarantee. I am only interested in trying to understand the dynamics of film interpretation. These two women volunteered their perceptions and thoughts to me, including the information that they personally had suffered serious assaults, to be part of a research process. I do believe something additional is revealed by their accounts, above and beyond the detail I have so far assembled.

One of the two, **54**, in fact recounts that she had to leave before the film ended. The flashbacks at the Church Hall had brought her own experiences back to her too fiercely for her to be able to bear any more, and she left. Overall, she summarises her personal experience of the film under the one word: “traumatised”. And assessing the film for what she didn’t admire about it, she writes simply: “Unnecessarily explicit violation scenes”. The essence of her view of the film is caught in her repeated use of the word “cruel”, conveying a sense both that the people and events in the film are cruel, and also that in an important sense viewing the film was cruel to her. It “brought memories back to life which I have not yet forgotten and still find very hard to cope with”. It is notable that she recalls very clearly that her assessment of *A Clockwork Orange* had been quite different: that, she had both liked and admired. **54**’s answers were short, and said little more than I have already repeated here.

There is a powerful contrast with **3**. Her opening comments, explaining her liking and admiration for *Straw Dogs*, are philosophically charged: “Secrets are best let out in the open, for if it is shut up for too long the world, even your home, the supposedly safest place, becomes too dangerous for living. Men are beasts, they strive for only what they want and most certainly do lose their common sense.” This notion of revealing secrets runs through all her answers. It connects with her positive *will* to see the film, because censored films are like secrets: “the film must be shouting something at the audience, wanting to open their eyes to a sense of truth, to ban it is to stay blind”. **3** then gives a long answer to the question about the rape scene:

The rape scene was not the most crucial point in the play, of course it was ‘shocking’ (though it seemed she enjoyed it with her ex boyfriend) she seemed to be leading him on, the only crucial point in that scene was when the other boy took his turn. The strange thing about this point, was that the ex boyfriend didn’t see he was doing anything wrong, so when the dark haired guy wanted his turn, the ex boyfriend felt like he needed to protect her by having her not seeing who was about to rape her. It is a very strange process, the swapping of boys. And the ‘communication between the two’. The relationship between the three are very interesting to observe though tell us little of their past. What I found the most troubling was the way everyone treated the slow man. Like in ‘Of Mice and Men’, the slow man was unable to recognise his strength and killed the girl. He was the reason why Dustin Hoffman’s character and his wife went through that enormous battle in the house at the end. It was the cruelty towards the slow man that really made me angry because the girl seemed to ‘enjoy’ the attention, even though she

did seem 'scared' she neither told her husband or police about the incident. So she must be keeping secrets as well.

This theme of 'secrets' is so recurrent, I will risk a small speculation, that this young woman has learned to cope with the trauma of being raped (she states directly that this is what happened to her) by insisting on being open about it, by not hiding it, indeed by making herself face the question why it might have happened. So the act of seeing the film was part of a confirmation to herself that she *is* capable of being open. The idea of 'not hiding things' continues finally in her comparison with *A Clockwork Orange* where she writes: "*A Clockwork Orange* was more of an observation that began to take on reactions through the film that built up awareness, anger, fear etc. But in *Straw Dogs*, this film was more like a story than a commentary on life. The story went on with build ups and strong awareness that there are many things we do not know about the past and what happened to the woman when she was young. There are many secrets still left unanswered. ... *A Clockwork Orange* makes us cringe out of embarrassment for being human but *Straw Dogs* made us feel reactions of anger and pity to many characters."

In one important respect **3** is exactly like the other four women who are in the Like/Admire group. All of them directly rejected the idea that the rape scene is the most crucial scene in the film. Instead, they point variously to the death of the young girl, or to the threats to the village simpleton. What **3** adds, as the element that integrates her response to *Straw Dogs* into her own history, is this refusal to hide from what she has experienced. She regains her sense of her own full humanity by *estimating the awfulness* of rape so that, as she says: "From my point of view, not enough was shown in the rape scene. Rape is worse than what was shown and people need to know. I thought the scenes where the slow man was hit or verbally abused at were the strongest because that showed real mental pain ... real damaging pain".

It would be quite wrong for me to philosophise on these painful accounts. I want only to say that they display in a particularly naked way how a filmic viewing strategy is inevitably bound up with wider strategies for thinking and understanding one's own life and experiences, and even one's wishes for the future.

Modelling positive responses

What, finally, can we learn from those who did Enjoy and Admire *Straw Dogs*? I have reserved them till last – not because they are the most important, but for two reasons. First, people taking this position are those about whom most claims are made in the way in which critics 'figure the audience'. When critics state their fears about a film, they are not worrying about those who reject it, hate it, or walk away from it. They are worrying about those who became involved in it. They constitute, therefore, the potentially 'dangerous' audience. But there is another completely separate reason. It has long been recognised that enthusiasts often lack ready languages to explain their enjoyment.

Perhaps the first researcher to point this up was Len Ang who in her study of *Dallas* and its viewers shows the contrast between the confident languages available to those who criticise or ironise the show, and the hesitancy of the show's fans.^[15] Because of this, I have found it to be a useful tactical step in research to approach an understanding of enthusiasts crab-wise, via what may be revealed by those who decline to adopt their position. It seems that in the act of *refusing*, those who are disappointed can reveal important facets of the *position which they are declining to take up*. Therefore it helps to examine the responses of the enthusiasts *after* analysis of other positions.

Twenty seven people (22 male, 5 female) responded that they had both Enjoyed and Admired *Straw Dogs*. But reading their explanations, and their reactions to particular moments or aspects of the film, it emerges that within a *generally* very positive response can lurk qualifications, caveats, confusions and concerns. In fact, if we were to discount anyone who expresses a significant level of confusion or uncertainty, the number of unconditionally positive responses would shrink, to thirteen (10 male, 3 female).^[16] But from an analytical perspective, the presence of qualifications offers distinct benefits. It makes it easier, paradoxically, to *model* positive responses. By noting the hesitations which mark where particular audiences pause, wonder or worry, or admit a point beyond which they cannot go, we can model the response without such hesitations. By attending to their subtractions, it is possible to draw a fuller outline of what a response without these would look like.

For maximum clarity, I have chosen to present the findings as follows: I have itemised the components of a positive response, illustrating each against a number of transcripts, and at the same time noting how various forms of qualification point by their absence to the same component. Each component turns out, on examination, to allow for levels of engagement. And in exploring these levels, I try also to show how the components then show themselves to be interdependent, mutually implicative. Some of this has, I hope, already begun to show in my earlier contrasting of the two responses of **13** and **14**.

1. ***Establishing the unity of the film:*** at the simplest level, those who are positive about *Straw Dogs* respond differently from those who, as we have seen, found the first half slow and undramatic, and therefore the second half as dislocated, even a shock. Typical expressions to describe the first half were “slow/tense build up”, “slow suspense-building”, “slow-burning”, “knowing it was only a matter of time before something major happened”, leading to a “dramatic/inevitable finale”. One respondent (**16**) elaborated on how this was experienced: “I felt very drawn into the film, from the outset. The beautiful aerial views of the village and all those lovely children playing. Alarm bells started ringing, you just know it's got to be too good to be true! I was gripped with morbid fascination as the weirdness unfolded, never guessing how far it would go.” **16** in fact gave one of the most positive accounts of all of her response, saying “I have to admit I left the theatre on a thrill – exhilarated”. It is important that we hear in her response not

only the alarm bells ringing, and the predictions of disaster, but also that sense of not knowing, being astonished, yet feeling that in some sense the outcome was valid. Others with the same levels of positivity used other expressions to say something similar; **10**, for instance, caught his thrill of uncertainty in a summation that said “Excellent film that kept you on the edge of your seat and always thinking”.

Some of the qualifications to this are revealing. Some were not as comfortable as **16** at the unpredictability, and searched the film for some recognisable principles. For instance, there is a hint that **20** searched for a justice motif in the film. Responding (unusually) to my offer to add anything else that was important to his responses, he reported “The fact that Amy shot the last person, I felt made me feel better about the number of people Dustin Hoffman’s character killed, I don’t know why, it just did”. It *felt right* because in some way it put a balance into the film. Others reported different kinds of hesitation; **8**, who found that the plot was “slow to start”, was drawn into full attention once the “action” began: “I felt as though I’d walked in halfway through, and never really caught up with what had gone on”.

The unity achieved by positive viewers needs careful statement, however. The principle of uncertainty which the most positive experienced meant that in a curious way the film was *not heavily plotted*. As **10**, whom I quoted above, put it, as part of *praising* Peckinpah’s film over *A Clockwork Orange*: “Also there is a lack of clear plot in *Straw Dogs* as nothing really happens and the underlying plot is never complete”. This, to **10**, was part of the “reality” of *Straw Dogs* which he valued greatly; I return to the meaning of this recurrent use of ‘real’ in a moment.

This finding of a unity in the film opens doors in other directions. One critical one is the integration of events into a motivated flow. They cannot be understood or judged just as *events*. The key example of this is the rape scene. To those who disliked the film, it was judged by some as gratuitous, or as too horrible to contemplate. Those who had qualified responses to it tended to find it “confusing” – they couldn’t understand Amy’s response. But to those most positive, event, motivation and understanding went strongly together, as in **9**’s response: “the rape of Amy is perhaps the most crucial scene in the film, as it gives the audience a deep insight into the character of Amy, who up until that scene I had found to be a fairly one-dimensional character. It also signals the ‘beginning of the end’, as all the tension that Peckinpah has mounted up throughout the film is coming to a head and the tone of the film is turning far darker.” **9** also, like **10**, valued the ending precisely because it didn’t tidy things away: “I felt that the ending of the film was excellent, as it leaves the audience to consider the violence that has just taken place. ... The final shot of Dustin Hoffman grinning is in my opinion a truly chilling image, as it shows how much violence can affect an average man. This final shot shows that although he killed the attackers, he has not necessarily won, as the effects of committing violence to an average man are far stronger emotionally, than they would be for someone in an action movie for instance. I feel that this shows that David is paying the price for his cowardice earlier in the film”. Notice the weaving of several threads in this answer: the

ending as 'chilling', because the audience has to go on after the film has ended; David as an 'average' (therefore more real) man; the distance required of the audience who must look at David and see his cowardice and what he is now paying. This is the beginning of the interweaving of components that make a fully positive response.^[17]

2. **Completing the back-story:** a related component to the above ability to find a particular kind of unity in the film, is the will to make a history to the relations to the characters. A typical way to express this was to see the conflicts as showing that a "dark past has emerged". Without necessarily specifying in great depth, all the most positive respondents saw in the second half the outcome of a *hidden history*, a "sub-plot" which burst through the accumulating tensions of the first half. We will see in a moment that while the rape scene was for many the key turning point, it played this role because of one very strange aspect of it. Perhaps the fullest statement of a positive reading comes in **21**'s account of the rape scene: "The rape scene was crucial to the narrative of the film. If you explain that scene to anyone who has not watched the film, they will say the scene is wrong. Amy is unhappy with her relationship with David. During the rape by her ex, something is triggered in her mind, of the way she used to feel with her ex. This leads her to enjoy it. It deals with really complicated emotions. It was very confusing to watch". Here, being 'confused' is not a negative experience, but one of feeling required to work through to an explanation. Again, I note that the entire account of Amy's thoughts while being raped is an imputed one, but again *it is one that works*. And it allows us to see, in some detail, what kind of work on the film is involved in arriving at a positive judgement about it (**21** reports being "shocked and surprised, I laughed and recoiled", but then calls it "brilliant").^[18]

An interesting case of someone who realises that they have to work at this is **18**, who gave long answers to explain why the enjoyment he had experienced was only partial. He enjoyed finding the "inner depths" in the characters. In fact we see a particularly stark contrast between his responses, and **9**'s, cited earlier, who had found that the rape gave him a deeper insight into Amy. **18** reports the opposite: "Amy, played by Susan George, doesn't really have any depth to her character although she is quite interesting. I like the fact that she is annoying and 'naggy' because I have never met anyone as annoying as her". What is most interesting here is that **18** moves from this to reporting finding the violence, including the rape scene, somewhat "gratuitous". Finding her character "interesting" is not enough. And the rape scene just becomes unacceptable to him, because he isn't able to find any further meaning in it.

Another interesting case of such an interpretative move comes from **17**, who repeats several times how "uncomfortable" he found himself at Amy's enjoyment of the first rape. Something made him stick with the film – he found it overall "clever" and "brave". To sustain that reading, he had to do something with his considerable discomfort. The result was an *effort after meaning*: "During the rape scene I started to get uncomfortable when

she was seemingly enjoying it but I then thought that it must be this way for a reason. I think the intention was to show us that Amy was yearning for an archetypal male figure and her burly ex-boyfriend helped her to feel young again. I could be very wrong but it is something along these lines". There is a *will to interpret* here, in which this man would concede to better interpretations that more effectively make sense of something which he feels must make *some* sense.

The contrast with those who failed to find/produce the back-story is well illustrated by **6**, one of many who called the film "confusing". Describing the rape scene, this one wrote: "I think it was the most troubling scene, and possibly the most confusing, because she seems to enjoy sex with the first man although she resists at first, but then he lets the other man rape her. The relationship between Amy and [Charlie]^[19] is never truly explained and this is what I found confusing about the film". The point is important. The explanation is *not* given by the film, but many of the most positive viewers *felt able to supply it*, but then to *attribute it to the film*.

A different mode of qualification is shown, as we've seen, by **13** who reported enjoying *Straw Dogs* "in parts". His prime interpretative move was to classify the film generically, as a "slow-paced thriller with an exciting climax". **13** found the opening hour "excruciatingly slow", but then – although he enjoyed the rest – found it "extremely predictable". What is interesting is to find the co-existence of this claim of predictability with an assertion that the film was "far-fetched", because "I couldn't comprehend why Hoffman's character didn't just open the door and let the gang take the man away". The potential contradiction between these doesn't need to come out into the open both because **13** conveys a sense of not caring that much about the film (calling it a "run-of-the-mill thriller") – therefore just not pushing very hard – and because, where he does display his criteria, they are *strictly filmic*: so, the rape scene, while "uncomfortable" for him, escapes criticism by dint of being "not glamourised – it did keep shots during the rape very tight. It was mainly just on the faces, which made it graphic but not gratuitous".

The back-story, for those who construct it, functions to open up a set of wider themes around the film. It took on the "taboos of society (perhaps even more of the society in which it was made)" (**1**). Several comment on the film's attention to "the dark side". **14** developed into the characters being "symbols of the darker side of human beings", and illustrated this on David "whose logic and intelligence are almost abandoned as he has to use his strength and courage in place of his reason and common-sense". To see these things is not necessarily to approve of them. It is to approve of the film's *exploration* of them.

3. Declining identification with characters: it is no surprise that viewers – in particular but not only women – who felt strongly for Amy, should hate the film; they found the rape scene unbearable because an important sense they found themselves 'sharing the

experience'. What is more surprising, in a way, is that a condition of a positive response was to be *balanced* between several characters. To the extent that a viewer might dislike Amy, or find her responses inexplicable, to that extent they too moved away from positivity. Indeed, this turns out to be true with *all* the characters. What seems to emerge is that positivity is most closely connected to *associating with the situation*. **14**, whom I have just quoted and who stresses the extent to the characters function as *symbols*, does not because of that simply intellectualise the film. To the contrary: he writes that he was expecting "some horrific, violent art house flick", but instead "was treated to a genuinely warm but thoroughly engaging as well violent tale of a couple's fight against forces that are working against them".

For some, the grounds for qualification are wide and general. **15**, for instance, explains his caveats by saying that while he never has problems watching violence between men, he always has problems watching violence against women. This supervenes on his experience of the film, but it also has an effect on his reading of Amy herself. He says of the rape of Amy that "we were shown her more than once sending out the wrong signals to the workmen, whom she had known previously. It may have been shown to say we are not as in control or as safe as we think we are". This *detaches* this scene to a considerable extent from the rest of the film, his discomfort with it making it carry its own 'message'.

For others, getting either too close or too far away from particular characters leads to interpretative difficulties. **2**, for instance, summed up what the film was about for him by focusing entirely on David: "A man who is too interested in his self that he neglects others and subsequently draws himself into an unavoidable situation without even realising the brutal rape of his wife". I return shortly to the significance of that remark about David not realising Amy has been raped. Note, here, how this centering on David then links to a problem with the ending: "THE VERY END. It seemed out of place and sent out a mix of ideas. Was it an escape from Amy, his crimes, or had he done the acts in the house for his hidden love of her? I don't really know". The end becomes hard to decipher, given his overall reading centred on David. The same problem takes on a different form in others.

For those for whom the film was most positive, the shift in David comes either as no surprise, or as a welcome revelation – something to be embraced as revealing something. So, **20** summed his whole experience of the film as "thought-provoking" in this neat phrasing: "A battle of morals: the good guy won, but by winning in the way he did, is he a good guy?" For this man, David was caught in a contradiction; he was "a man fighting with his own morals, whilst trying to protect what was his".

4. *Watching (ourselves watching) the film:* *Straw Dogs* was originally released in 1971, and many of its qualities display its date: clothing, hair styles, manners of speech, and many more locate the film in time. But for many of the most positive viewers, the film

is encountered as though in the present day. For them this is, in an important sense, a film about *us*. **11** put this effectively into words, saying: “I can’t say that I got a clear message from the film. It made me think how there is bad in all of us and that we can’t run away from our pasts”. Note the clear reference to the hidden back-story. Note also that this response came from one of the most positive female respondents – the ‘we’ in here is interestingly inclusive (and contrasts with some of the more qualified responses which insisted that the problem was ‘men’).

Two features in the responses display this. First, as I noted earlier, positive viewers repeatedly register *points at which characters do not know something vital*. There are two most obvious points of this within the film: the fact that David never actually learns that Amy has been raped, let alone the ambiguity of her response to Charlie’s rape; and the fact that no one knows that paedophile-inclined Henry has (accidentally) killed the young girl, who tried to seduce him. It is the way these ignorances function within positive accounts that is striking. Talking of the rape of Amy, **14** makes a striking connection: “I do feel that the rape of Amy is the most crucial scene in the film as it looks at her as a character in a more personal way. She had every right to stop him but she let him go ahead with it ... and by the end was showing signs of enjoying it. ... Its happening possibly acted as an important turning point on the film in showing that she in the end didn’t tell [David]”. This is very striking and recurs – that the rape was a turning point *because* David does not know. This is not then the provision of classical narrative motivation – the opposite, in fact.

Second, people register a relationship between the film and their own life-experience – not just in the obvious way that a woman who has suffered rape comments. Here is one comment from a man who records his own origins as ‘Small town’: “Cleverly executed look at small town attitudes and the very extreme things that can go wrong” (**5**). There is an important species of self-awareness here. A different element of self-awareness comes in the complicated response that several report from watching the rape scene, as here: “It was weird to watch in that you feel uncomfortable but you can also enjoy it.” It is important to say that this response was from a woman (**11**).

Finally, there are ways in which the film can initiate processes of reflection and self-examination as audiences work on making sense of what some find at first confusing. Here is one long answer from a man whose answers make clear that he is very film-literate: “It’s hard not to say *Straw Dogs* isn’t clichéd because, of my generation, I am looking at it from a perspective that has seen many action films before hand that use similar devices. The film is similar to *Die Hard* when it is drawing to the film climax: the siege. I think what *Straw Dogs* does to draw itself away from such descriptions as clichéd is to show what might be seen as a cliché but then show how a character reacts to that situation i.e. the different reactions between David and Amy when they discover their cat hanging in Amy’s wardrobe. David is confused and Amy wants to jump the gun and accuses the builders outside. For me, when watching the film, I got slightly confused in how David and Amy’s reaction differed so often. It made me wonder why they were

married in the first place. Now, taking a step back from it, I realise not all marriages are perfect. This is why I came to the conclusion that when Venner raped Amy it appeared consensual when it was happening but all the time Amy was thinking of David.” Woven together are his recognition that in order to appreciate how *Straw Dogs* affected him, he has to ‘think back’ to a period where the kinds of cinematic genres and techniques with which he is (all too) familiar were uncommon. Doing that permits him to see the film as beyond cliché – yet in saying that, he still paradoxically retroactively inserts his present-day knowledge into that past. But doing this allows him to resolve a confusion and to construct a judgement which is applicable *today* as much as it might have been then: marriages are not all perfect. It also allows him to place an interpretation onto Amy’s reactions during the rape, which is in concert with that judgement.

These are ordinary but vital processes of bringing ‘self’ into relation to the film. And those who were most positive about the film were without question those who were most moved, surprised, engaged and aroused by it. This is not *absence* of effect, it is just a wholly different kind and mode of effect than conceived by textual theories or public debates.

Learning from the audience responses

What does this analysis of audience responses show? A number of things, I believe, with varying degrees of certainty:

1. First, it supports the idea which many have asserted on other (textual, philosophical) grounds, that there is not a reading of the film. Different stances in relation to *Straw Dogs* are linked to different perceived meanings or ‘messages’ in it. To admirers, its meaning was complicated: it amounted to a thematic exploration of insider/outsider conflict, where this had more than geographical meanings. And characters’ motivations, and therefore their goodness or badness, were muddled. To rejecters, its meaning was still perhaps complicated, but it was refused as an unacceptable portrayal. (And of course those in-between had many kinds of mixed responses.) Therefore, contrary to the assumptions underpinning Cumberbatch’s research, not only does it not make sense to try to determine ‘a line’ beyond which films should not go, but also the very notion of asking people what ‘messages’ a film proffers is troublesome – it presumes one way of watching which typifies those who disliked and rejected the film.
2. It shows, more complexly, that these different conclusions regarding *Straw Dogs* were a function of the different *viewing strategies* which people adopt and adhere to. By a viewing strategy I understand an emergent way of connecting events, attributing meaning and motivation to what a film presents, and to its characters. This can of course be largely formed prior to viewing (because of prior filmic experiences, or because of established expectations). Or it may be largely formed ‘on the fly’, as the

film is encountered. A viewing strategy combines several strands of response: (a) the cognitive skills of linking events into causal sequences, and the associated skills of making sense of forms of filmic representation in order to derive the knowledges that need to be sequenced; (b) the attribution of motives to characters, drawing on cultural stocks of knowledge to determine both likely and also appropriate modes of behaving in various situations; (c) processes of 'taking sides', which can include such things as wanting things to happen or otherwise, judging behaviours, approving or disapproving of outcomes; and (d) feeling emotional involvement in all the above.

3. All these are more-or-less phenomena. And what this research confirms is something demonstrated by previous research in which I have been involved: that the greater the degree of emphatic adherence to a viewing strategy, the higher the search for some kind of coherence, unity, and acceptability. So, to a viewer with relatively low investment in *Straw Dogs*, the fact that the first half of the film was experienced as slow-paced and undramatic (as against it being tensely slow-motion) was no major barrier to experiencing the second half as in its own right exciting. But to someone for whom the second half aroused strong, perhaps unanticipated emotions, the slow first half constituted a failure at least, at most almost a betrayal – how can a film so blatantly cheat and not prepare us, or leave unmotivated and unexplained the violence of the second half?
4. An extremely important, but very uncomfortable methodological principle emerges as a consequence from this. It is that, for purposes of answering many questions about the significance of films, *not all responses are of equal value*. Someone for whom watching a film is a passing moment, a space-filler, an encounter of low valency will simply have less to say, and will inevitably reveal less about the nature of the experience – because there simply was less of an experience – than someone for whom the encounter was rich, and committed. This is not, absolutely not, a recipe for only considering those whose responses suit some conclusions we wish to arrive at on other grounds. But it does mean that a quantitative, para-public opinion approach to questions of the kind that involved here simply will not work.^[20] This is of course the opener to a major methodological debate between rival traditions of research into media audiences.
5. We can see the outlines of an answer to the question we posed in the *Crash* research: what conditions have to be met in order for a viewer to have an unequivocally positive experience of *Straw Dogs*? Before sketching these, I need to emphasise two points. First, defining these conditions is not the same as validating them. It does not mean either that this is my own reaction to the film, or that I approve of it. It is neutral in these regards. Rather, it is an attempt to depict a culturally-specific achieved role. Second, the meaning of the word 'positive' becomes important. It is not synonymous with 'enjoy'. Rather, it means something closer to 'find purposeful and worthwhile'.

6. Because viewing strategies construe a film along several dimensions simultaneously (as in a-d above, at least), there are in principle many opportunities for conflict. But because of the swirling moral challenges accompanying a film like this, it may in fact be very hard indeed to sustain a positive viewing experience in the face of such conflicts. For this reason, the responses which I find in many ways the most remarkable are those – predominantly women – who disliked *Straw Dogs*, but engaged with the film in such a way their personal emotional responses became 'relative'.

This account is based, of course, on just 60 responses, and all from students studying film. But I do not see that as a major limitation to my conclusions, because I am in no way seeking to generalise about how widespread particular views might be, or which group might tend to adopt one position as against another. I am doing another job altogether – trying to identify the *processes involved in forming a judgement of any kind*.

In the second half of this essay, I return to *Straw Dogs*, to ask how this investigation of audience responses might affect our understanding of the film itself.

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Appendix – Questionnaire Form:

1. Overall, would you say that you “enjoyed” or “didn't enjoy” *Straw Dogs*, in the sense of having had a positive or negative personal response to it?
2. Can you describe in a word, phrase or sentence – or more if necessary – how you would best summarise your personal response to the film?
3. Overall, would you say that you “admired” or “didn't admire” *Straw Dogs*, in the sense of judging its qualities (which could be anything from aesthetic to moral qualities) as a film?
4. Can you describe in a word, phrase or sentence – or more if necessary – how you would best summarise your assessment of it as a film?
5. What did you know about *Straw Dogs* before you watched it here? Did you have any clear expectations as to what kind of film it would be? If you did, where did you get those expectations from?
6. Can you think of any other films that you would say *Straw Dogs* reminds you of?
7. If you had to sum up what to you the film was *about*, how would you do this?
8. My sense is that the most crucial, and the most troubling scene in the film is the rape of Amy – do you think I am right? I realise that it could be uncomfortable to say, but can you explain how you responded to watching it? Why was it there, why did you feel it happened? How did you feel about the way we were asked to watch it in the film? (If these aren't quite the right questions, just say what you would want to say.)
9. To me, the end of the film is quite striking. Was it to you? What did you feel about the ending of the film, and how it related to what had gone before?
10. Is there anything else about the film that to you is important, that helps to explain the reaction you had?
11. If you were asked to compare *A Clockwork Orange* and *Straw Dogs*, what would you say?
12. Can you give the same information as before about yourself as in the previous questionnaire? (Just delete the ones that don't apply to you.)
13. Which of the following age bands do you come within? 17-21. 21-25. Over 25.

Are you male or female?

Which comes closest to describing the area where you mainly grew up? City. Suburb. Small town. Countryside.

Have you ever, before University, followed a course involving the study of film?

14. Can you say how you responded to the previous questionnaire on *A Clockwork Orange*?

[1] Very little information is so far available about the film, currently titled *Fear Itself* (dir: Rubi Zack), scheduled for release late in 2005. But it looks likely to be a low-budget, runaway production 'shocker'.

[2] Carol J Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, p. 139. Clover also made a crude assumption about Peckinpah's role in the film, implying a very direct and unmediated 'authorial' control. In the second half of this essay, I return to this issue. Recently, Jacinda Read has published a full-length study on rape-revenge films, which includes a long critique of Clover's position, particularly for her classification of these films as 'horror'. Although Read does not cover *Straw Dogs*, a good deal of her discussion and critique is of relevance to the arguments of this essay. See Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000.

[3] The quotation does come from Peckinpah, from an interview he gave to *Playboy* in 1972, in which he let fly in very stupid terms at critics of his film. Stephen Prince discusses this, and other occasions where Peckinpah behaved in similar provocative ways, arguing – to my mind convincingly – that he was simply his own worst enemy in these situations, and that his other accounts of his intentions display quite different motives. See his *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, London: The Athlone Press 1998, p. 126.

[4] The outcomes of this research have been published. See Martin Barker & Ernest Mathijs, 'Understanding vernacular experiences of film in an academic environment',

[5] Of the 60 who responded, one proved unusable – no answers were given to questions 1 & 3, and there was no secure evidence from its other answers to categorise the questionnaire.

[6] Guy Cumberbatch, 'Where do you draw the line? Attitudes and reactions of video renters to sexual violence in film', Report prepared for the British Board of Film Classification, Birmingham: Communications Research Group 2002.

[7] I say this advisedly. Although possibly not the most common numerically, it is currently the main form of research where care is taken over methodological issues. There is a current of work deriving from cultural studies, to which issues of research validity are of quite low importance. As a result, if it is aware that there are issues at all about validity, research of this kind tends to limit itself to offering 'insights' – that is, interesting and perhaps challenging ways of perceiving the responses of particular audiences, without any intention of formulating from these any wider generalisations, models, or proposals for moving the research to a next stage.

[8] I am reminded of the critique by feminist scholars of the ways researchers' categorisations of male and female languages contained implicit judgements of superiority vs inferiority – and offering recategorisations which reversed the traditional implications (for example, from 'field-independent vs field-dependent' to 'context-blind vs context-sensitive')

[9] For example, Cumberbatch writes [6] that 'The previous questions on rights to see revealed that sexual violence was far less acceptable than sex or violence. Thus we could have expected more respondents to believe that 'The problem of rape in our society is bound to be made worse by the easy availability of videos which show sexual violence' (Question 16). However, this was not the case with the ratio dropping only modestly to 32% agreeing versus 46% disagreeing. This is

intriguing and suggests that more important factors than belief in harm might influence attitudes to sexual violence in film'. The *strength* of this research lies in its having shown these conflicts so clearly. Its *weakness* lies in not having a procedure that could go beyond seeing the issue.

- [10] I am here reporting a given position, not agreeing with it. In fact I strongly disagree with these being sensible grounds: first, all research on public opinion shows it to be both an artefact of research procedures and, connectedly, something which can be 'swung' on moral issues by powerful circulating claims, including of course claims originating in academic research circles. Second, there is now a powerful body of research into the fundamental problems with the policy-driven research which has dominated in particular American-originated communications research, of exactly the kind that 'moral opinion-makers' seek out and delight in quoting.
- [11] It is certainly true that a considerable proportion of my research has concerned itself with 'problematic' films, and indeed other media. That is primarily because I believe it is the responsibility of academics, where possible, not to duck research which has clear policy-relevance – even though the price can be quite some unpleasantness. But the methodology laid out here can be, and has been, used on other materials, for instance *Being John Malkovich* (2000). It was also used as one basis of the cross-national study of *The Lord of the Rings III* which I directed in 2003-4.
- [12] See Martin Barker & Kate Brooks, *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*, Luton: University of Luton Press 1998, Martin Barker with Thomas Austin, *From Antz To Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis*, London: Pluto Press 2000, and Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs & Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception*, London: Wallflower Press 2001.
- [13] It takes a rare exception to test this. Suppose that someone reports that they are disgusted by the idea of sex between people of different ethnic backgrounds. In such a case their rejection would become for many people a mark of their own problems.
- [14] A striking comparison: the table of responses reveals one person in the Dislike/Neutral on Approval category, and I looked at this questionnaire with the thought that it might display strong overlap with the Dislike/Disapprove group. I was wrong. This 17-21 female did not enjoy the film at all, but did note her admiration for a certain "moral quality" in the story. The marked difference from **55** arises over the motives attributed to Amy: "This scene was the most disturbing, yes. I was rather confused watching it as Amy appeared not to mind until the second man raped her, even then I think she should have been more traumatised. I feel it happened because of her obvious trouble with her marriage, and how she just wanted attention, and how the peaceful surroundings were in sharp contrast with the violence of these men. I feel this scene shows how she missed her husband spending time with her and how she felt rejected which is why at the end of her 1st rape she appeared less upset and possibly attracted to the worker."
- [15] Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Operas and the Melodramatic Imagination*, London: Methuen 1984.
- [16] The figures alone tell a small story – especially when seen in association with the figures for those who expressed Neutrality/Ambivalence on enjoyment along with Admiration (where women strongly predominated. In reducing to unconditional positivity, we see that a much larger proportion of males reported a positive experience, but in fact admitted significant qualifications. This suggests that it was somewhat easier for males to live with relatively high levels of uncertainty and confusion whilst still reporting themselves fully positively. Women, by contrast, found the kinds of uncertainty they experienced as more challenging or threatening, and therefore reported their responses more cautiously.
- [17] This division over the 'unity' of the film could in fact appear in other forms and contexts. In August 2003 Channel 4 broadcast a documentary on *Straw Dogs*,

researched and fronted by Mark Kermode. This hour-long programme benefited greatly from its interviews not just with those who have spoken on the topic before – Susan George and Dustin Hoffman, in particular – but a range of other people such as Del Henney who plays Charley, Amy’s former boyfriend and her first rapist in the film. But the documentary was marred by an almost obsessive will to ‘explain’ the film in terms of some inner demons and childhood problems in Sam Peckinpah which damaged his ability to relate to women. The effect of this kind of explanation was to isolate the rape scene as a thing apart, not to be understood in relation to the film as a whole. See ‘Man Trap: *Straw Dogs*, the Final Cut’, *Channel 4*, 9 August 2003, 11.20pm-12.25am.

[18] An interesting contrast: **26**, who interestingly sets the film very firmly in the past (“powerful, a product of its time, but not so much now”), rejected Amy as a character as “really annoying and hypocritical”. That can’t co-exist easily with finding any depth in her. As a result, but because the film is valued in general, the rape scene diminishes in importance: “the only reason it’s there is to make us hate the bad guys”.

[19] **6** misremembered Charlie’s name at this point; for clarity’s sake, I have corrected it.

[20] It has of course been a recurrent criticism of opinion polling in general that it treats as identical those whose responses are the result of a long and purposeful engagement with the topic being polled, and those who effectively ‘make up’ an opinion as the questions are being asked of them.

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