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'Loving and Hating *Straw Dogs*: The Meanings of Audience Responses to a Controversial Film' Part 2 - Rethinking *Straw Dogs* as a Film

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Loving and Hating *Straw Dogs*: The Meanings of Audience Responses to a Controversial Film - Part 2: Rethinking *Straw Dogs* as a Film

What was it, indeed what is it, about *Straw Dogs* that aroused and still arouses such a mix of reactions: from thrill to perplexedness to disgust. In an important essay published shortly after the film's original release, Charles Barr explored the strange opposition that emerged between reactions to *Straw Dogs* and *A Clockwork Orange*.[1] Many critics who hurried to the defence of Kubrick's film rushed equally to public condemnation of Peckinpah's.   My conclusion from studying both the film *and* the reactions of those who receive it most positively is that the problem arises from a series of things that the film *isn't*. In a series of steps, the film appears to posit the possibility of particular reactions, which are in some sense 'generic' or typological. But then the film disables them – not simply by containing elements which won't readily fit within the generic expectations, but by confronting those expectations with something which challenges and undoes the comforts of those expectations.

First, and most relevant to the contrast with *A Clockwork Orange*, *Straw Dogs* is not consistently art-y.   There are few if any stylistic gestures – whether of Peckinpah's supposed trade-marks (slow-motion balletic violence, for instance) or of any other kind. The film does begin, as do a number of his other films (most famously, the children torturing the scorpions at the start of *The Wild Bunch*), with a scene of children strangely playing, in a graveyard. But these children never recur. So, unless a viewer takes on the position of interpreting some other characters as particularly child-related – Janice, the young, sexually-provocative girl who dies accidentally at the hands of Henry; or Amy herself – the symbol is offered only to be ditched. Not readily an art film, then, in the way that *A Clockwork Orange* allowed and invited that form of response. And the 13 critics who wrote to the *Times* to revile *Straw Dogs* did so just on the basis of that distinction.

Then, the film keeps hinting at, but then backing away from, various larger generic, or even mythic, forms. Is it a transposed Western, in which frontier myths of masculinity are now played out in a different kind of testing environment? But if so, then although it does indeed show David 'discovering' in himself the resources to stand up to the black-hatted villains – but to what end? No 'civilisation' emerges, indeed he takes his stand in defence of Henry, whom we at least know to have paedophile tendencies, and to be a killer, perhaps the more dangerous since he doesn't know what he is doing as he kills. And the

very ending neither reinstates him as hero of the new civilised order, nor returns him to a mythic 'lone traveller' role.

Is it a thriller, whose dynamics would then be more to do with the discovery of the sources of danger and threat, and then the fight-back?

Is this in some other way a film about myths of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', as a number of feminist critics have declared? Centrally, it's been said – and used as the basis for the BBFC's judgements on the film – that *Straw Dogs* enacts the basic male myth of rape – that a woman who says no means yes, probably likes her sex rough, and will gain sexual pleasure of being forced. Carol Clover, as we have seen, exemplifies this position. The ways in which *Straw Dogs* contradicts this account are more subtle, but no less certain. And again, we will see that it isn't simply that the film contains elements that don't fit, it is more that the deviant elements *deny the possibility of the myth*. It isn't that the film is inconsistent, but it consistently refuses to be read mythically.

Take David, first: a nerd before the word. A coward who has fled the hinted-at conflicts in America over Vietnam, to hide in his abstruse, possibly pointless mathematical work. Who squabbles with his wife.   Who tries to be 'in' with the villagers. Who as a result is lured out on the shooting trip and is seen, absurdly, sitting among the gorse while his wife is being raped at home. And when he finally shoots a pheasant, he looks at it, and with a mixture of sadness and disgust puts down the pointlessly-dead body. Who returns home so self-engrossed that he doesn't hear his wife try to tell him that she has been raped – and when he finally notices her unhappiness, is sexually aroused by it. So his final turn to violence is less a discovery of courage, even less a will to revenge, than a pointless yell at the world that has made him feel so stupid.

Consider Amy: the child/woman. Who used to live in the village, and (though we have to do a little filling in, to be sure) probably had sexual relations with Charlie before she left, met and married David. Who knows she is being sexually provocative in walking bra-less through the village. Who consciously walks half-naked past the window when the local workmen will see. Who does these things though she must know, coming from there, the kind of enclosed world this sort of village was. Who, after she has been raped, still tries to make David integrate into the village by reminding him to get ready for the show – where her flashbacks of the assault will become more and more insidious until even David realises how disturbed she is (though he still never asks her why …).

Take Charlie, the first rapist: a slow character about whom we never quite know enough. Did he or didn't he strangle Amy's cat? We know that Scutt, the vicious one, got into the couple's bedroom – he is the one to pull out the trophy knickers he stole, but Charlie? So what's Charlie's position? When he leaves David adrift on the moor, and calls on Amy, does he know he is going to rape her? That Scutt will follow? If he does, then an act that is appalling either way becomes that much worse – a scheme to lure the husband away so two men can abuse the wife, versus a situation read wrongly by a former lover who loses control of himself, and then finds himself half-forced to admit the second man. The

clues are *so* contradictory. When Amy calls out 'Who's there?' to his first knock, he doesn't answer, forcing her to open the door to him. Yet he immediately offers to go, if she prefers. When she coolly invites him in, he appears to lock the door – an odd act, in itself, and hinting that Amy won't be able to escape him, but even odder if he expects Scutt to follow him in. When he first kisses her, she seems to half-respond before she asks him to go. He removes her glasses and she allows him to, so he can kiss her again. Now the violence intrudes. After her slap and retreat, he knocks her down brutally, drags her to the sofa and tears her clothes open. This is rape, without question or excuse. Yet in the middle of it, unmistakeably, he says to her: 'I don't want to leave you, Amy – but I will'.[2] His 'sorry' to her after the rape is easily gathered up into the male myth, the conqueror who can seem just to have lost control of himself. But faced with Scutt's gun in his face, and his acquiescence that Scutt too should rape Amy, the long lingering look at his face betrays guilt, and knowledge that he has betrayed her. He *is* a bad man, his act *is* appalling. And yet it is to him, and to his strength, that Amy calls when she is again attacked by Scutt during the climactic siege.

In each case it seems to me that the film confronts us with the *messiness* of people's motives. Yet it is never just confusing. Because its overall narrative thrust is so easy to tell – young, hesitant couple move to enclosed, suspicious community where she used to belong; they encounter hostility from the locals who seek to wreck their lives and 'reclaim their own' in the woman; finally the man finds the inner resources to fight back and, improbably and through great violence, wins. It is through the characters' perceptions of the situation, and through our reading of the clues as to their motives, that the film attains its complexity.

We can refuse. We can back away and denounce. And that will usually be linked to claims about the dangers of the film.[3] Since we can't be audiences for this film, we worry greatly about those who do – they must be getting 'messages' of considerable moral danger from *Straw Dogs*. This will likely be composed around an opposition: that some bits of the film work to make palatable those parts which contain its unacceptable morals. We can slim the film down and 'lose' the resistive elements, and make the film just a generic one. The price is limited involvement, a feeling that the film is either patchy, or confused/confusing.

Commuting *Straw Dogs*

Some years ago, John O Thompson published an unusual essay in which, discussing the contribution that stars make to the meaning manifold of a film, he proposed the use of 'commutation tests'.[4] What if other stars had played the part? By looking at real cases of remakes with different stars (the three versions of *A Star Is Born*, for instance), or by thought-experiments exploring what might have happened (for instance, if one of the other actors offered the part had accepted the lead in *The Shootist* ahead of John

Wayne), the contribution of a particular star should become more visible. Although frequently referenced, Thompson's ideas have not been much used. I want to use them here, to contribute to my evaluation of *Straw Dogs*. I want to ask how we might better understand how it *is* constructed and what meaning-potentials emerge from that construction, by considering how it *might have* been if certain script and screenplay decisions had not been made.

Three biographies in particular enable this investigation, because their account of Peckinpah's life has been enriched by, among other things, a scrutiny of the production files on the film. Garner Simmons[5], David Weddle[6], and Steven Prince[7] each give splendidly detailed consideration to the film, and point up some detailed changes made in the course of the development, principal shooting, and final edit of the film. I want to discuss four in particular:

1.   the decision to cast Susan George as Amy – a decision which worried Dustin Hoffman, who made a strong case to Peckinpah for another kind of actress;

2.   the decision to film the rape scene as a whole through Amy's reactions, following pressure from actress Susan George;

3.   the subsequent decision, made during the final editing of the film, to reduce the attention given to Charlie's sexual interest in Amy;

4.   the decision, made very close to the end of principal photography, to scrap the ending as written in the screenplay, and substitute one altogether different.

How may these four 'commutations' help us understand the nature of the film as it actually emerged?

1. Garner Simmons recounts Dustin Hoffman's considerable doubts over the casting of Susan George as Amy. Hoffman had seen screen tests of George, and liked and admired her as an actress. But in terms of his reading of the nature of the story, he doubted the wisdom of choosing her: "'I said to Sam, 'I just feel she is the wrong type for a guy who's a teacher in college. You're opening up a whole big can of worms as to why he married this kind of Lolita-ish girl.' I could see a woman in her late twenties. Also the whole rape thing. I thought a woman who was a little older and starting to feel a little out of it in terms of being attractive – had a sensuality but was losing it – might be more ambivalent about being raped. Sam said he agreed and that I shouldn't worry because he could get that out of her. He even went so far as to say that he couldn't do the picture without her.' (p.126) George, though, was not the only actress screen-tested for the part.

Peckinpah's insistence on using Susan George is interesting. Among the other contenders were Carol White (considered, but not screen-tested) and Judy Geeson (screen-tested), and a secretary and current lover of Peckinpah's. White had made her

name in *Poor Cow* (1967), in which she starred as a woman who lives a life filled with bad choices. She marries and has a child with an abusive thief who ends up in prison. Left alone she takes up with his mate (another thief) who seems to give her some happiness but who also ends up inside. She then takes up with a series of seedy types who offer nothing but momentary pleasure. Geeson became known through a Sidney Poitier film *To Sir, With Love* (also 1967), about a black engineer who becomes a teacher in a tough London school, and has to learn to cope with angry/violent boys and sexually provocative girls. Geeson played his main female nemesis, Pamela Dare, who develops a crush for him. George, meanwhile, seems to have been an actress in transition. Having first come to notice for a small role in a sweetness-and-light stage adaptation of *The Sound of Music*, in the mid-1960s George emerged as a 'sexy young actress', in particular playing roles as 'threatened blonde' in some horror films, and then as 'blonde temptress'.

All three had strong credentials as serious actresses, not simply as good faces/bodies. And they surely share some screen qualities. By the time of *Straw Dogs*, all three were post-adolescent, attractive, open-faced, and slightly wide-eyed. But there are subtle differences in both their 'look', and in the persona established through their defining role. The most repeatedly available photos of each hint at these differences.[8]

| Susan George | Carol White | Judy Geeson |

What White had come to embody was a woman knocked about by life – already a victim. Geeson, meanwhile, portrayed a flirty, working class image. What George seems to have had, more than the other two, was a certain age-confusion in her look. Whilst clearly a maturing woman in age, body, and speech, her face still held a slight puppy-fat. And she could play a certain petulance, the petulance of someone who didn't yet see that the world might react to her behaviours in hurtful ways. When hurt, her face had the capacity to display her upset physically – as a child might, more than an adult. As a screen-presence, then, what she appears to offer is the potential for walking herself into situations in which a tendency to cruelty might be provoked in others. George-as-Amy is not a child; she is a woman with some of the characteristics of an irritating adolescent.

2. Holding this possibility in mind, consider the decision that emerged over the filming of the rape scene. We do not know in detail what Peckinpah intended for this – George, the main source of our understanding, has only ever said that she was horrified by what he proposed, and threatened to walk out on the film. It is clear that Peckinpah proposed to display her completely naked. What we may guess, mainly from the way George insisted on her alternative, is that his preferred way would involve a far greater emphasis on her physical and sexual brutalisation. David Weddle's biography of Peckinpah draws on extensive interviews with Susan George to tell the story of her battles over how the rape scene should be filmed. Peckinpah wouldn't reveal to George how he planned to film the scene, and George not surprisingly was very nervous. Finally she forced him to reveal his plans, by threatening to walk out on the film. George has only ever revealed tangentially what Peckinpah's ideas were, but it clearly involved complete nudity, and an emphasis on showing what was being done to her body. She rebelled. Eventually a compromise was reached. Peckinpah said that he 'wanted to film the best rape scene ever'. She persuaded Peckinpah to film the scene with an emphasis on her eyes, showing the horror of what was happening to her through her reactions. Forced to compromise, Peckinpah agreed to try this, with the threat of reverting to his preferred approach if it did not work. When he saw the rushes, he acknowledged to her that he had what he wanted – the materials for the 'best rape scene ever filmed'.[9]

The question, though, has to be: what exactly is meant by this strange and provocative expression? Malgré all those who attacked this as an embodiment of the woman who says 'no', but ends up meaning 'yes', it is in fact much more complex than this could ever grasp. There is a terrible but quite specific ambivalence in their relationship, which is not only there if you mishear Charlie's 'leave/reave'. It is also there in the changes between screenplay and film. The screenplay – presumably representing Peckinpah's plans before Susan George's refusal – has the rape scene driven by three forces: sheer physical attraction – the screenplay has Charlie fondling Amy's breasts, and enjoying her discomfiture at this; a back-history of a previous relationship between Amy and Charlie; and a split of 'loyalties', between a genuine affection he keeps feeling for Amy, and a sense that she has become an outsider, a city girl, someone to be used.[10] The film alters the presence and balance of these.

The important thing is that in the course of watching Amy during the attack on her, we learn a number of things about *her*. The focus on her face, along with the reverse shots which not only show Charlie, but simultaneously – by the manner of the filming – display how she is seeing him, make the scene into an examination not simply of her shock and distress, but also her momentary realisation of something about herself.

3. This focus on her self-realisation was increased by the changes made in the third of my 'commutations', the final editing of the scene which produced the variations between an early 'European' and a subsequent, preferred 'American' version. Stephen Prince helps us take this part of the story further. Drawing on the film's production files, and the existence for a time of two released versions, he explores some specific decisions Peckinpah made at the editing stage. A European cut of the film gave more extended attention to the rape, including in particular showing Charlie fondling Amy's breasts, and then dwelling on the sheer brutality of Scutt's anal rape. Partly under pressure from the distributors, who worried about responses in America, partly because of his own thinking about it, Peckinpah told his editors to recut the scene, to de-emphasise just these aspects.

Had the former become the standard version, the significance of the rape scene would have been subtly but significantly different. An overt focus on Charlie's pleasure in Amy's body would have sexualised the scene in a particular way. As it is, although her body is exposed to him, it is the character of the interactions between them – and thus, of course, the potentially reawakened past histories – that are emphasised.

4. The commutation of the ending is decisive. Garner Simmons recounts how the film's finale was dramatically altered: 'Throughout the project, there had been much discussion over exactly how the film would end, considering the amount of violence that takes place in the final twenty minutes. The scripted ending called for David and Amy, their attackers dead and dying, to suddenly be confronted by the children of the town led by Tom Hedden's son, Bobby. The children, all carrying sticks and clubs, survey the bodies and then close in on the Sumners who stand on the stairs. The last line of the screenplay reads:

DAVID SLIPS CATLIKE down the stairs towards them as AMY is suddenly at his side, their weapons ready –

    [David]   Just like the rest of us –

         Sooner or later.

   FREEZE FRAME.' (p. 133)

Simmons cites Peckinpah's awareness that his producer Marty Baum wanted a happy ending, but kept delaying a decision on it – until the solution emerged almost accidentally from a discussion between David Warner (Henry), Dustin Hoffman, and himself. Warner commented 'I don't know my way home' to which Hoffman riposted with his own line – and that sedimented into the scene as we now have it.

Had *Straw Dogs* closed as the screenplay indicates, then it would have had a certain closure. The film opens with the children playing their strange game in the local cemetery. To those familiar with Peckinpah films, this would have to recall the children

torturing scorpions in the opening of *The Wild Bunch* – who then look up to watch the Bunch ride into town. In that film, the children return at the end. Their innocent/wicked eyes observe the failures and follies of adults. *Straw Dogs* would have taken this one stage further, making children the inheritors of their parents' violence. The circle would thus have been closed, and although the *outcome* of this final confrontation would not have been given in the film, its *necessity* would have been implied. By changing from this ending, the children remain ambiguous, and their role incomplete. And the film as a whole tumbles into uncertainty.

Gordon Williams, Sam Peckinpah, Stanley Kubrick, Robert Ardrey

I want to close this discussion by returning to the film itself. The broader argumentative framework within which this investigation of audience responses is set, is one which seeks to question the ways in which 'textual analysis' has predominantly been used. In a great many cases, it is claimed that 'meanings' have been found, and that these 'meanings' have implications for 'figured audiences'. I am absolutely not trying to dissolve film 'texts' into audience responses – not least because audiences are always acutely aware of the substance of the film itself, as they respond. What I have been arguing for, rather, is a need to attend to the film-as-constructed by different kinds of audience, and the work required to produce each kind of 'film text'. Rather than, then, going back to the film to do my own textual analysis of it, I want to approach it from two comparative angles, which I believe can throw light on what in its nature makes possible the kinds of response I have discovered. The two angles are comparisons, then, of the film: first, with its source-book, *The Siege of Trencher's* Farm; second, with its virtual contemporary and equally-debated *A Clockwork Orange*.

Some important pointers to the nature of Peckinpah's film can be gained by examining the novel on which it was based. Gordon Williams, who wrote *The Siege of Trencher's Farm*, was the author of more than twenty novels – including a number ghost-written for football figures. *Siege* was written, according to Williams, in under three weeks, following a trip to Dartmoor at a time when a violent convict had escaped from prison there. Published in 1969, it was a pot-boiler, sold on by an astute publisher who smelt that it might be 'of its time' of Hollywood.

Within a broad sweep of similarity (an outsider couple move from America into a Cornish village, are met with distrust; a young girl disappears, and a convicted paedophile is suspected who accidentally finds refuge in the outsiders' house; the couple are violently besieged, but ultimately – and bloodily – victorious), the film varies from the book in important ways. Some of these have to do with the differences in modes of story-telling between novel and cinema; others are different. Most notably, the rape scene which made the film so notorious is not present in the book. But while obviously significant, it may not be the most revealing alteration. For simplicity's sake, I have risked presenting some key differences in table form:

	Siege of Trencher's Farm	*Straw Dogs*
Who are the core characters?	George (literary scholar), Louise (his wife), Karen (their daughter).	David (mathematician) and Amy (his wife) – there are no children.
Why have they come to Cornwall?	She is from England (but not Cornwall), imagines a place of retreat. He wants a quiet place to work. **A hint that he is running away from family tensions.**	She is from this village, has memories and old (boy)friends. He wants a quiet place to work. **A hint that he is running away from the 'Vietnam war on the campus'.**
How are the locals presented?	As in-bred, possibly incestuous, jealous and secret-guarding.	As in-bred, jealous and rural backwards.
Janice is the girl who disappears. How is she represented? What is her fate?	Backward, diminished intelligence. **A hint that her backwardness might be the product of too close in-breeding.** She is rescued from the blizzard, unharmed.	Sexually provocative, out of control. **A hint that this community doesn't know how to handle girls' sexuality.** She dies, semi-accidentally, at the hands of Henry Niles.
The couple's cat is killed – what does this trigger?	Disgust and withdrawal in George. Reminder in Louise of the pleasures of seeing game brought in from hunting.	Not much interest in David. Childlike upset in Amy.
What is not *known about, but narratively important?*	"Soldier's Field" (a story which reveals the locals' willingness to kill outsiders). **George learns its meaning, late on.**	Amy's rape, which is 'hidden' from David. **David remains ignorant of this, to the end.**
What is 'at stake' in the defence of their home?	For both, their daughter. For George, the defence of reason and law.	For David, the defence of reason and law – but partly he doesn't know why.
What is achieved by their defence?	For George, rediscovery of his manhood. For Louise, the same. **Strong suggestions that he overcomes his impotence.**	For David, destruction of his sense of who he is. For Amy, total, unhappy confusion. **No hints at all as to gains.**
Who does the wife turn to at the height of the crisis?	To George, but only once he has asserted dominance over her.	To Charlie, who raped her, when she is again threatened by the second rapist.
How does the story end?	Louise finds a remasculinised George attractive again, and they make love – in the light.	David leaves Amy in the devastated house, to return Henry to town. They are both 'lost'.
What other, 'external' themes are explicitly raised	The morality of capital punishment. 'Civilisation', over-civilisation. America and anti-Americanism.	The Vietnam war, and the campus battles over it.

This table alone suggests some thematic alterations between book and film. The film increases the couple's links with the village, and introduces female sexuality as a motive-force in its own right. It reduces the sense of damaged masculinity as something which has to rediscover itself. There is also in the book a theme about hunting, and blood, and men's and women's responses to them, which is completely absent from the film. But to understand the differences fully, they need some further glossing. Williams' book is replete with a kind of philosophising through the eyes of the different characters. The villagers give voice to all kinds of dislike, and envy of outsiders, rich people, those that they can never be. Other occasional characters give us 'opinions' on the locals – their in-bred narrowness, their almost incestuous way of life. To George and Louise goes the

task of giving a 'civilised' perspective. Their rows are never just about each other as individuals, but about what a man and a woman ought to be like. They are about 'America' which, curiously, is presented as a decadent too-civilised place which has lost touch with the body, with the physical, the natural. What emerges is a sense of self-disgust, which is overcome only through violence, and with that the reassertion of traditional gender roles. George realises that he wants, indeed needs to be a 'man': "What good did it do to a man to know he had brains? How could academic knowledge make up for a lack of *maleness*?" (p.32). And that means that his flinching over their dead cat was a mark of unmanly sickness. Meanwhile, what Louise needs is to be told, directed, dominated; she discovers her need to be a 'woman' again: "For the first time in years she'd felt the way she'd always wanted to feel, like a woman. Protected. Given a man to lean on. No longer leaning on herself." (p.144)

Siege certainly does not proffer a coherent ideology. Novels don't generally deal in such things, because if they are to work at all, they generally do so by presenting characters' conflicting perspectives. This aside, there anyway appear to be competing discourses driving it: the urban vs the rural, the modern vs the primitive; the civilised vs the instinctual (but which of these pairs is 'good' in the book, is somewhat arguable). But it is not fanciful to see within its story signs and elements of the set of ideas that became very popular in the late Sixties: the pop ethology, and instinctivism that associated with the work of writers such as Desmond Morris, Robert Ardrey and others which for a time also won adherents in Hollywood. These ideas set up the terms of a debate in which violence, crowd behaviour, and gender characteristics could be given essentialist, pseudo-evolutionary explanations. But while Peckinpah and his producers may have been attracted to Williams' book by its address to those themes, I would want to stress that they are markedly altered and some new elements (including that reference to the Vietnam war), and also the film reveals itself to be *much less confident* about their outcomes than the book.

With this in mind, I want to recall again Charles Barr's fascinating essay comparing first critical responses to *Straw Dogs*, and to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Critics, Barr shows, generally delighted in Kubrick's film because they believed it invited them to stand back and survey the issues it dealt in; while they felt 'contaminated' by Peckinpah's. Barr did a very useful job of showing the nature of this contrast. But I wish to take it a step further.

The difference between the responses to the two films may partly derive, I will argue, from something they share, but which they use differently. This is a relation to the work of Robert Ardrey. Ardrey worked for a while as a scriptwriter in Hollywood, most famously working on *Khartoum*. But he is best remembered for a series of popular, indeed populist, books presenting an 'instinctivist' account of human behaviour: most notably *The Territorial Imperative* (1966), *African Genesis* (1969), and *The Social Contract* (1970). At the time of making of both films, Ardrey's work was widely read, held in some

regard, and was certainly known to both Peckinpah and Kubrick. But although both were clearly *influenced* by his account, I believe their relations to him were rather different.[11]

Ardrey sought to explain human aggression by reference to pent-up instinctual forces. Living unnaturally in cities, living in societies where the boundaries between cultures were no longer clear, living out of close contact with 'nature' (which meant such things as hunting, to Ardrey) led to unmanageable stresses in society. Out of this could come an explanation of human violence and savagery. All this was well received in an American political culture rather desperately seeking non-political explanations for black urban revolts, the student movements, the failure of its Vietnam war (and the emerging evidence of American soldiers' brutality). But Ardrey was not alone. While on his own side were a number of other popularising crude social Darwinists such as Konrad Lorenz, and Desmond Morris,[12] on the other side was the equally crude behaviourist work of B F Skinner, a popularising psychologist who sought to explain all human behaviour in terms of cumulative environmental stimuli. The debates between these two bald positions were hot, and echoed into public politics.[13]

Kubrick himself made overt reference to Ardrey's work. In a famous controversy, he responded to a diatribe against his film in the *New York Times*. Fred Hechinger had accused Kubrick of having produced a 'fascist' film because of its bleak pessimistic view that either we give way to our dark inner impulses, or we have to have a totalitarian state. Kubrick, not one for engaging in public controversy, was angered enough to reply. Here is part of his letter: 'without citing anything from the film itself, Mr. Hechinger seems to rest his entire case against me on a quote appearing in *The New York Times* of January 30, in which I said: "Man isn't a noble savage, he's an ignoble savage. He is irrational, brutal, weak, silly, unable to be objective about anything where his own interests are involved...and any attempt to create social institutions based on a false view of the nature of man is probably doomed to failure." From this, apparently, Mr. Hechinger concluded, "the thesis that man is irretrievably bad and corrupt is the essence of fascism," and summarily condemned the film.' Kubrick then proceeds to draw upon a complex combination of quotes from Ardrey, Arthur Koestler, and the *Times*' own reviewer Vincent Canby, to argue that humans are 'risen apes', capable both of music and massacres, of both art and savagery; his film is an argument about the need for humans to *choose*.[14] It is clear that Kubrick himself sees *A Clockwork Orange* as engaged in a debate about humans' capacity for violence and savagery, and the possibility and the appropriateness of scientific interventions to 'control' these. What becomes clear, through these debates, is the extent to which the film's philosophical themes were grounded in terms of debate set by Ardrey and his opponents (Kubrick himself references Jean-Jacques Rousseau's conception of the 'noble savage' as the alternative to Ardrey). The strength of Kubrick's film lies in not polemicising, but in pushing *us* to consider sides; and in leaving at the end no clear outcome – Malcolm McDowell's final mocking 'Oh, I was cured alright', as he couples wildly with a naked girl in front of the delighted politicians, does not offer easy comfort. The meaning of 'cured' looks highly insecure!

Sam Peckinpah also knew Ardrey's work, although he may not have encountered the ideas directly until after he had completed *The Wild Bunch* (1969).[15] But by 1971 a new factor had entered Peckinpah's view of the world. A rising disgust with the US role in Vietnam had crystallized after his outrage at learning about the massacre at My Lai. Peckinpah was one of those who pressed angrily for the prosecution of Lt. Calley for his role in the massacre. 'Violence' was no longer something to be understood as something about generalized 'human savagery'. It had now a political meaning, but one that was not entirely clear to Peckinpah. *Straw Dogs*' inquiry into our human capacity for violence is no doubt inflected by that background instinctivist account, but is very unhappy at its uses and implications.

If Peckinpah shifts the film away from the book's instinctivist tendencies by introducing both political elements, which tend to locate the characters in time and place, and a strain of narrative uncertainty which qualifies the force of the theme of 'savagery', Kubrick took *his* source in the opposite direction. Vincent LoBrutto (1997) among others tells the story that Kubrick worked from the American edition of Anthony Burgess' book – in which the final chapter where Alex *reforms himself* by simply growing up was deleted. On top of this, Kubrick made specific decisions to downplay explicit political references. At one point he considered making the marauding gangs' masks into the likenesses of Winston Churchill, Vladimir Lenin and Mahatma Gandhi. Instead, he chose to use masks with phallic noses, thereby emphasizing the primal nature of their violent tendencies.

I am arguing that the previously 'comfortable' position directed stated and imaginatively embodied in *The Wild Bunch* – that humans just 'naturally' tend to defend their homes – took on in *Straw Dogs* a much less secure position. Still to some extent caught within the same terms of debate ('native savagery' vs 'environmental conditioning'), the later film makes 'home', its meaning, and its defence now much more disturbing. 'I can't find my way home', says Henry the lost child-molester. 'Nor can I', says David, in the closing line of the film, with a smile torn between recognition, pain and acceptance. Audiences who loved the film, lived its ambiguities, its loss of moral or motivational certainties. Audiences who hated it, sought for a clear meaning in it, and became distressed when they couldn't locate one. Because they were watching it nearly 30 years on, their sense of the terms of debate was no doubt different than those in Peckinpah's own time. But the film's own form thus comes into different view, through seeing it with the eyes of these audiences.

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'Man Trap: *Straw Dogs*, the Final Cut', *Channel 4* UK, 9 August 2003, 11.20pm-12.25am.

Notes

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[1]   Charles Barr, '*Straw Dogs*, *A Clockwork Orange* and the critics', *Screen*, Summer 1972, pp. 17-31. Barr makes a still-compelling case that those who hated Peckinpah's film so much were expressing a fear of 'contamination' – because the film did not permit an easy distancing from the ambiguities of feeling which the actions and events of the film portrayed.

[2]   Ah, the power of a mishearing. I have discussed this part with a number of colleagues who know the film quite well. Noone has queried my perception of this. Then, when late on I was revising this essay, I finally managed to obtain my copy of the screenplay for *Straw Dogs* (marked: revised 11 January 1971). Reading it carefully, I discovered that I had always misheard this sentence. In fact what Charlie says is this: "I don't want to reave you, Amy – but I will". 'Reave' is a very old word for 'force', or 'pillage'. Heard aright, this would have been a straightforward threat of violent rape if she does not submit. But it is strange, nonetheless, that at this point – and only at this point (I can find no other example in the entire screenplay) – there should be this turn to an archaism: almost suggesting that here Charlie is reverting to his most 'primitive' and 'local'. My suspicion is that most audiences, not knowing the word, would have shared my mishearing. Those who do know the word, will know it as a marked archaism. I have left my mishearing in the main text, not to deceive, but because it emphasises how details can indeed lead to problems in constructing working accounts.

[3]   I found one exception to this. Derek Malcolm, reviewing *Straw Dogs* in the *Guardian*, does unusually combine seeing the film as very clever, and very bad.

[4]   John O Thompson, 'Screen acting and the commutation test', *Screen*, Vol.19, No.2, 1978, pp.55-69.

[5]   Garner Simmons, *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage*, NY: Limelight 1998.

[6]   David Weddle, *Sam Peckinpah: If They Move ... Kill 'em!*, London: Faber & Faber 1996.

[7]   Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, London: Athlone Press 1998.

[8]   In fact while with both White and Geeson there were a small number of recurrent images, which seem to typify their screen meaning, an Internet search for Susan George did not disclose a single image functioning to define her 'presence'. I acknowledge that I have chosen the image that to me most closely associates with how she appears in *Straw Dogs*.

[9]   Mark Kermode, long a defender of the film, wrote and broadcast about it upon its release. He tells the story of the shooting of the scene thus: 'Susan George had to prepare for the rape scene which has since made *Straw Dogs* notorious, but which was described only in the vaguest terms in the script, and remained shrouded in ominous silence throughout the shoot. When Peckinpah finally and reluctantly agreed to discuss the scene, he announced bluntly: "I don't intend to tell you how I'm going to shoot it, but I will tell you that you are going to be naked; two men are going to attack you; one is going have sex with you; and the other man is going to bugger you." "At 20 years of age," remembers George, "I have to say I sat back in my chair and said 'What does that mean?' So he told me. And I was terrified. The way he was talking, it seemed to me that he was intending on this being an actual thing, that was really going to take place on the set. So I got up out of my chair, looked him in the eye, and said 'I'm not prepared to do that Sam.' And he said 'You will do it.' I said 'No, you didn't hear me - I am not prepared to do it, and you must find yourself another Amy.'" Recriminations followed, during which George boldly held her ground even when threatened with legal action for breaking her contract. Finally (and impressively) the usually implacable Peckinpah caved in and agreed to let George try to depict Amy's trauma by concentrating on her eyes and face, rather than her body. The resulting scene [was] a strange mix of the explicit and the oblique …' (Mark Kermode, 'A wild bunch in Cornwall', *Observer*, 3 August 2003). Here we see the absurdity of Clover's critique, with its assumption of Peckinpah's determining authorial role. For a wider and fruitful discussion of the complexities of actual film-making processes, see Gianluca Sergi & Alan Lovell, *Making Films in Contemporary Hollywood*, London: Arnold 2005.

[10]   The screenplay contains 'instructions' for both Amy's and Charlie's reactions. For instance, after penetration: 'HE HOLDS HER GENTLY. BARELY KISSING HER … almost in slow motion, slowly touching her face with his hands … looking at her eyes … not only making love, but loving her. AMY is responding to his touch, now more than willing, totally possessed and possessing' (p.77). Then, after a sudden violent end to his love-making, she challenges him 'What happened to you? We were so close'. VENNER LOOKS DOWN AT HER - REVERTING TO THE COUNTRY STUD WHICH IS REALLY ALL HE UNDERSTANDS – all he really is – (although he was very close to breaking through to something – something that terrified him – 'commitment' someone once called it …) (p.78).

[11]   There is an early brief essay by Steve Neale on the relations between Ardrey and Peckinpah (see his 1976). In it, he draws in particular on Peckinpah's *Playboy* interview to argue that Ardrey clearly 'influenced' Peckinpah, and to point to certain parallelisms between claims in Ardrey's work, and particular scenes in Peckinpah's films. The rest of the essay, written very much under the star of the then-dominant academicist Marxism (in which Althusserian ideas of 'dominant ideology' passed as theorising), does honestly explore tensions in a too easy equation of the two sets of ideas. But although it gestures at the end towards the need to consider 'textual mediation, signification and reading', it does not in fact give a hint as to what that might mean in relation to a film like *Straw Dogs*.

[12]   On this group of writers generally, see my *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe*, London: Junction Books 1981.

[13]   In 1968 a US Government report, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, sought refuge in some of the terms of the 'innate savagery' argument when trying to make sense of the campus rebellions. For more on this, see my 'Violence redux', in Steven Jay Schneider (ed), *New Hollywood Violence*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2004, pp. 57-79.

[14]   These exchanges have been reproduced on a number of websites devoted to Kubrick's work. See for instance http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0037.html (accessed 24 August 2005). See also

http://www.users.muohio.edu/erlichrd/350/odyssey.php which discusses Ardrey's relations with the south African anthropologist Raymond Dart. I must be clear that I am not in any sense supporting Hechinger's 'fascism' charge – this is an absurd 'position-taking'. I am interested in the way Ardrey constituted a resource for Kubrick's vision – and even his sense that Ardrey's account could constitute an *optimistic* view of the world.

[15]   Garner Simmons wrote: "It had been Strother Martin who, following the completion of *The Wild Bunch*, had given Peckinpah a copy of Robert Ardrey's *African Genesis* because he had felt Ardrey and Peckinpah shared a common attitude toward violence in man. Peckinpah had read the book and had been impressed enough to also read Ardrey's other works, *The Territorial Imperative* and *The Social Contract*. Based on the findings of a number of anthropologists, Ardrey's writings attempt to explain the violent side of man's nature through his evolutionary descent from killer apes. As a consequence of his ancestry, man also shared a number of characteristics with the rest of the animal kingdom, especially a strong instinct for the protection of his territory or home from invasion. Peckinpah stated: 'Robert Ardrey is a writer I admire tremendously. I read him after *Wild Bunch* and have reread his books since because Ardrey really knows where it's at, Baby. Man is violent by nature, and we have to learn to live with it and control it if we are to survive'. *Straw Dogs* would reflect much of Ardrey's thesis." (p. 128) Many problems are concealed inside that word 'reflect'.

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