What a performance! Exploring audiences' responses to film acting

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Abstract:
The part played by acting in audiences' responses to films is largely unexplored – but often assumed to be considerable. In this essay, we report on the results of a small research project into this, using the 1995 film *The Usual Suspects* as a focus and stimulus. Deliberately recruiting a mix of audiences, the project resulted in twelve discussion groups. Out of the responses of these groups, we explore the variety of ways in which acting plays a part within people's responses, and outline a tentative model for theorising this relationship.

Keywords: film acting, performance, *The Usual Suspects*, audience responses.

In the 2012 film *Albert Nobbs*, Glenn Close plays a middle-aged woman in late 19th century Dublin, who for most of her life has 'passed' as a man, working in service in hotels. The story unfolds around the discovery of her sex when she is forced to share her room with Hubert, a visiting painter and decorator – who in 'his' turn discloses that she too is secretly a woman – and married to a third, Cathleen. There is a particularly striking scene where, following Albert's thinking about the implications of this (s/he had always thought herself completely alone), s/he visits the couple. Albert is persuaded to try going out (perhaps for the first time in thirty years) dressed as a woman. At first unable even to cross the doorstep, she does go, and we see the two 'men' in long skirts walking along a windy beach. Albert tries, at first inexpertly, then with fluid movement of her wrists – to adjust a long

shawl she is wearing. Then she runs, clumsily in the skirts as a man might but with a sense of newly-discovered freedom, until her feet tangle in the fabric and she falls.

We happened to see this film on the same day that we began planning the writing of this essay, and it chimed perfectly. What fascinated us was Close's performance. In brief, this is what we saw happening. Close is performing the role of a woman who had had to become man-like, in order to survive, but who is now, as that 'man', trying out (not altogether competently) what it is like to be a woman again. To be effective, and to carry forward the narrative arc – of her emergent hopes of finding a 'wife' like Hubert with whom she could open a small business – her acting of this scene had to capture layers of tensions: a woman who has had to become a man, in all visible ways, who wants to relearn being a woman.

Neither of us thought it a great film. But we were both impressed by Close's management of her role. What emerged, as we talked, was that we had noticed different things in the beach scene. One of us had attended to how she ran – the 'male' use of her hips and feet which eventually caused her to trip. The other had noticed particularly the wrist movements, at first clumsy and restrained, then (like muscles rediscovering old skills) free and expressive. Close, as a man, was restrained to the point of immobility. 'His' body was postured in almost impossible stillness, but the eyes seemed so watchful, so guarded, as if to hint at some inner turmoils or fears (a 'reading' of course made much easier by our having heard in advance that this film was about a woman living as a man). Even in the privacy of her locked room, she hardly dared release her body from those guarded constraints. The beach scene revealed a character in self-transformation, shown through the *embodiment* Close gave from him to her. In conversation, then, we combined elements of our accounts to refine and in the end largely share an evaluation of the film, and an appreciation of Close's contribution. That fact of *talking* about acting and performance is important – it is what audiences so commonly do, and what turns private evaluations into shared and circulating judgements.

Academic work on acting

There is of course an extensive body of work about screen acting *per se*, from biographical studies of specific actors to explorations of acting styles and schools (Constantin Stanislavski, and Lee Strasberg, for instance). But in the last three decades, there has been growing attention to the part that acting and actors play within films' development, production and circulation. Beginning with James Naremore's *Acting in the Cinema* (1988), there have been steady moves to incorporate *performance* as a necessary component of film analysis (alongside prevalent emphases on narrative and genre, directorial authorship, cinematography and editing and the like). In a curious parallel to the rise of 'active audience' theory, there was a new insistence that film characters were not just the objects of *gaze*, but were *produced* by actors' skilled labour. This new emphasis then connected with the already rising star studies (provoked especially by Dyer, 1979). This saw stars as produced as much by surrounding media reportage and story-telling as by the films

themselves, saw stars as constructing double (public vs private) super-ordinary personae, and explored the way all this might defray ideological tensions around individuals' place in contemporary society.

There were some important elements of empirical audience research, most of it growing out of star studies, and asking questions about the aspects of stars which are of most interest and importance to audiences. Research into fan cultures explored the ways stars' fans built knowledges of them, created clubs, and put demands on the studios (perhaps most notably Barbas, 2001). Annette Kuhn (2002) and especially Jackie Stacey (1993) explored the sedimentation into memory of people's beloved stars, from the 1930-50s. There were studies of particular stars' admirers – notably Rachel Moseley's on Audrey Hepburn (2003), and a few adventurous studies of transmedia stars (eg, Messenger Davies and Pearson on Patrick Stewart (2003). But by and large research outside star-centred work into audiences' responses to acting has been slight.

Instead, as so often, film studies tends to work with figures of a unified audience, assumed to have homogeneous responses. On the cover of Peter Krämer & Alan Lovell's (1999) excellent edited collection, *Screen Acting*, this typically assumptive claim appears:

> While not everyone would agree with Alfred Hitchcock's notorious remark that 'actors are cattle', there is little understanding of the work that film actors do. Yet audiences' enthusiasm for, or dislike of, actors, and their style of performance is a crucial part of the film-going experience.

We don't necessarily disagree. But we wanted to find out *how* such enthusiasm or dislike might actually operate. We also wonder if these are the most important questions to be asked.

Curiously, despite the fact that audience research is even rarer overall in the realm of theatre studies than in film, one major study there sets a possible template. Willmar Sauter conducted a series of studies of theatre audiences, using his distinctive method of 'Theatre Talks' (post-performance recorded conversations over a meal):

> In one of my own projects I also wanted to find out the impact of the theatrical elements on the judgements made of performances. Was a production evaluated with regard to the play, the directing, the set, the costumes of certain combinations of various elements? The result showed that only one factor was crucial, no matter what performance the spectators saw or what background he or she had. This factor is the quality of the acting. This might not be an altogether new discovery but the fact that the acting quality is almost entirely responsible for the overall impression of a performance is worth noting. This is true whether the judgement is positive or negative. Moreover, the evaluation of the actor is always slightly higher than the grade given to the whole performance. Appreciation of the acting is also decisive for the

spectator's interest in the fiction of the performance: if the acting quality is considered too low, the spectator will not be prepared to discuss the content of the play. Only when he or she enjoys the acting will he or she also show an interest in what the performance is all about. (Sauter, 2002, p.126)

The question we wanted to ask was whether this focus on acting is true in the very different situation of cinema.

The *Usual Suspects* project

This essay draws on materials generated in a small self-funded research project conducted in 2008. Aware that little work had been done on audiences' relations with acting, four of us – the two authors here, along with Sarah Thomas and Rhys Fowler – collaborated in all early stages. But work and personal circumstances led to two withdrawing, agreeing to Barker and Ralph continuing as they wished. Our other involvements meant that the materials have lain idle for several years, until now.[1] It is interesting to reflect if the field has moved on in the meantime, in ways that might have made us design and conduct the research differently. We don't believe this is so – there still remains a paucity of work on audiences for film acting.

The project involved a special screening at Aberystwyth Arts Centre Cinema of the film *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1996) on 28 November 2008. A specially recruited audience watched the film, aware that they would then meet us in groups to discuss the film and its actors. Participants were recruited from University and town, on the basis of their different existing relations with the film: first-time, and repeat-viewers; Kevin Spacey fans; general film enthusiasts; film students and lecturers; acting students and professionals; and male and female viewers (for possible gender differences linked to the film's genre). At the screening, we were open about our focused interest in acting, and the reasons for this – but in the discussion groups (as our question schedule hopefully shows – see **Appendix 1**) we worked to generate a conversation about the film in which acting was merely an aspect, thus hopefully making the discussions more akin to post-cinema exchanges common to audiences. We hoped initially to organise separate groups around these different orienting interests. In the event, this did not prove possible in all cases. Instead we continued with some mixed groups, rather than lose willing participants. In the end, 36 people – including some at least from each orientation that we had sought – participated in 12 discussion groups, following the screening.

The Usual Suspects was chosen for several reasons. When first released, most of its lead actors were relatively unknown, many (including Spacey) achieving fame thereafter, partly on the basis of their roles in this film. The film itself is an archetypal "puzzle film" (Buckland, 2008). For it to work, audiences have to be drawn into its conceit: that Verbal Kint, Spacey's character, might be just a small-time criminal caught up in a weird conspiracy which he doesn't understand – as against [SPOILER] being, as suggested in the film's final moments, its near-mythical criminal mastermind, Keyser Soze. *Suspects* also involves

complex play with narrative time, opening by showing events near its end, and using extensive flashbacks, some of which may be deceitful.

Early in the film, the five lead characters (Fred Fenster [Benicio del Toro], Michael McManus [Stephen Baldwin], Todd Hockney [Kevin Pollack], Dean Keaton [Gabriel Byrne], and Roger 'Verbal' Kint [Kevin Spacey]) are separately arrested over an arms heist, and put together in a police line-up (the basis of the film's famous poster, and many subsequent parodies). They are required to speak the words (overheard during the crime): "Hand me the keys, you fucking cocksucker", as if to the camera. All five, in different ways, take the mickey out of the situation, joshing each other. In this, almost our introduction to the characters and certainly the first time we see them together, the line between *actor*, *character* and *mock-persona* is blurred in the extreme. This, we felt, could provide an opportunity for detailed, close-up conversation about how different audience-members perceive and evaluate these three layers, and the relations between them – and how these might then relate to their broader film (and plot) appreciation.

Clearly we were aware that in choosing a 1996 film – and one which has attracted quite a following (in some ways approaching cult interest) among many young people – we would need to take into account not only how repeat-viewers' attitudes might have developed over time, but also how even first-time viewers might carry knowledges about the film that they had acquired without seeing it. We tried therefore to encourage talk which would bring these historic effects into the conversation.

The notion of close-focusing on particular scenes has long held attractions within film studies, but has recently returned to the fore, for example with Paul McDonald's introductory essay to the Baron & Carnicke (2008) collection, which recommends attending closely to particular scenes and small moments in order to catch the fine grain of performances' contribution. McDonald's chosen moments are from *Victim* (1961) in which Dirk Bogarde's character confesses to homosexual attraction, where the grain of his voice is critical; and one from *Notorious* (1946), where Ingrid Bergman's character suddenly understands she is the victim of a plot – and, through editing, we see her realisation. Similarly, Philip Drake (2006) has looked closely at the opening scene of *The Godfather*, exploring Marlon Brando's contribution to mount an argument about the presence of two 'economies of acting' (based on the two primary characters in the scene). Most recently the book *Film Moments* (Brown and Walters, 2010) collects 38 detailed analyses of scenes within both classic and contemporary films. Drawing on a variety of approaches to 'Issues', 'History', and 'Theory', the essays together set out to show how particular scenes can illuminate a whole film, and its workings. In effect, the tenor of many is as *recommendations* to examine scenes more closely than we might otherwise do, in order to discover additional layers and qualities which we ordinarily miss. A few point to the issue of audience attention, but most commonly in the form of an assumed 'we' who respond uniformly. Unusually, Kristin Thompson's essay, on the lighting of the beacons in *Lord of the Rings III*, does this more concretely, as a proposition about how audiences might be 'trained' to be able to follow this sequence. We return briefly to this, later. But perhaps most

importantly, even if predictably, all the essays address scenes felt to be particularly meaningful or effective. None addresses arguable puzzles, failures or dissonances.

Instead, we hoped that using the iconic line-up scene might gather a mix of likings and disliking, but that then fine-grained responses might reveal the role that such evaluations play in the full processes of getting sense and pleasure – or discomfort or irritation – from a film.

At the start of the screening, participants were told the general purpose of the research in a very short introduction: that we were interested in the part that people's appreciation of acting plays in their understanding and enjoyment of a film. All kinds of views were welcome, and indeed expected. (This was reiterated at the start of each of the discussion groups.) At the screening's close, everyone completed a short questionnaire, which gathered general information on responses, including asking for a favourite character. Responses to this were used as a starting-point in the group discussions. The schedule of questions was prepared, and followed in each group. Inevitably we had some drop-outs and no-shows when the discussion groups assembled. Discussions lasted in each case around an hour. This included reshowing the opening six minutes of the film, up to the close of the line-up scene, as reminder and stimulus. All groups were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed. This essay offers a first analysis of some features of the discussions, leading to a very tentative model. We realise that this model far outruns our available evidence, but it is certainly compatible with the features we have identified. We offer it as something for others to consider and evaluate, and perhaps amend through future research.

Preliminary analysis

Anyone who has ever done audience research knows that the first thing one encounters is simple variety. And we got that. Among our 36 participants, we certainly had a strong majority who enjoyed the film – but even so, enjoyment was qualified in some cases. Comments ran from unqualified praise ("awesome", "one of my favourites", "so different") through general characterisations ("gangstery", "intriguing", "deliberately confusing"), to qualifications and doubts ("become too iconic", "not mad about it", "too two-dimensional" – although the Performance Professional who offered this last, did also declare herself "completely gripped" by Spacey's "disciplined embodiment" of his character). First indications of favourite characters threw up many choices (including a few declining to nominate): Kint/Spacey came top (14), followed – interestingly, particularly among first-time viewers – by Keaton/Byrne (11), with smaller numbers nominating McManus (as "the cockiest"), Baldwin (for his "tick-y" acting), Pete Postlethwaite/Kobayashi (a "consummate professional"), and Dave Kujan/Chazz Palmintieri ("an everyman character"). But the same character could be chosen for quite different reasons. Kint/Spacey was chosen: because his is the guiding voiceover, for the actor's general ability ("he is always dark, brooding", "you can't go wrong with a Spacey movie", even intriguingly "because he plays an actor who invents everything"). One person even nominated *Keyser Soze* as his favourite character, and described watching the film repeatedly for the glimpses within Spacey/Kint of the

master-criminal. Only Keaton/Byrne shows a relatively consistent pattern: he is consistently referred to as the "most human" and "watchable", the "most fleshed out" who "shows his emotions", and who never wanted to get involved.

These preliminary responses already point towards some broader orientations towards acting/performance. In extremis, the 'Keyser Soze' enthusiast is closely monitoring everything in the behaviour of Soze's cover-version – Verbal Kint – for signs of the concealed mastermind. It is *Kint*'s acting which fascinates him. The fact that Spacey is doing the acting is of little significance. Other Kint/Spacey admirers simply delight in the gap between the mild-mannered loser and the awesome nemesis. Gabriel Byrne's slightly tragic character – bad cop reformed, now forced onto the bad side again – depends as much on the provision of more back-story (seen to flesh him out) as it does on identified acting skills – although for some having knowledge of Byrne from other films gives another guarantee. Baldwin's "tick-y" acting is a particular pleasure for some through close-ups, which display a complicated character – although exactly the same feature was damned as over-acting by others. For McManus, it mattered not at all whether his "cocky" persona was the actor's or the character's. Meanwhile Pete Postlethwaite's strength is simply for his reliability, making much of even quite small roles. This of course depends upon a much wider knowledge of his acting career.

Fred Fenster as Case Study

Take one actor/character as a test-case: Fred Fenster, played by Benicio del Toro. At the time of *Suspects*' release, del Toro could be known to some audiences through appearances in TV series such as *Miami Vice* (1987), and films such as *The Indian Runner* (1991) and *Swimming with Sharks* (1994). For those rewatching *Suspects* or encountering it between 1995 and our 2008 screening, many more might be added, including more TV appearances, and films like *The Way of the Gun* (2000) and *Sin City* (2005), along with Awards, including an Oscar for Best Supporting Role in *Traffic* (2001). Del Toro/Fenster was named and discussed by a good number of our participants, but in contrasting ways. Some were unspecific, labelling him as a *kind* of actor and comparing him with others:

> ***Interviewer****: Did you recognise any others?*
> **Dylan**: Yeah, Gabriel Byrne. And … is it Del Toro? [Stumbles on first name] No I don't know any of the others. Not really expecting anything particular. With Del Toro he's like a chameleon, and every film he does is different. I suppose Gabriel Byrne, he's slightly the same in some of his movies. [First-time viewer]

Others did not signal knowing the actor, but focused on the character's narrative contribution:

> **Jan**: I really enjoyed Fenster being in there, cos he was really quite a random character. He wasn't really your ordinary bad guy, but he really sparked it off,

and a lot of the comedy focused on him. […] They do get that depth and they do get that believability, but they are stock characters. You know, the intelligent one and the not so intelligent one and so on. But I don't think that took away from the film, you know, even Fenster, he didn't do that much, but he still added that dimension which I think you need in a film like that. [First-time viewer]

The idiomatic word 'random' indicates pleasurable unpredictability. Jan clearly has a working sense of his overall qualities, which she then uses in her 'work' on the rest of the film. It is his contribution to the mix which underpins her evaluation. For another, wider knowledge of del Toro plays a complicated role:

Emily: [The line-up] is quite a good narrative tool basically. It just leads you into the story. It gets to introduce you to all the characters, their relationships with each other, just from that little bit you know where they laugh when umm [pause, clicks her fingers] F- Fenster steps forward and everyone knows it's just *bullshit* basically, umm but it's not revealing in any way, about anything, you've no idea what's going to happen, you just know that because they've come together that there's something, there's something that's going to happen with them five. You just don't know what. [Film student]

Emily returns to del Toro, to say more:

I was kind of expecting Fenster to have a bit more of a role, only just because he is Benicio del Toro and you just sort of, I've been reading about him being in umm *Che* about his portrayal of umm Che Guevara but [pause]... yeah, he just popped up in my mind just before the screening I was, you know, just but umm... really, really small quiet role I have to say which is, I thought it was a bit different for him, really.

This knowledge half-guides, half-interrupts her appreciation of the character – but when she returns to the line-up scene, he is just Fenster, not del Toro, and it is the character's distinctive contribution to the scene that holds her. Asked who she felt the five men were 'speaking to' when uttering the notorious line, she says:

I felt like they were talking to each other the way they say it, I mean them laughing is the best bit, you know [laughs] and when Fenster punches McManus and they're just having a whole fight [laughs] but like yeah they're talking to each other not talking to the audience or the police, they're just talking, having a laugh with each other.

This sense of preparing to build a larger picture is repeated by another of our participants:

> **Andrew**: Although they do interact, the only physical interaction is between McManus and Fenster, and it gives you the idea that they've known each other before. So the other three aren't excluded, but they aren't as tight-knit as those two. But then you work out that Verbal is the odd one out. [First-time viewer]

The onscreen play-fighting between the two becomes, for Andrew, a springboard for a wider understanding the dynamics between all five characters – hinting at back-story, and laying down future potentials all at one go.

All these *appreciated* the character as embodied by del Toro. One or two others didn't, as (the first) here:

> **Ryan**: Fenster annoyed me cos I couldn't understand all that he was saying. I know that was the point, but if you can't hear it still annoys you.
>
> **Matt**: I felt the opposite, I found humour in that fact. [Acting students]

Neither of these called on knowledge of del Toro – it was just the performance that they responded (differently) to, but in another case two participants half-changed their minds once they realise who they are talking about:

> *Interviewer: Is anybody less good, less convincing?*
>
> **Jenny**: The one who gabbles his lines.
>
> **Tina**: I don't think his acting is actually bad, I feel like he is putting on an act. So I feel like he is putting it on as well.
>
> **Jenny**: It's making him harder for him to become the character.
>
> *Interviewer: Did you recognise him? It's Benicio del Toro.*
>
> **Tina**: Seriously?!? [laughs] He looks so young!! I'm so used to him looking absolutely haggard! … And he's also an incredibly good actor.
>
> *Interviewer: Does that change your view of it at all?*
>
> **Jenny**: I just know he is an incredibly good actor, so him doing that just makes me think he is playing it a certain way. I'm used to him being a sort of mafia-type crazy guy. And he has that sort of edge about him. And here he just seems like 'meh, I don't care enough'.

Finally, rare and distinctive among the responses we gained to del Toro/Fenster was this one, from a Performance Professional, who holds the character at arm's length to ask a different kind of question about him:

> **David**: They each have their own way of delivering the line, so you are immediately invited into their world. So McManus has this very funny way of

delivering it. Then Fenster does it in that really broken American accent. What I'm interested in as an actor and a theatre director is what the instruction from the director was in terms of how they deliver that line. Because I was wondering if they were really laughing.

There is a deferred judgement here on the *authenticity* of the acting, to be settled by information he can actually only guess at, but which intrigues him because of his professional interests. This did not prevent him enjoying the film – almost the opposite in fact, this professional evaluation was going on simultaneously with rich engagement:

> **David**: Truly enthralling performances – especially the one who plays dim. I was disappointed when he was killed off because I was so enthralled by his performance.

Being 'enthralled' doesn't disable the other kind of questioning attention – it almost *provokes* it.

What can we usefully learn from this examination of responses to a single actor/character duo? A number of things are suggested. First, and most evidently, there is not only variety of judgements, but wholly different grounds for arriving at them. Indeed, we can see signs of at least eight distinct reasons for choosing a favourite character even without our very limited materials:

- Wider appreciation of an actor / of other roles he's played
- Liking their acting style
- Appreciating the role in the film
- Seeing character 'depth' produced
- Appreciating their physical look, or attractiveness
- Appreciating the type of character being performed
- Curiosity about them as public figures
- Going for distinctiveness / 'least bad' performance

Second, part of audiences' appreciation can be recognition of *characters'* play-acting. Judgements on this can run from (acceptance or otherwise of) 'hammy' comedy, to using such moments to build back-stories and predictive expectations. Third, *knowledge* of an actor (his/her other roles and performances) is not itself sufficient for a judgement – it has to be knowledge that *matters* to the audience at the time (as for instance we saw that Emily's knowledge of del Toro recently appearing in *Che* mattered to her as she watched *Suspects*). Finally, and we would argue most crucially, perceptions and evaluations of acting and performance become salient in responses to a film when they *inhabit and shape the 'work' that audiences do to follow a film as a whole*. In this respect we find ourselves at odds with Kristin Thompson, in her film moment essay on *Lord of the Rings III*. Thompson

quite brilliantly demonstrates the necessity of audiences being able to follow the sequence of both traditional and untraditional panoramic shots of the lighting of the beacons – where Jackson bends the 'rules' for placing elements requiring close attention off-centre in wide-screen filming. She concludes her account with praise for the shots' unconventional 'slow lyricism' (2010: 148) – but doesn't ask how these elements might become components within a wider reconfiguration of the film's genre. The essay as a result remains a demonstration of the general power of the Bordwell/Thompson model of 'learned cues' for theorising films, generally.

What we believe our evidence shows is the value to be gained by attending to the ways, for particular audiences, being drawn in detail into a performance can initiate *interpretive work* which then shapes people's sense of a film as a whole. It is to this that we now turn. Underneath these differences it is possible to discern linking patterns – first and most importantly around identifying the *kind* of film *Suspects* is, as here:

> **Kerry**: I really enjoyed it. It was the first time I'd seen it, again it was a fantastic cast, and I really enjoyed the plot, it's really twisty-turny. And it was fun, and it was exciting, and there was a lot going on.
>
> **Jan**: I really like the fast pace, and all the bits I didn't quite understand, cos it was a bit kind of 'woof!', it was like throwing things at you, and I liked the variety within the characters and the way they mixed with one another, and the more intense kind of scenes. […] There was a bit at the beginning where, is it Kint? Yeah, it's the very beginning, you think, oh, it's going to be one of those sorts of films, when they ask him something random and he just reeled off about a lorry or something and I just went 'What, what? Did I miss something?'. It was that kind of moment where you realise, OK, I've really got to listen. But I was thinking after, it really doesn't matter that you miss those kind of things, cos you pick it up as you go sometimes. So it makes it more interesting really, cos the bits you've missed, you have to work out, and it's like 'Oh, that's what that meant!' so I quite liked that fast pace.

What these quotations illustrate is the central place in judging acting to *identifying what is appropriate to the perceived genre of film*. Acting in films gains charge, and sets up evaluative requirements, according to the kind of film it is. This is what lies behind the comment we earlier mentioned on Baldwin's performance:

> **Jan**: Yeah Stephen Baldwin, he did sort of really immerse himself into the part, you know, really tick-y, but other than that I didn't think there were any really Oscar-worthy performances. It's like you said, the pace was so fast and the characters were so sort of stock characters, so there wasn't really room for

that, really. And the dialogue so sort of tongue-twisting. There didn't seem a lot of room for … really deep acting.

The notion of 'deep acting' – sometimes commented on to us as 'Actor-ly', implying the self-consciously theatrical – belongs elsewhere. *This* genre, however exactly named, does not call for that kind. Rather, it is perhaps described as one on which characters are examined for what they give away about themselves. Who reveals more than they ought? How transparent, consistent, trustworthy are they? Are they as they appear to be? In this sense, the film's accompanying documentary 'Nothing Is What It Seems' dovetails perfectly into this orientation.[2]

Even for a first-time viewer, this might of course be at least partly known in advance (from publicity, reviews, conversations, etc.). This is more complicated than just labelling it as a 'puzzle', or "twisty-turny" (as Jan delightfully called it). What probably *won't* be asked of viewers is that they give close attention to the manner/aesthetics of filming, or to complex sound constructions, among other things. In other words, what is shown is likely to be *evidential*. It is within this frame, therefore, that acting is likely to be considered, if viewers commit to the film. (If they do not, of course, all bets are off.) Looking on acting as a source of evidence has implications – it means that manner of performance becomes one source of clues.

In the course of working out what kind of film it is, then, people have to try to do all the following:

1. Keep an eye on what has happened / is going to happen: what clues we need to have picked up.
2. Keep hold of the order and interconnectedness of events shown (or hinted at).
3. Develop a sense of the ways in which events will unfold.
4. Determine what kinds of characters there are.
5. Work out what in particular to pay attention to, who to follow and trust.

Quite unlike, then, what Sauter claimed to have found with theatre audiences, where acting appears to act as a kind of independent variable, there is first and foremost a question about the *kinds of acting* which will be found simultaneously useful (for giving clues) and persuasive (in making it fun to follow them), that are required.[3] So if we consider these three evaluations of Kint's/Spacey's performance, we can see the ways in which judgements on *acting* tie in with other aspects of participation in the film:

> **Malcolm**: I think I probably enjoyed the Keyser Soze character the most, I think in some of the scenes in the police station some of it looks slightly forced. And I didn't find the scene where he's crying completely convincing but I think when you get to the end you realise that there may have been a reason for that,

which was that he's really Keyser Soze and a really hardened and horrible guy and you can see that if there is one thing he's isn't going to be able to bring himself to do is cry in an interview. [First-time viewer]

Rhian: There's something about acting in a kind of classical way. With Kevin Spacey [slightly mocking tone] he's kind of looked at the line, he's thought about how to deliver it, and that's how, and he's layered in the meaning in the delivery. Whereas with Gabriel Byrne, with his delivery of the line, he says it normally, and the way he acts in the scene kind of sets him up as, well not the father figure but you know the kingpin or he's the boss now. [Film enthusiast]

Sarah: I was wondering about Kint right from the start, 'cos he was so unassuming and so quiet, and the others were so obviously criminal bad guys, and he seemed like with the disability and that, it seemed a major advantage in the criminal world, you're kind of going to stand out like a sore thumb. So there was straightaway a question-mark about him, like, what was he really doing there, and is it real? [Repeat-viewer]

Malcolm identifies Kint/Spacey by reference to what he is revealed to be at the film's end: master-criminal Keyser Soze. Bits of Spacey's acting therefore are measured for how convincingly they portray such a persona. His crying becomes ambivalent – would such a tough guy do that? Unless of course if he really is so very tough, cunning and deceitful, then convincingly 'crying to order' might be just possible...? Rhian uses a different frame of reference. Referencing 'classical acting' as an *intrusion* into films, she mocks Spacey for over-playing his delivery of the line. Byrne convinces her because she can see his wider position within his management of this scene. She can *predict* on the basis of his presentation of just this one line what he will turn out to be … except of course he doesn't! So, her prediction will have costs. Sarah, meanwhile, quickly built a character-portrait whose outcome, as she looked for clues, was to make her doubt. His anonymity became a *clue* to his being more – and that for her broadened into a wider distrust: "is it real?"

A tentative model for thinking audience/acting relations

What struck us, looking at these and other comments, was *how little* people ordinarily talk about acting. They talk about *characters* and, as appropriate, talk about characters being convincing. This, despite all our participants knowing that the project was directly interested in acting as a component in films. Where it is our kind of film – one involving deceit and disclosure – they talk about characters performing. But acting is a kind of given. This point came strongly to the fore in one group discussion, when our two interviewees realised this about themselves:

Dana: Sometimes it's like I don't really notice the acting when it's good. It's like you notice it when it's really bad. [...] 'That's just a terrible movie because it was so unbelievable'. But if it's good you actually *fall into* the characters. [...] And you do sometimes look for certain types, and you know they'll cast someone for a specific role. And you'll be like 'Ok, I've seen Gabriel Byrne [...] and he's been like this kind of evil character before so maybe he could be in here as well'. But basically you *fall* into that. You believe it. I think if the acting is good you *just fall into it*. I wouldn't say 'That was really great'. Except for roles where you know that... Well, for example, like Philip Seymour Hoffman playing Capote. He's like really impersonating someone and he does so well. Then you actually say 'Well yeah, that was like really well done...'

Emily: ... It's a character you know, isn't it?

Dana: Exactly. You can actually like compare it to something you've known about a specific character. Whereas in movies like this it's just 'Yeah, he does this crime lord really well, he does this person really well', but it's... I mean he does, obviously he's a really good actor but I couldn't point it out.

Dana does acknowledge that there can be situations where 'acting' becomes an object of attention in its own right – sometimes when it is bad, but at other times when an actor is 'impersonating' a known figure. But these are given as exceptions to the situations where she "falls into" a character. This relative invisibility of acting *per se* led us to think that we needed to start from a different direction. Below we offer a **Figure** which we realise runs us well beyond the evidence which this *Usual Suspects* project generated. But it is consistent with that evidence. Its starting point is a realisation that, when experienced as successful, screen acting produces in an involved audience a sense of an embodied person, and a 'call to depth' to understand them. But this is conditioned by a sense of the *world of the film* in which they are appearing.

Figure 1 (below) is designed to express in simplified form the ways in which various kinds of knowledge and interest might intervene between a viewer and an experience of acting as an *achieved embodiment*. In expressing it thus, we are not at all suggesting that either a mediated, or an unmediated experience, is superior to the other. They are simply different from each other, in distinctive ways. The four dimensions (Actor, Film, Other Knowledges, Other Experiences) and their eight sub-dimensions (explained further below) summarise, we think, the most likely mediating factors. But there may well be others. It is how they work which particularly interests us, rather than their 'completeness'.

We begin with the 'centre'. Where viewers do not bring to bear (even if they have access to them) any mediating knowledges or interests, we argue that they do not distinguish actor and character. Rather, they experience a *film-person*.[4] Relating to them in this way, and to the extent that they *care about* and become involved in the film, they

respond to them on an analogy with anyone else that they know. Of course they have to be willing to start on this enterprise, and if they simply don't respond to the film-person, there is nothing to work with, as here:
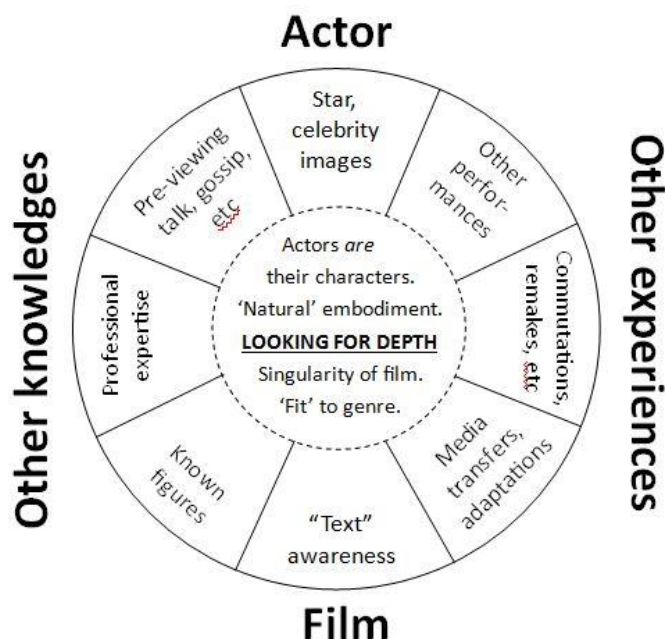

Figure 1: Typology of relations between audiences and film acting.

Joel: I have to admit, I don't personally like Kevin Spacey at all. But maybe that's a bit unfair. I haven't seen that many films with him in, but one film that definitely springs to mind is *The Negotiator*, which is a film I actually really enjoyed with Samuel L. Jackson. But it's just Kevin Spacey to me kind of, even though I think he acts well – if you can say that – just, he doesn't seem to have much of an actual character to him. I find it hard to relate to him in his roles that I've seen. He just doesn't seem to show that much emotion. Like even when he's crying in *The Usual Suspects*, I think it's towards the end, I just didn't feel like I was relating to him or felt sorry for him at all. You just kind of feel – I think it might even be just his face – like it just doesn't seem to be a very expressive, emotional face. And so I'm just not that great a fan of his really. […] I mean, sorry, I didn't mean to suggest I didn't think he acted this role well, I mean I think he did. But whether it's just because kind of, it could be that every role that he plays kind of makes him come across as this kind of ... a character with no emotion. Or just doesn't show it. But that's just the kind of thing that I see, and it just must be something that I want to see in an actor. Someone who really shows emotion, who is someone that we can relate to and obviously that's just something I look for. Maybe that's just something that he just doesn't show so much.

There is a kind of minimum condition for interest in a character which, for Joel, Spacey hardly reaches.

Past this point, audiences do a lot. They observe their actions; they try to understand and predict their behaviour; they wonder about their motives; they watch for and respond to signs of their feelings. There cannot be any sign of a 'performance' per se, because the presentation simply *is* a person. This could apply in principle to a cartoon or animation character, to a CGI construct, or to a character known only through voice-over. This applies even down to the film-person proving *deceptive*, *lying*, *untrustworthy*; *incomprehensible*, or *impenetrable*; or as *putting on a performance*. This last would be quite different from the *actor* performing (as) the character; this is the *film-person* performing a character.

In viewing these as qualities of a film-person, viewers are treating them directly on an analogy with their ways of regarding other kinds of people. The big differences are these: film-people are shown to them in an organised, structured encounter; and there can ordinarily be no interactions between film-people and audiences *in the actual act of watching the film*. These are at the same time, and importantly, *heightened* encounters, to which additional charge is added by such factors as cinematography (showing us faces in detail, for instance), music (giving indications of mood, feelings and likely actions), editing (pointing to relationships between people, things, and situations, for instance), managements of time (in the configured relations between *fabula* and *syuzhet*)[5], and so on. For all these reasons, to engage in this manner with film-persons is in many ways to experience an invitation to in exploration in depth of their characters.[6]

The same is true in principle with any other medium which deploys characters: literature, TV, comicbooks, theatre, radio drama, oral story-telling. Simply, the resources available to each of these for constructing those invitations to depth, obviously differ; and some audiences learn to appreciate and engage better with each different array. Moving away from the Figure's centre, then, each of the outer-ring segments points towards issues which butt up against areas of substantial existing research and debate. Taking them in turn, we try to suggest, however briefly, how an interest in audiences and acting might intersect with this wider work. (We must emphasise that these eight are not in the least bit watertight, but will overlap and combine with each other, in complicated ways.) For each one, we cautiously suggest what evaluative discourses are likely to be mobilised by this intersection. Though we would love to be able to give illustrations from people's responses to *the Usual Suspects* we cannot, simply because in the main these particular discussions did not go in these directions:

Star/celebrity images:

The extraordinary growth of star studies since Richard Dyer's ground-breaking (1979) work has established this as a major field in its own right. Stars were to be studied for their construction across much more than films, but the whole paraphernalia of publicity, gossip, photo-opportunities, biographies and the like. They were constructed as in effect super-

ordinary, able to perhaps embody and even resolve ideological tensions around individuals' place in that society. And they operated on a tense division between their public persona, and a (constantly interrogated) 'private' life and personality. *Star interests among audiences are likely to activate comparative discourses – how this performance adds to, builds on the special sense of the actor.*   Star studies was soon expanded to encompass the broader field of celebrity studies. Celebrities lack that claim to specialness which stars claimed, instead often being 'famous for being famous'. Here, there was little sense of a private self. Instead, everything was (on the) surface – and the ideological possibilities lay in the links with consumerism, fashion, and the selling of sexualisation. *Celebrity interests among audiences are likely to mobilise discourses of display, attractiveness, style but also of genuineness.*

Other performances:
Irrespective of star/celebrity status, audiences can bring with them awareness of other screen performances. From characteristic body and verbal styles, to looks and perceived personality, these can become entangled – to benefit or otherwise – in audiences' judgements on a current performance. *Here, mobilised discourses might be about repetition, continuity, or consistency.*

Commutations, remakes, etc:
The existence of remakes, franchises with changing leads, and the like introduces a different audience variable. Use of the concept of 'commutation' dates in particular from John Thompson's much-cited (1978 – see also his 1985) essay on the topic. Thompson asked how we might determine the difference that a particular actor makes to a role. He proposed using either real cases where remakes would allow us to compare their different embodiments (for example, the versions of *A Star Is Born* (1937, 1954, 1976); or imaginatively conceiving the differences. This was for Thompson a task for academic analysts. But of course audiences often behave like untrained academics, in this regard, making their own comparisons, and 'trying out' their preferred actors in roles. An obvious contemporary example is the controversy over the casting for the film version of the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, with a massive online petition demanding that the studio's preferred Dakota Johnson and Charlie Hunnam be replaced with Alexis Bledel and Matt Bomer (in the outcome Johnson was paired with Jamie Dornan). *Evaluative discourses are likely to run from 'rightness' to 'distinctiveness'.*

Known figures:
Actors who play real, historical figures will face the accumulated set of associations around them. But of course very often real people become likely topics for films precisely because they have become topics of gossip, debate, controversy, myth. Think the differences between the Queen, Margaret Thatcher, Richard Nixon, and Solomon Northup (of *12 Years*

a Slave). The first three cases will surely invite a consideration of the appropriateness of their physical looks and bodily style, and voice. But since part of the point of the film could be to disclose an 'underneath' (certainly the case with *Nixon*), evaluation of performances will be in part about disclosure. *Evaluative discourses are likely to stress capture, believability, and revelation.*

"Text" awareness:

Film versions of plays whose dramatic text is well-known – and here, the pre-eminent example must surely be Shakespeare's plays (with more than 400 screen versions, and a critical literature to match) – put actors in the position of 'speaking lines' that, for those who know the plays, do not 'belong' to them. They may of course offer an interpretation of them, bring them to life, add nuances. But except in rare cases where an actor is seen (for a time) to make a role his or her own (as perhaps Lawrence Olivier did with some Shakespeare roles), there may remain a gap between text and performance. *Evaluative discourses are likely to include: originality, adequacy and consistency of interpretation.*

Media transfers, adaptations:

The field of adaptation studies has undergone a wholesale transformation in recent times, with a shift from essentially normative (Have the makers done it right/justice?) to more descriptive/analytic (what resources have they called upon? how do different versions of a text acknowledge each other, and relate to their times?, etc). We would see audience research adding to the latter dimension – although we know that frequently audiences themselves call on normative positions, to warrant their personal likes and (especially) dislikes of film adaptations. Of course a huge variety of sources is called on by the film industry: novels, plays, TV series, comicbooks, videogames, and so on. So what might be *added* by a film version is going to vary. *Evaluative discourses are likely to appeal to the 'real' of the perceived original, whose 'spirit' or 'essence' has to be retained.*

Placing *The Usual Suspects*

Where then in this array does *Suspects* best fit? An original story, with few well-known actors (at least at the time of its first release), in a genre unlikely to spark professional expertise, perhaps the most obvious audience knowledges/interests would come from previewing images and talk. "Nothing Is What It Seems": the promise here is of challenges to see beyond, to spot deceits, and be a 'clever' audience. Additionally the widely-publicised poster of the line-up (and of course, as fan studies has so excellently demonstrated, pastiches and parodies are themselves a clear form of audience response and can be analysed as such), which has been endlessly copied and parodied since 1995, suggests a glimpse into criminal worlds. Perhaps then the most obvious audience orientation could be said to be *distrust of performance* but *delight in discovering things to distrust*.

It is therefore worth, in closing, briefly comparing our account with that of J P Telotte who, in a 1998 essay, reflected directly on the sense of 'character' in *Suspects*. Taking elements from David Bordwell's notions of the 'comfort of character' offered by classical narrative, and Vivien Sobchack's phenomenological notions of 'sensing a living being' and thereby perhaps sensing ourselves differently, he traces the centrality of character to the film: particularly in the thread of Dave Kujan's interrogation, who just 'knows' that this is all about Dean Keaton. Keaton cannot be dead because he has conjured his death before, only to reappear again when it is safe to do so. But the film's narrative doesn't play fair with Kujan, who finds his account imploding – or, as Telotte puts it:

> What Kujan gleans from Verbal's account, in fact, is that all of these events are actually about character – or more precisely, the obliteration of character in a classical sense with all of its attendant marks. (p.17)

Telotte's conclusion is that the film acts as a kind of *warning*, that we have placed too much faith in the reliability of 'character', to which the recent cycle of neo-noir films is a warning:

> [I]t is a warning that resounds throughout the recent crop of neo-noirs, populated as they are with elusive, enigmatic, role-playing figures who seem to function in much the same way, that is, mainly to bring us face to face with our expectations of character-expectations driven by long-standing cinematic experience, as well as by a conventional way of thinking about film. (p.19)

There is an ambivalence in here. Telotte evidently cannot make up his mind what he thinks about this. Is there something morally dubious about offering this new model of 'character' which can include this diabolical Soze? Or is there something to be said for shaking up fixed norms? Perhaps the most telling part of Telotte's conclusion comes in a passage where the dominant is an unquestioned and undistributed 'we':

> [*Suspects*] is a film that begins with a mystery and almost literally invites its viewers to play at guessing that mystery, at ferreting out the clues to its narrative and anticipating its twist ending. Moreover, that mystery depends totally on the film's conception – and our own orchestrated and convention-driven misconception – of character, a set of reactions that pointedly flies in the face of our anticipation of narrative conservatism and undercuts one sort of pleasure or comfort we have come to expect from our films. (p.20)

But of course a first principle of audience research, as we have emphasised, is that inside such a 'we' is a spread of responses and uses. What that spread is, in this case, is not possible to determine in advance. What we hope and believe this research has shown is that we need to bring into play *audiences'* conceptions of character – and that a factor in

this is the ways in which different audiences perceive the relations between the actor and his or her presented character.

Which, then, among our eight mediating dimensions are most likely to be factors in cutting between our audiences and the film-persons of *The Usual Suspects*? Aside from Pre-viewing factors introduced by trailers, teasers and the like (on which see for instance Gray, 2010), it strikes us as most likely that versions of 'Known figures' are the most likely. And what is interesting is how many of them are themselves close to myth. Except where audiences might come with knowledge of low-level criminality, conflicts with the police and the like (we had no sign of these), the most likely mediating knowledge would be general perceptions of the Mafia, of rumoured international gangsters, or such as the shadowy figures at the base of James Bond films. Precisely because these are almost certain to be foggy, and scary-but-distant, they will less disturb than just intensify the pleasurable danger of trying to see inside such film-persons. *The Usual Suspects* readily lent itself to pure genre-play.

Acknowledgements:

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Appendix – Interview Schedule:

1. How many times have you seen the film, why did you see it, and what did you think of it as a film?
2. What would you compare it with? What kind of film would you class it as?
3. Do you have a favourite character? Did you recognise any of them as actors?

   SCREENING THE FILM'S OPENING MINUTES, UP TO THE LINE-UP SCENE.

4. Say what you feel generally about this scene, and what it is contributing to the film as a whole.
5. When they say that line, 'Hand me the keys, you mother fucker', who do you feel they're speaking to?
6. What are you learning about them as characters?
7. Anything else you would want to say about the acting in the scene? Is it good, nor not? Is it a *kind* of acting that you recognise from other things, or have a name for?
8. What do you admire in actors, generally? Who would be among your favourites? What is it you like about them? Does 'outside' information about them ever interfere with your appreciation of a performance?
9. Do you have any most memorable moments from other films, where the acting was either particularly good or bad? Do the requirements of acting differ according to the kind of film?
10. Is there anybody at all that you like because they're good at just being type-cast?

Notes:

[1] We want to record our gratitude to Sarah and Rhys, both for their work on the project, and for giving us a free hand to continue as we might wish.

[2] See 'Nothing Is What It Seems: The Making of *The Usual Suspects*' (1998).

[3] One of our referees wondered whether this might not be a function of the way we conducted our discussion groups – that people were invited first to discuss the film in general and only then to discuss the acting. We cannot of course rule this out, but the contrary risk – that people would feel forced to discuss the acting – seemed to us the greater one. We await other researches using different strategies to test our confidence that this is so.

[4] We leave for future consideration the ways in which this idea relates to recent considerations of 'character' within films. On this, see in particular Murray Smith, 1995, and Jens Eder, 2010. Our sense is that these empirical findings, and our modelling of them, will constitute a significant challenge, not least to the starting notion to these theoretical elaborations that there is something requiring special explanation about audiences relating to fictional beings (see for instance Tan (1994) pp.7-8, and Zillman (1994), pp.33-4.

[5] *Fabula* and *syuzhet* are terms deriving from Russian formalist thinking, and popularised in relation to films by David Bordwell, 1987. 'Fabula' denotes the implied chronological order of events within a narrative; 'syuzhet' denotes their presentational order and sequencing – which may well be very different, and certainly is in *Suspects*.

[6] One of our referees asked us to consider further the relations of our findings to discussions of identification'. This raises a large set of issues which we cannot fully address in this essay (although it is something one of us has discussed at length elsewhere – see Barker, 2005). The one thing we

would say here is that when we checked our transcripts we had to note that only on one occasion did any participant spontaneously use the concept, as follows:

> Sam: I disagree with your [Liam's] statement about Christian Bale, cos particularly in the case of *Batman*, cos I don't think you can particular identify that with one person so I think that is clearly a case of taking on a character. Cos Batman is a character that you're aware of, everyone knows it's a persona you are aware of. And you are also very much aware that Bale has his own take on Batman, or the director does. Not that I'm saying that is good or bad, that's just how your preconceptions work. I think something like *Burn After Reading* is an example of good acting cos you have a lot of well-known people playing different kinds of character, like Brad Pitt for example plays a very convincing character who we can all identify with, like a local psyched up to very bright kind of a guy. Cos I think in that case even if it wasn't BP playing it you can still identify with the character cos clearly the actor himself is not that mentally challenged. It impressed me.

Without analysing this comment in detail, we would emphasise that Sam is clearly working out a complex set of ideas about the relations between a character, an actor, and a wider persona – in which the concept 'identification' mainly does casual work to help him think this through.