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## ***Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema***

Today, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) publishes a research report into *Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema*. The report was commissioned from Professor Martin Barker of the University of Aberystwyth and is based on new and substantive qualitative research.

In performing its duties as a regulator of the moving image, the BBFC is obliged to balance the right of freedom of expression with the need to protect the public from harm. In the case of 'video works', including DVDs, the BBFC has a particular obligation under the Video Recordings Act 1984 (VRA) to have special regard, among other factors, to any harm that may be caused (to viewers or to society) by the manner in which a video work deals with sex, violence, horror, drugs or criminal activity. Scenes of sexual violence inevitably combine two, and sometimes all five, of the potentially harmful elements identified by the VRA and therefore raise particularly difficult issues for the BBFC.

Despite a vast amount of media effects research, absolute 'proof' of harm, or of the extent of harm, is elusive, not least because of the ethical and practical difficulties involved. The responsible media regulator must therefore exercise judgement in a manner which takes account of the concerns raised by some research studies, but which also acknowledges the limitations of the research and the rights enshrined in UK law by the Human Rights Acts 1998.

The BBFC's own large scale public opinion research<sup>1</sup> has consistently shown that a majority of the public believe that adults should be able to choose their own entertainment, within the law. However, this general view often comes with a caveat when sexual violence is considered. In light of this, in 2002, the BBFC commissioned a detailed study<sup>2</sup> of public reaction to six films featuring sexual violence. The results revealed a degree of public concern about adults viewing graphic depictions of sexual violence which contrasted sharply with the attitude to adults viewing graphic depictions of consensual sex or graphic depictions of violence with no sexual context.

The 2002 research focussed on the views of a demographically balanced sample in relation to what adults in general should be allowed to view. Respondents were asked to view films which, in normal circumstances, they might never have chosen to view. As such, it revealed the extent of public concern over what impact certain films might have on *other people*, and relied upon assumptions about how these 'other people' might experience or respond to the films. The research did not reveal, or seek to reveal, the actual responses of the people who actively choose to watch such films.

To explore the issue further, the BBFC therefore commissioned qualitative research designed to investigate the ways in which naturally-occurring audiences understand and respond to five films – *À Ma Soeur*, *Baise-Moi*, *The House on the Edge of the Park*, *Ich i the Killer*, and *Irreversible* – chosen because the BBFC had been exercised over their inclusion of scenes of sexual violence. The central issues for the project were to find ways to explore: how audiences' understanding and response to the films were affected by the existence of different versions of the films, and the impact of the cuts required for four of the films; how audiences use the idea of 'context' as they make sense of the scenes of sexual violence; and how in particular audiences who respond positively to the films are understanding these scenes.

The report published today makes extremely interesting reading and underlines the complexity of the issue. The research was not designed to offer simple policy solutions to the BBFC and has,

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<sup>1</sup> Sense and Sensibility (2000) ; BBFC Guideline Research (2005)

<sup>2</sup> Where Do You Draw the Line (2002)

quite rightly, studiously avoided doing so. Nevertheless, the research offers some clear and valuable insights into the ways in which real audiences understand and respond to scenes of sexual violence in contemporary cinema and the BBFC is currently considering the implications of its findings for future classification decisions.

9 OCTOBER 2007

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This Summary presents a brief overall account of the main tasks, processes, problems and findings of the research project, *Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema*, contracted in early 2006 between the British Board of Film Classification and a research team from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, under the direction of Professor Martin Barker.

The task of the project was to explore the ways in which naturally-occurring audiences understand and respond to five films – *À Ma Soeur*, *Baise-Moi*, *The House on the Edge of the Park*, *Ich i the Killer*, and *Irreversible* – chosen because the BBFC had been exercised over their inclusion of scenes of sexual violence. The central issues for the project were to find ways to explore: how audiences’ understanding and response to the films were affected by the existence of different versions of the films, and the impact of the cuts required for four of the films; how audiences use the idea of ‘context’ as they make sense of the scenes of sexual violence; and how in particular audiences who respond positively to the films are understanding these scenes.

The findings in this Report draw upon data and materials gathered by means of:

- 1 a survey of 243 websites identified as key sites containing online debates around the films. By film, the number of analysed sites were: *À Ma Soeur* = 89; *Baise-Moi* = 88; *The House on the Edge of the Park* = 82; *Ich i the Killer* = 88; *Irreversible* = 89;
- 2 responses from 760 individuals (providing in total 1178 comments on the designated films) via a web questionnaire available online between June – September 2006, and supplemented by 79 completed paper-equivalents from a special screening of one film;
- 3 20 focus groups, 4 per film, with 50 recruited men and 44 women indicating positive responses to one of the films, recruited at a wide range of locations around the UK, audio-recorded and transcribed.

There are strong continuities between the picture of audience responses emerging from our three strands of evidence. Although each draws on a different source, and on talk produced in different speech-contexts (therefore governed by different rules of exchange), the three sets of findings are almost entirely consonant. We believe that this should encourage confidence in our findings.

## **Approaches and Methods employed:**

This research was grounded broadly within the cultural studies tradition for investigating and understanding audience responses. That tradition emphasises that real audiences are always located socially and historically, and the ways in which they respond to mediated images and narratives will inevitably relate to their sense of self and of their place in their world. It also sees in audiences’ ordinary ways of talking about their media engagements a rich resource for analysis, in the discursive categories, connections and separations which people deploy, and in their languages for describing and communicating their responses. In this research, a range of methods was used, including the following:

1. Quantitative: simple counts, using tabulation systems in large searchable websites and databases; cross-tabulations within our questionnaire database of responses to multiple-choice questions; a variety of analyses of materials coded by members of the project team, including coded accounts of websites surveyed.
2. Qualitative: broad surveys of kinds of talk, themes addressed, and languages used in websites; summary portraits of focus groups discussions; semantic modelling of positive and negative responses to each of the five films; close examination of assumptions, criteria, and implicit moves within these models.
3. Quali-quantitative: where possible, we used observed patterns within the quantifiable materials to isolate and then explore qualitative tendencies. This approach was used particularly to explore the relations between judgements on the five films.

It was agreed between the BBFC and the Research Team that for the focus groups we would seek in particular to recruit people who had positive responses to each film, in order to explore the nature of their pleasures and valuations. It was also understood that some of the questions to which we were seeking answers (for instance about sexual arousal) could not be approached directly, since audience members either would be unlikely to, or in some instances might probably be unwilling to, answer direct questions. However it was expected that the materials gathered and the methods employed to analyse those materials could throw valuable light on even some of the most challenging topics. This did, however, mean that to a considerable extent the Team had to approach the key topics indirectly, and to be alert to possible ways of capturing and conceptualising emergent aspects of audiences' responses. We note here three central moves the Team made in these regards:

- a) From the outset, and in the research design, we worked with a picture of the different likely impact on viewers who respond positively or negatively to the film. We formalised this recognition into a distinction between Embracers and Refusers (with different kinds of Ambivalence in between). Our research design was constructed to allow us to locate and distinguish these positions and explore the different ways in which they responded to the film – with Embracers afforded particular attention in the focus groups, on the working assumption that if there are influences, they are more likely to occur with those who engage most intensively with a film.
- b) Recognising the importance of 'context' both to the BBFC and to audiences, from an examination of our materials we developed a five-part classification of kinds of appeal to 'context'. These seek to capture the ways in which people account for the meaning of scenes of screened sexual violence. We have found that people do this by reference to: (1) Impacts on Self, and responses to those impacts; (2) Intra-filmic relations: how the scenes connect with, and are given meaning in light of, wider aspects of the film; (3) Inter-filmic: how comparisons with other films, or placement within recognised genres, provides grounds for judgements; (4) Non-Filmic Reality: the ways in which people measure the 'reality' or otherwise of events, and motives; and (5) Other Audiences: how the possible meanings of the scenes for other people are felt to condition responses. These appear to interrelate in distinctive ways for each of the five films.

- c) Recognising the necessity for the BBFC to consider how films may shape audiences' feelings and attitudes beyond the cinema, we examined closely the ways in which audiences *remember* aspects of the five films. From an examination of our materials, we developed a five-part classification of the ways Moments from a film become memorialised and meaningful to audiences. We have found that people do this in five distinguishable ways, each with different implications: (1) Resonant Moments – where an element of a film chimes very personally with a previous experience or perception; (2) Punctuation Moments – where an element of a film is unexpected and breaks a routine of watching; (3) Challenging Moments – where an element of a film clashes with previous expectations or ideals; (4) Imperative Moments – where an element of a film is felt to require a viewer to review his/her understanding of the whole; and (5) Circumstantial Moments – where a component of the viewing situation impinges on how sense is being made. Separating these has proved valuable, even though they do not always remain completely distinct. Again, there appear to be distinctive patterns for each of the five films.

### **Key findings:**

1. In the main, responses to the five films are distinct from each other. There are few overlaps of audiences and judgements. Within our data we can find little evidence of an interest in screened sexual violence *per se*. There are three exceptions to this: (a) a 'bad taste' interest, whose primary drive is towards a very public delight in the offensive and possibly illicit; (b) an anti-censorship interest, whose primary challenge is against anyone taking the right to judgements away from the individual; and (c) a 'BDSM' special interest group, whose members seek out materials which may contribute to sexual interests based around consensually-enacted fantasies.
2. Other than these, the differences in kinds of attention shown to the five films are to be found in the following main features: (a) into what vernacular genres they are placed, or against which they are measured; (b) where and within what rules of exchange debate tends to take place; (c) how moments of screened sexual violence are viewed, explained and related to contexts
3. A vital factor in determining responses to screened sexual violence is the *kinds of context* within which it is understood. Our research reveals that 'context' has a number of distinct meanings for audiences.
4. For the most positive among our audiences, on all five films (but especially for *À Ma Soeur* and *Baise-Moi*), in crucial scenes "seeing" events is not the primary element of their responses. Rather, tensions among and between seeing, hearing, physically responding, knowing and imagining constitute the basis of their understanding and response.
5. There are considerable tensions surrounding the issue of finding screen representations of sexual violence "arousing". This is understood to be a 'forbidden zone'. Yet there is strong evidence within our study (a) that many – both men and women – do find some such scenes arousing, but (b) that this can associate with *greater* condemnation of the violence because the arousal heightens awareness and involvement, and thus imaginative participation in the implications of the scene.
6. Overwhelmingly, Embracing and Refusing respondents find different kinds of meanings in the films, as a result of relating to them differently.

In the following summaries of findings for the individual films, we focus in particular on the contrasting responses of Embracers and Refusers. In the full Report we say more about the nature of Ambivalent responses, not least because their responses are often valuable in enabling us to specify the Embracing positions which they partially eschew.

7. *À Ma Soeur*: unsurprisingly a great deal of the debate around this film turns on the issue of the ending. For Refusing viewers, the ending is simply an unpleasant and inexplicable shock. Embracers, by contrast, find a logic in the ending, of a kind which requires their close attention and deep exploration. (Ambivalents frequently seek an intra-filmic explanation.) For Embracers, relations are particularly built with the character Anaïs who is perceived to ‘grow up’ through the film, and whose response both startles and challenges them. The pre-eminent contexts for Embracing reviewers are the (external) deceitfulness of ‘romance’, a perceived logic and structure within the film, and the ‘authoring’ of the film’s message through its central characters. The ‘cut’ concerns these viewers because (a) it disrupts a perceived flow and rhythm in the film and (b) withholds crucial understanding of Anaïs’ motives and responses. Both Embracers and Refusers take the view it is very hard to conceive how the ending might ever be used as a means to ‘grooming’ – for the Embracers, it is too meaningful, for the Refusers, it is too dark and pessimistic. The primary Context-categories for Embracers are Intra-filmic (binding together elements across the parts of the film), and Reality-measurements (sensing the ‘realities’ facing young girls entering puberty), and in associated manner *À Ma Soeur* Embracers show the highest level of Resonant Moments, as viewers measured the ‘reality’ of the two girls’ situation against the world they recognise.

Although we cannot do this so well with the other films, with *À Ma Soeur* we can locate a tendency for Embracers to be either younger women (recognising and feeling close to the difficult experiences of sexual maturation of the two girls), or older men (reflecting back with a touch of acknowledged guilt on male predatory tendencies).

We propose the following generalisations, each deriving from our materials and bearing on what a person has to be and to do if they are to connect with the film, and find it pleasurable and meaningful. They therefore bear on *how* the film might be influential. The more a person Embraces *À Ma Soeur*, the more likely they are:

- to place Anaïs at the centre of the film, as a complex character who embodies a kind of wisdom which can see through men;
- to accept that Anaïs speaks simultaneously as herself and as the embodiment of Breillat’s position;
- to find a broader ‘truthfulness’ about contemporary conditions in the film, in particular in relation to ‘deceit’ around romance as an ideal;
- to find the ‘slow’ earlier parts of the film as forewarning for the final attack, even while its precise occurrence is unexpected;
- to welcome the ending as an ambiguous commentary reflecting back onto the earlier scenes;

- to experience productive tensions between seeing, hearing, physical (including sexual) responses, their existing knowledge of male and female sexuality, and their imagining of characters;
  - not only to resent the cut but also to feel that the sense and point of the film has been undermined, through the loss of evidence of Anaïs' responses.
8. *Baise-Moi*: there is a substantial debate around how to judge how 'good' this is as a film, with Embracers and Refusers using incompatible criteria. A good deal of this debate turns on different perspectives of the relations between this film and an understanding of 'porn'. To Refusing viewers, *Baise-Moi* strays too close to porn, although they emphasise that in doing this, it fails since it fails to be arousing. Curiously, Embracers are more likely to acknowledge finding the film arousing, but point to characteristics which differentiate it from porn. Notably, Embracing viewers find the rape scene "realistic", by which they appear to mean that it is the very casualness of the rape scene which makes it realistic, as opposed to, say, the brutality of the rape in *Irreversible*. Embracers locate the story of the film quite precisely, to the world of debased inner cities – this is for them the most important context. The cut of the explicit penetration matters to them inasmuch the inclusion of that became part of the *awful, dull factuality* of rape. For Refusers, the showing of the condom at the moment of penetration renders it unrealistic in being simultaneously porn-like (showing penetration) but un-porn-like because of the condom – generally, the film is seen by Refusers as so poor, they do not much care either way.

It is difficult to identify precisely who is most likely to Embrace the film. In many ways it seems easier to Reject it. It appears that some quite tough criteria have to be met, to commit enthusiastically to it. Its *reputation* as an 'explicit' film seems to have led to a deal of 'hopeful' viewing, most of which results in disappointment ("it's not good porn"). Only very tentatively do we conclude that the greatest Embracing of *Baise-Moi* comes from women with a working perception of urban decline and its dangers for women.

We offer the following generalisations: the more a person Embraces *Baise-Moi*, the more likely they are:

- to locate the world of the film quite precisely – as that of the banlieux in France, and their tournante gang-rapes, or their echoes in other countries – and to understand 'from the inside' the reaction of the two central women as responses to these conditions.
- to engage with a perceived zestfulness in the women, seeing their response as a mad despairing spree, with a punk-ish energy, but doomed from the outset, and to perceive and respond to a playful knowingness in the film;
- to draw upon knowledge of the lives of the actresses involved in the film as a positive parallel to the struggles of the characters;
- to perceive and play with the idea of the role-reversal in which, for a brief time, the women become as men;
- to operate with a sense of their being a complex set of conceivable pleasures that can be gained from films;
- to see the early penetration shot as a sign of the will to intrude on their bodies, as a way of possessing of them – coupled with thus seeing the scene as a

commentary on (rather than an example of) pornography, aided by (among other things) the contribution of the sound in the film.

9. *The House on the Edge of the Park*: responses to this film turn around perceptions of, and attitudes to ‘exploitation cinema’, a vernacular film category with quite developed meanings for many viewers. According to their level of knowledge of and interest in this ‘genre’, viewers borrow criteria from it to judge *House*. In one respect, all agree – the use of the razor on Cindy is a point of rupture where the film’s events rupture the rules of the genre. However they may rate the film, Embracers and Refusers appear to agree that such substantial cuts render the film almost unintelligible – the nature of Alex, and his ultimate demise, become meaningless. The greatest debate is reserved for the two scenes, where some viewers could not decide if two of the women were consenting to ‘rape’. There is a surprising range to the film’s Resonant Moments, encompassing many moments of arousal and discomfort; but there is virtually only the one Challenging or Imperative Moment, the assault on Cindy – seen as a turning point by both Embracers and Refusers. The overwhelming Context-category for all viewers is Inter-filmic: how does this film measure against the perceived rules and content of the ‘exploitation’ genre? This is so strong that, for instance, there is a striking lack of interest in Other Viewers, who are simply presumed to share expertise in this genre.

With caution we would identify the ‘naturally-occurring’ audience of *House* as predominantly young men, along with a smaller number of young women, who are attracted to the visceral delights and arcane knowledge of the exploitation genre.

We propose the following generalisation, that the more a person Embraces *The House on the Edge of the Park*, the more likely they are:

- to have encountered the film as part of an interest in a larger subgenre of films, heavily mediated by a sense of belonging to a community of such viewers, who swap knowledge, lists, and judgements, and enjoy debating their love of this kind of film; where on the other hand viewers encounter the film more accidentally, and still Embrace it, they are likely still to sense that this is ‘specialist cinema’;
- to view almost all the characters within the film as flawed and compromised. This is a kind of film which does not fall into a simple opposition of good vs bad, rather, because of the inherent conflicts, even the worst character is capable of winning a degree of sympathy;
- to distinguish ‘genre-moments’ from the bits that ‘matter’ because they retain the required capacity to have impact. This works differently for those who are new Embracers of the genre, who will be trying to build an account of its working rules while still savouring moments of impact. Responses to the music appear to differentiate Embracers sharply from all other groups of respondents;
- to see a central political dynamic within the category ‘exploitation’, and thence within *House* see a central conflict over *class* – and see the film as taking, to a degree, the side of the lower class against rich and hypocritical



upper class people. ‘Exploitation movies’ reflect this – they are disreputable films fascinated by the lives of disreputable people;

- to insist on the real ambiguities in the various kinds of interpersonal violence in the film. Within this class model the arrogance of the wealthy means that they *deserve* a lot of what happens to them – even if at the end Alex has to pay for his excesses; on the other hand, they are most likely to identify the character of Cindy as coming from ‘outside’ the genre’s *dramatis personae*, not at all deserving what happens to her;
- to view the ending as largely irrelevant to the overall genre-measurement of the film, and often as unsurprising because prefigured by the ‘victims’ callous plot to use Cindy;
- to regard the cuts to the film as pointless because the violence is what the film is, and what it is about. But they also see the cuts as predictable – the BBFC is identified as speaking from the position of “respectability” incapable of understanding the pleasures and pursuits of those who value this kind of cinema. They challenge the BBFC’s logic of claims about how audiences are affected and champion ‘bad films’ as distinctively valuable;
- to insist on the complexity of kinds of permissible responses, and *make a show* of their responses – simultaneously refusing as “pretentious” any depth-analysis of the film, its narrative and construction, and at the same time showing that they can do it; simultaneously drawing out impeccable moral logics from the film’s construction, and proposing and playing with the exact opposite. There is a running tension between seeing that the films that they love are ‘bad’ (in a series of senses), and knowing that if they *were* good (cinematically, morally) they would probably not like them.

10. *Ichii the Killer*: in the debates around *Ichii* neither Embracing nor Refusing viewers particularly single out the scenes of sexual violence as things to be considered on their own. Rather, they take their place amid an array of other violence. *Ichii* is overwhelmingly viewed and measured for its place within Japanese cinema, as an example of this distinctive tradition of film-making. Audiences, furthermore, organise their practices (for instance, collecting editions and gathering knowledge) and their viewings (in order to ensure the wished-for visceral experiences) in accordance with their understanding of that membership.

We propose the following generalisations: the more a person Embraces *Ichii the Killer*, the more likely they are:

- to celebrate the visceral, and the extreme, and identify themselves as a distinct group with distinctive practices of viewing.
- to celebrate Japanese horror cinema as a distinctive tradition exploring “dark” ideas, themes and characters.
- to perceive the film as constructed around a series of set-piece extreme scenes, measured first by their Impact on Self. Thereafter, for second viewings and beyond, several distinct strategies of further meaning-making emerge, either emphasising cinematic stylistics, or character-formation.
- to deny any simple distinction between the general violence of the film, and scenes of supposed sexual violence.
- relate to a variety of characters in the film, and follow their story-arcs

- the more they are likely to perceive the cuts as withholding character motivations, and transforming the film's genre.

11. *Irreversible*: unsurprisingly, debate around this film turns on two aspects in particular: the use of the reverse-narrative, and the long central rape scene. To Embracers, the reverse-narrative becomes a meaning in its own right, and they frequently self-consciously adopt the film's slogan: "Time destroys everything". Refusers, comparing *Irreversible* unfavourably with *Memento*, see it as a self-defeating ploy. Embracers congratulate the BBFC for their courage in accepting the awful truth embodied in the rape, and frequently report finding themselves feeling guilty at being able to do nothing to stop it. Refusers almost always see the rape scene as excessive, so long as to be unendurable (although none call for the scene to be cut – although some do argue that the film should not have been made at all). The issue of how "gruelling" a rape scene should be, brings into view a doubled relation that Embracers have: the ability to be 'hard', and watch the entire scene, should lead to a transforming 'softness' of sympathy for any woman ever raped, and this frequently leads, through the combination of reverse narrative, central rape scene, and shifting cinematic styles, to a thematic about the dangers and self-destructiveness of male violence. There are few Resonant Moments that are not also Challenging or Imperative Moments for Embracers (and to a considerable extent Refusers). The few exceptions focus on the later parts of the film, where the known-to-be-fragile 'normality' of the couple becomes almost too poignant. Context-categories are likewise very circumscribed – this film is measured overwhelmingly by a combination of Impact on Self, and probable Impacts on Others.

Of the five films studied, we would say most positively that *Irreversible* works primarily for a 'male' viewer (although this can include women who are able to adopt a 'male perspective'). We have also found sufficient references in all three strands of materials to suggest that the most committed audiences frequently feel driven by the film to look at their own lives, and to revalue their family and friends.

We propose the following generalisations, each deriving from our materials and bearing on what a person has to be and to do if they are to connect with the film, find it pleasurable and meaningful. They therefore bear on *how* the film might be influential. The more a person Embraces *Irreversible*, the more likely they are:

- to see the narrative form and structure, other cinematic components (eg, sound, camerawork, editing), and the resultant filmic message, dovetailing to warn the viewer to look at his/her own life;
- to experience the rape scene as simultaneously too long, and needing to be so; as simultaneously unbearably voyeuristic and a sign of our helplessness;
- to probe certain discourses around masculinity, both in the film, and in the viewer 'himself';
- to perceive Alex as a 'figure' symbolising a lost idyllic possibility;
- to see La Tenia's homosexuality as a sign that any woman is at risk of rape, since he is not even interested *per se* in women, and to see Bellucci's star-beauty as thus made irrelevant;

- to be caught in a paradox, that repeat-viewing is potentially valuable, but only justifiable if it continues to be as hurtful as the first viewing.
12. In a closing section, we report the results of an experimental methodological procedure, in which we isolated within the questionnaire those respondents who only gave positive responses to one film, and compared them in detail first with the responses of those who combined positive responses to that film with positive responses to another, and then with the responses of those who gave negative responses to the selected film but positive responses to another. In the main, this procedure simply confirmed the findings of our other analyses. However in particular it did emphasise the following features:
- with *À Ma Soeur*, the central focus is ever more strongly on Anaïs, her collaboration with director Breillat, along with a very strong sense of the structure and rhythm of the film;
  - with *Baise-Moi*, there is a particular emphasis on the film as an expression of ‘women’s dangerous sexuality’ – a *force* external to the film which it harnesses;
  - with *House on the Edge of the Park*, while most elements are continuous with our other findings, two features do get emphasised: a willingness to acknowledge sexual arousal as part of viewers’ response; and the class dimension of the filmic experience;
  - with *Ich i the Killer*, the greatest emphasis is on the capacity of the film to surprise by dint of its sudden shifts in speed and tone, and that this is part of the film’s dealing with issues we normally ignore;
  - with *Irreversible*, there is a very positive drive to relate the film to viewers’ own lives – that the visceral impact of the film forces viewers to think philosophically about family and friends.
12. Whilst avoiding trying to suggest any policy-responses, we draw attention to three issues which have particularly struck us: (a) the public position of the BBFC, and its perceived membership of a ‘respectable’ class which threatens the legitimate interests of counter-cultural film enthusiasts; (b) the issue of the BBFC’s implicit models of the audience contained within its judgements about different films, whose evidential base may not be available for scrutiny; and (c) the problem of the release of versions which do not acknowledge that they have been cut.

**Martin Barker**  
**Project Director**  
**1 July 2007.**

# **REPORT**

**to the British Board of Film Classification**

**upon completion of the research project:**

**“Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in  
Contemporary Cinema”**

**from the research team at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.**

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**March 2007.**

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# 1. Contents of this Report

This Report documents the main processes and key outcomes of the research project “Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema”, which was contracted between the British Board of Film Classification, and a research team at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The data-gathering part of the project ran between June – December 2006, with the analysis and writing of this Report extending to the end of March 2007. The project was designed to explore audience responses to five films, and to the relations among those responses, with a central focus of the following questions:

- a) How do audiences understand, respond to and judge scenes of sexual violence, and in what ways do they relate these to various kinds of ‘context’?
- b) How are understandings, responses and judgements affected by viewing different versions of the film?
- c) How does knowledge of the existence of/difference between different versions play a role in people’s understandings and responses?
- d) How in particular do audiences – both male and female – who are particularly positive about a film containing such scenes understand and respond to it, and what difference is made to them by viewing different versions of it?

The designated five films, *À Ma Soeur / Fat Girl* (Breillat, 2001), *Irreversible* (Noë, 2002), *Baise Moi / Fuck Me* (Despentes/Trinh Thi, 2000), *Ich i The Killer* (Miike, 2001) and *The House on the Edge of the Park* (Deodato, 1980) were chosen in concert with the BBFC because each had posed difficult questions regarding classification, due to their inclusion of scenes of sexual violence.

The contract between the BBFC and UWA Team delineated two streams of data-gathering, chosen as an option from four proffered possibilities. The two streams were: a survey of key websites, in order to gauge the nature of the debates surrounding each film; and a series of focus groups, four to each film, with recruited ‘positive’ audiences. However, for reasons outlined below, the Team remained convinced of the value of including a third stream, and were able to gain additional funding from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth’s Research Fund for this. Although this is outside the research contract, the findings of this strand are included in this Report, because (among other things) the processes and results are in practice tightly interwoven with the other two data-streams.

In order that this Report should be of manageable length, it draws out and illustrates the main findings of the project rather than giving detail on every point. In doing so, it references and draws upon a series of Working Documents, all of which were made available to the BBFC.

# **Part One: The Research Process**

## **2. Conducting the Research**

In the period between the agreement of the Contract and its official start, a number of important processes were undertaken:

1. The post of Research Assistant was advertised and, following interviews, Ms Melanie Selfe, a former Aberystwyth student now nearing completion of her PhD in Norwich, was appointed to a 7-month contract (six months funded by the BBFC, one additional month funded by UWA). At the same time, another shortlisted applicant, Denzell Richards, was invited to become our second focus group moderator.
2. A detailed Research Ethics document was prepared, examined within the Department at Aberystwyth, and conveyed to the BBFC. This covered a range of issues, from the ensuring of anonymity of responses, through the problems of how to explain the nature of the research and of asking 'sensitive questions' of respondents, to ensuring secure use of uncut versions of the five films made available to us by the BBFC.
3. Following the successful bid to the UWA Research Fund, the web questionnaire was designed and developed, and an external consultant employed for its digital creation. Following the RA appointment, this was tested, amended, and launched in late June.
4. A coding system was prepared and agreed, and developed into a database using Microsoft Access, for recording the nature of the talk around each film on chosen websites.

An approximate timescale for the project was mapped out. Across the months June to October the work of identifying, gathering and coding websites would be undertaken by the RA and one other member of the Team – analysis to begin in November. Across the period late June to the end of September, the web questionnaire would be publicised – analysis to begin in October. From email responses arising from completions of the web questionnaire, through which individuals could indicate their willingness to take part in further discussions with us, focus groups would be constructed over time in various parts of the country, with the aim of completing all 20 groups by mid-October. Transcription of recordings by casual paid assistants to begin as soon as the first groups were completed, and then analysis (shared among all members of the Team). In the event, with the exception of the web questionnaire which closed at the expected time, all other processes ran over time. Notably the organisation, management and transcription of the focus groups proved harder than anticipated – locating viable groups in different parts of the country, and finding dates to meet them, taxed our abilities. In the end, our very last focus group did not take place until early March 2007. As a result we sought and were granted by the BBFC an additional month to complete the analysis and writing up of results.

Over the course of the project, we regularly monitored the progress of the various strands of our work, including checking the levels of response to each of the five films

within the web questionnaire. It became apparent early on that no matter how we tried, we were unlikely to recruit good numbers of respondents to *House* – either in positive or negative directions – and that this was likely to make it hard for us to organise our focus groups. As a relatively older, and less well-known Italian film, its naturally-occurring audience is just smaller. To remedy this, it was agreed with the BBFC that we would organise a special screening of the uncut version of *House* at the Arts Centre Cinema in Aberystwyth, advertising widely in the local area. Although inevitably we drew a high proportion of University-related people to this, our audience of 79 did include a number of others. All participants had agreed to complete our questionnaire on paper, and these were manually entered into our database, coded in order that their different provenance could be taken into account. And from this screening we organised one local focus group, made up entirely of positive female respondents.

The research was managed through a combination of irregular meetings of the whole Research Team, and regular oversight of the on-going work of the RA by the Director of the project. One major change arose when Dr Mathijs left Aberystwyth in September 2006 for a post at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. He did however remain involved in the work of the project, and especially in the analysis of the web-materials, albeit at a distance.

This Report has been written primarily by the Project Director, Professor Barker, drawing on the contributions and Working Documents of all Team members, and with their comments and critical input. He wants in particular to record his thanks to Melanie Selfe for her commitment, energy, care and intelligence. Her contribution hugely outran the brief of a Research Assistant.



### 3. The Research Tasks

The BBFC made it clear to us that, because of their remit, they were particularly concerned with the question of the impact, if any, on audience responses and understandings of the cuts required for classification, to either cinema or DVD/video, in four of the five films. The question of screened sexual violence in general is a topic on which there is very little research, to date; and what there is, has been almost entirely laboratory-based and subject to the problems and critiques which such work has attracted.<sup>1</sup> It is an issue which clearly raises powerful moral concerns. Some of these relate to age-appropriateness. Others relate to possible effects of such representations in influencing attitudes towards victims of sexual violence, or *in extremis* encouraging the commission of sexual assaults. For these reasons, the BBFC were particularly interested in learning about what it may mean for audiences to be very *positive* towards such films. What kinds of enjoyment may be derived from watching such films and their scenes of sexual violence? What ‘messages’ may be taken from the scenes, from either cut or uncut versions? What sorts of ‘context’ frame the scenes of sexual violence for different kinds of viewers? And what indications are there of distinct responses to, and understandings of, such films among men, and among women? But if there is little enough research (leaving aside its quality and reliability) on the general issue of screened sexual violence, there is none, to our knowledge, on a topic as detailed as the impact of specific cuts on audience understandings and responses.

The research posed a number of methodological challenges. In our discussions with the BBFC it was accepted and understood that some issues are not readily open to *direct* examination. For example, it is not sensible simply to ask people, directly, if they find some images and scenes sexually arousing.<sup>2</sup> Issues around intrusiveness, and of truthfulness, abound. For these reasons, it was accepted and understood that this research project would seek to gather a wide range of kinds of materials which might, through analysis, *reveal* elements and components of the difficult topics. This was also not a public opinion survey, in any sense. Rather, it was an investigation, through three routes (allowing comparisons of findings) of the *naturally-occurring audiences* for these films, and how under these three different circumstances they talk about and make sense of their responses to the films. Through these, the impact of any cuts could become visible. Methods of analysis deriving from two related research traditions – reception studies and audience studies – would be used to draw out understandings and responses, at a sufficiently detailed level to capture how meanings are made from encounters with the films.

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<sup>1</sup> Ideally we would have liked to conduct a comprehensive literature search and review, but this was not possible in the project’s timescale.

<sup>2</sup> The sensitivities are strong around this issue as illustrated by the assumption posted here in a web discussion: “Rape is a very sensitive subject matter to film, and I agree if there is to be rape scenes they should have a point for being included in the plot and shouldn’t be filmed to arouse the viewer in any way, although there will be certain individuals who will be.” (C4-Xtreme-rape-in-film-thread(Irr, BM)\c4-rape-in-film-thread.htm). It is as it were ‘written in’ that to wish representations of rape to be arousing would be a complete demonstration of perversity. This is an “unarguable” that this research has had to learn to argue with.

This did mean that the actual practices of gathering and analysis had to have their own internal logic and trajectory. Given large bodies of complex materials, procedures had to be developed for managing each of them in order to discern meaningful patterns, categories, separations and oppositions within them, which could eventually lead back to answers to the large overall project questions. Since there is so little preceding research on the topic, few analytic categories already exist. We drew heavily on our own preceding research experiences and practices, as well as on our knowledge of work in parallel fields, in order to generate clear and unambiguous working categories.

An example may best explain our meaning here: the BBFC's interest in cuts and their impact required us to pay attention to how audiences attended to each film as a whole, and how each 'whole' provided a *context* for the scenes of sexual violence. What understandings and judgements are called into action to explain the scenes that they encounter, whether cut or uncut? Again it is not possible to ask this directly, for a number of reasons. In each of the three data-streams, therefore, our task was to develop means of locating all the ways in which audiences talk about 'context', without necessarily using this word or any of its near-synonyms. What does 'context' mean in every case, and how does an understanding of 'context' play a role in shaping understandings of and responses to the moments of screened sexual violence? As analysts, our task became complicated, but usefully so, when we began to see that the concept of a 'context' is multi-layered. It is not simply the film as a whole, rather, a number of other features (including the context of viewing, the audience member's own physical and emotional reactions, the imputed genre of film/event, and perceptions of other viewers). Realising this complexity, the Team developed and tested a series of categorisations of 'context' with the aim of ensuring that these were unambiguous, comprehensive, and explanatory. These were used both quantitatively and qualitatively to explore the nature of audiences' responses.

Having developed and tested these analytic distinctions, we were able to re-examine our materials with them to hand. This enabled us to locate patterns not otherwise readily visible, and to relate them to the project's over-arching questions.

## 4. Theory and Concepts

At the heart of our analysis of all the materials we have gathered is a conception of ‘the audience’ which we have made clear to the BBFC, and which has closely guided how we have gone about examining and finding significant features. This conception has been elaborated at length in our own and other people’s writing, but we summarise a few key points here:

1. Unlike a great deal of research which takes its cue from the mass communications tradition – and which focuses either on the search for a ‘vulnerable audience’ (young, immature, or morally half-formed) who encounter ‘unsuitable materials’ – or the arguments (we know of little published research here) from a more psychotherapeutic tradition which looks to the possibility of dangerous ‘loners’ who may seek out materials to bolster and shape unchecked fantasies – our research begins from the notion that *all* audiences are rooted in complicated but investigable ways in their history and society.
2. From this comes the notion that in the ways in which audiences choose to talk about their likes and dislikes, their preferences and avoidances (in both naturally-occurring contexts such as online, and deliberately-staged situations such as interviews) can be found very many of the signs and evidence of the manner of their engagements with materials such as films.
3. The method derived from this conception for examining audience talk neither takes the talk literally, nor looks ‘behind’ it for evidence of unspeakable ‘motives’. Rather, it sees in the ordinary descriptions that people give a range of forms of evidence: the *categories* into which they place films, and therefore by implication, against which they measure the film; the *real, implied and possible audiences* that they associate with the film; the *kinds of engagement* (pleasures, bodily responses, senses of narrative organisation, cinematic construction and aesthetic achievements, comparisons with the world beyond) they participate in; and how these are *connected, separated, patterned* and *formed into ‘wholes’*.

This abbreviated summary has at its heart the strength, we believe, that this research tradition is committed to the study of real and actual audiences, rather than either those induced to watch films in laboratory situations, or those hypothesised by ‘worried investigators’, deriving responses from their models. The methods are committed to trying to take into account the circumstances under which the ‘talk’ being analysed was produced, and acquired. This is a requirement of the very approach we take, which emphasises that when people talk, they always address *someone*, and that therefore in the context and moment of ‘talk’, real, imagined and possible audiences are all already in play. As audiences talk to each other, and to us, they are engaged in versions of an ordinary activity of making and communicating their meanings, pleasures and involvements. We next briefly report on four important methodological moves made by the Research Team, which significantly shape how we conducted our investigation and analysis.

## 5. Distinguishing ‘Embracers’ and ‘Refusers’

From the outset, we agreed with the BBFC that we would need to pay close attention to one especial set of viewers: those whose response to a film was particularly positive. The logic behind this is, we think, clear. A person who dismisses a film because they regard it to be of very low quality is very unlikely to retain a strong impression of it – not least because they are unlikely (unless a professional reviewer) to have spent much time attending to it. A person who dismisses a film because they find it unpleasant, may well retain some uncomfortable memories from it. However, precisely because these are uncomfortable, they are likely to be held at a distance. On the other hand, a person who is pleased, impressed, excited, or aroused is likely to engage with the film more concentratedly, and will carry away impressions and memories which are more likely to be welcomed and absorbed.<sup>3</sup> This is an issue one of us has broached in previous research, in particular, the *Crash* film project.<sup>4</sup>

It was for these reasons that we recommended, and it was agreed, that we would use the focus groups to explore very positive responses to the film. For the overall design of the project, however, we wanted to be able to explore as fully as possible the *different characters* of positive and negative understandings and responses to each film. We also wanted to be able to explore the ways in which they modelled each other – what view a negative viewer has of what a positive viewer might be like, for instance. For this reason, we formulated a working definition between Embracers and Refusers of the films (and of course in-between Ambivalent positions), and defined for ourselves ways of distinguishing and locating them within each strand of the research. In our Web Survey, we took advantage of the fact that contributors to very many web fora give star rankings out of 5 to any film they comment on. This gave us a simply method of sorting Embracing (5\*), Ambivalent (3\*), and Refusing (1\*) reviews, for instance. In the Questionnaire, we invited respondents to rank each film along two evaluative dimensions, with five point scales on cinematic quality, and thematic value (immediately followed by an invitation to explain in their own words what they meant to convey by these rankings). Again, this gave us clear means for preliminary sorting of responses into the three categories. The focus groups of course recruited directly from those who indicated positive responses. However, in practice, within the detail of many individuals’ responses, we were able to identify a range of differences between outright Embrace and variously qualified Ambivalent positions.

It is important to say that the adoption of the term ‘Embracer’ does not seek to predetermine the *manner* or *implications* of audiences’ positive responses to each film. It was for this reason that we consciously avoided terms which might carry such implications, or the echoes of past work: for instance, ‘fans’, ‘enthusiasts’, ‘critics’, or ‘disapprovers’. In fact, our conclusions are that the meanings of Embracing and Refusing are widely different by film. For some, we would argue that terms suggesting ‘pleasure’ or ‘enjoyment’ are not really right at all. Even a looser term

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting here the point we report later, that in all five cases positive respondents to the web questionnaire simply had more to say on each film, and that where the quantities approached each other, it was because negative respondents might want to comment on the topic of censorship.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs & Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception*, London: Wallflower Press, 2001.

such as ‘admiration’ works better for some films (e.g, *Irreversible*) than others (e.g., *The House on the Edge of the Park*). The primary intent and force of the term ‘Embracer’ is first and foremost to help us locate that audience which should, by all logic, be the most influenced, and then to seek to determine, independently, the nature of the film’s influence on them.

## 6. Understanding How People Remember Films

“I would put [*Irreversible*] right up there with some of the great films such as Haneke’s *Funny Games*, and Pasolini’s *Salo*. They’re both films that have had a huge impact on me, they’re films I also saw uncut, in a cinema, with an audience, I experience that kind of mass fear and tension with all those films. I can’t think of any other film with which I’ve experienced *that*. But all three of them are incredibly well made films, they...again I think we also can’t put our finger on something that affects you, all three of those films really affected me one way or another. Even if it’s just the case that they gave me the creeps, but they’re still films that really will stick in my memory forever. They’ll always be with me. And I do regularly think of them.”

Our research inevitably drew upon people’s memories of watching our five films – and in some (self-acknowledged) cases that could be after a longish time. In other cases (in particularly in association with some of our focus groups), questionnaire respondents and focus group participants made a point of rewatching a film shortly before talking to us. Either way, we had to consider the issue of recall.

In recent years, in a number of fields, there has been rising attention to the topic of ‘memory’. Within film studies this has predominantly been an interest in two things: (a) the role of nostalgia – for example, the ways in which the recalled memories of the elderly can summon back the social relations of past cinemagoing; and (b) paradoxically alongside that, the self-construction of memory – that recall is not pure or direct, but rather a story of the past, through which people make sense of their present-day as much as recall previous times. But in the field of the psychology of memory, a wider set of discussions have led to the recognition of a series of different kinds of memory: from flash memory – those encounters which impress themselves on us in such a way that they remain detached and startling; to predictive memory – the ways in which, as we encounter new problems or tasks, we are able to summon back appropriate previous experiences in order to plan actions.

In the course of analysing our materials, we have been likewise forced to make distinctions between a number of different ways in which people can recall moments in films that they have seen. This first came to our attention when one of us was inputting the paper *House* questionnaires. Casual inspection revealed a sharp disjunction between answers to two questions. Responses to the question ‘What is the most memorable moment?’ were highly individuated. Responses to the question ‘What is the most uncomfortable moment?’, on the other hand, were highly stereotyped. It emerged that while the first question was clearly seen as requiring a *personal* answer, the second was regarded as requiring a *measure against an ethical standard*.

We have come to distinguish five major kinds. However much they may overlap and interact, each has its own distinctive characteristics, and implications and consequences for how films mean and matter to people:

1. ***Resonant Moments:*** elements of a film which strike a personal chord with a viewer, awake a memory, or arouse strong personal feelings, for reasons which can include sensuous or aesthetic or other kinds of responses. Our *feelings* about such moments are likely to be paramount. And as a result, these tend to be highly individual, idiosyncratic and unpredictable – and may be without implications for the rest of one’s responses to a film.
2. ***Punctuation Moments:*** Attention-grabbers, intrusive moments where a film seizes us and requires full concentrated attention. The fact that this involves concentrated participation does not mean that we will recall them accurately – indeed, possibly the opposite, our involvement is so intense at those intrusive moments that we may ‘exaggerate’ what occurs and how it is presented. These are most likely to be led by distinctive, unpredicted filmic moments.
3. ***Challenge Moments:*** These are moments when a particular conflict is set up between an event in a film, and the presumptions and criteria of judgement of a viewer – or presumptions that the viewer is *aware of* and feels to be widely held. Unlike Resonant Moments, these can be moments of difficulty and can lead to a sense of distance from the film. They may or may not lead on to the fourth kind of Moment. These are likely to be quite patterned, in two ways: there will be particular moments within a film which tend to provoke such challenges, but equally since these are likely in part to be provocations to elements of current cultural ‘commonsense’, *what* and *how* they challenge may also be patterned and relatively predictable.
4. ***Imperative Moments:*** Any aspect of a film which, because of the manner in which we have been attending and building a working account of it, either at the time or retrospectively, forces us to reconsider that overall account. These act as crystallising elements, in and through which the film becomes either relatively cohesive, or challenging and incoherent. These do not work automatically. Rather, they require a viewer to *try* to articulate an overall account of the film.
5. ***Circumstantial Moments:*** Any part of the circumstances and contexts relating to how and when the film was viewed, which pressed expectations or a framing onto it, leading to the accentuation of attention to specific aspects of the film. These can include where, or when, or with whom the film is viewed.

Of course these can overlap and enter each other – or perform doubled roles – but equally they can exist pretty largely separate from each other.

Examples, to illustrate, all from our Brighton *À Ma Soeur* focus group transcript:

1. **Resonant:** Tom discusses his memories of the film, which are not in general all that precise. But here he is sure: “Umm, the thing I remember, the thing I remember most, well, the thing that struck me was the, the little songs the girl sings in the first one. I tried to transcribe them, but my French is so crap that I gave up, but I really like them, I used to like that little girl and so I, umm, didn’t, I don’t know the other characters seemed a bit, I wasn’t really interested in the other characters to be honest ...” The point is, his memory is interwoven with his

building of a relationship with Anaïs which is, as he says, quite unlike his relationship with the other characters. There is an example of a quite other kind, in Kerry's responses, who tells us something which she *knows* is kind of 'separate': "Umm, the scene where the, the, Italian lad was erm stroking and touching the girl perhaps, yeah with the sister, the sensual nature of him doing that, that's, as an image, has really struck me, and, and I liked her nightie as well so [laughs] that really has nothing to do with that but the whole thing, that, that's quite stayed with me." This may sound like a passing comment, but in fact it does play a role, and she returns to it later, in her answer to our "difficult" question about sexual arousal: "Er yes, when they were in bed and she was in the nice nightie which I've already said, and umm [pause] that was very sensual, and it was before it went beyond, what she was actually looking for, she was enjoying the sensuality of it, and the kissing and the touching and then it moved on to umm, other areas where she wasn't quite ready to go so, the initial bit was I thought was very sensual and umm, you know quite, quite a turn on really." In some way the nightie was *appropriate* to the sensuous, and seductive nature of the scene – until the boy began to push Elena too hard.

2. **Punctuation:** Cliff recalls the ending, but in a curious way, which the moderator in fact asks him about – in fact he 'gets it wrong' revealingly: "I couldn't remember, you know, the sexual details of it, erm, and, yeah, the end.. the ending when all of a sudden it's bright and it's violent and stuff, I'd say that sticks out, for obvious reasons, erm, even though it then just sort of cut to credits for it and I just sort of went 'What?' [laughs] erm [pause] yeah, er, but I, I remember, er, on more a sort of general level, that, erm, thematically it was, er, I was surprised it was kinda harking back to, er, Breillat's *Trente-six Filles*, rather than later stuff like *Romance* and [pause] whatever the other one she did around that time was." Cliff's misremembering this as a very *bright* scene, when in fact it occurs in the dark, is surely a result of his 'all-of-a-sudden' intense attention to the scene – which he then *contrasts* with his thematic appreciation of the film ... which happens to make little use of the final scene.
3. **Challenge:** Two very different examples. Tom, first, commenting on one aspect of the final scene which has stuck with him (his comments are interlaced with a lot of interjections from other people, but we have cleaned these out for simplicity of presentation): "I felt the film was a bit maybe a bit prurient, I had I had I had you know I did feel it was a bit, you know, enjoying itself a bit, I I remember there was a scene with the guy's erect penis a nice sort of red hard looking thing, was a prosthetic I found out on the umm on the the web somewhere, and I thought 'Ah they've gone to the trouble of making that prosthetic' it does give you a jolt you think fuck man this is you know, they've made a porn film... Yeah you see his you see his penis, you see a... Ah but he has an erect... And and there's a bit at the end where she wets herself I think, the er the younger sister... and you kind of see up her skirt and she's wetting herself and I thought hmm yeah, I just didn't know I I thought we'd just. are we getting off on this or is this adding something, and I wasn't quite sure..." Tom's discomfort with this does not lead him to think further about the scene and to seek a meaning for its contribution to the film – instead, he 'steps outside' and measures the film against an external criterion (a "porn film").



There is a very different, interesting example of a Challenging Moment with Deb, just after she joins the discussion (late) and adds a new dimension to it. She was struck, she says, not by the fact that the girls were so young (which Kerry had been discussing as she entered) but by the open recognition that one of the girls is fat: “The thing, the thing I remember most strongly ... was the fact that it was about a *fat* girl and her sister and that, seemed to be almost written about as if that was a kind of transgressive thing in itself because even when you’re talking about underage girls, it’s not very often that you see images of kind of kind of the female form that are less than perfect? And I think that was one of the things that kind of interested me in the film because, you know I I kind of related to that personally but that seem to be when I read the reviews that was the thing that jumped out, for me, and it seemed almost as I I don’t remember reading that there was you know a rape scene or they were underage or anything its almost seemed to me the way I read it that the shocking thing was that it was about a fat girl, you know cos you don’t see them in films very often...” This is not her own response – she has encountered this in other comments about the film – but it conditions what her own response will be. And it is as much about her preparations for seeing the film (since she got it from reviews before seeing the film) as it is about seeing the film itself. It tells her what is significant to note about Anaïs.

4. **Imperative:** Tom found the ending very difficult, and did not overcome his ambivalent reactions to it, even in the course of the group discussion. He couldn’t make up his mind about Anaïs’ reactions: “I guess I started off I thought it was kind of, attention seeking and [sucks teeth] a bit silly, I felt that well it’s kind of, it was as if umm, the, th. what the Italian guy did was equivalent in some vague way to what the, er, to what this guy who put the sledgehammer through the, through the windscreen did, and I didn’t buy that really, and, I didn’t believe in the girl’s reaction for a minute, and, I thought well it’s just playing a game with me, it’s not taking itself seriously, I remember thinking that it’d have been better if the Italian guy had had sex with the *little* girl, cos that’s the kind of thing arseholes *really* do, I figured, umm, and umm [pause] but I, I just didn’t get it [said very quickly], but then later on I felt, I, it suddenly came to me and I thought [pause] that, umm, the girl’s joke at the end really is that she hasn’t been raped, because, well [pause] umm, she doesn’t see, she sees it as just what men do, umm, she, she’s sort of diagnosing what had, what the Italian guy had done you know? She’s saying to all men there well, you know [pause] it’s not rape because [pause] well, you guys don’t rape do you? [pause] so that kind of came home to me and seeing it again the Italian guy seemed more an arsehole than he did the first time round [pause] umm, and also then I, I couldn’t, what also kind of really stuck in my mind was, the idea that, this, this, that that the *prettier* sister had umm [pause] had kind of brought this on herself, kind of thing, and that the kind of rapist guy was the fantasy of the *little* girl [pause] umm, and I thought it’s kind of, kind of strange that she kind of has this fantasy of being raped and, and her mother murdered and her sister murdered [pause] and I thou. I thought it was a bit *un-serious*, and I still ki., I still kind of the thing that troubles me really is how much this is a fantasy on her part and how much we should be buying into this, you know, is this kind of what she wants to happen kind of thing, and how much is this, you know, is this a *rape* fantasy? or is it a, an indictment of male rapists, I couldn’t kind of work out which it is or if it’s both...” We make no apology for the long extract because its length is indicative – he is once again, it seems, working through something which

bothers him, and which he would like to resolve because to leave it unresolved is uncomfortable. This example is compelling also because it shows that Imperative Moments may not actually *produce* sense, rather, they produce an *impulse to try* to make sense.

5. **Circumstantial:** Again through Tom's responses we can see how a memory of how, where, when and with whom a film is watched can shift what is memorable, and affect a film's meaning. Tom: "I think I must have seen it some point early last year, er, just rented from the video shop on spec ... I think it was just filling out a dull afternoon, umm, I then saw it again, umm, er, earlier on this year with my wife. ... I, I liked it a lot more the second time round, umm, and er, I noticed that my wife seemed to be paying attention to things that I really hadn't, hadn't paid much attention to, she, umm, seemed to take certain things seriously which I didn't, at the first viewing, and I thought, ah, yah, umm, I hadn't really thought of it that way, things like the Italian guy, I really hadn't, really hadn't objected to on the first viewing, and the umm, and the ending seemed a bit tedious, I didn't get the joke, but it may have been just watching it with someone else that it suddenly became clear to me at the end, ah that's what it's about, I kind of get it now, umm, so it has a certain clarity, maybe seeing it with a woman, I, I thought, changed it rather, for me." The different circumstances of viewing *À Ma Soeur* push Tom into asking different questions of the film.

Our sense is that these distinctions are important, because of the greater clarity they introduce into thinking about *how films leave traces within individual audience members*. Given the BBFC's remit to consider possible influences on audiences, it is clearly vital to be able to make sense of the processes whereby elements of a film sediment into memory, feeling and understanding. The mast-headed quotation from a member of our Manchester *Irreversible* focus group points up the evident power that films can have. Our task was to consider what *kinds* of power this might be. The differences between the five kinds (the highly individuated Resonant Moments, the more patterned ethically motivated Challenge Moments, the essentially narratively-driven Punctuation Moments, the largely social Circumstantial Moments, and the reconstructive Imperative Moments) prove to be crucial, also, to the ways different audiences encounter and respond to cuts in films.

## 7. Analysing the Meanings of ‘Context’ within Responses to the Five Films

The emphasis on the meanings of ‘context’ in the analyses presented in this Report was driven not only by our general contract with the BBFC, which set this as a major task, but also by our realisation that irrespective of the *kind* of respondent we gathered, the response that the acceptability of screened sexual violence is ‘dependent on context’ was overwhelmingly the most chosen (73.3%) by respondents to our web questionnaire. What, therefore, ‘context’ *means* at different points within audiences’ responses is of critical importance. It is of course likely that for some, at least, this choice functions as a defensive, rhetorical move, making the respondent appear liberal and thoughtful, without their having to elaborate what this means in practice. But our preliminary inspections of materials led us to believe that this was not all that was at work in people’s answers. In deciding how to map the meanings involved, we developed and tested a five-part categorisation:

- A. **Relations to self:** in what ways are the scenes of sexual violence to be assessed in terms of their impact, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, or moral, on the viewer? S/he may state this impact in purely personal terms, or in terms of an impact on a group s/he feels s/he belongs to.
- B. **Relations to the rest of the film:** in what ways do the scenes of sexual violence either gain from or contribute motivation and meaning to the rest of the film, and its ‘wholeness’? This can be among other things a contribution to the *structure* of the film, or to an understanding of *characters* or *situations*. It can also, of course, be a function of *how* the scenes are presented, and where within the whole film.
- C. **Relations to other films:** in what ways are the scenes of sexual violence to be understood by reference to wider kinds of film-making? This may be in terms of a direct comparison with other particular films, or by reference to a perceived genre of film-making, against which the film in question is measured, or in terms of a director, or a wider tradition of film-making.
- D. **Relations to ‘reality’ beyond the film:** in what ways are the scenes of sexual violence to be measured against the world beyond the film? This might for instance be in terms of the ‘realism’ or otherwise of the presentation.
- E. **Relations to other audiences:** in what ways are the scenes of sexual violence to be measured against their real, presumed or imagined impact on audiences other than the viewer him/herself and any community s/he feels part of?

These five appear to cover the main possibilities. It is important to say that these were not intended to exhaust the answers. Some features, such as discussions of the rights or wrongs of sexual violence itself are not adequately covered by these categories. However some other aspects, although not directly addressed by these meanings of Context, become explicable by them. For instance, an understanding of people’s attitudes towards the aesthetic/cinematic construction of sexual violence on-screen can often be reached by considering the complex ways in which they appeal to one or

more of the five Contexts. Similarly, although debates over the discussion of the rights and wrongs of censorship can be considered as a stand-alone topic, governed simply by moral or political views, we would suggest that it may be more productive to see such attitudes linked discursively to peoples ways of understanding films. Through a close examination of the ways people's responses to screened sexual violence appeal to the above categories, much can be learned about the mental models underpinning different attitudes towards censorship.

We have chosen one focus group to illustrate how these five kinds of reference to context operate, and the kinds of work around a film that they do: the London group for *Ichii the Killer*.

**Relations to self:** James (an unequivocal Embracer) talked about the ways in which he found himself responding to the violent scenes in *Ichii* and, in order to explain how he felt about it, found it easiest to define the scenes by reference not only to his reaction, but to his reflections on that reaction: "Err yeah same for me just because there are so many scenes of Miike's movies before that I knew were a little bit extreme and but I've never seen anything quite as strong, ever! Umm so I think yeah that first bit with the guy on the hooks and the boiling oil and it was sooo unbelievably violent and then I just thought why am I laughing at this, it's not a comedy scene, but it was kind of funny cause it was sooo over the top [laughs]." This tendency to define scenes by their capacity to induce a reaction which had then to be at least noted was found elsewhere in this group, as in James' much more casual later reference to "the quite wince-inducing nipple scene". We will see that this tendency may be the marker of a larger kind of response which we have dubbed a 'set-piece aesthetic'.

**Relations to the rest of the film:** interestingly, in light of what we have suggested above, we found that this group's ways of relating extreme scenes to their intra-filmic context tend simultaneously to invoke Relations to Self. This is well illustrated by the one female member of this group, Lisa, who marks the role of scenes of extreme sexual violence as a requirement in the following words: "...Also it would impossible to do a kind of film with the kind of character who's really into sado-masochism without sexual violence in it, so it's kind of essential... [Group laughter] I'd be let down if it wasn't there." The failure implied by the absence is not simply a generic displacement, but a personal disappointment – a failure to meet her requirements for appropriately challenging extremity.

**Relations to other films:** In a similar fashion, we found that this group of *Ichii* fans tended to mark the meaning of generic placements in a fashion suggesting their own mode of use. Dan, following James' first comment (above) commented on the significance of the levels of violence as follows: "Well I think the thing about *Ichii* is it's a whole and the reason the violence was more palatable than a lot of other films that have even lower levels of violence is that none of the characters ever come across as real, because it's a comic book done as a movie, none of them feel, you can have no empathy with any of them no matter what happens to them and the whole thing is done as a series of caricatures, the bit I took away with it was the bit where Kakihara is actually talking after having kinda having his tongue off, it's probably my favourite scene cause he's just done this incredibly extreme thing you know, the traditional taking the finger off, ... and then he's like just sown up his tongue and then he's like

*ahh it'll grow back don't worry about it.* That was probably the bit that really struck me from all of it. I mean obviously there are bits like the guy who tears off umm [Pause] tears off his boiler suit and he's got this crazy muscle, that bit's amazing, amazing! And of course the bit where the man Kakiyama takes the piercing out and his jaw finally opens up...umm but also the cameo's really did for me all the other people, all the other sort of Japanese directors that got in there.. Takashi he managed to get in there, so that was really good, bit of a geek-fest!" Beginning with a refusal to measure the film against any external reality, he assembles a list of favourite parts, then claims them as knowing intertextual references – and then claims that this is precisely what makes the film worthwhile (a "geek-fest"). It will prove to be important that this genre-label is so evidently a vernacular audience term. The measure is meaning and use to self, a defined mode of participation and use.

**Relations to 'reality' beyond the film:** aside from such frequently repeated denials of any direct external measures (captured under phrases such as 'cartoonish' and 'over-the-top' violence), occasional moments did indicate other possibilities. So, at a moment of recalled discomfort, Dan marks an unexpected Punctuation Moment when something *non-violent* confronts him with a possible 'reality': "I saw the really heavily cut version first and there wasn't a thing in it that made me wince really, I mean the tempura scene with the oil on the back was extreme but it wasn't, you know it didn't really grab me like that. When I watched the uncut one with the nipples across the [Indist] but it was actually the guy dressed as the dog that was more freaky in that scene I thought, err like sort of sniffing the girl and the sort of the idea of the sexual violence was having a game and that was probably the most unpleasant bit in the whole film." It is the distinct psychological possibilities this raises which disturbed him. This is the nearest we found to acknowledged real-world comparisons for this group – and this was difficult, and in itself non-violent.

Even when rape was considered by Lisa, she declined real-world comparisons, as follows: "I found the psychological violence in *Ichii* worse in the manipulation of Ichii himself by his mentor. I thought that was worse because you couldn't imagine that happening, you know people do manipulate people everyday sort of everyday intentionally and unintentionally...so that kind of was the most disturbing thing to me more than the actual violence. I think also...if you...a lot of the violence is kind of err almost random isn't it, whereas you know if you're going to say...well...to make it realistic most...most kind of violence of rape is done by err women's partners...so it's kind of not that realistic in that way, most people won't be raped by a stranger or beaten up by a stranger...hopefully you know it will be hand the hands of someone they know or a partner...so." Even here, it is a claim that real world comparisons are off the point.

**Relations to other audiences:** in related fashion again, this group, in commenting on other audiences, tend to *discount* their relevance. Lisa, for instance, uses a discussion of the distinctiveness of 'J-horror' fandom (itself an important **Context 4** claim), to mark a difference in kinds of audience: "I think it's always going to be kinda niche isn't it? Cause even, even horror fans are divided over his films you know, some people just hate and then think it's so ridiculous that they won't ever want to watch them again. Err I really like them [Pause] but it is always gonna come down to personal tastes, I think his sense of humour and his sense of bizarre are kind of the things that stand out even more than the violence and that's what I kinda take away

from it, but obviously it's the violence [Pause] [Laughs] that helps!" We will see, in the fuller discussion of this focus group, that the issue of cuts caused a return to this distinction of kinds of fandom, and their different expectations – in the form of a claimed boundary breach. In similar vein, James uses a contextual reference to other (im)possible audiences to raise the flag for those who do appreciate J-horror: "Umm the biggest cut bit that I can remember is...is that one and it just has the effect of making it worse, making it more disturbing destroying the intent of the scene and you know just been better left uncut I mean it's gonna...my mum's not gonna watch it, if she watched even the cut version she's gonna be disgusted and horrified thinking it should be banned, whether she watched the cut or uncut version it's gonna have exactly the same violence, so it's only people *sick people* like us who are going to seek these things out and we want to see the whole thing..." The *impossibility* of other audiences pinpoints for him the irrelevance of cuts for the real audience, for whom the missing bits are the whole point.

We use examples from this group of all five Context references to point up how they may connect. The analytic separation of them allows us then to see more clearly how, for this kind of audience, it is presumed that this is specialist material, measured in distinctive (set-piece) ways for their Impact on Self – this Self knowing itself to be socially disapproved.

## 8. The Issue of Levels of Articulation

Finlay: ...umm yeah well I was intrigued at just the sort of kind of abstract like intellectual level like what...what you know what did the director mean? [Laughs] What are we supposed to take away from that? Umm but yeah I was intrigued *but* I wasn't intrigued enough to like really sit there and think about it, I just thought okay that was quite a nonsensical ending, but yeah I mean that...cause...if I enjoyed a film and it had a strange ending like that I probably would spend a lot of kind of effort reading on IMDb trying to get people's opinions on what it meant but actually I didn't care that much [Laughs].

A problem first encountered in an earlier research project into audience responses to the film of *The Lord of the Rings* revealed itself again here. In the *Lord of the Rings* case, we had been attempting to conduct a Qualiquant analysis of audience accounts of the kinds of pleasures they gained from the film. The problem was that while we could separate audiences into groups, using clear and consistent criteria, some of their accounts of the pleasures were so abbreviated and generic as to be unanalysable. Responses like 'Wow!', or 'Fantastic!' can in principle be an indicator of almost any kind of extreme pleasure. Or indeed, with some respondents, the use of such words might be casual, and not even especially indicative of high expectations having been met. In the other direction, without elaboration it is hard to make much of the grounds of rejection intended by very short answers such as "Awful", "Dull", "Couldn't be bothered", or "Disgusting". We therefore saw the need to distinguish different levels of articulation of responses, and adopted a tripartite distinction, between:

- A. Extensive answers which use and display discursive categories and moves.
- B. Fragmentary answers which display categories, but are relatively inexplicit about the moves which connect them.
- C. Short answers making little use of discursive categories or moves.

The allocation to the three categories clearly has to remain partly intuitive. But with these working distinctions, it became possible to count and compare the frequency of different kinds of responses.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this is only to enable an analyst to locate the kinds of discursive moves and categories deployed in more or less articulated answers, and does not in itself warrant conclusions. The subsequent qualitative analysis of modelled positions could only benefit from any provisional insights this level of investigation can provide.

The implication of this is, of course, that not all answers are of equal value in framing a qualitative analysis. But we have taken care throughout not to privilege those respondents with access to particularly intellectualised forms of talk. Rather, our

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<sup>5</sup> See Martin Barker, 'The Functions of Fantasy: A Comparison of Audience Responses to *The Lord of the Rings* in Twelve Countries', in Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (eds.), *Watching The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences*, New York: Peter Lang, forthcoming 2008.

procedure has been to explore the *discursive moves* audience members make, in the course of explicating their responses, understandings and judgements. This certainly does not privilege positivity. The mast-headed response from an Ambivalent respondent to *Ichi the Killer* illustrates how we have looked at responses. Finlay *notices* a problem about the ending of the film, but his level of engagement is not sufficiently strong to make it necessary for him to commit to *resolving* the problem. As a result, he does not produce an overarching account of the film's narrative. In this case, he does not say much more than this to enable us to bring into view the reasons for his relative disengagement from the film. In other cases, through the ways in which people attempted to find meanings and resolve puzzles, for instance, the reasoning processes and available terms, categories and concepts could be identified.

A much larger body of theory and method underpins this which we have not developed here. This body of work is broadly associated with the ideas of 'discourse analysis', which we understand broadly for our purposes here as the consideration of talk as embodying and expressing people's ordinary understandings of things in their world, their selves and their relations to each other.



## 9. Why Three Data-Streams, and Associated Methods of Analysis?

It may not be obvious why we saw benefits in obtaining three distinct sources and kinds of information, carrying with them, as they do, the problems of having to ask distinctive questions of them, and use distinctive modes of analysis. The reason was not some simple appeal to a notion of ‘triangulation’ – a concept with which we have considerable problems in its classical versions, and which if achievable was more likely to be gained *within* the analysis of different elements of web questionnaire responses. It had rather to do with what we see as the distinctive strengths and weaknesses of each as a source of evidence:

1. **Web debates: Key Strengths** – they offer naturally-occurring, rather than research-prompted talk. They are important in showing *where* (in what sorts of domain, governed by what sorts of recognised ‘rules of participation and exchange’) the talk goes on, and therefore potentially the *kinds of use* to which the films are being put. This talk is relatively uncensored, and frequently occurs through aliases, making it more likely that ‘outrageous’ responses will be examinable. It is possible to compare the kinds of talk on generalist (eg., IMDb) and specialist (eg., gore/horror) sites. They can also, through particular features such as reviews, display how participants (embracing, ambivalent, or refusing) relay the structure of the narrative of a film, in the course of delivering a judgement on it.

**Key Limitations** – there is no way to access deliberately hidden or restricted sites, without highly specialist help. There is a wide range of film viewers who will not use the web. The very strength (the frequent visibility of ‘rules of participation’) can also be a weakness, in that the web both generally and in specific cases may privilege certain kinds of talk over others.

**Prime Methods of Investigation and Analysis** – we have followed three main strategies. First, a broad survey of frequencies of topic, ranges of debate, designed to give a ‘flavour’ of the web discussions around each film; second, by means of coding and databasing the discussions on the websites, a part-quantitative, part-qualitative analysis of typical languages and concepts; third, by selecting typifying citizen reviews, we have undertaken a close analysis of the ways in which the narrative of each film is understood (through retellings) in a small number of embracing, ambivalent and refusing reviews.

2. **Questionnaire: Key Strengths** – the capacity to generate large numbers of responses which can be categorised and investigated quantitatively. This permits the discovery of patterns, overlaps, relationships, separations and oppositions. In the particular form of questionnaire which we have adopted, it permits the examination of the relations between self-classification on multiple-choice dimensions, and the declared meanings of these. It has also allowed us to explore *relations between* judgements on the five films.

**Key Limitations** – it is impossible to be sure who is reached and who excluded by a web questionnaire (there is for instance no knowable refusal rate). Questionnaires

generally have a problem of ‘staying-power’, the willingness of respondents to see them through the end. Given that we were asking about five films, there was a risk of people dropping out before telling us all we could learn from them. With web questionnaires, because of the ‘distance’ between creators and completers, there are potential problems of misunderstanding the purposes of the questionnaire.

***Prime Methods of Investigation and Analysis*** – we have used serial strategies. First we characterised the total recruited population around each film, then sought by cross-tabulations to find out how particular groups (by sex, age, film-expertise, and views on censorship) within that total judge and understand the films. We then chose sample sets of key groups around each film for close analysis of their qualitative answers, with a view to drawing out a range of operative models of film response which are shaping and connecting individuals’ responses. Finally, we explored the *relations between* the judgement-populations of the five films, with a view to seeing how each film appears from the vantage point of the others. The aim throughout has been to take advantage of the combination of quantitative and qualitative features.

3. **Focus Groups: Key Strengths** – the ability to pursue topics in depth, and to probe the meanings of answers. The ability to choose with reasonable precision who will take part, and what sorts of characteristics one wishes to emphasise and explore. The ability to ‘play on’ the characteristics of group-talk – the ways in which people will prompt and provoke each other, and thus hopefully bring into view the organising principles and criteria in a debate.

***Key Limitations*** – the known tendency in some situation for people to produce ‘agreement-talk’, that is, talk that they think is expected or required by the situation. In addition, since we used on a number of occasions existing friendship groups, there is the problem of ‘continuing talk’, that our discussion with them is at an arbitrary point in a history of conversations which we cannot know.

***Prime Methods of Investigation and Analysis*** – for each transcript we produced a ‘portrait’, that is, a summary characterisation of the nature of the exchanges between participants, the individual positions taken up (and perhaps evolved over the period of the discussion). From these, we drew out the ways individuals pay attention to particular features of the film, attribute meanings to them, and account for their judgements of the film through these. The aim was to bring into view the operative concepts, connections and criteria through which a positive account of the film is arrived at; and at the same time the points of reservation and refusal which mark a person’s unwillingness or failure to respond positively to a film.

## 10. Surveying Web Debates

Our aim in conducting the survey of web debates was to visit and examine as wide a range of websites as we could, where we could locate talk about one or more of the five films. To find them, we used a range of standard and non-standard search engines. We selected not only the most visible, but also those which appeared to belong to specialist interest groups. In order both to keep a record of what was found, and to paint a portrait of the range of kinds of discovered talk, from the beginning of the survey we designed, coded and entered all the located discussions into a searchable database. Along with the name of the site, this stored information on all the following:

1. The kinds of writing generally found on the site (coded under: Professional/Semi-professional writing; Citizen/Customer Reviews; Discussion boards; Newsgroups; Festival / Exhibitor)
2. The sites' self-descriptions (a textual summary).
3. The range of films covered in a site (coded under: Very broad; Eclectic; Selective (eg, genre-based))
4. The discursive range of each site (coded under: High; Broad; Low)
5. The degree of openness to contributors (coded under: Very open; Reasonably open; Very circumscribed)

In addition to this site-information, by film we recorded quantitative information on:

- a. The scale of coverage (100+ items; 30-100; 10-30; 3-10; 3-)
- b. The spectrum of responses (coded under: Predominantly positive; Broad spectrum; Predominantly negative)

Alongside these we recorded the main positive and negative expressions, and points of reference. A coding system was developed for the most common reference points (eg 'director' = dir, 'audience' = aud) to speed inputting, and aid searchability.

We know of few precedents for this kind of web survey, other than those conducted using automated software which can only count immediately quantifiable features. Therefore we acknowledge 'following our noses' on a number of occasions. We also recognise that certain sites are now so big – the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), or Rotten Tomatoes, for instance – that it made no sense to treat them as single sites. In our database, therefore, there are multiple entries for certain multi-sector sites. IMDb provided us with a unique resource. Not only is it reliably in the top few hits for any movie title search, it is a high profile destination site for those seeking film information.<sup>6</sup> It also functions as a database,<sup>7</sup> which allowed us to search the

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<sup>6</sup> On 14/12/06, IMDb's current 'Alexa' site ranking for UK traffic was 19 (Google is number 1). Youtube was listed 8<sup>th</sup>, Amazon.co.uk 9<sup>th</sup> and Amazon.com 18<sup>th</sup>, but IMDb was the highest ranking movie specific site. Alexa rankings cannot be taken as a direct index of popularity as they are dependent on a volunteer sample. However 'Big Boards', a message board monitoring site and database, lists IMDb as having the largest number of members of all the high volume film related sites they cover, in conjunction with a high number of posts, and a low average posts per member ratio (meaning that the volume isn't caused by the same people posting an awful lot).

information contributed by users in a variety of useful ways. There are two classes of IMDb material which we have used extensively: ‘citizen reviews’ – discrete evaluations of a film, visible to all site visitors; and film-specific discussion forums, each containing multiple message board threads (in order to read or contribute to these forums users are required to register with the site). In particular, the facility for sorting the citizen reviews according to gender/nationality/age information and star ratings offered by posters, alongside the information the database holds on their use of the site (prolific reviewer? recommended as useful by other users?) provided us with a valuable possible resource for doing quali/quantitative analysis on pre-existent data – something we could then map against the results produced by our own more structured online questionnaire.

The Table below summarises the quantitative codings from our Web Survey Database:

		AMS	BM	HEP	ICH	IRR
Total sites analysed		89	88	82	88	89
Kind of site <sup>8</sup>	Professional	29	25	16	26	30
	Citizen	49	47	51	48	39
	Discussion board	24	22	23	35	35
	Newsgroup	3	2	0	0	0
	Festival	4	5	0	6	7
Range of films covered	Broad	60	53	46	52	60
	Eclectic	19	23	9	19	20
	Selective	10	12	27	17	9
Discursive range	High	20	23	13	11	15
	Broad	65	62	55	69	69
	Low	4	3	14	8	5
Openness to contributors	Open	48	47	41	47	54
	Moderate	17	15	18	27	21
	Circumscribed	24	26	22	14	14
Scale of discussion on each film	100+	1	2	0	9	8
	30-100	6	11	1	10	11
	10-30	4	11	11	13	15
	3-10	12	9	8	8	12
	3-	66	55	62	48	43
Balance of discussion	Mainly positive	39	29	55	54	38
	Mainly negative	24	29	9	11	14
	Broad spectrum	25	30	18	22	35

As raw data, these figures mainly record, to our satisfaction, the broad range of kinds of talk we managed to gather. A few points are however immediately worthy of note. The lack of Festival attention to *The House on the Edge of the Park* is coupled with a greater presence in more selective websites. We note also the fact that *Ichi* and

<sup>7</sup> Growing out of a collaborative series of lists on rec.arts.movies, its searchable functions are credited to Col Needham, a Brighton-based poster, who wrote a series of programmes to turn the information into a downloadable database. Growing in size and ambition as the web developed to become what we see today. It was bought by Amazon.co.uk in 1998, as part of their expansion into video sales.

<sup>8</sup> Because sites could be multiply-coded, figures in these columns will sum to more than the total.

*Irreversible* have attracted more intensive debate (100+), and that there are quite wide variations in the spread and balance of positive and negative responses by film.

## 11. General Presence and Longevity of Debates around the Five Films

Through our analysis of web debates, we sought not only to identify *what* was said about the films, but *when*, *for how long* and *in what contexts* these discussions took place. For these reasons, we sought to identify trends in these discussions. Much of the discussion of how this was done, has primarily technical relevance, and we have therefore not included it here. Here, we summarise simply the main outcomes of the searches and what they suggest about the processes and forces at work, which are stimulating and shaping public debates on the films.

Our first interest was in tracking the extent of talk over time. The following Table summarises when, and for how long, public discussion on the five films took place. Since this is based on ‘citizen reviews’ on the IMDb website, which has very wide international appeal (albeit entirely English language), this first Table captures world attention generally:

<i>Number of new citizen reviews posted and retained for each film on IMDb, in six month periods</i>					
	<b>AMS</b>	<b>BM</b>	<b>HEP</b>	<b>ICHI</b>	<b>IRR</b>
July – Dec 2006 <sup>9</sup>	7	8	6	8	26
Jan – June 2006	7	13	7	23	38
July – Dec 2005	5	19	6	25	32
Jan – June 2005	6	15	3	22	45
July – Dec 2004	5	13	7	27	38
Jan – June 2004	0	17	3	23	58
July – Dec 2003	1	14	11	25	92
Jan – June 2003	3	17	7	15	102
July – Dec 2002	2	11	2	15	27
Jan – June 2002	6	23	3	7	21
July – Dec 2001	19	19	4	9	-
Jan – June 2001	2	19	2	-	-
July – Dec 2000	-	11	2	-	-
Jan – June 2000	-	-	0	-	-
Earlier	-	-	7	-	-
<b>Totals</b>	63	199	70	199	479

For specifically British Press debates we used Lexis Nexis as our means of locating patterns of debate, as shown in this Table:

<sup>9</sup> These figures were taken on the 13<sup>th</sup> December 2006, cutting the last period slightly short.

<i>Number of press articles referring to film in British Lexis Nexis, in six month periods<sup>10</sup></i>					
	<b>AMS</b>	<b>BM</b>	<b>HEP</b>	<b>ICHI</b>	<b>IRR</b>
July – Dec 2006	0 (0)	0 (7)	0 (0)	1 (1)	3 (6)
Jan – June 2006	0 (1)	6 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	10 (4)
July – Dec 2005	2 (4)	2 (3)	0 (0)	0 (1)	21 (12)
Jan – June 2005	0 (1)	3 (11)	0 (0)	1 (1)	11 (5)
July – Dec 2004	4 (4)	3 (6)	0 (0)	7 (11)	10 (8)
Jan – June 2004	2 (2)	0 (7)	0 (0)	3 (10)	7 (4)
July – Dec 2003	20 (28)	1 (6)	0 (0)	5 (7)	11 (11)
Jan – June 2003	3 (3)	8 (26)	0 (1)	8 (14)	65 (97)
July – Dec 2002	5 (7)	4 (32)	0 (0)	1 (4)	52 (86)
Jan – June 2002	21 (43)	34 (113)	0 (0)	0 (1)	34 (30)
July – Dec 2001	30 (42)	3 (15)	0 (0)	4 (5)	1 (0)
Jan – June 2001	5 (6)	2 (17)	0 (0)	0	
July – Dec 2000	0 (0)	6 (20)	0 (0)	0	
Jan – June 2000	0 (0)	7 (8)	0 (0)	0	
Earlier	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (2)	0	
<b>Advanced Totals</b>	92	73	0	30	225
<b>Title Only Totals</b>	(141)	(272)	(3)	(55)	(263)

What can we learn from these about the factors sparking and maintaining debates in these fora? The following brief notes draw upon the patterns observable in the British press and IMDB citizen reviews over time (since the films' release, or in the case of HEP, since 2000), and what contributors posting on the IMDb Message Boards themselves marked as their reasons for discussing these films over a recent four week sample:

*À Ma Soeur*: Here the various cinema releases of the film in 2001 are the most significant factor in the clustering of the citizen reviews. There is a noticeable British press increase in response the UK cut version in June 2002 and to the release of the director's next film in July 2003 but unsurprisingly this has no impact on the international citizen reviews, however a small but steady flow develops after the film becomes available uncut from US label, Criterion, in 2004.

Message board activity around *À Ma Soeur* is partly responsive: not all new posts draw directly engaged responses, and a wider circle of less frequent debaters are involved. One slow but responsive strand contains the imaginative discussion of a possible rational explanation of the ending.<sup>11</sup> Here the suggestion, in mid December, that the attack was an elaborate suicide arranged by Elena, and designed to grant Anaïs her wishes of life and loss of virginity to a stranger, is received very positively as another possible explanation by two posters. Through this ending discussion, in

<sup>10</sup> The two sets of figures were arrived at by use of different search terms within Lexis Nexis. Those in parenthesis mention neither directors nor main stars. The difference very crudely indicates the degree to which the films became a point of reference both on and off the arts pages.

<sup>11</sup> "I am confused ... about the ending (spoiler)" thread within the *A Ma Soeur* boards.  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243255/board/flat/56224236>. Accessed through December 2006.

conjunction with other strands articulately debating the definition of rape and consent and applying these to the film,<sup>12</sup> and negotiating the meanings of these things within the film,<sup>13</sup> the continued discussion of this film conforms very closely to the issues which have marked the debate surrounding it from the beginning (the child porn question was also raised not far outside the time period).

***Baise-Moi:*** The British cinema release contributes heavily to the early 2002 citizen review cluster, and the flow become steadier after the simultaneous release of both US and UK DVD versions in April 2003. Where, for the other films, declared British responses contribute between 5% and 10% of the IMDb citizen review totals, for *Baise-Moi* it is a 22%.

For *Baise-Moi*, what we are seeing in message board discussions are responsive re-eruptions of discussion: someone sees the film afresh, makes a post, and briefly re-ignites the discussion, drawing people who have flagged the board (to alert them to new posts or marked it as a favourite) back into the discussion. In this case most of the posts were generated by two people: an interesting, posturing, although ultimately good natured exchange between representatives of the two classic models of positive response for the film: a (female) feminist fan of the film and a (male) extreme/cult cinema fan, who felt it could have been better. This was conducted across a number of different threads, most productively, in response to a third person's (a possible 'troll' feminist) question/hypothetical, about the educative feminist merits of showing the film to her ten-year-old son.<sup>14</sup>

***The House on the Edge of the Park:*** The central ripple of citizen reviews can be attributed to the unedited US Shriek Show DVD release at the end of 2002. However, only one or possibly two of the smaller 2004 blip could be attributable to the UK Vipco, heavily cut release.

*House* message board discussions were marked by shorter, often almost free-standing comments on the film and cast, with collaborative discussion appearing in relation to the practical issues of information about cuts, and identifying and locating the music (a topic on a couple of threads, making up half the posts in this period).<sup>15</sup>

***Ich i the Killer:*** Where the other films citizen reviews are marked predominantly by US cinema and DVD release patterns, the *Ich i* figures are remarkably constant. Here we would suggest that this is the effect of the gradual word of mouth build (or its online equivalent) associated with the development of a cult reputation, in conjunction with a far more developed and well served specialist market for the international circulation of Asian cinema DVDs. The web discussions around this film demonstrate a high awareness of multiple versions and their different edits, and the US unrated

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<sup>12</sup> "Ok who got raped?" thread within the A Ma Soeur boards.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243255/board/flat/55844713>. Accessed through December 2006.

<sup>13</sup> "Please - Avoid At All Costs (Spoilers Inside)" thread within the A Ma Soeur boards.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243255/board/flat/19117309>. Accessed through December 2006.

<sup>14</sup> "Suitable for a 10 year old?" thread, within the Baise-Moi discussion boards.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0249380/board/flat/60769487>. Accessed through December 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Example: "Soundtrack" thread within the House on the Edge of the Park boards.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080503/board/flat/2219972>. Accessed through December 2006.



version is not the only option for English language viewers seeking a more complete experience of the film.

The strongest feature of the continuing discussion on *Ichi the Killer* boards is the degree to which it is not strictly about the film. The busiest single thread in the period was the massive and long running (started July 2005, well over 200 posts) “Biggest list of the sickest and most disturbing movies on IMDB...”,<sup>16</sup> in which *Ichi the Killer* features as a touchstone and point of comparison, but is not automatically referenced in everyone’s lists and comments. More broadly, discussions of ‘sick’ and comic aspects of the film are common, as are character details and motivations (particularly re. ending), and comparisons to the manga. The level of intra-filmic (and even inter-media) discussion of the film is mirrored by the presence of dedicated *Ichi the Killer* threads on the Horror Genre boards, where the structure of threads are generally assurance of a quality extreme experience following a request for advice on whether to buy/watch it.

**Irreversible:** Here, first in the British Press, and then in the IMDb reviews, it is possible to see the impact of a marketing strategy based on festival related hype throughout 2002, being followed up highly effectively with the close clustering of limited cinema and DVD releases (UK cinema Jan 2003, UK DVD May 2003 / US cinema March 2003, US DVD Aug 2003) This gives the film some momentum, something which is also visible in the heavy concentration of internet discussion in 2003 (on other sites), where individual threads can last long enough to straddle the two releases and encompass both those who have come to it via the DVD while still covering those who saw the film relatively recently in the cinema.<sup>17</sup>

IMDb message board discussions of *Irreversible* are by far the most substantial in volume, but there is a degree to which much of the richness of the earlier debates about the film is largely missing (see part 2 of the report). The continuing debates are marked by relatively few narratives of discovery, and although the issues of whether the film can (and should) be viewed as erotic, meaningful, and exploitative continue to circulate, they do so largely with the expectation that people are defending established positions within a well worn debate. This is now well-trampled ground and, as a result, there is an expectation that less needs to be explained than in early strands, where the terrain of public debate was still being mapped, and final personal judgements were being actively worked towards. Within these boards, deliberate provocation sets the tone, and the film acts a trigger for the discussion of the ‘real’ topics which for this film are usually contexts four and five – the social meaning of rape as a facet of sex or violence, the location of blame on men or women, representations, and the potential social impact of the film, as evidenced by the views of others. Although many favourable assertions of personal impact are still present, longer workings-through of ideas about the film in terms of context two – the inter-filmic – have become a more minor feature.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0296042/board/flat/22449951>. In *Koroshiya I (Ichi the Killer)* boards. Accessed through December 2006.

<sup>17</sup> As there is such high volume of posts on the IMDb forum for this film, unfortunately the older threads, relating to the time of its release, have been cleared to make space for new ones.

## 12. The Web Questionnaire

Over a period of some two and a half months, we publicised and maintained a complex web questionnaire through a specially purchased web domain, at [www.extremefilmsresearch.org.uk](http://www.extremefilmsresearch.org.uk). This not only drew a good number of individuals (760, containing 1,178 responses to the five films), it also functioned to publicise the project more generally, and without seemingly attracting adverse publicity. Funded by a grant from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth's Research Fund (to whom we record our grateful thanks), this questionnaire was our prime means to attract responses to highly specified questions which would allow us to discern patterns and separations, and to combine qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis.

Our questionnaire's design and organising principles drew heavily both on our general understanding of questionnaire design, and on experience gained in particular with the *Lord of the Rings* international audience project. The full questionnaire is set out in the Appendices to this Report. Its key features were these:

1. Our website offered audiences a very brief explanation of the project, with the opportunity, if they wished, to read a longer explanation of its purposes and intended outcomes.
2. We adopted a quali-quantitative structure, within which respondents were invited to position themselves on various multiple-choice dimensions (worded carefully to be as neutral between possible meanings as we could), and then to tell us what those positionings meant to them. This allowed us to explore the meanings which different kinds of respondents attached to their responses. At the same time we sought a limited amount of personal information (age, sex, kind of film viewer, general views on censorship) so that we could consider audience patternings.
3. We built in 'key questions' which, in our experience, bring into view important features of people's responses. In relation to each film such a question was 'What was the most uncomfortable moment or aspect of the film for you?'. Experience on previous projects had shown that features such as *disappointment* or *discomfort* can particularly bring into view people's hopes and expectations, and thus their requirements for an ideal viewing experience. In addition to the questions attached to each film we added one such question to the personal section of the questionnaire: 'Finally, is there something about you which you would regard as most important for understanding your response to the film(s) you've told us about?' This question, we believed, was the most likely – by its nature (guaranteed anonymous), and by its positioning (the very last question before submitting the questionnaire) – to elicit difficult-to-say personal reasons for liking or disliking screened sexual violence.
4. We included for each film one question within which we digested the BBFC's judgement and invited respondents to give us their thoughts on it.
5. We were able to invite responses to as many of the five films as people had seen (within the limits of their tolerance of answering), and thus to examine how audiences for the various films overlap or conflict. By creating a digital buffer, we could associate all such responses with each individual's personal information.
6. A final page asked people to tell us a little about themselves: their age, and sex, two five-option questions asking the kind of film viewer they would class themselves as, and their views on censorship, their two individual favourite films

and favourite genre. There were also two open-ended questions, asking the most troubling film they had ever seen, and anything particularly important they felt we should know about them to help us understand their answers to our questions.

7. The questionnaire, upon being submitted, flagged an opportunity to people to say if they would be willing to talk to us further, if we asked them. This generated hundreds of responses, from which we were able to locate those UK respondents who had given positive responses to a film, thus giving us the means to bring together a number of our focus groups.

Upon closure, the completed responses were loaded into Microsoft Access, for checking and cleaning, and both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Prior to analysis, the 79 paper-completed questionnaires from our special *House* screening were manually entered, with a code attached to one column to permit the isolation, separate examination and comparison of these with the main body.

Not all questions have so far been analysed. We are clear that some – for instance, those relating to favourite films and genres – were less likely to yield information of use to the BBFC, and have therefore deferred our consideration of these.

### **Key Tables from the Questionnaire:**

#### ***Sex and Age:***

	M	F	–18	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	65+
Total	653 78.7%	177 22.3%	27 3.3%	319 38.4%	308 37.1%	136 16.4%	32 3.9%	5 0.6%	3 0.4%
AMS	64.6	35.4	0.9	22.1	41.6	23.9	8.8	0.9	1.8
BM	83.3	16.7	0.0	21.6	43.2	27.8	5.3	1.3	0.9
HEP	74.4	25.6	0.6	51.2	31.7	15.2	1.2	0.0	0.0
ICH	89.4	10.5	7.0	38.7	36.1	15.2	1.8	0.9	0.3
IRR	81.1	18.9	1.8	49.1	60.2	28.0	5.0	0.0	0.4

#### ***Kind of viewer / what range of films they watch:***

	Extremely knowledgeable	Wide range of films	Watch particular kinds	Frequently, but no special kinds	Occasionally, by interest
	377 46.1%	362 44.3%	38 4.7%	27 3.3%	13 1.6%
AMS	51.8	40.2	4.5	0.9	2.7
BM	52.2	41.2	3.5	1.3	1.8
HEP	42.6	38.3	8.6	7.4	3.1
ICH	56.5	39.1	2.7	1.5	0.3
IRR	51.8	40.7	4.0	2.5	1.0

#### ***General views on the showing of sexual violence:***

	Should never be shown	Should never be shown explicitly	Only a problem in special cases	Depends wholly on context	Should not be an issue at all
	3	18	47	608	154

	0.4%	2.0%	5.7%	73.3%	18.6%
AMS	0.0%	0.9%	4.4%	76.1%	18.6%
BM	0.0%	2.6%	4.4%	73.6%	19.4%
HEP	1.2%	3.0%	8.5%	64.6%	22.6%
ICH	0.3%	1.2%	4.7%	70.1%	23.8%
IRR	0.0%	1.0%	5.7%	77.9%	15.4%

***By film, the proportions expressing Liking and Approval were as follows (figures and percentages):***

	Excellent		Good		Mixed		Poor		Awful	
	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%
AMS	22	19.1	45	39.1	39	33.9	8	7.0	1	0.9
BM	24	10.5	43	18.8	58	25.3	68	29.7	36	15.7
HEP	9	3.0	44	26.7	53	32.1	44	26.7	15	9.1
ICH	141	41.1	118	34.4	63	18.4	14	4.1	7	2.0
IRR	201	49.6	105	25.9	80	19.8	10	2.5	9	2.2

***The Value of the ideas felt to be expressed:***

	Extreme		Quite		Mixed		Little		None	
	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%	Nos	%
AMS	26	22.6	50	43.5	29	25.2	10	8.7	0	0.0
BM	18	7.9	44	19.2	82	35.8	70	30.6	15	6.6
HEP	9	5.5	28	17.0	55	33.3	43	26.0	30	18.2
ICH	47	13.7	83	24.2	116	33.8	83	24.2	14	4.1
IRR	93	23.0	151	37.3	123	30.3	29	7.2	9	2.2

These are raw data, and because this was not in any sense a sampling questionnaire, great caution must be used in their interpretation. More could be learnt at a second stage when we considered internal relations among responses by cross-tabulations. However, the following were notable in these figures:

- There are some interesting variations in proportions of both age and sex within our sample. While the figures for *House* may be distorted by the unusual recruitment process, the figures for *À Ma Soeur* do show a striking rise in the proportion of female respondents. Although extreme, the age variations associated with *Irreversible* (a much higher proportion in the 25-34 age bracket), this is readily explainable by the more mainstream release that this film received – since this is the predominant age group for overall cinemagoing.
- The figures for Kind of Viewer are striking in as much as they do overall indicate that watching this kind of film is very much part of a felt cinema-literacy. With all five films (even if *House* with its atypical recruitment is the least sure in this respect) over 80% regarded themselves as either specialist or very knowledgeable film viewers.
- General views on screening sexual violence are likewise highly focused, with over 70% adopting the perhaps ‘safe’ view that it depends upon ‘context’ – hence our realisation of the need to try to unpack this category. What should not be ignored is that the next highest category – and especially so for *Irreversible* and *House* (where atypical recruitment will not on this occasion

explain the variation, rather, may underplay it) – is the view that the representation of sexual violence ought not to be an issue at all. These two films, of course, are most closely associated with specialist viewing communities. This raises issues worthy of separate investigation about how different viewing communities understand the nature and impact of representation.

We do not say anything here about the figures for Liking and Approval, since these constituted the bases for exploration in relation to each of the five films, and indeed for recruitment to the focus groups. Discussion of these figures, their meaning and further breakdown is deferred until there.

## 13. The Focus Groups

All focus groups were located and organised by the RA, and were moderated either by her, or by our second moderator, Denzell Richards (to whom we here record our appreciation for his very valuable input to the project, running well beyond his formal role). Originally we had planned to employ one male and one female moderator in order that we should be able to conduct separate single-sex groups. However it became evident early on that this would have gone against the wishes of a majority of our participants, and we had to review our assumptions on this:

1. In exploring further and critically into the small literature in this area, it became clearer to us that several working assumptions underpinned recent and current research. Among these are assumptions that, as audiences, in watching films containing sexual violence we are effectively forced to take sides – for or against the woman-victim; and that in so doing, the woman becomes in important senses a representative of womankind in general – this could be happening to *any* woman. The research imperative that arises from this is that there are likely to be generically different experiences for men and women, hence the preference for same-sex groups. These were among the assumptions which we realised our research had to put at risk.
2. At another level entirely, we realised very early on that it was likely to be difficult to recruit same-sex groups if we followed one practical method we had planned to use: via friendship groups and snowballing. From our very earliest contacts with respondents to our web questionnaire, we came to realise that very often people had watched these films *as couples* or *in mixed-sex groups*. If therefore we were to seek to tap into existing discussions about the film, we would of necessity have to use mixed-sex groups.
3. Responding to this realisation, we devised a question to be used in our responses to those who indicated willingness to take part in a focus group. We asked them simply if they had any preferences regarding either friendship groups or same-sex groups. The responses to this question were striking. Just three respondents informed us that they would only be happy to take part if in a single-sex group. Beyond these, although not unanimous, there was a strong overall preference. Both men and women in the large majority of cases indicated that they would prefer to meet other people, and in mixed sex groups. The predominant reasons are very interesting. Very many people saw the act of participating in our focus group not just as an opportunity to inform us of their thoughts and views, but also as an opportunity to hear other people's thoughts, to compare them, and in particular to hear the reactions of people of the other sex. We would put it like this: the issue of sexual violence on screen is of sufficient salience publicly, but equally people who are interested these films are sufficiently aware of the complexity of their own responses, that they really want to know what is going on in the heads of the other sex when they watch them. We decided that if we could ensure that our focus groups maximised this aspect, we had the prospect of very energetic exchanges and explorations. And by and large, from the evidence of the eventual groups, we believe that we succeeded.

For these reasons, we felt it right to diverge from our original intentions. It had two pragmatic added advantages: (1) it was easier to recruit naturally-occurring groups

since these very often included both sexes; (2) it meant, too, that our two moderators did not have to travel to all parts of the country – we could divide their operations more on the basis of geographical proximity, known contacts in an area, and so on.

Most recruiting of participants came through completed responses to the web questionnaire. As people submitted their answers, they were asked if they would be willing to take part in more detailed discussions about their responses, if asked to do so. We had a high rate of responses – over 50% of those submitting the questionnaires – but in practice our ability to organise groups was quite constrained. We could clearly only use responses from within the UK (both for logistical reasons, and because we were exploring within the domain of the BBFC's powers). We had to obtain groups within reasonable distance of each other. And, of course, the distinguishing feature of the focus groups was that these were to be with people whose responses were *positive* towards each film. All participants were paid £25 to cover travel costs and to show our appreciation for their help. A number of people in fact travelled considerable distances in order to take part in these discussions. We record here our appreciation to all participants in these groups, for their willing and committed contributions.

All focus groups followed the same broad schedule of questions, with freedom given to moderators to use follow-up or linking questions according to their own best judgement. For all focus groups moderators provided the Research Team with an account of the characteristics of the group, and of their experience of running it. All focus groups opened with an explanation of the purpose of the project, and of the Research Team's relationship with the BBFC, with an opportunity to ask any additional questions. The subsequent full question schedule is given in the Appendices to this Report. This was designed on the principle of encouraging a combination of individual expressions of views, and group debate. Towards the end of discussion, the more difficult questions were introduced in the hope that by this point a degree of trust would have emerged to allow greater self-expression of personal responses. In this, we believe we were to a great extent successful. Also, towards the end of each group, one 'challenging' clip from the film under discussion was shown (in four cases, a 'cut' scene) as a stimulant to reflection on its meaning, and contribution to the film. As an aid to talk, we also prepared for each film sheets of sample pro- and anti-comments, asking people to measure their own attitudes against them.

Focus groups typically lasted around two hours and, such was the willingness of people to discuss and debate, had in a number of cases to be curtailed for fear of overrunning room bookings and people's travel needs. At the end of each session, the Moderator produced a typed report on the circumstances and outcomes of the discussion, the physical space and how that might have affected talk, any thoughts on dominant or silent participants, and any concerns about their own role. All recordings were transcribed by casually-paid assistants, to a common set of guidelines. The resultant transcripts were then summarised in a Portrait, that is, a summary account of the nature and directions of the discussions in the group, which isolates key themes, and debated ideas (with one member of the team each taking primary responsibility for these for one film). These were then shared and compared, and used to identify key moments in the transcript which illustrate these themes and debates in action. As is typical of focus groups, the discussions could range widely, and sometimes seem to

lose specific focus on the film in question (although often these digressions would prove to have a link for the speaker(s) to the film).

We do not try in what follows for each film to summarise all the discussions. Instead, we have drawn from the transcripts what focus groups are particularly useful for: namely, revealing the ways in which audiences respond closely to the materials of a film. What detailed ‘work’ on a film is done by committed audiences, and what understanding of the film itself may we gain from these processes?

**Table of Focus Groups:**

<b>G</b>	<b>FILM</b>	<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>F<sup>18</sup></b>	<b>M</b>
<b>3</b>	AMS	Newcastle	4	4	0
<b>6</b>	AMS	Hull	6	1	5
<b>12</b>	AMS	Brighton	5	3	2
<b>15</b>	AMS	Edinburgh	4	2	2
	<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>7</b>	BM	Leeds	7	2	5
<b>9</b>	BM	London	5	2	3
<b>17</b>	BM	Glasgow	4	2	2
<b>20</b>	BM	Aberystwyth	6	6	0
	<b>Total</b>		<b>22</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>5</b>	HEP	Brighton	4	0	4
<b>13</b>	HEP	London	8	3	5
<b>18</b>	HEP	Glasgow	3	1	2
<b>19</b>	HEP	Aberystwyth	6	6	0
	<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2</b>	ICHI	London	4	1	3
<b>4</b>	ICHI	Manchester	4	1	3
<b>10</b>	ICHI	London	4	4	0
<b>14</b>	ICHI	Edinburgh	3	0	3
	<b>Total</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1</b>	IRR	London	5	1	4
<b>8</b>	IRR	London	2	1	1
<b>11</b>	IRR	Manchester	7	3	4
<b>16</b>	IRR	Edinburgh	3	1	2
	<b>Total</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>
	<b>All Film Totals</b>		<b>94</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>50</b>

<sup>18</sup> Two people outwardly female identified themselves as intersex.



# Part Two: Findings of the Research

## 14. General Introduction

The BBFC invited us to provide an essentially descriptive account of responses to the films. We have tried to ensure that we stayed within this brief, with the obvious requirement that this had to be an analytic description, capturing tendencies and patterns. We were also very aware simply of the quantity and complexity of materials we had gathered, and of the demands of reasonable and trustworthy summary (the focus groups alone generated over 1,000 pages of transcribed talk). We have therefore organised our account of these materials in a number of consecutive ways.

First, we address the question of whether there is evidence of any overarching connections between responses, particularly with reference to responses to screened sexual violence.

Following this, we address each film in turn. We do this under the following headings:

1. The Web Survey, providing an overall portrait of the main tendencies, then exemplifying these tendencies through sampled message board debates and through a close analysis of sampled citizen reviews.
2. The Web Questionnaire, building portraits of positive and negative responses to each film, in particular through close analysis of sorted samples of Embracing and Refusing responses to each film, focusing in particular on the ways in which appeals to 'context' contribute to each kind of response.
3. The Focus Groups, drawing out key topics which emerged in these, illustrating these with direct quotations from our transcripts<sup>1</sup>, and deriving and proposing some key generalisations about the conditions required for someone to Embrace each film wholeheartedly.
4. The overall ways in which Embracing and Refusing audiences understand Contexts, and memorialise Moments in relation to each film.

Finally we present the outcomes of a specially-devised form of analysis which enabled us to compare the criteria of judgements used for each film.

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<sup>1</sup> We have 'cleaned' these for ease of reading of minor hesitations, and repetitions, but with care not to alter meaning in any way.

## 15. Spanning Orientations

The focus of our research was on responses to five separate films. However, a question which we asked ourselves early was this: was there evidence within our data and materials of people with interests in screened sexual violence for its own sake, irrespective of context of presentation? And if there was, what kinds of interests were these, and what uses and attitudes were they associated with? We have found evidence of *three* such interests which are separable but of which the first two in particular can overlap and combine in complicated ways: (1) a “bad taste” orientation; (2) an anti-censorship orientation; (3) a BDSM orientation.

(1) The “bad taste” orientation is associated particularly with young men, and is characterised by bravado, by being provocative and offensive, and with degrees of public daring. It is, we would argue, the organising orientation behind the repeated uploading on YouTube of the excerpted rape scene from *Irreversible* – just as repeatedly taken down almost as soon as it is noticed. From associated discussions it is evident that part of the pleasure in this comes from its ‘in yer face’ quality. In our web questionnaire, for instance, one individual responded to almost all the films in the overlapping ways. Commenting on *Irreversible*, he delivered the memorable “I like rape are you happy ... Ass raping is good” along with “god bless the USAAAA!!!!” and “As I said earlier I’m a Yale graduate, I have been watching ultra graphic films my whole life and now I’m rich, bitch.” Answering on *Ichi*, he added his wish to “KILL all crappy surveyors who seek to take away my good old fashioned gore and rape opuses I hate you all.” The hostility and ‘loudness’ of all the answers is, to us, one of the marks of this position.

(2) The anti-censorship orientation insists on an individual’s *right to see*, and on a refusal to allow others to decide on what is appropriate. This is for a number of people a deeply-felt and argued commitment, almost a condition of contemporary society. It has strong elements, also, of *testing oneself* as part of seeing such materials. This orientation can readily overlap with the first, and in that form frequently leads to *list-making* of challenging or banned materials. These lists are frequently characterised by high levels of fannish knowledge, and a driving interest in having seen the *authentic* version.

Examples of this kind of talk emerge in questionnaire responses to our summaries of the BBFC’s judgements, as here: “I do not believe in any kind of censorship, those scenes are intended to be in the film because the director wanted those scenes in his film, and no one has the right to cut anything out of a movie. I do agree children (and no one that does not want to see it) have to be protected and should not be allowed to see movies like this movie but that’s what ratings are supposed to do and parents need to enforce it. As for a ‘harmful response in some viewers’, I do not believe it will have any negative effect on a person with a sound mind.” Or again, responding to the BBFC’s view of *House* (and the length of this answer to just one question is not rare): “Sicker than the rape scenes themselves quite frankly. Point 1- The film is an 18 certificate and so regulated (when exercised correctly) for a restricted audience. Point 2- We have a law protecting women from rape in and out of marriage, we know as a society it is wrong, we know as rational human beings it is wrong whether the assault is eroticised or sexualised we still know it is wrong, therefore by seeing it will not

change want we know as a nation is absolutely taboo and totally unacceptable, it's ingrained in us. Point 3 - The film is not nefarious or scandalous enough to be number 1 in the blockbuster rental charts so wouldn't cause massive moral revolution. Point 4 - our society is finally growing up and is sexually less oppressive for the uncut scenes to cause mass scale offence. Point 5 - It is scientifically proven that there is no correlation between television/film violence and society's violence, if a pervert (call it what you will) is going to carry out such an attack on a woman it won't matter if the scenes are uncut or not. Whether the violator gets his kicks from this movie or from any other million of visual triggers the act will unfortunately be carried out. I would imagine the film would be a vulnerable target and used more as a scapegoat than for the real reasonings behind the violation should such an incident occur. Point 6 - on whose opinions should we base these grounds? Everyone sees things differently what is so sacrosanct about a small number of opinions, one person's voice cannot reflect the voice of a nation after all. Point 7 - The film is still being marketed as the director did not intend it to be. Deodato had a reason for these sequences and as all artists should be free to express whatever he wants to; whether he did this rightly or wrongly should be down to each person's unique opinion who should choose to view the movie." We quote this in full as an illustration of the way the anti-censorship view is more than simply a moral argument, but rather interweaves a complex set of beliefs and arguments.

These first two can and do at various points overlap and interact, but they are clearly distinct. The third remains determinedly separate.

(3) The BDSM orientation is complex.<sup>2</sup> We have only brushed the edge of it, and therefore what we say here is cautious, and partly derived from other knowledge of it. But it does show a number of times within our data and materials. Probably in existence in different forms for a very long time, this is now a community in a number of ways. It has its own systems of communication (magazines etc), and shared resources (websites – see in particular “Informed Consent”). It also has variously articulated ‘rules’ of use. Still largely confidential, for unsurprising reasons (there have been threats to its legality, as well as various risks of public exposure), the key to understanding this orientation is the complexity in its use of the notion of ‘sexual fantasies’. One questionnaire respondent told us frankly (in response to the Most Important Thing About You question) that “I am involved in the BDSM scene so naturally sex and violence is a very much a part of it but there is a difference of course. Two people consenting to hurt and pleasure each other in real-life and in film is absolutely no problem. When we are dealing with sexual abuse it is much more tricky although I may find a scene of S&M type violence on screen stimulating it certainly wouldn't be if it was clearly intended to shock and disturb me.”

Our sense from examining cursorily some BDSM websites is that this is an intensely rule-governed sphere – partly from necessity of protecting themselves, partly from choice. This means, among other things, that the rape scene in *À Ma Soeur* will *not* be used in any fora as a basis for fantasies because of the ages of the characters.

This is the limit of the reach and sensitivity of the instruments of detection we used in this research. But beyond these, what we find, overwhelmingly is a *separation* of

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<sup>2</sup> BDSM = Bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sado-masochism.

responses; the operation of *different and separate criteria* for engaging with the five films; leading to largely distinct groups and kinds of engaged populations. We turn now to each separate film and its audiences, and return to comparisons only at the very end.

## 16. *À Ma Soeur* (Catherine Breillat, 2001).

*À Ma Soeur* is probably the least widely known of the four more recent films which we studied. Released in France in 2001, it arrived in the UK shortly thereafter. With very little cinema release, it did achieve some Festival screenings. When it went to DVD late that year, one cut was required by the BBFC. By this time it had acquired a small reputation, predominantly centred around its French / Breillat / 'feminist' origins (an issue which was frequently discussed in our focus groups on this film). No great controversy accompanied it, the film was not obviously placed in any generic category which would attract any very particular audience (indeed one of the features of some of the reviews we found was of people 'coming across it', as an almost unknown quantity). Therefore public discussions of it, where they are about anything more than quality/watchability, tend to be over two related things: over the shock ending, and over the issue of the cut made for DVD release.

### 1. The Web Debates.

#### A Sketch of the Web Debates

This sketch is based on an examination of 88 substantial entries in websites discussing *À Ma Soeur* (which divide into 44% were mostly Positive, 27% mostly Negative, and 28% Debating/Ambivalent). Where some of the five films have had lively and extended circulation within online debate forums, this is not the case for *À Ma Soeur*. This internet life of this title is closest to that of *House*, in that single-film focused message board discussions were scarcer and rarely sustained for long. Both films were best served by the stand-alone review format, and many of the richest sources for *À Ma Soeur* were arty equivalents of the horror fan sites where evaluations of *House* found their natural home.

One significant factor is the narrative structure of the film itself. In most message board forums, where it is good protocol to keep discussion of a film to the dedicated thread, spoiler etiquette makes *À Ma Soeur* more difficult to discuss. The following exchange from Filmtalk Forums illustrates:

Poster 4: It's REALLY hard to talk about the movie with someone who doesn't know the ending. So, without giving anything away, I'll say that I appreciated the film's moral message but I don't feel I can support it, exactly... and the film was basically made for the purpose of hitting home this message, meaning the characters don't have a whole lot of depth. The movie itself is well-done but.... agh, just go watch it and come back so we can talk about the ending!!!

Poster 1: When discussing this film everyone seems to have a problem with the ending. I'm fascinated to find out what happens!

The first Poster duly does this, and is able to because (as another Poster points out) the strand is in a section for discussion of films one has already seen, where spoilers are not an issue. However Poster 4, although not a fan of the film, is very keen not to spoil it for a potential viewer. This is rather different to the way those recommending

or respectfully advising on *Irreversible* or *Baise-Moi* can discuss; they are able to describe the key meaningful elements more freely, as foreknowledge of the narrative events is not seen to prejudice the viewing experience in quite the same way. Not all boards have pre- and post-viewing arenas, and when spoiling does take place for this film, on general boards and in stand alone reviews, it is often as part of a severe and dismissive critique, deliberately deflating the importance of the surprise as mere shock, and attempting to rob the ending of any power.

The censorship life of the film attracted some attention: arts coverage of the censorship difficulties that the film ran into in Canada, and in certain American states; and mentions by citizen reviewers, angry both at the censoring of Breillat's version and the perceived intellectual insult to the audience. However unlike some of the other cut films, there was relatively little attention devoted to discussion of how to obtain an unedited cut. This may be in part because that information was more obvious ('it's the Criterion edition'), but it may also be that, having already conjured a sense of the missing scene, few people were inspired to seek it out. There is a sense that even for many of those who liked the film it is 'a renter', rather than something to purchase and review.

There are a number of key factors for this film that become embodied in the high profile image of the director: namely feminism; Frenchness; and artiness. In the later the key battleground is about what a director has the right to make their characters endure in order to make their (highly individual) point about sexuality. Do the characters have rights? Should films be polemics 'spoken' through the characters? The most contentious aspect of this concern – and the Refusers' trump card – is its real world extension: what has Breillat made her young actresses endure, and what does this say about her moral character?

We have presented the analysis below through the five kinds of account of 'context' we have generally discerned within debates around the five films.

### **1. Self as Context**

**Embracers:** For Embracers the discomfort of the seduction scene is very important. It is – and should be – uncomfortable, and they are either with Anaïs in witnessing this terrible situation, or experiencing through memory (and possibly guilt) an uncomfortable sympathy for Elena (some can move between both). Here the discomfort of viewing builds character-sympathy, and contributes to an intellectual understanding about what is being said about the nature of romance and adolescent sexuality.

Some Embracers really enjoy the shock of the end. Here they are expecting normal constructions of tension and pay off, and the uneventful ending of the driving scene leaves them unprepared for the final attack. Because it is not trailed in conventional film grammar, it can function as a truly successful shock ending, making the film pleasurable for those let down by many conventional shock endings.

However this is not the most common, nor the most elaborated type of positive response to the end; that is more likely to see the ending as more natural or right within the context of the film. This is a less visceral and more cerebral response,

however it is unclear whether different people come to this cerebral understanding in the same way. Some express surprise at not finding it a shock, whereas for others it is possible that they were shocked when viewing but the shock has faded and been replaced by a more rounded interpretation which reaches back into the film and retrospectively naturalises the ending.

**Refusers:** For those who Refuse the film, the discomfort of the earlier scenes can be too much, causing them to question pacing, narrative and dialogue, and the plausibility of characters and action. The actress playing Elena is discussed as attractive by some, and this may be an additional source of Refuser discomfort in the long seduction, however for some Refusers the confrontations with Anaïs' body (pool/beach/eating) produce more than the discomfort brought about by seeing pubescent flesh onscreen, they are driven by distaste and sometimes outright disgust towards a *fat* and unruly adolescent body. The driving scene also produces tension for both Embracers and Refusers (and boredom for some Refusers), but the failure to pay-off the motorway drive, followed by the hammer attack, is likely to be seen as incompetence, or wilful pretension: an insult to the viewer rather than the valid thwarting of narrative conventions.

The ending is the biggest sticking point – and it seems here to make little difference whether Refusers have seen a cut or uncut version; it is too brutal, and gratuitously so. It can be perceived as an attack on the senses and sensibilities of the viewer. Even if the rape of Anaïs is not seen, it is known to be there, and that is enough to create a horrified response.

Boredom is also a common refusal response to the pace of the film.

## **2. Intra-filmic**

This is a film with a gentle narrative pace, strong characterisation, and a strong (and externally cued) director voice in play. Here a key issue is the plausibility of the characters, their actions, motivations and responses to the situations the film puts them in. This is often in tension with the acceptance/refusal of the notion of the director as the agent doing the constructing of those characters and situations.

**Embracers:** Taking this position usually means engaging with Anaïs' logic and her desires, and a complete embrace often means to be able to do this in a way which does not contradict the notion of something being 'said' by the director. The character of Anaïs makes a (perhaps perverse) kind of sense, and enables Breillat to make her position clear, however she can still function successfully as a three-dimensional character. Here the ending is most likely to be understood as the most fitting, perhaps the only possible ending, and Anaïs' reaction to the rape is both a vindication of her point of view throughout the film and an invitation to reflect upon, nuance and consolidate the viewer's understanding of Anaïs'/Breillat's world-view. For some there is an even more literal layering, when the real-life experience of Breillat as younger sibling to a more glamorous actress sister is brought up.

**Refusers:** Although some Refuse the characters outright there is almost always praise for the performances, and criticism tends to centre on Breillat, for creating unreasonable situations and unrealistic dialogue. Refusers ask, would a young girl

really talk, think or react like that? Would Anaïs have stayed as witness to her sister's sexual experience? Would Elena really have agreed to anal sex? (These are also, of course, Reality checks.) Refusal is often follows a process of trying to reconcile the actions of the characters, with what the viewer finds comprehensible, either in terms of external (context 4) understanding of human psychology, or within diegetic logic. This results in a curious negotiated spectrum for this film.

**Ambivalents:** This is often where the most curious ending explanations arise. People appear to *work hardest* at finding plausible accounts – but then are not content with them. Take for instance the IMDb ending-strand where someone proposes that Elena sets up the double murder and rape when she goes to the toilet, granting herself the wish to die, and Anaïs the wish to lose her virginity to a stranger she can despise. Although the notion of the ending as Anaïs' fantasy, or otherwise Breillat's less than literal commentary arises for Embracers, for some Ambivalents the duration and nature of the fantasy needs to be more clearly outlined in digetic terms. Reasoning remains firmly anchored in, and evidenced by textual factors, with viewers evaluating the realism of sequences (why doesn't the mother fight/scream?) for proof of the 'dream' status of the ending. Often they are concerned to identify the point at which the 'real world' ends and Anaïs' imaginary one begins (is her dream is triggered by the sight of the truck driver?).

### 3. Inter-filmic

#### Using Comparisons to Embrace and Refuse

The most common point of comparison is Breillat's other films. For many – both supporters of European auteur cinema and its detractors – the film is viewed as one utterance in a longer articulation by Breillat of her particular brand of feminism and her ideas on sexuality. For those who Refuse the film and Breillat, this is characterised as flat, one-note, crude, and mean-spirited. It is an unevolving position; she merely damns herself further, and more loudly with each film. Some of these Refusers defend the principle of films as directorial utterances – they just don't like what Breillat has to say – but for others Breillat is the ideal vehicle through which to attack a whole style of European, and particularly French filmmaking, seen as pretentious but empty. For those who engage positively with Breillat and the film she is a far more complex, evolving artist. Each film adds depth: another chapter of the thesis. Here references to the films of Michael Haneke, Clare Denis and other challenging French titles, such as *Dans Ma Peau*, are more likely to be specified by name, as part of a positive framework.

### 4. Relations to the Real World

**Embracers:** The main positive connection to the real world is to view the film as an accurate reflection /dissection of the experiences of young girls, as they develop as sexual beings within society. This can be framed within differing degrees of gender-political consciousness. For some, viewing it primarily as a character study, the focus is on Elena's experience as victim within a predatory sexual situation, and secondarily on Anaïs as a teenager under pressure to conform to beauty norms. This works most strongly for a partial Embracing position, which sees a rich depiction of believable sibling relationships and the trials of adolescence, but does not engage successfully



with the ending. Here the seduction is sometimes talked of as brutally educative, something that “should be shown in Sex Ed classes”. In particular, young girls ought to see it, in order to better protect themselves.

For those who take a more complete auteur Embracing position, this is completed by readings of the ending, which steps beyond the diegetic to see a feminist comment on the ways in which women are socially structured into relationships that are effectively like rape. Here the juxtaposition between the two scenes really matters. It can also be seen as a reflection of the complex nature of human emotions and psychological damage, and Anaïs’ response is seen as perverse but logical, evidence of how the character’s experiences have screwed her up sexually, and given her a warped vision of the world.

For those who Embrace the shock, but not the ‘message’, the randomness of the attack can even be seen as a kind of true-to-life quality – random violence happens, interrupting mundane life.

**Refusers:** Here Anaïs’ reaction to the rape is seen as not only implausible, but as potentially dangerous: reinforcing rape myths and sexualising an adolescent. Other behaviour is also seen as implausible, particularly the seduction scene and the knowingly articulated dialogue. The film is often seen as bad because it portrays sex without joy, an untruth which perpetuates a destructive feminist myth that all men are rapists.

## **5. Relations to Other ‘Audiences’**

**Embracers:** The Refusers are sometimes characterised as Hollywood fans incapable of dealing with difficult material, subtitles and less conventional structure. This is the refutation of the highbrow looking down.

**Refusers:** As is common in very many situations, the Refusers flesh out the other audience more fully. The audience who likes the film is often seen as heartless, joyless. And most often characterised as feminist harridans just like Breillat. The other, more dangerous audience which is invoked is the paedophile. However, this is in relation to taking deviant pleasure and perhaps gaining personal reinforcement, but never in terms of grooming a child.

## **Sample Analysis of Message Board Threads from IMDb**

The ending is *the* key point of debate for this film. Although it is clearly a Punctuation Moment, and issues a challenge to the viewer, it is also perhaps the best example within the study of an Imperative Moment, driving many viewers to try to place it in the context of what had gone before, in order to produce a larger meaning for the film. For both the most clear-cut Embracers and some articulate Refusers it distilled and clarified what the film (and Breillat) were ‘saying’ about the nature of sexual violence and heterosexual sexuality; it is an uncompromisingly bleak statement emerging from a particular feminist position, and it can be embraced or rejected on those grounds. Such posts/reviews routinely reach back into the film, particularly to the long coerced sex scene, and to Anaïs’ earlier statements, in order to construct meaning.

For some who have defined the film as a character study and coming-of-age film, the ending is simply too sharp a disjuncture. It is a gratuitous attempt to shock the audience, which may be read simply as an incompetent filmmaking choice – an inappropriate genre shift for its own sake, too ‘horror’, too ‘urban mythy’ to work. Thus the moment remains a Punctuation, but the call to make further sense of it is refused, causing at least the latter part of the film to be dismissed. Alternatively it is recognised as an attempt to impose Big Meaning on the film, but declared a failure: “Oh why this ending?! It didn’t make me think ‘what it all means’. Rather it made me angry with Breillat that she had the need to put something like that in.”<sup>3</sup> However it is in the space between Ambivalence and complete Embrace of the film, that viewers have to work hardest to make meaning from this film.

As highlighted in the broader outline of web debates, this film faced an obstacle on general message boards: spoiler etiquette. As a result most of this analysis covers two dedicated ‘spoiler’ declared threads from IMDb, as these facilitated the fullest discussion of the matter. In the first thread, “Please Avoid At All Costs (Spoilers inside)”,<sup>4</sup> polarised positions are expressed, and the logic of fully Embracing the ending is explored. In this, Anaïs’ response to the rape is utterly convincing and comprehensible because it ties in not only to her earlier statements, but also to what Breillat is perceived to be trying to ‘say’. Here, perceptions of the central character’s reasoning are closely and sympathetically layered with those of the director. Anaïs is more than a literal adolescent; she is simultaneously a credible young character and the visible construction of an adult intelligence, reflecting back upon adolescence and its meaning. This enables the positive responding posters to refute the common complaint expressed by the thread starter (a complete Refuser) that “I don’t believe that ANY girl, no matter her state of shock, would behave towards the killer and the police as the ‘heroine’ does here”. This is refuted as follows:

Remember that incident with the killer? Her lack of emotion made sense, because she stated earlier she wanted to lose her virginity with someone she didn't care about. The film seems to be saying that her rape is a perverse form of wish fulfilment.

This reading remains predominantly at the level of character logic, however other posters forge stronger connections between the two depictions of sexual activity, and make explicit the author’s role. One makes a parallel with blue collar and white-collar crime: the film unmask the more socially acceptable damage done by the Italian’s behaviour. In order to refute suggestions that Anaïs’ reaction to the rape diminishes the seriousness of sexual violence, another poster, positioning herself as a victim of sexual violence, argues:

Rather than demeaning the damage which sexual violence can exert upon an individual, I believe Ms. Breillat is attempting to point out the nature of the role that sexual and cultural/emotional violence play in society. We elevate sexual violence to a level of abhorrence, while accepting the existence of traditional gender roles in society.

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<sup>3</sup><http://filmtalk.guardian.co.uk/WebX?50@213.wQ8Gbbz6rxI.1@.ee9a4b7>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243255/board/flat/19117309>

In this thread, as elsewhere, there are those who feel that they understand where Breillat's statement about sex is going, but that this would have been better served by a less extreme version of the ending : "it would have been more powerful and realistic if Anaïs had gone to the restroom and been raped on the way back. As it is we are left with a total sense of destruction at the end, which is unnecessary." However this attempt to separate out the sexual and murderous violence is contested:

[...] what I took from that part was the fact that the mother and sister were beautiful, and Anaïs was the one the killer raped. I took that as a symbol of the killer's twisted view of reality, as well as a symbol of rape as an act of violence rather than sexual gratification.

For this poster, although the depiction of Anaïs' actual rape may not have been as violent as it could have been, the fact that we have just seen the murders means that the violence of rape is neither lost nor minimised.

A key debate springs up around the thread starter's preference for *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which crystallises an undercurrent of anti-American sentiment/snobbery:

Apparently, you seem to be the typical viewer, you know, the one the likes everything spelled out for them in the way *Bastard Out of Carolina* did. [...] Apparently there is a difference between European filmmaking and American, and that's in the handling of form and content, cause and effect.

Here, as elsewhere, *À Ma Soeur* – and particularly its ending – is seen as incredibly French, a classification which is considered to bring a mature attitude to sexual issues, and to expect its audience to be able to deal with ambiguity as well as unhappy endings.

Posters in the short second thread, "I am confused ...about the ending (spoiler)",<sup>5</sup> however, are driven by the need to find a logic which is sustainable purely at the level of the intra-filmic – the level of narrative and character – eradicating ambiguity, no matter how far fetched and implausible the logic might seem. Following the suggestion that it has all been set up by the depressed Elena on her trip to the toilet, a poster grabs the explanation enthusiastically:

Goodness! I never made that connection, however when the killer breaks the front-shield, I assume that the noise would have woken Elena up. It looked to me like for a split second, before he struck her, they were looking at each other in silence. I was wondering why she didn't scream, or struggle, or even look surprised. I figured she was in shock. However, if what you are saying is true, then that would explain why she wasn't surprised when he came, cos she had in fact asked him to. It would also explain why he didn't kill Anaïs. Also, half way through the rape Anaïs stops struggling. Maybe because she thought it was futile and gave up, or maybe she realised that her sister set the whole thing up?

Here it is important that the interpretation can be anchored in aspects of the visible text, however, the Punctuation Moment is misremembered; the 'silent look' is

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243255/board/flat/56224236>

between the killer and the mother, not Elena. What is remembered is a version which permits the desired logic to work. Other threads strive towards the same end using textual cues to define and pin down the last segment as Anaïs' fantasy, imagined after she has fallen asleep in the car.

The film can only be most fully embraced (or most skilfully and completely dismissed) by those who are able to work fluidly within Contexts two (the intra-filmic – narrative and character coherence) and three (the inter-filmic – including a sense of an external author). For those who require the production of a meaning that can work purely at the intra-filmic level, the ending, and the film itself remain problematic.

### **Citizen Reviews of *À Ma Soeur*:**

A small sample of citizen reviews was taken from Amazon.co.uk for examination, with particular interest in the ways the narrative was understood and retold.

**Embracers** (5\*) tend to focus on Anaïs, both as character and actress. For example, “I feel I should draw particular attention to the performance of Anaïs ... Her comic/desperate juxtaposition is one of the best threads in the film.” The film is summarised by its *difference* from mainstream (“a tribute to anything non-disneyfied”). The longest of the chosen Embracing reviews emphasises the sisters' relationship (“the film peels the layers of [its] complexity”), and tracks Anaïs' role from the very opening – and she is the one with insight (“The only one who can see the true nature of [Fernando's] intentions is Anaïs”). Her song is seen to echo through the movie. Summarised as an “intriguing exploration of the complex relationships of two adolescent sisters, their mother, and the men who neglect, manipulate and violate them”, even the most Embracing reviews don't quite know how to take the ending. It is “a bit melodramatic”. And a basic sympathy for the perceived feminist message of the film trips over the lack of *any* “kind, genuine” men. This review, uncomfortable at the ending, takes its most positive position by dint of minimising the ending. The others sidestep the issue by hardly commenting on it – eg, one saying only “the end is shocking, yet in the context of what has happening before, an unsurprising conclusion”. For another, it is only characterised by “brilliant acting” by Anaïs.

**Ambivalents** (3\*) do not know how to take Anaïs. The longest – which does insist that “this is predominantly a good film” – debates her motivations. Is she “cynical” or “rationalising her own lack of [sexual] opportunities”? During the seduction scene does she cry out of sympathy for her sister, or out of jealousy? A motivational package is never assembled, so the events of the film remain just that. Others simply express bewilderment at the ending. Interestingly a tone of disgust enters: “For me and most viewers the climax is gratuitous, unjustified and deeply unpleasant, even if vaguely plausible”. But the distance from full participation is shown again here in a point-by-point testing of earlier scenes for ‘realism’: “The failure of most family members to enjoy their holiday will strike a chord. The trip home ... has some very realistic had driving ... Anaïs getting out to be sick, something most viewers will have experienced during childhood!” This counterpoints the inability to find an *internal* logic.

**Refusers** (1\*) write much more briefly, and emphasise (like some of the Ambivalents) the “unpleasant scenes”, dismissing the film as old-hat feminism. Even

the longest Refuser review reduces the film to a sequence of events: “Two sisters, one fifteen and nice looking and the other thirteen and fat are vacationing with their family at the seashore. The older sister gets involved with a young Italian man, and they end up making love (shown very explicitly) in the same bedroom as the younger sister.” Asking “What is this all about?”, it offers and rejects a series of possible ‘preachy’ messages. The failure of the film is that “the characters are almost impossible to identify with because of their narcissism”. What is evident is a disinclination in this review to see the girls’ world as anything other than a bourgeois world, and therefore their pain as nothing other than an overblown aspect of that same world. All this is counterpointed to the attack on the World Trade Center (the review is from a New Yorker), against which measure the entire film is simply “self-absorbed”.

*What this suggests is the centrality to Embracing of an agreement to look inside the sisters, to see them as typical girls. The ability to do that allows the scenes to become more than just events, and for the film to be experienced as a flow.*

## **2. The Web Questionnaire.**

As reported earlier, we received a total of 115 responses within our questionnaires to *À Ma Soeur*. Among these, there is a significantly higher proportion of female respondents than in the total population (Total = 22%, AMS = 35.4%), with an age spread overall markedly more concentrated in the 26-35 year old group, and a slightly higher proportion judging themselves to be Extremely Knowledgeable about film. There is no meaningful difference in the pattern of responses to our Censorship question.

It is perhaps worth noting that among the five films *À Ma Soeur* displays the *least* difference in the *quantity* written about the film by Embracing and Refusing respondents (R = 91% of E (as against, at the other extreme *Ichii*: R = 55.7% of E)). Refusing viewers had almost as much to say about the film as Embracing viewers – at least in the questionnaire. It is a film which induces a wish to debate.

57 of the 115 met our criteria for an Embracing response, of whom 21 (36.8%) are women – almost exactly in line with their overall raised population compared to the total questionnaire population. In other words, while *À Ma Soeur* does appear to have attracted more women to see it in the first instance, that does not seem to result automatically in a higher level of Embrace of it.

However this picture becomes more complicated when we factor in age differences. Cross-tabulating age and sex with Embracing, we find that it is markedly *younger women* and *older men* who most appreciate the film. Among female Embracers, 33% are aged 18-25, and 38% are aged 26-35; while among male Embracers 41% are aged 36-45. Although these are based on quite small figures, when we connect these tendencies with the qualitative accounts which emerge below, we hazard the explanation that *younger women are able to feel closer to the life experiences of the two young girls, with issues of body size, of emerging sexual feelings, and of the pressures to early sexual experience particularly encountered in recent generations; while older men are able to stand away from the possible feelings of guilt at the manipulative behaviour of Fernando, and admit the wrongness of his behaviour.*

### The meanings of ‘context’ for Embracers and Refusers of *À Ma Soeur*:

This is based on a close analysis of the forms of argument and discursive moves of a comparative sample of Embracers and Refusers, within the questionnaire responses. In each case a set of 50 responses was sought, gathering their answers to two questions. The two questions were:

1. What contribution in your view do the scenes of sexual violence make to this film as a whole?
2. In the UK, although the film was released uncut for the cinema, one substantial cut was made to the very end of the film when it was considered for video release. This remove most of the scene in which the younger sister is attacked. The major reason given was that the scene “was similar to material which paedophiles use to groom their victims”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

The sets were generated as follows:

**A: Embracers:** sorting within the questionnaire by [1 – 2] answers to both the opening multiple choice measures of response (“*as a piece of film-making*” and “*ideas it was dealing with*”). This located 57 responses. Using the responses to ‘Where and when did you see *Baise-Moi*?’ as a spare column, and Access’s ‘Sort Descending’ command, these were randomised, and the first 50 selected for analysis.

**B: Refusers:** sorting within the questionnaire again, use of [5] alone located only 4 responses, and even adding [4] answers did not significantly expand the set. Therefore the group was extended to include [3] answers on both dimensions. This generated a group of 29. *This obviously invites a slight caution as to the form of hostility to the film, which needs to be checked against responses to the film available through the internet.*

Because we are here (and in subsequent analyses of the other four films) exploring patterns in the qualitative materials, we are now able to develop the analysis in two ways: (1) we can begin to develop Models of responses – that is, to see semantic connections and argumentative reasons of positive judgements on a film; and at the same time (2) we can explore how reservations, and ambivalences in responses bring into view any gaps between what is perceived to be in a film, and what an audience *sought* in it. In these ways, the particular meanings and understandings of ‘context’ become particularly accessible.

#### **Embracers.**

The predominant response of Embracers to the closing scene of the film, with the rape of Anaïs, the younger and chubby sister, is to see it as “essential” to the film, as “making the film whole”, and “central to the message” – although what that message is, may then be differently cast. Indeed in a number of cases, no answer is even implicitly given to that question. It is possible to identify a number of strands of possible answers to this question – and they become particularly clear when set against the positions taken up by the film’s Refusers, whose grounds of rejection are frequently a revealing obverse of what the Embracers claim.

- a) The most commonly occurring explicit claim is that the ending is in a sense “realistic”. It is not nice, but that is right – we have to be “shocked” by it, because we need to be reminded just how cruel men can be towards women. ‘Realism’ is a direct statement of the nature of the world in this respect: “The film is cruel but that’s not a reason to cut its depiction of the casual cruelty of romance”. The implication being that romance per se *hides its cruelty* and needed this shock to awaken us from its mirage. Only thus can the film be “genuine”.
- b) It is important to see that many of the responses to this were highly articulate responses – aware of setting themselves out as arguments, working with logic from premises to conclusions. A very good example is this [40]: “The sexual assault and violence works as a comment on the sexual representation in the film and the way men and women are trapped into sexuality. The first relationship between the pretty sister and the guy represents a conventional and very bourgeois ‘normality’ based on gender roles and gender expectations but because of conventions the woman is let down. The violence and sexual attack is narratively built up during the *mise-en-scene* at the motorway. It shows that sexuality and especially female (and male) sexuality is deadly and dangerous. The fat sister survives maybe for three reasons. I present them here and they may seem quite undifferentiated: Her ugliness, her virginity, and her resistance to adapt to approved norms. The third reason is the most interesting because it is a subversive one, the other two are moral ones and I don’t see the film as a moral lesson. But the film does not give much hope for joyous and unforced sexuality for men and women and that is an absolute black mark.” The last qualifying statement is interesting – it is rare, and worth noting precisely because while here it is just a reservation, it becomes the thematic of a number of Refusers’ positions (it also recurs among some participants in focus groups).
- c) An extension of this argument is that the rape at the end constitutes a completion of the arc begun with the seduction of the older sister. The rape “completes” this. In that earlier long sequence, seduction is shown to be a form of exploitation. The difference, say these respondents, is that whereas in the seduction case the older girl is complicit via her commitment to the idea of romance, and her willingness to play along with the boy’s demands because she believes somehow that he ‘loves’ her, the younger sister is cynical about romance and love. Her rape at the end is a terrible form of logical outcome of what has happened to her sister. But her *response* to the rape also thence takes on a different meaning, because she ‘survives’ it.
- d) Exceptionally, thence, an occasional respondent will *celebrate* the ending, on the grounds that it marks a kind of empowerment of Anaïs. One refers to the final scene as constituting the “awakening” of Anaïs through the death of her sister – she comes into her own, as it were. Another talks of the impact of the cut as reducing her at the end back to the status of “victim” when throughout the film she has made clear that she refuses to be. So it is her *choice* to submit to the rape, and thus to get rid of (not lose) her virginity.

Two points of general interest must be noted: whereas with some other films their length of availability, plus their association with slightly cultist collector-viewing, has

led to extensive seeking out of both information about the uncut version and the differences made by cuts, and of the ‘authentic’ DVD version from abroad, with *À Ma Soeur* a considerable proportion of our respondents talk of knowing that there has been a cut, but not knowing precisely what it is. They frequently sense a gap right at the end, but have had to imagine in what might have been excised. They therefore work with a sense of *what the film was trying to do* and ‘fill in’ something to make it more complete to their sense of the purpose.

The second point of general interest is the way in which people talk about Catherine Breillat. She is clearly known as a filmmaker to a considerable proportion of the audience, but her ‘name’ has different meanings for Embracers and Refusers. For Embracers, her name conjures up *the making of purposive aesthetic choices*. As the director, she knows what she is trying to achieve, and this deserves respect. We will see that her ‘name’ works differently for Refusers.

One other point worth considering is the relative *lack* of confusion and debate about the apparent shift of gears at the end of the film. There is surprisingly little talk, even, about the murder of the mother and older sister – and this may signal an implicit focus already on Anaïs and what is about to happen to her. There are tiny whispers of surprise, or dismay, at this, but mostly it is integrated into the film in the manner we have outlined above. ‘Shock’ was necessary. One or two even ‘saw it coming’ (whether proactively or retrospectively, it is impossible to tell, of course). They explain it in terms of the rising tension of the driving scene – which they interpret as showing yet another form of male sexual aggression, this time towards a woman driver. The accumulating threat to her culminates in her mother’s and Elena’s murders, and the rape of Anaïs.

### **Refusers.**

Negative responses to *À Ma Soeur* are markedly different – they are very short, in general (more of the writing (42–58%) is given over to discussion of the BBFC’s judgement, to which we come separately in a moment). People seem to feel that there is not much worth saying. One summarises the whole thing as “worthy and dull”. Another simply dismisses the whole thing, ending and all, as follows: “They set the tone - ugly scenes for an ugly film”. This takes on the appearance of an aesthetic judgement, but we do not think it actually is – we sense a moral condemnation within and behind the term ‘ugly’. The most common response (remembering that the set is only 29) is that the end is just “shocking”, an out of the blue twist, from which little sense can be made. Or, if there is a sense to be made, it is not to the credit of the film. There are a number of strands of ‘explanation’ of the shock:

- a) Catherine Breillat: where the Embracers credit her with making a purposive aesthetic judgement, the Refusers condemn her as an embittered feminist. This is a ‘typical overstatement’ of her hatred of men.
- b) Breillat’s failure carries over, for a few, to a dislike of Anaïs, whom one describes as being shown now to be ‘spiteful’ because she does not seem to care that her mother and sister have been killed: “The murders of her mother and sister do not upset Fat Girl and she looks positively pleased not merely to survive but to lose her virginity”. Here, the respondent appears to set this in opposition to what s/he



has identified as “the themes the director has examined”, without feeling the need to say what these might have been. But this nicely illustrates the *separation* of ending from bulk of the film. (Another did the same, using the word “otherwise” to suggest that without the ending the film would have been about sibling jealousy.)

- c) But if there is one strongly emergent theme, it is, curiously, like the BBFC’s judgement on the film – that the final scene is too shocking because it shows a “child” being hurt, abused. One expresses extreme hostility to the experience the film had evoked, ending “I don’t like seeing children harmed sexually or otherwise”. Another talking of Anaïs “tricking herself” into getting raped, and another to the girls being too inexperienced to cope. One, finally, talks of “innocence being corrupted”.

This opposition of responses to the Embracers is interesting, since they clearly constitute opposite orientations and means of finding meaning in the film. What is striking is that, almost without exception, the two sides join hands to condemn the position taken by the BBFC. On the Embracers’ side, unsurprisingly, with their authorial stance, and conviction in the ‘necessary realism’ of the shock ending, there is annoyance at the cuts – even though often they do not know for sure what has been cut. But their strong sense of the film-as-a-whole makes them sure what it can and cannot do. But on the Refusers’ side, the position is almost as strong. Of the twenty-nine, just two show any kind of support for the arguments about the risks of the final scene. The rest agree with the position that it is just too dark, too shocking, ever to be arousing, or to be capable of confirming to a child or a paedophile the possibility or acceptability or rape. The two who *almost* do so are particularly interesting. Their concern is that with any accentuation of the rape the film would just become so dark, so grim, as to be unbearable.

### **3. The Focus Groups.**

Four Focus Groups were held, in Brighton (2 men, 3 women), Hull (5 men, 1 woman), Edinburgh (2 men, 2 women), and Newcastle (4 women) – all with people broadly meeting our criteria for Embracers. However, in the ensuing debates, individuals frequently expressed strong reservations. For purposes of analysis, these can be particularly helpful, in at least two ways. They bring into view the gap between people’s wishes, expectations and ideal viewing experiences, and the features of then film which challenge or deny those; and in ensuing debates on the points, others are pressed to clarify their own responses, and how features of the film are meaningful to them. Through these processes, it is possible to discern *what conditions a person has to (agree to, be able to) meet in order to achieve an entirely positive experience of the film.*<sup>6</sup>

Typically, each focus group lasted up to two hours. All were lively, and very committed. In every case, although our Schedule of Questions did not formally introduce the topic until quite late on, the question of the ending, its meanings and

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<sup>6</sup> This kind of outcome relates strongly to the model of audience responses presented in Martin Barker, “Loving and Hating *Straw Dogs*: the Meanings of Audience Responses to a Controversial Film”, *Participations: online journal* 2:2 (December 2005) and 3:1 (May 2006).

relation to the film as a whole (and thus, the issue of the BBFC cut) very quickly became leading elements in the discussions.

First, we note two general – and apparently, but not actually, conflicting – features: how people *remembered* the film; and the ways in which they attended to the ending, in particular.

**Remembering the film:** Not everyone was sure if they had seen the cut or uncut version. This was particularly so with those who, it turned out, had seen the cut version. One woman had realised that she had seen the cut version, partly because the ending confused her, and had sought out the uncut version to learn how it had actually gone. Clearly, being sure what version you have seen affects what and how people remember from the film. Earlier, we distinguished five ways in which people may recall a film, using illustrations of their operation around *À Ma Soeur* taken from the Brighton focus group. Rather than repeat this here, we simply note how differently this can operate between Ambivalents and Embracers.

The five kinds of remembered Moments can of course overlap and enter each other – or perform doubled roles – but equally they can exist pretty largely separate from each other. Inasmuch as they remain separate, we have argued that **Resonant Moments** are the most highly individuated and unpredictable; **Punctuation Moments** are the most textually-determined; and **Challenge Moments** are moments of abrasion between points in the film, and cultural and ethical presumptions in viewers. The differences between these coordinates strongly with differences we found in responses within our Questionnaire to the two questions ‘What was the most memorable ...?’ and ‘What was the most uncomfortable moment or aspect of the film?’ **Imperative Moments**, meanwhile, are those points at which a viewer finds him/herself driven by a point in the film to *seek a broader sense*, while **Circumstantial Moments** relate to the conditions under which meaning-making goes on.

The relevance of these points can be seen in an example from the Newcastle focus group. Here, Mary – somewhat Ambivalent about the film – very specifically recalled two moments in the film, and noted that she wasn’t sure why: “The only image, there are two images from the film that stayed with me actually, um, the one where the older sister is wandering through some lane ... she’s on her own and she’s just ... it’s that, that, what you were describing before Clare, about the lots of boredom and time sort of just going nowhere ... I remember that, and also a scene at the end, where the mothers driving the two daughters back and there’s the aerial shot, er, with her boxed in by trucks ... I don’t know why that sticks with me, but it does...” This is a classic case of a Resonant Moment. Mary however goes on to puzzle about the ending, unable to say how it relates to the rest of the film: “I remember, I was very shocked by the ending, .. just by the turn of events .. and thinking .. where did *that* come from!? I wasn’t expecting that to happen and then wondering what the point of it was. It, it seemed to be a very different movie up until then, and to this day I really don’t understand why it ended that way.”

This contrasts with Nat, considerably more positive about the film overall, who from exactly the same scene begins (with Lucy) to build a presaging of and a possible explanation of the ending: “Perhaps, it’s y’know, you mentioned that Hollywood movies give it, well some of them anyway, usually give it a happy and easy ride and

happy ending the beginning of the film, it's been a bit difficult... there's tension mounting up, they've come to this rest place, everything's ok now, y'know, there's that feel that yeah, it's all right for the moment, to settle down maybe, that's why she put that scene in just to say keep watching, you're not out of it yet, y'know, typical French in your face sort of thing and the way she seems to work as well. [...] I heard that some people have said that, they think that um, she made it up. I don't know why she would but ..." (Nat) "That is an interesting take on it, it was just a complete fantasy." (Lucy) "The man in the truck who drives past and he gives her a very sinister look and you think something's going to happen with that, so maybe after she saw him she made up the story and perhaps?" In this way, an explanatory account is built which provides a possible logic for the ending.

The point is that how we remember a film is closely bound up with the sense that we manage to make of it. But it is clear at the same time that almost without exception our focus group participants *paid very close attention* to the ending. Among the features which became 'noticeable' – that is, possible contributors to the meaning – were the following:

- a) the way in which Anaïs looks back at the attacker immediately after her mother and sister have been murdered – is this a sign of her acceptance of what he is 'here for'?
- b) the fact that Anaïs says to her attacker "You're not going to hurt me" – which for some echoes that Fernando *did* hurt her sister, and thus 'rounds out' the film.
- c) the fact that she appears to 'accept' their deaths – does this indicate that it is a dream-fantasy scene, what she would *like* to have happen?
- d) the fact that having murdered mother and Elena, the rapist is quite 'gentle' with her – is this even a 'gift' to her of what she wanted (to lose her virginity with someone unimportant to her?)
- e) the fact that she keeps her eyes open during the rape – is this a sign of her sudden adulthood? ("as if she was waiting for something ..." (Ilaria, Edinburgh)); "the look on the young girl's face at the end ... the huge unbridgeable gap between the male and the female that she presents – it's the great gaps that seem to me unfathomable" (Lesley, Hull));
- f) the fact that she appears to hold him in the same scene – is this a sign of her almost being kind to him, seeing and responding to *his* need?
- g) the way in which she removes her panties from her mouth ("sort of quite silkily done ..." (Kerry, Brighton)) – is this a marker of how women have learnt to appeal to male sexuality?
- h) the fact that her denial of rape is ventriloquised for her by a policeman – is *this* a mark that 'rape' is something defined by men, but experienced by women? – so, could her final "You don't have to believe me" be a reclaiming of her voice?
- i) the fact that at the very last moment of the film she appears to look at the camera as she says 'You don't have to believe me' – is this her challenge to us, as viewers? ("violated, defiant – a kind of two fingers to you, kind of expression!" (Lesley, Hull))

This level of detail is significant in itself, and it evidently ties in with the effectively unanimous response among our participants that the cut to the final scene matters. The main reasons given for this are the following:

1. We need to see Anaïs' maturation, that she is now the most knowing and wise among the characters. Her reactions need to be seen in full, in order that we can estimate her.
2. We need to see the ambiguities of the rape, since they reflect and comment on Fernando's 'rape' of Elena, earlier.
3. The rhythm of the film is lost, with the cut – after the long, slow explorations and revelations of the earlier parts of the film, the tense claustrophobic scenes on the motorway, and then the irruption of the attack, the final scenes need to be slow and full again. Otherwise the 'crisis' of the film is unresolved.

At certain levels the four focus groups are quite unlike each other (as is the case with the groups for the other films). The progress of debates among participants depended heavily on their individual histories, and the circumstances of the discussion. The individual foci and judgements, and of course in particular the very individualised Resonant Moments, vary greatly. But behind the differences it is possible to discern a series of common issues and processes. As people talk and argue about the film, and relate their understanding of the film to their judgements about it, so it is possible to see emerging a pattern of criteria which make possible a positive judgement and an embracing of the film. The film appears to set a series of particular *tasks* and pose a series of particular *problems*, and our participants respond to those tasks and problems by moving either closer to, or further away, from the film. But whichever way they move, as we will see, this has the striking result that *the more that people talk about and argue over the film, the more important to them does the cut become*.

We summarise these tasks and problems in these seven issues:

1. The issue of the centre of the film. Who is the central character, and what does she embody? The nature of Anaïs, her age, knowledge, and intentions. Refusers and Ambivalents often expressed concern at the age of Elena and especially Anaïs, only rarely invoking child abuse, but certainly often suggesting that Breillat might have exploited her actresses. Embracers do not simply reject this charge, rather, they see Anaïs as *maturing* and becoming the *centre of wisdom* in the course of the film – which then becomes a feature of their reading of the final scene.

Anaïs (for Embracers): “very Freudian ... full of anger”, “the most lovely person who ever existed” ; for Ambivalents “shallow”, “not a real character”.

“I found that quite disturbing when I watched it, the young girl, umm, I found quite quite disturbing when I watched first time round because that's obviously the bit cut out from the one that I'd seen before, because it's quite noticeable, I think, if you've watched it, she does cry [in the early seduction scene], but then, umm she starts to seem older, she starts obviously there is a puberty thing going on and towards the end or in some scenes she actually looks older than some other scenes and in some of the scenes she looks quite *young*.” (Eleri, Brighton – Embracer)

“... the idea that he gives [Elena] the ring that belongs to his grandmother, and then the mother has to come and get it, and there's a super piece of dialogue, it's the young girl who comes back and says 'You're doing your son's dirty work', it's, the dialogue's great”. (Lesley, Hull – Embracer)

“... the idea that, you know, you’ve just seen this guy murder your mother and your sister, no matter how sort of pissed off with them you might be feeling, ... I mean, you couldn’t even, you couldn’t even call it rape because she participated actively, that she didn’t seem to want to resist ... my memory is there were a couple of shots where she actually appeared to be the more mature, knowing one who was kind of helping him, somehow she saw that *he* was troubled and needed *her* help to do it, like – you’re, what, 12 years old!” (Ailsa, Edinburgh – Ambivalent) Ailsa *sees* Anaïs’ maturity but cannot accept it.

“The thing that I remember most strongly from reading the reviews ... was the fact that it was a *fat* girl and her sister and that seemed almost to be written as though that was a kid of transgressive thing in itself. ... And I thought that was one of the things that kind of interested me about the film, you know, that I kind of related to personally ... the image that’s portrayed isn’t the beautiful, older sister that everyone wants to have sex with and the sort of younger sister who just kinds of floats around the swimming pool singing songs about wanting to die, you know, there was that image that, that, very much that message you know if you are a fat woman your life is going to be awful and nobody is going to want you and the only way you are going to have sex is if someone rapes you, that’s quite a tough message isn’t it?” (Deb, Brighton – Embracer) “Cos there’s a scene in the swimming pool when she’s floating around where she’s kissing the umm kissing the steps, to the swimming pool .. and kissing the umm diving board ... and going ‘Ah you will always be my lover’, you know ‘I’ll love you forever’, you know so she’s fantasising and really that’s incredibly liberating that she, as a twelve year old, is aware that she’s going to have more than one lover”. (Kerry, Brighton – Embracer)

“You know that idea of [the French] a nation of lovers but actually, that whole kind of thing Fernando does, y’know, ‘you’re beautiful, I love you’, but I think he also starts saying, ‘I have to find someone else, if you , if you won’t..’, actually what you want is a fuck!, but you’re not prepared to say that, because then that would be to admit that you are indeed as shallow as we think you are... clearly he’s just revolting, but he’s gorgeous as well, and that’s what I think is really interesting about Anaïs, is that she’s not fooled by that, whereas clearly the mother is being fooled by that in her own husband.” (Clare, Newcastle – Embracer)

As a contrast to these predominantly celebratory accounts of Anaïs, consider:

“I thought they were all horrible characters, and you know, there wasn’t one person [I could sympathise with]” (Bruce, Hull – Ambivalent) “Not when she’s singing her song in the swimming pool? That’s lovely.” (John, Hull – Embracer) “No, I just thought she was crackers, actually!” (Bruce)

“I really don’t know what to make of the end as there’s just so many ways you can interpret it... the way she says, don’t believe me if you don’t want to, it’s... she is an ambivalent character, she doesn’t... it *seems* like she’s not sure what she wants and she thought she did at the start, she said I’d rather it was with a stranger and this has happened ironically, yet .. it’s something that she said she wanted but in a way she doesn’t want it either so it’s really hard to make out. ... It would make more sense that she behaved like that because of her character in the rest of the film but, ah, I

think I've seen many films where they've fought against the attacker, I would have expected that, but now after seeing this [the cut scene], it makes more sense that she would have acted like that, just the way she is as a character." (Nat, Newcastle – Ambivalent moving to Embracing)

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to see Anaïs as its centre; as a complex character who embodies a kind of wisdom; and as someone who in the final moments of the film reveals a knowingness which sees through men and male sexuality very clearly.*

2. The problem of who is 'speaking the film' at various points. Does it matter that people identify the end as 'Breillat's' ending', rather than/as well as Anaïs'? Film studies has long debated the topic of 'authorship'. Whilst we did not raise this issue at all, we did find a chain of ideas surfacing about the relations between the characters, the actresses and the director's vision. Whose ideas are being presented? While Refusers might reject the ending of the film as 'polemic', and Ambivalents might not be sure how to take it, Embracers appeared to accept a *merger* of the adult Breillat with the *fast maturing* Anaïs. *Compare the following:*

"She's the narrator's persona, in a way, cos she's the one that's got more intelligence than anyone else in the film." (John, Hull – Embracer)

"It is propaganda, propaganda in a very beautiful way." (Lesley, Hull – Embracer)

"A skewed feminist polemic – but I don't think that's a bad thing." (Cliff, Brighton – Ambivalent).

Characters are "cyphers" (Richard, Hull – Ambivalent)

"I now like the ending in a way, because, it's just... There's part of me thinks... did she just put it in there just to .. shock, y'know, or, has she put it in there for a reason? It almost made the whole thing more real, because that could happen to anybody. It wasn't just... I don't know (pauses) it could just happen to anybody and obviously, the rape was significant as well because there's the question of the loss of virginity and things like that, but not through an expected way, sort of thing, so, yeah, I do think it is. I just have mixed feelings about those elements that are I think..." (Nat, Newcastle – Ambivalent moving to Embracing)

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to perceive, and accept as an achievement, that Anaïs speaks simultaneously as herself (a character in the film) and as the embodiment of Breillat's sexual-political position.*

3. The issue of the points at which the film is measured against the 'world beyond'. What measures of 'realism' or 'plausibility' do people use? Refusers and Ambivalents, we broadly found, tended to maintain a 'running commentary' between the events, actions and motives of the film and their external plausibility. Embracers, on the other side, avoided much direct reality-testing, instead relating to the film through a kind of emotional logic – what must it feel like to Anaïs to be growing up in this way?

“Noone’s mother gets killed and you just wander off like that.” (Tom, Brighton – Ambivalent)

“At the start, at the beginning she doesn’t want to have sex with this guy and so she has anal sex instead, and I said, and at first viewing I said ‘Come on that wouldn’t happen’, I mean, isn’t that kind of worse than penetrative sex vaginally, it’s absurd ... Well that’s how I read the film anyway and I said, well, that’s just sensational ... and a girl I know said ‘No, no, that’s quite wrong, it’s not uncommon to, to sort of consider the anal sex thing is not the same, and I you, umm she found the reaction perfectly credible and I thought, ‘Oh OK’ ...” (Tom, Brighton – Ambivalent)

“I remember at one point thinking, what, you’re really going to have sex with your boyfriend whilst your sister is lying in the other bed ... I thought, well, that’s a really close intimate relationship ... and I would never have done that with my younger sister in the bedroom. And just things like that actually jarred for me intensely in the film, something really credible, I mean like, it’s a big house, you know, she could have sex somewhere else.” (Ailsa, Edinburgh – Ambivalent)

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to avoid measuring the film, point-by-point, against the world beyond (is this character behaving believably? could that really happen?), but rather to find a broader ‘truthfulness’ about contemporary sexual relations in the film, in particular in relation to a deceitfulness around the idea of ‘romance’.*

4. The issue of the pacing and rhythm of the film. The problems of parallels, forebodings, shock, and misrememberings. The requirements for close attention. Just about all viewers were aware of the shifts and juxtapositions of pacing in the film – slow and uneventful for long sections, painfully slow during the night-time seduction scene, intensely claustrophobic during the drive home, then the suddenness of the attack. While Refusers did not enjoy this rhythm, often finding the slow parts boring, and while Ambivalents found the sudden disruption hard to take, Embracers often reported experiencing a steady rise in tension, which led to be ‘ready’ for the attack, even if they could not exactly anticipate its nature. It therefore enforced their close attention.

The seduction scene was “very drawn out” (Eleri, Brighton – Embracer)

Newcastle – Nat and Lucy (Embracers):

Nat: “I always find, I mean, I haven’t... I’ve probably seen more French films than I have, say, Japanese or German, but, I always notice the focus on, on relationships when they love conversation, whereas a lot of films are all action. They really go deeply into the way people think and everyday life and also I had this sort of...it was, it was in the middle, quite slow, not in a boring way though, but it just had this real, real life feeling as it was just moving the way time should be [really].”

Clare: “I agree with all those things, but, there seems to be something about the *colour* as well, there’s something about it that’s very misty thing that she does. Y’know, it’s um, it’s a bit like a Sunday afternoons used to be in Britain, but...y’know, it’s very difficult to explain that kind of... that sense of truly *boring*

, um, y'know, and the fact that they're on this holiday which they're dragged along on and can't even stand to stay on holiday, that is incredibly French it seems to me, and um, um, the weather and everything and y'know, kind of, if it was an American film you'd have much more kind of bright colours .. we're on holiday, its got be bright sky and bright sunshine and things but actually it's quite misty when they drive back home, it's raining and things like that... so, it's that kind of very everydayness and sort of boringness of the French (general laughter) They're the only people who would make whole film about it. Do you know what I mean!? Does that make any sense?"

The 'rhythm' of the film is simultaneously experiential, generically 'French', and a kind of real-life.

Lucy (Newcastle, Embracer): "If it was different, if it was implied. If it wasn't actually visually in the film, then I suppose I would have been less shocked by it, obviously...um, I can't imagine if I think...it definitely should be in the film (pause). I think it was a valuable part of the film... it made... it probably helps with the flow, as you were saying, it's quite a slow film and if it didn't have those elements in which were a little bit more shocking than the rest of it, it probably would have been completely dull, as a film, but I think definitely added the scenes with the older sister definitely add to the film... it added to me remembering the film, more than a lot of other films, but I'm still quite shocked that the end scene hasn't stuck in mind (laughs)."

Clare (Newcastle): "This speed of the film throughout has ... it's actually quite a short film, ... but, it has this kind of slow drawn out sensitive, that boring Sunday afternoon feel, and one of the reasons I felt cheated was that the film ended before I even understood it, what had happened in that final... because there isn't the bit in the wood.. and the rape, actually it's quite difficult to get your head around the fact that they've just been attacked because actually...d'y. (slight pause). I think there's more of a cut than I think... the slow look at each other is cut from the film. ... I think there's y'know a couple of seconds... that look she gives him which has a bit of a come on, and yet isn't, erm, from behind the seat, and where she clearly decides I'm going to get out here, while he's busy with my Mum (laughing a little). I'm gonna disappear, not like a good victim would – to fight off him, to try and save Mum. I'm sure there's a cut there because everything seemed to be incredibly fast and the whole of the rest of the film was slow and that, and that scene does, it is what I expected... it's slow and not much happens in it but otherwise (indist)."

Ilaria (Edinburgh – Embracer): "Yeah. It changes a lot, you know, from the expectations you have from the movie and from the brutality itself of seeing the action is quite different from like [indistinct] this interview, for example, had much more more, I don't know, a quite more dreamy picture of this film, more like fluid and more, except now I've seen that I didn't feel that comfortable as I did before seeing that, and so it's well because when you see that she is actually looking at him in the eyes, in the end, waiting for something, you know, really waiting for a caress or a kiss or something, or just strange, you know, she didn't ever close her eyes, you know, she still had her eyes open to the end, you know, so that was quite strange, you know, and it seems strange because it was, it seemed that she was waiting for something."



(See also the earlier-quoted account of the rising sense of tension and danger during the car journey.)

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to find the 'slow' earlier parts of the film challenging, tense, forewarning and prefigurative. The irruption of the attacker remains completely unexpected, yet somehow logical, and a continuation of what has preceded it.*

5. The issue of the ending, its status, its relationship with the rest of the film, and the tolerance of ambiguity. Unsurprisingly, the ending attracted much attention, irrespective of us. For Refusers and Ambivalents, issues of credibility (could this really happen like this? Would people react this way to it?) were quite dominant. This is not the case for Embracers who *watch* Anaïs very closely, wondering at her responses to the turn of events. Because of this, they are relatively untroubled by the scene's ambiguities – they are watching someone come to terms with a change in her life.

The ending (Embracers): “unpredictable ... very good”; (Ambivalents) “illogical”, “implausible”.

“I think it's the whole complicated thing of if you remain completely impassive and don't scream 'No no no no!' a million times, then no judge in the land will hear that you didn't ask for it and umm, as a result, it's you know people are interpreting it that she enjoyed it or even invited it or you know just didn't put up enough of a fight which is not the same thing as having something happen to you and deal physically with what is happening umm, in a completely natural, physical way.” (Kerry, Brighton – Embracer)

“I saw it as very very Freudian actually, a way of seeing the film's meaning that ... even the situation where the girl gets raped and said that she didn't, it felt so much like, you know, not being appreciated all her life, you know, always having the competition of a sister and never being appreciated and then being called fat by her parents, and every time she would always take the fault of every problem that would come in the house, and so I think in the situation where she got raped she thought that, like, there was this person who did actually prefer her to her mum and sister obviously cared more about her ... that's why I really appreciated it ...” (Ilaria, Edinburgh – Embracer)

“It's coming back to me now, I remember it, yeah, when she says “I wasn't raped”, if you've only seen the cut version, I mean I didn't know what was cut until I looked it up in *Sight and Sound*, it's only when you go and look and see what has happened, it's like “Oh, she *was* raped!”, whereas obviously Breillat's intention is that she *is* raped or I haven't seen it or it's left ambiguous ...” (Cliff, Brighton – Ambivalent)

“I don't think, I don't get the impression that she does enjoy it [the final rape], she does kind of mimic you know putting her arm around the the, sort of thing, maybe that's what she saw her elder sister do, mimic that, kind of do you know, way of having sex maybe, but I don't get a sense from that scene ... she didn't say that, it was the police officer, I don't think she does enjoy it from my point of view.” (Eleri, Brighton – Embracer)

“[T]he other connection to me was, perhaps not a shocking, violent image, is not just the man breaking the window, but then stretching through the window and lying on the bonnet throttling the mother ... And that looks like orgasmic, you know, it looks like sexual act. To the car and the woman ...” (Bruce) “She is actually, the image of her [gasping] ...” (Lesley) “Almost regardless of what happened in the rape scene I think that is a particularly shocking image. Because again it’s a kind of throwback to the Italian lover. I don’t know if he ends up stretched out in, there’s some kind of echoing going on ...” (B) “He’s doing something, he’s doing something similar. ... He caresses her cheek, doesn’t he, he’s got his arm over her ...” (L) “I can’t remember, but there’s some visual referencing between the two, I seem to recall.” (B) “Yeah. They’re both in the dark as well. The scene, the final scene is sort of at night and the, um, scene in the bedroom is deliberately very very dark.” (L)

“I never thought of it particularly as sexual violence, I just thought, y’know, the young woman’s reaction was just so *odd*, I thought it was almost something that this was she’d been... I hope I’m not projecting back on this, but she’d been left out of the first part, with the sex in the first part of the movie, and now this was her opportunity to be included in this mysterious world, that was, I think, that’s why I took it. I think there is a violent scene in it... but I don’t think it’s a movie with sexual violence in it.” (Mary, Newcastle – Ambivalent)

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to see the ending as a commentary on the earlier scenes (Elena’s ‘seduction’; the parents’ lack of engagement with the girls, the drive home, etc), and to welcome and want to think about the ambiguities of the ending.*

6. The issue of the film’s cinematic construction (in particular of the seduction scene), and the effect of this on how audiences attend to the events, especially in relation to sexual arousal. Film studies, and indeed public discussions about film, tend to be dominated by an assumption of the primacy of *vision* in people’s responses. This was to some extent true of the Refusers. But we found with Embracers that they were acknowledging responding at many different levels – including hearing, imagining, physically responding, and also bringing external knowledge to bear. The complicated interaction of these constituted the basis of their responses.

“I think that male sexuality is completely conditioned to respond to naked women, this pretty naked young woman would have some impact on me, you can almost feel physiologically that it has an impact, I think is what Keith’s trying to say, how this then progresses in terms of the picture, that completely would you know diminish any kind of sexual arousal ... it’s completely diminished by the scenes of interaction that are taking place, it becomes really quite, quite nasty, and this again, the other girl’s lying there watching this going on, you think, good god this is awful ...” (Sean, Edinburgh – Embracer)

“Well I don’t agree with the idea [demanded by Bruce] of sympathising with the characters. I think that’s Hollywood. I don’t sympathise with anyone.” (John, Hull – Embracer) “I think it’s much better to think, um, what was it Cliff talked about?, a point of contact”. (Lesley, Hull – Embracer)

“That kind of sexuality is also arousing to women. We’ve not discussed, is this arousing to women? ... [T]here is a kind of same-sex attraction in women that makes them respond sexually to scenes of other women being caressed, especially beautiful young women. [...] And so you get, um, the beautiful skin shot, with the male caressing it, to interest you, but it doesn’t take you much beyond interest, because as soon as you start to become interested in it, then you suddenly realise that the girl is not willing and then you start to think about what’s going on in the mind of the girl, and you start to see that the girl’s being abused, and you start to think about how does it feel, what was going on in her mind, there’s a part of you which says ‘Don’t say yes!’. And you know that inevitably he’s going to get inside her.” (Lesley, Brighton – Embracer)

“I think what’s really interesting about those scenes is that, *for me* is that they’re quite, actually I think they are quite sexy. At, at the same time as they are ... absolutely not, too. I think, I think its ... I know. I think it’s what Breillat wants you to do. You become complicit in that scene, we’re in the bedroom too, an’ watching, and y’know, it’s, it’s a thing that some people call heterosexual imperative. Y’know, I sit watching *Coronation Street* or whatever an (high pitched slightly hysterical comedy voice ‘Oh yes, they must get together!’ y’know (through laughter) ‘Yes, they must kiss! They must love each other!, (voice gradually coming back to normal pitch) y’know, that, that kind of thing.... Oh it’s , uh, they’ve always got to get together, y’know, the Prince must meet the Princess and y’know blah dee blah, and I have that y’know ‘oh yes I’m watching this lovely romance unfolding , y’know, and isn’t it lovely, and they’re two gorgeous people and y’know, objectively, on some level, it ought to be really sexy. She’s lying there with her body and y’know we get to see his erection, and he’s got a nice body and all the rest of it and it’s kind of it is, (pause) that’s what I think the film is about.” (Clare, Newcastle – Embracer)

“I agree that the sex scene with the elder sister is, in some ways was kind of, it was sexy at some points, but ultimately it was shocking. Oh no, it’s not actually sexy, it’s not fun .. it’s not good, but then to begin with it was, ... I think like you say, it’s the two young people being intimate with each other. It’s going to be sexy at some level, until you actually start analysing what’s going on, first. ... It’s also it’s quite clever, I thought, how it does do that, like how it can slightly turn you on. So it oh that’s quite good, then jars... No you’re not! And that’s also how they might have felt in the film. Like, she was quite liking this, I’m quite liking this and then turns out to be quite nasty. And she would have felt that same thing – you were being carried along with the character there.” (Lucy, Newcastle – Embracer)

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to experience productive tensions between five different modes of attending to the film: what they see, what they hear, how they draw upon their existing knowledge of male and female sexuality, how they respond physically (including sexually), and how they imagine effects on characters.*

7. The issue of the cut, and its impact on the film. Hardly anyone could see a logic in the cut that was made, but it did not especially alter their perception of the film and the final scenes – except for the Embracers. A number of these had been aware that something was missing, but had not seen what it was until we showed

the clip in the focus group. Then, a number responded with shock at how important it was, and how it increased their interest in and valuation of the final scene.

“It makes the final scene a non-thing, I felt there was something missing, I felt it was disjointed, and I’d been denied something I wanted to know about. Um, so I felt it made the end more confusing.” (Lesley, Hull – Embracer)

“... cutting that scene just obviously ruins that final line, you know, just makes a nonsense out of it.” (Cliff, Brighton – Ambivalent)

“... the film doesn’t make sense to me by cutting it, when I saw it first time round I’m not quite sure what was supposed to have happened there, and there’s an implication that she’s been raped, has she or hasn’t she? But it doesn’t work with that scene being cut ... yeah, I think the, the issue of consent of whether of not she’s being raped or not is a lot less clear when you actually see it ... it does kind of start you questioning well was it sexual violence, was it rape, was it not, or was it her fantasy, and actually having it *in* the film I think raises all these kinds of questions which you don’t necessarily get when it’s cut.” (Eleri, Brighton – Embracer)

“I was quite taken back at how ... extreme the cut was.” (Clare, Newcastle – Embracer)

“I do know, because I’ve only seen the cut version, but I think when you cut something, what happens is you change the relationship of time, you change the rhythm of something.” (Cliff, Hull – Ambivalent)

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are not only to resent the cut (this can be as true of Refusers of the film) but also to feel that the sense and point of the film has been undermined, through the loss of evidence of Anaïs’ responses (to which they have paid exceptionally close attention).*

We offer one final thought from the focus groups on the reception of *À Ma Soeur*, through the words of one woman in the Newcastle group who reflected, without a particular judgement, on the impact on her of the film compared to another, *The Accused*:

“I was thinking about the film with a rape scene, *The Accused*, with Jodie Foster. I felt, I identified much more with that character and I felt that was much more horrific and I was very conscious of my female vulnerability watching that thing you know, y’know, the crowd of men. ... Yeah, there’s all these men and then there’s that one female apart from the barmaid in the background and I felt, yeah, watching that as a vulnerable female and if I was a man then you could not identify with the male characters, but it would have been less shocking I would imagine, but I’m not sure. I felt the women in *À Ma Soeur* were quite powerful, and the younger sister was quite a powerful character, so I didn’t feel as vulnerable as a female watching it.” (Lucy)

This clearly poses a challenge in its perception that powerfulness may be unrelated to age.

#### **4. An Overall Portrait of Context- and Moment-References in *À Ma Soeur***

1. With Embracers of *À Ma Soeur*, it is very clear to us that the predominant context-categories through which responses are organised are categories 2 and 4 (Intra-filmic, and Relations with Reality), and that these are closely interwoven, but in a special way. In building an account of the film through Anaïs' journey to a position where she feels that she is taking control of her own body, and her destiny, in the face of everything that the world can throw at her, Embracers are alert to changes of pace and rhythm in the film, to nuances of character-portrayal – but use external measures of how a young girl is likely to, and indeed should, respond to her position as part of their appreciative participation. (It is worth noting that the turn to the 'Anaïs' fantasy' explanation is *not* one particularly used by Embracers – this entirely intra-filmic explanation belongs to those who are partially engaged with the film, but just looking for some strict internal 'sense'.) If Embracers do say anything about Other Audiences (Category 5), it is to say that this is a film that *should be watched* by young girls, and young boys – as an education on how sex should not be approached.

Precisely because of this way of participating, Embracers almost always notice the cut *even if they have not had it directly drawn to their attention*. They sense a loss, a disruption of the flow, and wonder what on earth can have occasioned it. They feel that something important to their grasp of the film, and to its completion, has been withheld from them. When asked to consider the BBFC's reasons for the cut, they find it very hard even to make sense of it, because the implied picture of the film is completely alien to their own perception of it.

For Refusers, *À Ma Soeur* is more than anything else boring. It is not a refusal of anything shown, heard, or experienced – it is that the pacing and central characters and themes simply do not engage some audiences. Nothing unpleasant is left, because nothing is left.

Curiously, Refusers almost unanimously join with Embracers in seeing the cut as pointless. From either perspective on the film, the idea that the film might be used to "groom" a young girl into sex is seen as inconceivable. To the Embracers, the film is too serious, too invested in Anaïs and her feelings and understandings for this to make sense. For Refusers, the film is too arty, slow and boring to make any such use possible.

2. *À Ma Soeur* appears to invite some very particular kinds of memorising among Embracers. It is a kind of film which encourages strong individual *resonant* connections – especially for women, who 'recognise' many situational elements as like things from their own experience. Other Resonant Moments relate become embodiments of qualities identified in central characters, especially Anaïs. Her swimming/song scene becomes for some a memorial of her aloneness and her fantasising. These can be either positive (in particular, the seductiveness of certain situations) or negative (the forms of masculine pressure towards unwanted sex). The sudden windscreen-attack is the single and obvious form of Punctuation Moment. 'Challenge' is almost entirely given over to the long drawn-out seduction scene at the

end of which Elena concedes anal sex to Fernando – this is experienced as painful by Embracers. The overall shift enacted at the end of the film forces, as we have shown, a powerful Imperative attention to Anaïs in the closing scenes – hence the awareness of the cut. But it is not a film where for most people circumstances of viewing particularly impact on the nature of the experience.

Precisely because Refusal of *À Ma Soeur* predominantly takes the form of bored disengagement, we can find little evidence of *any* memorialised Moments among the most negative audiences.

## 17. *Baise-Moi* (Virginie Despentes & Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000)

*Baise-Moi*, for good or ill, gained a lot of its reputation from its inclusion, in its original French version, of an explicit penetration shot. Its release in the UK came two years after its French debut, where it was very quickly withdrawn from cinemas after protests, and followed the requirement of a cut by the BBFC to precisely that shot. The film got very little cinema release, and mainly became known to viewers through its DVD.

### 1. The Web Survey.

#### A sketch on the spectrum of web debates

Of the five films in the study this perhaps is the one for which gender politics is most clearly and directly an issue in reception. The idea of gendered production intentions are very prominent (is this a feminist movie?), and as a result, through the process of articulating themselves in relation to notions of feminism – and the way in which people feel themselves to be addressed by the (normally male associated) generic ‘porn’ shots – writers often consider both themselves, and construct others, as gendered audiences for the film. This film is far more negatively received than any of the others but it can be interpreted positively as both a feminist statement and an exploitation film. It is even sometimes held up as the plot-driven future of porn. It is worth noting that it is possible to defend the *idea* of the film even if you don’t think it was a success, but of course in order to do this one must have a sense of what the film *should have been* – and this, again, can differ.

#### Four Key (and closely connected) Debate Issues

1. Porn: This arises in a series of ways. What meaning is ascribed to the porn industry backgrounds of the production team and cast? Is the film porn? Is it intended directly to titillate or does it aim to use porn conventions in subversive ways? Is it successful at doing either of these things? This of course involves each writer needing to mark out their territory, in a very loaded area – explicitly or implicitly - the position from which they regard porn (i.e. expert, fan, occasional user, knowledgeable, inexperienced, disapproving).
2. Realism: Does real sex make for realism? And how does this intersect with the other genre elements in play here. A big issue here is whether there is a perceived difference in style between the initial double rape, and the banlieu setting, and the rest of the film’s more action oriented movie elements (*Thelma and Louise* being the most common narrative reference point) and how this is evaluated. A particular hurdle for many is the use of real (consensually performed) penetration in the depiction of a violent rape: this can be a key factor in making either a positive or negative reading – or it can just sort of hang there as an odd paradox.
3. Feminism: Views about the feminist intentions of the filmmakers can either emerge from the evaluation of the issues above (feminists would/would not show X in this way, therefore these filmmakers are/aren’t feminists) or it can be a predetermining frame within which the above factors can be interpreted. If one

assumes the feminist intentions of the filmmakers then judging the film becomes the way to measure how successful the communication of the feminist message (as defined by the writer) has been. This often has consequences for evaluations of the competence of the filmmakers, and both pro and anti feminist writers can mobilise concepts of the failure of the feminist message, in order to berate the filmmakers for incompetence. A key example, for many, is the killing of the woman at the cash machine.

4. Style: Can the aesthetic of the film be embraced as knowingly reflexive, expressively punk, or is it dismissed as evidence of filmmaking incompetence?

### **Rhetorical Resources and the production of positive and negative readings**

Assertions of directorial (in)competence: Variations on the theme of competence are key to multiple reading positions for this film, and attacks on filmmaking quality are the most common way for those who refuse the film to negate it. This can be as simple as the construction of a basic opposition: anything which shows real sex, is sordid porn, and ergo cannot be a proper film of any quality. These arguments are rooted in disgust and disapproval, and are often allied to assertions of impacts and effects on 'other' viewers.

More complex arguments require the writer to mobilise knowledges of multiple film genres (including porn) and conventions, against which the film can be found to fail, often on multiple counts. The fragmented style of the film is held up as evidence of poor filmmaking, and the porn backgrounds of the cast and crew are most often cited as the reason for this incompetence.

Unsurprisingly, liking the film often involves staging a defence on exactly the same territory. The most positive reading positions have to embrace the movie for what they perceive it to be, and find it a success within those terms. This can mean embracing the movie as exploitation and claiming it for the lowbrow, or it means leapfrogging into a more highbrow reading strategy, taking on the 'neither fish nor fowl' complaints, and transforming them into a positive hybridity. The film is no longer inconsistently mixed up; it no longer hopelessly apes Hollywood; or fails to be a thriller, a classical feminist statement, a decent road movie, or even a porn flick; instead it functions as a critique of these forms. And thus what was a jarring mismatch between the rape and the rest of the film becomes an intelligent attack – through juxtaposition – on the conventional commodification of sex and violence within other film forms. These two types of positive reading are not utterly separate, they exist on a continuum – and the concept which links them is 'punk'.

Knowledges of the real world: Assertions of this kind relate both to how the film might speak about the world and to the impact it might have within it. Those that focus on what the film says *about* the world in a culturally specific way are usually positive. It captures the terrible reality of life in the Banlieux, and exposes the cultural shame of the tournante (pass-round) gang rape culture. (a special feature by Rose George in the *Guardian Weekend* on the 5<sup>th</sup> April 2003 seems to have been very influential as an English language source on this). Where this reading is well developed it becomes possible to rationalise both Manu's impassivity during the rape and her sudden snap, because the rape is understood not just as a single life changing incident, but as a whole and imprisoning way of life – and the whole of respectable France is culpable for allowing to happen. This class-based reading is least likely to



struggle with the concept of the ‘innocent’ victims, and is one the few ways (apart from embracing the film as completely nihilist) of dealing with the shooting of the woman at the cash point, as something other than a feminist betrayal (or evidence that these silly feminists are incompetent even on their own terms). However, for those who embrace the realism of the rape and the early portrayal of Banlieu life, but who cannot also see a play on film form, the film starts well but then flounders, a failure which can undo the power of the early scene, or lead to it being judged as irresponsible precisely because of the initial power of the rape scene. Here there is often the recourse to the ‘incompetence and inexperience’ argument.

If the film is understood primarily as a feminist statement not allied to class and specific social context, the outcome will be largely predetermined by the writer’s attitudes towards gender relations and feminism. For some the film is purely man-hating, something expressed through the violence towards men, with the use of explicit sex adding prick-teasing insult to injury. For positive feminist interpretations the film uses the conventions of porn to directly address pornography, and the wider representation of sex and sexual violence. In this model the filmmakers and actresses are not devalued by their experience of working within the porn industry – instead it gives them superior knowledge – they know of what they speak – they are both insiders and survivors.

Special factor: Clearly the special factor for this film has to be the unsimulated sex, and the film’s relationship to the porn industry. A curious footnote to this is the way in which Karen Bach’s suicide can function as a cautionary tale – this is where sex on screen leads – while providing the opportunity for expressions of compassion from porn fans.

### **Sample Analysis of Message Board Threads from *IMDb* and *Anchor Bay***

A key debate surrounding *Baise-Moi* centres on the meaning of the real, unsimulated sex. It occurs at a number of points throughout the film, but its inclusion within the rape scene creates a particular challenge for most viewers. The most frequent basis for dismissing the film is quality, and this connects to the ‘real sex’ issue via a binary which asks, is it porn or is it art? Regardless of which side the writer comes down on, porn and art are normally mutually exclusive terms.

“*If I wanted a porn film I would have gone to a XXX shop.*” For many the inclusion of penetrative sex in the film automatically classifies it as porn. This is something that can be as problematic for people who in other circumstances would choose to watch porn, as for those who disapprove of porn on principle. This classification may or may not lead onto the assumption that the film has been made for someone’s titillation, but in most such instances it is defined as failed porn. This can then be layered with other low’ motivations – such as publicity seeking – which are again bound together by their opposition to true art. These aspects all feature on the IMDb thread “Porno disguised as a story”, where they are both expanded on and challenged. More than one poster contests the purpose of the real sex. For example:

The sex in the movie was not meant for titillation. It was poorly written, poorly directed and poorly acted. An all-around bad movie, for sure. It’s a lot of things, but porn isn’t one of them.

However for others the separation between porn and art is about more than the absence of effective titillation. In a second IMDb thread about the film “Please take ample warning”, the thread opener opines: “Many of us see cinematography as an art form and can put up with rape scenes, violence, etc when accompanied by a decent story.” Narrative is defined as the necessary bridge between explicit content and art, and here it is deemed missing. Back on the “Porno disguised” thread, a poster reporting as a female film student, considers the film thus:

Good Porn, but a bad movie. If this movie had an XXX rating I would've been impressed with the attempt to add a story line. But it wasn't a porn movie trying to be a real movie, it was a horribly made real movie that actually had real sex in it. [...] Here's the bottom line. Porn movies deal with extreme fantasy not reality. This film continued in that premise of having extremely contrived fantastical scenes, including the rape scenes and most of the murders.

This isn't an entirely consistent position, but it also isn't an uncommon one. Although the film is theoretically ‘good porn’, it does not seem to have worked directly for the poster in question, and the film fails to become creatively valuable as narratively progressive porn. The problems seem twofold: clearly different standards are used to judge porn and ‘real’ films and the quality of the filmmaking fails to rise above porn standards. Meanwhile, the situations in which the real sex occurs are deemed to lack realism, keeping them firmly in the domain of porn too. However the release status of the film means that it demands judgement on proper movie terms.

In the “Please take ample warning” thread, there are a number of posters who would disagree vehemently with the suggestion that the depictions in *Baise-Moi* lack reality. For them the realism of *Baise-Moi* is incontestable, and greatly reinforced by the ‘real’ status of the sex. This realism can be invoked in relation to external reality, “BM was made by real porn actresses and it talks DIRECTLY about their real experiences” (poster identifying as female and feminist), or in terms of its relative realism, compared to other films. The following quote makes direct reference to *Ichii the Killer*, drawing favourable comparisons over both Hollywood and Japanese depictions (and their infantilised audiences).

BM is just a damn realistic film, in terms of what it shows. The violence is realistic in the extreme, they don't need rubber suits with blades in the heels etc. The sex is realistic as well, all of it. Maybe the reason you couldn't handle this film is because you like the safe, sanitised sex/violence of Hollywood or the extreme version offered by Japanese cinema, but you can't handle it when it looks realistic. Grow up and stop whining when you blatantly miss the point of the film.

Another poster highlights the fact that Japanese media, although containing much violence, forbids the depiction of pubic hair.

However, the knowledge of real sex taking place in the context of a rape scene can be very difficult for some to reconcile. This post (from a writer who notes his dislike, as a male viewer, of seeing male genitalia onscreen) demonstrates the problem:

With violence, moviegoers can sleep peacefully, satisfied that no one was actually killed or injured in the making of the film. sex is a different story, particularly explicit scenes.

One of the most articulate arguments on the subject takes place on the *Baise-Moi* thread on Anchor Bay, a site with a strong horror bias. The inclusion of the penetration shot in the rape becomes the key issue in a lengthy exchange which takes place between two posters: 'Black', writing in favour of the film, and 'mbellishment', taking a critical position. The two recount almost opposite experiences of encountering the film, and its real sex sequences. Black keenly anticipated the film, gave it his full attention and expected to be "wowed or disappointed". Crucially, he watched the DVD extras first and admits to "leaning toward liking it before I'd seen a single frame, mostly because I appreciated the conviction of the people making it". The importance of watching the DVD extras and understanding the filmmaker's backgrounds and intentions (and knowing their gender) becomes key in his early attempts to win mbellishment over. In contrast, mbellishment had been intrigued by the film's reputation, but was put off watching the whole film after having a quick flick through a friend's copy.

Saw loads of hardcore pornography in it. The fact that the rape scene was sequenced with porn really churned my stomach. If you are gonna have a rape scene in a film it should be to set a narrative for the film... the inclusion of real sex is just plain weird.

Slightly later he elaborates on the nature of this jarring weirdness: "Although its consensual, its still real... almost like a snuff film where the victim consents to it". The initially good-natured exchange with Black gradually begins to turn sour, and after Black suggests that despite the fast forwarding, the scene had done its job by disgusting him, mbellishment uses a comparison with *Irreversible* to try to clarify his position:

*mbellishment*: The *Irreversible* scene 'horrified' me... so job done! Rape.. horrible, etc. The *Baise-Moi* scene disgusted me in that someone decided to mix pornography with a rape based subject to titillate... and that's what it is! otherwise no need for the penetration. I thought the idea behind combining pornography and rape cheapened the scene.

*Black*: What makes you think they were trying to 'titillate'? You do know that rape in the real world often has penetration, right? If you think that was done in anything resembling a titillating fashion, then that will take some explaining. I mean, it's pretty damn horrible.

Here, once again we reach the nub of the matter. For some people onscreen penetration means porn and brings with it an intention to titillate, even if the titillated audience has not been precisely located. For those who do not share the presumption, it is logical to ask those who cry titillation if their evidence for this lies within their own responses. Fans of the film would wish to absolve the film's intentions, and so this is often asked in a confrontational way, which presupposes a 'sickness' on the part of the respondent, should the answer be unacceptable. Ultimately this particular exchange descends, through argument about what pornography is, into more personal attacks and an eventual impasse.

## Citizen Reviews of *Baise-Moi*

A small sample of reviews – positive, ambivalent and negative – was taken from Amazon.co.uk, and analysed. All three groups of reviews are intensely aware that this is a controversial film, and one that is likely to shock. One important difference, as we will see, is who the different positions think it is likely to shock – and by difference from that, what position the film ‘speaks from’. Again, all the positions interrogate the relations between this film, and pornography – but take different stances on this. Almost all reviews use *Thelma & Louise* as a measure for the film (although occasionally *Natural Born Killers* is also used); but again, *how Thelma* is seen to measure *Baise-Moi* differs greatly.

### **Embracers:**

As ever, Embracing reviews tend to be longer, and in some cases *very* much longer, since they feel the need to retell the story at great length, drawing attention to a logic linking events, their narration and their purposes. Typical words to describe the presentation of sex and violence are “raw”, and “realistic”. The latter term is important since it signals the ways in which the most positive reviewers make some *very specific* external connections. The kinds of phrasing that appear are as follows: “anger attributable to sexism and classism in western society”; “the rape of women and girls in certain inner-city environments in France and other countries”. One review names the themes of the film as “issues of ethnicity, poverty, gender, masculine and feminine sexualities, the complexities of power ... and the interplay of all these”. Another says of the women that “they’ve been worn down by the uncaring treatment to the point of utter alienation from human society” – to the point where they no longer care whether they live or die.

Embracing reviewers do see a relationship between this film and porn, but see the use of porn conventions, and porn actors, as part of the stylistics of the film. So, one calls the film “an exploration of the interface between porn and serious films”. Another, in a move which addresses also the issue of the controversy, writes that those who criticise the use of porn actresses are “treating these women as something less than human”. For the Embracers, the grainy, unprofessional cinematography and other such aspects become again part of a deliberate stylistics interwoven with the film’s themes. For instance, “The picture isn’t crap, the transitions aren’t smooth, but then life isn’t smooth, so why should the camerawork be?” For this reviewer this aspect is praised (“well done France”) for having the “guts to show the world some of the darker parts of life”. This response to the category ‘porn’ has several elements in it: first, it can acknowledge sexual arousal – that some of the scenes with the women are very sexy; second, it sees *Baise-Moi* as a *critique* of *Thelma & Louise* as too “glossy”, “clean” and “Hollywood”. And with this goes a disinclination to put *Baise-Moi* into any generic category.

Perhaps the most striking element is that of what we could call an identified “ventriloquism” in the film. It is argued that the film *speaks for* those who have had a certain experience of life. The longest review – and the one with a very strong sense of the class aspects of the film – speaks of their being two possible audiences for the film: those who have experienced the dehumanising life of the inner-city; and those

who haven't. But with this goes a sense that the film, by its nature, will probably not be *seen* by those who have had their experience. Therefore the film exists to speak for them, to others. Curiously, the lengthiest and most Embracing that we could find ends by *not recommending* the film – because it will be so hard for 'ordinary viewers' to watch. For this reviewer, the possible audience for it is completely hidden.

Aware of the controversy, the most Embracing reviews go out of their way to reject claims that the women go on a random shooting spree – and it is here that the class dimension particularly shows. Men who maltreat or abuse or insult them, will die. Men who treat them with respect will live. The test case is the shooting of the woman at the cash machine – for Ambivalent and Refusing reviewers, as we will see, this is a sign of a failure of gender politics. For the Positives, it is her *class* that marks her as someone to be attacked. So while viewers might not approve of their methods and targets, there is a wild logic to them.

In several of the most positive reviews, reviewers make a point of identifying themselves as women. One, for instance, begins by saying that she had expected *Baise-Moi* to be a French version of *Thelma & Louise* and was shocked, but in the end delighted, by the fact that it so evidently wasn't. She narrates a story of 'winning over' another woman to seeing the value of the film.

### **Ambivalent:**

Ambivalent reviews, most particularly, see the film as *only* about gender – and at the same time see what they identify as a 'feminist commentary' in it as crude, and polemical, and as about the fundamental brutality of all men. One reviewer develops this argument, arguing that the film has two parts: a series of set-piece "hard-core sex and violence" sex scenes, interspersed by rushed scenes of "feminist commentary" – whose separation means that no space is left for character development (this is a recurrent theme among Ambivalents).

Ambivalents use quite a few genre terms, most notably 'porn' – although seeing it mainly as porn without the capacity to arouse; hard-core; and – even seeing this as a positive feature – an "exploitation flick".

For Ambivalents, the *style* of the film is something apart from its ideas. One compares its use of black and white, and grainy shooting to Dogme – but sees this as a separate stylistic choice, disconnected from the film's "half-assed feminist manifesto". Other Ambivalents do perceive a message in the film, which *nearly* recombines the explicit sex and the women's dialogue. One reviewer pointedly recites one line from one of the women, explaining their actions: "It would be OK if you were a guy", adding "Point taken". The implication that, as a man, he only sees these things as shocking because they are not being performed by men, puts a boundary both his participation and his ambivalence.

In connection with their comfortable use of vernacular genre categories to label the film, Ambivalents strongly see the sex scenes as things in their own right, to be measured against their pornographic-ness. And on that test, it only partly works – the sex is not arousing enough, and its contribution to the film is as "gratuitous sex and extreme violence".

## **Refusers:**

Refusing reviews are beyond ordinary dislike to the film – there is anger and hostility in them. In this they rather remind us of the British critics of *Sex Lives of the Potato Men* – the film is “so bad” it is irredeemable and will just “make you angry”. Here again there is the comparison with *Thelma and Louise*, but now *Baise-Moi* is almost a theft of its worth – it is a “self-proclaimed French take” on it.

Inevitably the retelling of the narrative stresses its serial incident nature, finding no logic. Instead the film is “simply” a series of extreme incidents done simply to “shock the target audience” (it is hard to characterise what sort of people this is thought to be) and to publicise itself.

There is a very curious tension around how to ‘name’ the kind of film it is. Each of the Refusing reviews we examined seems to say two rather opposite things: that the film is shoddy, and badly-made; and at the same time it is “deliberately rough” (implying a conscious aesthetic), it has “stylish direction” or again “stylish-for-the-sake-of-it direction”, and having noted the porn origins and connections of director and actors, still it “has pretensions to be more”. In short, the Refusers appear to regard the film as *failed art-house*. Thus, one critic blames it for lacking “irony, subtext, intelligence or justification” – these are at least in part the expectations of art-house movies.

The Refusers feel they know how others will react – one senses that they cannot conceive a positive response. And the result is a regular recommendation/threat: “Let it be said, these are two chicks you should not acquaint yourself with if you value your life”. The implicit maleness of this ‘you’ is striking. This, it can be argued, links with a powerful sense of resentment that ‘we’ are supposed to feel sympathetic to these “poor, innocent” women – the heavy sarcasm in those quote-marked words indicates both that they are not this, but also in a way that they *need to be* if they are to win the sympathy of the Refusers. That they are not, merely makes the film “ugly rather than affecting”.

Unlike the Embracers and even to some extent the Ambivalents, for the Refusers there is not really a ‘place’ where the film takes place – it does not speak from any social setting. The porn-like elements appear to carry it for the Refusers into that liminal space.

## **The Meanings of ‘Context’ for Embracers and Refusers of *Baise-Moi* within Questionnaire Responses:**

This is based on a close analysis of the forms of argument and discursive moves of a comparative sample of Embracers and Refusers, within the questionnaire’s responses. These two groups were generated by drawing on those whose responses were between 1-3 to the Two Film Value questions. This generated a group of 58, sampled back to 50 using a randomising procedure with the ‘Where and when seen’ question for *House on the Edge of the Park*. The Refusers were located from the remaining set who had answered either 4 or 5 to the two Value questions, generating a group of just 37. In each case their answers were gathered to two questions:

1. What contribution in your view do the scenes of sexual violence make to this film as a whole?
2. In the UK, one cut was required to the film, of the shot showing explicit penetration. This was on the grounds that it could be seen to “eroticise sexual assault”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

A total of 229 responses were received to *Baise-Moi*, with a strong gender imbalance (83.3% males, to 16.7% females) with a heavy concentration for both in the 26-35 age band. Proportions for both Kind of Viewer and for Views on Censorship are almost exactly the same as for our overall population. The proportions valuing the film on either dimension were second lowest (a little above those for *House*). However, within these (albeit the numbers become quite small) the proportions of positive respondents by sex are a little different. With women, the proportion is 21.1%, while with men it is 16.4%. For reasons perhaps associated with its reputation as possible ‘porn’, we suspect women are less likely to see it; but if they do see it, they are perhaps more likely to find value in it.

### **Analysis**

In the case of *Baise-Moi*, the contrast between Embracers and Refusers is particularly fierce. They stand far apart, and say things that are not at all compatible with each other. Even their mutual other-descriptions do not significantly match. This is a film which produces runs to extremes, in interesting ways.

### ***Embracers***

There are complexities within the Embracers’ responses to *Baise-Moi* which are quite challenging – and only really come into view within the answers of those who give quite long, articulated responses, and especially those who are aware of the arguments that their own responses have to counter and challenge (especially once they pass beyond simply identifying the ‘enemy’ as the BBFC or ‘nanny-ism’). There are of course some who give very short answers usually saying simply that the explicitness of the scene is ‘necessary’ or ‘integral’, or who may go a stage further to say that its extremity is necessary to explain the extremity of the two women’s responses (their ‘anger’, as several short answers call it), and their subsequent career of revenge against men. But as we leave the short answers, and encounter the more articulated responses, so this gets made complex and problematic. And it appears that all the aspects we have identified all cohere to a perhaps surprising degree. All of them coagulate around a notion that this film, for those who most prize it, is valuable precisely because of its refusal to play standard cinematic games.

1. The most obvious aspect of this comes from those who debate the sense in which the rape scene is ‘real’. Those who will not go there, several times cite the fact that the men wear condoms. Or they worry about ‘others’ who might see this as a Money Shot. Or they introduce the fact that the characters were porn actors, for whom this might be ‘normal business’. Interestingly, these factors play quite differently for those who Embrace the film unreservedly – along several different lines. One line is to deny that the most important thing about rape is the act of penetration. It is, for several, the denial of choice or as one puts it of

‘personhood’ that is expressed in rape. It is the assumption of rights to the woman’s body. And it is very important to several (see our next point) that the women refuse to be *victims* to the rape. So, while those with reservations about the film tend to describe the effects of the rape on the two women as being ‘damaging’, those who embrace the film describe it in terms of *enjoying* their revenge.

2. There is an interesting strand around the issue of ‘seeing’, which in turn connects with the theme above. What is the importance of ‘seeing’ the act of penetration? To Refusers and Ambivalents, to ‘see’ it is to associate it with porn. But for the unequivocal Embracers, first, the act of seeing is removed from the centre of attention. It appears to be the very *casualness* of how we see it that denies it the category ‘porn’ – whereas what we *hear* and *know* about the scene counters and contradicts taking it casually. This creates a ‘reality’ which is something that has to be struggled for in a period in which films achieve particular kinds of ‘reality’ with great force – so, special effects are now particularly good at creating the *illusion* of reality. (One respondent (17) puts this most fully – we quote it at length, because it reveals a series of ‘moves’: “I don’t see how that scene could be eroticised and to cut it is to suggest that the visual is the most important element to the film but I don’t think it is. I said earlier that I thought the sound in that scene was brilliant and I’m not sure if I saw a cut version - the DVD came from the States - and had a very clear shot of penetration in the rape if that is the penetration removed in cuts to the UK version then it certainly didn’t eroticise the scene for me although I think the film overall is very sexy. Anyway that’s the point of the film that one action in one circumstance can be revolting and in another very pleasurable - there are explicit penetration shots in the hotel room I mentioned above but there they have a different purpose from those in the rape scene. In the rape scene there’s a real sense of the violation of the women and the penetration makes clear that this is an assault. It is part of the nature of the choices these women make - they want control of their own bodies and how they’ll experience them - they can be penetrated against their will but that doesn’t mean to say that they’ll respond in a sexual way.”) Seeing the rape in such a matter-of-fact way thus becomes part of a counter to this.
3. There is an emergent thread which wants to emphasise that in the rape scene it is not just *these* men who commit the rape, but potentially *all* men – it is a *kind of masculinity*. One expresses this through emphasising the first woman’s anger at her brother – although he is not a rapist, he embodies many of their attitudes (it is about threatening her ‘innocence’). And this combines with another aspect which is surely important – that as the answers get longer, so the talk of the women being ‘angry’ and ‘seeking revenge’ gets elaborated in different directions. Now, the emphasis is on their ‘enjoyment’ of their career of revenge. And this couples with an insistence that they are not and will not be ‘victims’ of the rape.
4. The relationship to ‘porn’ is a thread through a number of responses. The use of porn actors does *not* for Embracers constitute it as porn. Rather, it allows an aspect to be dealt with without hesitation. As one puts it, interestingly: “The inclusion of that shot would further the metacinematic impact of the sequence as it rams home (excuse the pun) the idea that these are porno actors doing it for real



and that it is an enactment of rape”. There is an emergent complexity in this which needs careful consideration.

5. This complexity around ‘porn’ feeds into a wider set of ideas about the difficult relationship between films generally and ‘reality’ – and this is perhaps the most challenging aspect of what is revealed by these responses. It challenges the very idea that the ‘safety’ position is one which separates ‘fantasy’ from ‘reality’, and insists that films about sexual violence must not be erotic. And in this, they go beyond, again, the position outlined at length above, which still insists that he personally did not find it erotic. In this approach, the point at issue is the *reality of fantasy*. Speaking very clearly from and on behalf of BDSM communities, several respondents (all women) insist that they *did* find the scene and the film erotic, and a source of fantasy-play – but that is wholly compatible with finding rape *per se* loathsome.

### ***Refusers***

The Refusers are quite hard to describe in any detail simply because their answers tend to be very short – especially to the Context Question – and very stereotyped. The same thing is said over and over again, albeit in slightly different words. This is not in any sense to dismiss what they say. Rather, it is hard to go deep into their responses, because their responses are simply not deep.

1. The core idea within the majority of the Refuser responses is that the film is pointless, poor and would hardly be worthy of consideration if it were not for the sex scenes. In a series of overlapping expressions, the Refusers separate off the sex scenes and see them as contributing little if anything to a ‘whole’ that is the film – because, basically, to these respondents there is no whole. Rather, the sex scenes are selling points. So, all the following expressions tend in the same direction: “purely to catch attention”; “for the sake of controversy”; “ensured a lot of publicity”; “without them we wouldn’t have heard of this movie”; “an excuse to seem daring and titillating to the viewer”. The common point in here is their detachment from any overarching meaning to the film – indeed, almost their substitution for any such possible meaning.
2. This strong set of claims associates with a loose set of generic classifications. *Baise-Moi* is termed an “exploitation” movie – whose implications are relatively obvious (this is done for the sake of getting a response, whether gratuitously positive, or censorially negative); or a “cheap hardcore porn movie” (and all the words are important to the meaning here – ‘cheap’ indicating badly made; hardcore indicating the levels of genital explicitness; porn implying a purpose – arousal (although most of those who use the term then deny that it had any eroticising effect). It is in fact interesting to see how the same *fact* about the film – that several among the actors had appeared in porn movies – takes on quite different meanings for Embracers and Refusers. For the latter, it is proof of the low intentions of the movie. For the Embracers, as we have previously suggested, it is to mark a *deliberate distance* from ‘pure porn’.
3. A minor, but interesting, emergent strategy which goes a little beyond this very immediate refusal is a critique of the film for failing to be a proper rape-revenge

movie. One response in particular (34) argues this – and the argument is interesting in that it plays as the *opposite* of what we found praised by the Embracers. It is evident that 34 wanted a *more explicit victimhood*. S/he writes that “The rape is just the girls’ excuse for committing crimes. It is in no way a justification for their actions while in many other rape-revenge movies it is” (and *I Spit on your Grave* is mentioned, among others). Although the argument is not made with great explicitness, it seems that they did not *suffer* enough, and their revenge was not *targeted* enough.

The difference between the two modelled approaches is perhaps best caught by thinking through the implications of one argument from a Refuser, who dismisses the need for the explicit penetration scene with the assertion that “When you watch a rape scene, you pretty much know what’s going on”. This suggests the availability of a ‘standard knowledge’ which every ordinary viewer should be able to call upon – and it is exactly this which the Embracers would want to see challenged. It is not that rape is *worse* than people say – their argument is not a demand for greater viciousness – but rather that it requires a recognition of what they believe is its *matter-of-factness*.

Perhaps the most challenging issue emerging from the two sets of responses seems to us to be the line of emergent argument from those who wish to use the film in a very specific way: the BDSM respondents. To do this they have to challenge two standard assumptions: the standard separation between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’; and the notion that representations of rape can only be acceptable if they resist being arousing. From the standpoint of their community of users (and they do reference this explicitly), they wish to rethink these assumptions.

### 3. The Focus Groups

We conducted four focus groups with positive viewers of *Baise-Moi*, in Leeds, London, Glasgow, and (late on) Aberystwyth. The groups involved 10 women and 10 men. Along with *The House on the Edge of the Park*, *Baise-Moi* gave us most difficulties assembling viable groups – Embracers tended to be quite unconnected with each other. Even among those Embracers we did eventually recruit, there tended to be quite a few reservations, and few unequivocally committed viewers. A good deal of the understanding we gained from the groups therefore came from measuring the differences between Embracing and Ambivalence. Indeed, the late Aberystwyth group is a case in point. The most ‘artificial’ of the four groups, in that its members came from our special screening, were far more ambivalent than positive about the film. However, they were enthusiastic discussants. And the discussions in the group brought the nature of their Ambivalence into very sharp focus, with the group repeatedly producing as a ‘talk-object’ what the film *might* have meant, and how it *could* be a good film – before, on each occasion, then retreating into a more distanced position.

We propose below a series of generalisations, but these are framed by a realisation that – unlike the other four films – the positions we outline are *hard to sustain* and *not common*, for identifiable reasons. These difficulties are implicit in all the focus groups, but come to the fore, perhaps because of its special nature and construction, in the Aberystwyth group. The following series of exchanges appears to catch the

essence of this difficulty They arose late in the discussion when we introduced for consideration our sample quotations about the film:

Beth	I agree with number 2: 'Swaggeringly punkish, defiantly immoral, it allows the audience to take responsibility for its own reactions'.
Laura	So - you like it!
Kim	I think it gives it too much credit.
Beth	I think it's OK.
Kim	REALLY? Karla WHAT?? [talking together; laughter, reactions]
Beth	I know how you all like to talk.
Soumita	I actually agree with this reaction – sorry, go on – but I think I have a different take.
Beth	Um, cos the way I saw it was about as we were saying, social politics and class politics rather than gender politics. And I saw it, I saw them as really lost and not belonging anywhere, having absolutely no place whatsoever in society. So they're kind of trip of killing, their killing spree, was the age-old rather than fuck me, fuck you. We have absolutely no place here, we don't belong here, so I don't abide by anybody's rules. And none of their rules applied to them, because they're victims of abuse and violence and rape and everything, so why the hell should they abide by society's rules when society doesn't give them a second thought?
Mel	So what's the function of the sexual violence in your understanding?
Beth	Well, the way ... I saw it as kind of like ... the ultimate way for Manu to express how she feels and how she views her place in society, as in, she can't be raped, because for her there's no such thing as rape, because it's just a bit of cock, this what sex is all about anyway. So that kind of, that's where she is.
Laura	But you say that the society is visible by its absence, in a way.
Beth	Yes. Absolutely. They don't belong there.
Kirsten	I think you're really writing the film off as crap. [laughter]
Kirsten	Exactly – it's just too crap to do with any intellectual [?] at all.
Beth	I didn't say it was brilliant, I said it was OK. But it's one of those films that is its own worst enemy. Because it wants to show this despondency and this feeling of loss, and absence, and the only way it can do that was having complete absence of plot! You know what I mean? So why would you want to watch it?

In the course of this focus group, Soumita and to a lesser extent Beth, both initially highly Ambivalent about the film, had built an account of it which approximates to that which we outline below as the position of Embracers. In this late section, Beth – responding to our sample set of comments on the film – singles out one which almost enunciates her own emergent position. In 'defending' this to the rest of the (very good-natured) group, she isolates what appear to her to be the *possibilities* of the film's meaning, and in course of that identifies the particular demands that the film makes on its audience – tough demands: to both display and communicate despondency. Earlier she and Soumita had identified as a possibility again that the

very absence of plot might itself be part of the meaning. But that redoubles the demands the film makes. To be *about* the dull awfulness of life, may demand being dull and awful. This was in the outcome a step too far for them. We use this to illustrate how *narrow and difficult* may be the possibilities for Embracing *Baise-Moi*.

1. The issue of understanding the location of the film. It became evident from our examination of the focus group transcripts that a mix of real and guessed-at knowledge of inner-city areas was playing an important role in how audiences evaluated the situation and behaviour of the two central women characters.

(Clare, Leeds – Embracer): “I think it’s a fantastic film. I think the rape scene in it is *the* best rape scene I’ve *ever* seen and heard in a film *ever* I mean I think it is incredibly powerful I think it’s really brilliant there is no denying the fact that these are two women being forced to have sex when they don’t want to, there’s absolutely no doubt about that for me in that film, and I think that the rape scene is absolutely *required* in the film because it’s not their excuse, cos I don’t see it as a revenge movie at all and I’m not talking academically here cos the you know I’m not a film studies person and um, and equally that’s not how I come to movies, I like the idea of being you know just a, enjoy, it let it hit me full in the face um, I think it’s um, well I suppose I also know that in the um outer reaches of the suburbs of Paris there’s been a real issue gang-raping of young women immigrant women, and um I think the whole film is about the underclass in France, that’s what it feels like to me cos they kill women as well as men and it is about you know, you’ve abandoned us, and also I just love the fact that they don’t behave like women are supposed to it is, a but they *are* clearly women and they want to behave in that way, and I thought the film had fantastic energy I loved the music, I loved the way it was shot, I loved everything about it and I find it very difficult listening to everybody else because I just wanted to leap in and say ‘No!’ cos its *not Thelma and Louise* even though I love *Thelma and Louise*, and there’s a real problem about the end I just wish you know, you know some people complained that *Thelma and Louise* go over the edge you know and they die and oh why couldn’t they live well, because frankly if they did, you know what, it’s such an anti-climax you know that they’d go to jail that’s what would happen and what would be so interesting about that, and I feel that way about the end of *Baise-Moi* that it would have been better if they’d both died, I’d have preferred that.” The fact that Clare presents this as one long monologue is important – she knows she is going against the grain and ‘making a case’ for the film.

(Mike, London – Ambivalent moving to Embracing) linking ‘realism’ with despair with position in an underclass: “there was nothing left to the imagination as such thing, and I’m wondering if how, if, where they knock the screaming one around quite a bit, I mean that looked to me, in fact, that she was actually being knocked around a bit as well, you know which was, it didn’t look that simulated to me, it looked like actual, it was, you know, shown a bit more like it was that you’d normally get and such, and I mean, I’m for realism, I am for that, I mean, one [of the time], make one or two complaints [about it], I think there were certain, couple of aspects that didn’t quite ring true with me about it, but I mean on the whole, I mean, it came across as to me vaguely, they’ve got nothing to lose, and they just sort of said: sod it, you know, let’s do what we’re gonna do and do it, and take it, the *despair* the *despair* that came through, from there, which you don’t normally get from most French films as such there, as such like that, you know, there definitely seemed to be a despair, an

undercurrent there that's a, probably in this country as well, you know, certain areas that have got a similar situation, you know, talk of an under-class that's got nothing and it seemed to me they had very little and nothing." Here 'realism' is seen as working together at two levels – cinematic convincingness, and a valuable relation with the underclass world beyond the film.

Rachael on the links with place, and despair (as against rape-revenge): "I've spent a bit of time, just outside of Marseille, and I think for a while it had the second highest population of a city in France, and yet there was just nothing there, it was all sort of industry that's now gone away, moved to other places. And it's not a nice place, and, you know, I could probably believe that there is nothing there, and there is no work, and there's nothing for people who were brought up there...um, not that that's any kind of excuse and there are probably a million places like that in France, in England, and in anywhere in the world. But it's that kind of atmosphere of 'I've got nothing, it's never gonna get better, I can do what I like'. And, yeah, I mean the rape and revenge side of it...that's, that's not necessarily the main reason why I liked it, it was more that sort of despair side of it really." Rachael here manages to be inside the very bleakness that the Aberystwyth group could see, but not participate in.

(Rob, London – Embracer) linking to place and following the logic of this to a 'reaction shot': "I think the sexual violence throughout I think is largely central to the idea of...the whole idea of the movie...um...that I mean the...bringing back the rape scene at the beginning, that, um, what I took from that is very much talking about the issues of the tournantes, the gang rapes that happen in the banlieu, the banlieux around Paris, around Marseille, um, where women are dragged off and gang raped by large groups of, err, groups of men...um...and there's a whole kind of lack of respect, lack of sexual respect issue there, um that it, in a sense, all the things that followed from the rape and from the other scenes at the beginning of the film, um, were about these women asserting their identities to some extent, not just as powerless chicks and toys, toys for men around them. For example turning round and blowing that guy away on the street, which was a lovely moment." Calling the shooting a 'lovely moment' makes sense to her in terms of the logic of their situation.

Kirsten (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent): "I think I remembered – I mean everyone remembered the first scene, but I had a lot of high expectations at that point, because you see the beginning, you see where they're living, you're kind of, OK, they're addicted to drugs, and alcoholism, they're in a kind of slummy area, there's abuse, and then you see the sexual violence scene at the beginning, and although shocking, you're thinking, you're going to have an insight into something, a kind of society or culture, a sub-culture of some kind, and you're going to kind of see this throughout the film. But you don't. You get a glimpse of that, and then there are people who go on a killing spree. It's very disconnected, and I think that's the problem I had. There's sexual violence in the beginning, which I think we're waiting for a story about the sexual violence, but then following that there's violence, and then there's sex. For the most part. There's not a lot of sexual violence, it's just separate issues of now they're committing the violence, rather than being a target of it, and they're kind of choosing to have sex rather than being violated, so I wasn't sure how the story – I had such high expectations from the beginning, and then it kind of let me down, in the end. So I think I remember the beginning mostly because I thought it was an interesting beginning to a film." This quotation is interesting in showing how the barrier for

Kirsten is her feeling that she needed to be told more, and shown more, and convinced more, about the need for the characters to respond the way they did to their conditions of life. A short time later another woman returns to this point, in similar fashion: “I think you’re right, that it had the potential to be a really interesting insight into a certain microcosm or sub-class of society, and then completely threw that away by going on this very stylised, artificial and ultimately we all found it quite unsatisfactory and meaningless kind of road trip killing spree thing.” (Laura, Aberystwyth – Ambivalent). Neither woman is able to be on the inside of this emotional logic, even though they can see it clearly enough.

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to locate the world of the film quite precisely – as that of the banlieux in France, and their tournante gang-rapes, or their echoes in other countries – and the more likely they are to understand ‘from the inside’ the reaction of the two central women as responses to these conditions.*

2. The nature of the central women characters. Connecting in strong ways with the previous point, we noted how the small number of most strongly Embracing viewers – and most especially the women – saw in the two women a punk-ish anti-authority attitude along with an associated energy. This functioned to lift the film for them out of bleakness into positivity. Embracers also identified a *humour* and *zest* (compared to other viewers’ sense of pervading pessimism), and an associated sense of a *playful humour* within many parts of the film.

Newcastle Group exchange:

Clare: ... Number two is ‘swaggeringly punkish, defiantly amoral it allows the, the audience to take responsibility for its own reaction’.

Steve: ... it definitely has a punk attitude to it, its just two fingers up at everybody really...

Paul: It certainly feels a bit rough around the edges as well so...

Clare (Newcastle – Embracer): “Well the rape scene does stick but mainly for the sound rather than the visuals as such, I think the sound is really amazing in that cos while one is not resisting and being told that she’s lying there like a dead horse or something you hear the other woman screaming and it’s incredibly loud cos it echoes around the warehouse and that and that really sticks in my mind and then the other is the scene where they’re getting ready and they’re dancing together I really like that scene in, it’s about half way through and they’re in a hotel and they dance together and then they go out and pick up a couple of guys, and I just I really think that scene has, I don’t know it um, you know you were saying about it being real you know that there’s this sense that they are, um you know the dancing is real it’s not just, it’s not just the sex, it’s actually you know this is we are actually seeing these two actresses having a good time [laughs] you know an and ... I think it it’s more about their autonomy actually, that, I really like you know about their personhood cos then it goes into the scene where they have the, they take the two guys back and one wants them to have a threesome and they tell him to get out, and you know that I just think it’s um it its great in terms of that kind of um, them saying what they want and how they want it and where they want it and all the rest so that’s yeh anyway..” The force

of the two women making their own decisions and uninhibitedly attaining the pleasures they want is central here.

Beth, Aberystwyth – Ambivalent toying with the possibility of Embracing: “Um, cos the way I saw it was about as we were saying, social politics and class politics rather than gender politics. And I saw it, I saw them as really lost and not belonging anywhere, having absolutely no place whatsoever in society. So their kind of trip of killing, their killing spree, was the age-old rather than fuck me, fuck you. We have absolutely no place here, we don’t belong here, so I don’t abide by anybody’s rules. And none of their rules applied to them, because they’re victims of abuse and violence and rape and everything, so why the hell should they abide by society’s rules when society doesn’t give them a second thought. (Mel: So what’s the function of the sexual violence in your understanding?) Well, the way ... I saw it as kind of like ... the ultimate way for Manu to express how she feels and how she views her place in society, as in, she can’t be raped, because for her there’s no such thing as rape, because it’s just a bit of cock, this what sex is all about anyway. So that kind of, that’s where she is. [...] I didn’t say it was brilliant, I said it was OK. But it’s one of those films that is its own worst enemy. Because it wants to show this despondency and this feeling of loss, and absence, and the only way it can do that was having complete absence of plot! You know what I mean? So why would you want to watch it?”

Rebecca, Pete, Mike and Rachael (London – predominantly Ambivalent) debate this:

Reb: I think, say, number two, the one about being punk is probably the closest.  
Um... it is punkish.

Pete: That’s suggesting that you just leave your brain at the door, and it’s not the sort of film...

Mike: ...it’s suggesting that you only look at it for the, for, for the pornography.

Rach: Yeah, well I mean that’s, that’s the statement, that sums up why these films are cut, and why people regard these films as bad because this is all they are and, this, whoever wrote that is the *one* person that the BBFC exists for I think (general laughter).

Mike: I think in many ways, that’s an appalling write up of it and such there, cause you know it’s just aiming for one thing only, it’s pornography, take it for that and enjoy it!...

Rach: ...everybody else, well not everybody else, but people who enjoy it are trying to defend it from *not* being just that. And yet this person enjoys it *because* of all the worst parts of it, and manages to gloss over any, anything else and pass it off as ‘half-arsed feminist manifesto’. It’s a bit of a shame really.

Even in their ambivalence, they register the oppositional nature of this ‘punkish’ position, and how it is likely to be ‘officially’ regarded.

*Compare* Tim & Stephen (both Leeds – Ambivalent) noticing components but unsure what to do with them: “I didn’t realise that there was quite a lot of sort of comedy element in there and er I sort of laughed a couple of times you know that um which was quite...” [Stephen: “Which parts? I didn’t find it funny.” Tim: “Um, well they seemed to be sending up the whole Hollywood sort of vigilante well, the you know couple on the run and they were saying well where are the witty lines?” Stephen: “It did seem like they were very self-conscious about being in their own film a couple of

times, I did think yeh they were aware of it and they were aware of their downfall towards the end as well weren't they, yeh and they didn't care you know hmm."

with Rebecca (London – Embracer), declining the comparison with T&L proposing instead to see it as 'riot-grrl' culture: "I definitely agree with that, I think, I mean, there is so much despair, and, it's a bleak feel of the film, but it's whimsical, it's got a wicked sense of humour. It's, err, I found it hilariously funny in parts, and I just like this whole kind of idea of this, you know, sticking up two fingers at the authorities...um, you know, that's...about society that's kind of left them in these ruts where there are no jobs, women are just forced to be porn actresses, it's like, Manu and her friend are raped, men are, you know, just seem to be drug dealers...and um...I mean I know that they do these terrible atrocities to these poor people but...it's, you can see that they're a product of their society. I think it's kind of a parody in a way, because I mean, as women, which you know, you don't, often in the cinema you just find them in a passive roles, but they overturn all these traditions and just go ahead on this kind of rampage and do whatever they want...um...and I think that's partly, I think it's kind of this...um...that kind of...recent 'riot grrl' culture, if you know what I mean, where it's kind of this 'do-it-yourself' attitude, and I think that's reflected in the cinematography as well, where it's very kind of grainy...and it **is** the woman who wrote and directed the film, it was kind of a do-it-yourself direct-a-film on a shoe-string. And, um, I do think it fits into that whole culture, um, really well, and I just found it, I don't know, was kind of a parody in a way even though it had this really bleak message and I think it's important at the end that it did have a bleak message because it wasn't like *Thelma and Louise*..." This response also connects strongly to our next point (4, below) that being porn actresses, for Embracers, contributes to the kind of realism the film achieves.

Beth, Aberystwyth – Ambivalent toying with Embracing: "Maybe the point was that there was no meaning. Because I mean, the, which is really a foolish point because then why would you watch it? ... I can't get away from the fact that they draw attention to it themselves when they have scene, do you remember, where they're saying, oh, it made me laugh, actually when you were saying about Hollywood and how, oh we needed better things to say to go on the script, yeah, we need a better script, and we were all sat there going, yeah, no shit! [laughter] So I mean, their point was, this is not Hollywood, this doesn't have a forceful narrative, it doesn't, there possibly isn't a meaning behind this, because there isn't meaning behind where they're coming from or where they're ..." Here Beth lays out the bones of a clearly positive response, without committing to it.

Pete (London – Ambivalent): "There was no redeeming qualities to nearly all the actors and actresses, ok you had the innocent victim that got shot at the cash machine, maybe her, we don't know, but on a whole, it was just a total, the bleak tone of the film, err, another film that I'd compare it with very strongly, another French film is *La Haine* it took it to, like you were saying, that part of France that you just do not see...and, yeah, overall the tone of it. Just one film that you'll watch that you won't forget in a hurry." Pete's ambivalence derives from his sense of the 'overall tone', which means that the film leaves him cold and with a feeling of bleakness.

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to engage with a perceived zestfulness in the women, and their*



*response to their abuse as a mad despairing spree, with a punk-ish energy, and doomed from the outset; and the more likely they are to perceive and respond to a playful knowingness in the film.*

3. The intrusion of the real lives of the film's makers. Without our mentioning it, a number of viewers called upon extra-textual knowledge concerning the two central actresses, and the two directors, as part of their evaluation of the film. Although the numbers doing so was not large, there was a clear division between Embracers and others as to *how* this knowledge was used.

Soumita, Aberystwyth (Ambivalent moving towards Embracing): “And the two themes of violence, that I remember were the ones in the beginning after the rape scene, the two in a sense that were killed so to speak, one by the ATM, the woman, and the other person they hit when they are stealing the car. And you think he hasn't been hurt but he's actually bleeding. Um, on the sidewalk. And those two because they weren't sort of sex-related in that sense also so I thought that was kind of interesting cos ... I mean that showed another side of the kind of violence they were engaged in. Um, and of course, I mean I agree with the thing about the pointless violence bit and that the rape scene was horrifying, but well done in a certain way but it's then not developed very much. The other scene that I was interested in, and as I warned them as well, watching the film is that I have way too many questions!, is about the, and I was interested to hear that the two actresses were born in French West Africa and that one of them killed herself and that her life was kind of similar to what was sort of portrayed in the films, I found all that quite interesting.” The two forms of knowledge – one textual, the other extra-textual – are made mutually reinforcing in this answer.

(Pete, London – Ambivalent becoming an Embracer) seeing real world parallels: “...I found it uplifting to a certain extent, yeah. The ending and everything. Closure. Um, even more so really when you look at what happened in real life, I'm not sure if everybody knows, but the err...the woman that played, not Manu, um, the other one, she did take her own life, with an overdose...um...couple of years after. And...there was a certain amount of poignancy, and a bit of an auto-biography in her characterisation I would imagine...as well ,, ...apparently she was abused herself by members of her family, so that's probably what led her into ... apparently she turned her back on it and has gone into a couple of mainstream roles and things now as well..”

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to draw upon knowledge of the lives of the women involved in the film as a positive parallel to the struggles of the characters.*

4. Thinking this as a 'woman's film'. A theme to emerge across the entire research project is the theme of 'who is speaking' through a film. Especially with challenging films such as these, it appears to matter greatly, and in particular it becomes a component within the perceptions and responses to Embracers. Whereas Refusers may often ask, rhetorically, 'Why have they done this?', not expecting an answer, Embracers appear to welcome and praise what they perceive as a 'woman's point of view', speaking to them through the film.

Laura, Aberystwyth – Ambivalent: “Who was it who pointed out the impossibility of this film being made the other way round? Like with, yeah with men as the protagonists against women.” Karla, Aberystwyth – Ambivalent: “Then it would be much more disturbing if it had been men running around doing what they were doing, because ... but I think it’s kind of a, I don’t know, I’ve mixed feelings about this film and I think the gender issue is something I’m always conscious of, you know, you try to say, OK, well, if it was men going around killing women and they were, you know what I mean, what would be, what would be the point of this, how would you feel, I think we would feel differently, because I think there was a sense in the film, and in a bad way they did this, in a kind of undeveloped way, the trying to see how these women create power for themselves by becoming the perpetrators of violence rather than the victims, right, so you see that in the beginning they’re raped, and you know, it’s shocking, and from that on, well, two of them are and the other one just kind of loses it, which at that point I don’t understand, and then you see kind of them saying, well, if life is so, if my life is so unimportant, and this is violence is a daily occurrence, then it becomes normalised and then they just take power by being the perpetrators of violence to a certain degree. And so I think that that would be a story in itself, you know, by showing this fact that when this becomes normalised then these women then everyday life, violence and killing and sex with whoever they want becomes not-shocking to them, and not disturbing to them, even though it is to us because it isn’t part of the lifestyle that we’re used to living. Hopefully. So you know, so that was going through my mind to a certain degree. So that gender issue, is this what they’re trying to say, that about empowerment to a certain degree but a very you know, badly, very bad sort of empowerment, is this how they try to become men in a certain way, just violent men? Men that they’ve been used to being in contact with, is that the point of this, cos that’s the only type of empowerment they can understand? So this was going through my mind a lot when I was watching the film.” Here Karla poses as a question an idea which others closer to an Embracer position saw as a logical outcome.

Kim, Aberystwyth – Ambivalent: “But that was one of the things I was thinking, though, because about half an hour into it, I think it was when you had said, well, switch it around, if it was men that were the two main characters in it how would it be? And that was when I think you said, oh, it was directed by a woman, and I was really really shocked by that. And I think for the rest of the film I was quite aware of that, cos I was thinking, as a woman I would not want to make this film. (Karla: Really? [indistinct] I was in shock, I was like, oh, that makes sense.) You know, I’m just trying to put myself in, and it’s not that I find it more horrifying cos it’s a woman, it’s just a ... huh! – if I was her, what, why would I want to do it? I cannot imagine any particular reason why I would want to do this as a woman. So it’s not that I think I find it more or less shocking as a woman, I just find it interesting to try and get into why ...” Once again the Aberystwyth women are “interested” in a possibility and *try* to get inside its logic, but in the end retreat. Here, it is the Punctuation realisation that this film was made by women – which unseats her emergent perception of the film.

*We offer the following generalisation: that the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to perceive and play with the idea of the role-reversal in which, for a brief time, the women become as the men.*

5. The nature of the ‘pleasures’ to be gained from the film. Refusers, and indeed most Ambivalents, tend to suggest that it is a problem with a film such as *Baise-Moi* that they don’t know *how* to enjoy it. We found, with the Embracers, a conscious extension and *widening* of the agenda of conceivable pleasures, for which there may not be ready expressions.

Rachael (London – Embracer): “I watch a lot of Artificial Eye, the, the distribution company or whatever that released a lot of foreign language films and a lot of the Tartan Extreme ones and that, and it just sort of turned up on the shelf with a load of those and I thought I’d get it, cause it was only, I don’t know, £5.99 or something, one of those sort of dvd impulse buys. I’ve only ever seen it on DVD so I’ve only seen the cut version as well. Um, and I just watched it, and it wasn’t really what I expected it to be. I like a film that...that provokes a reaction...um...not a very pleasant reaction, you’re not gonna sort of...it’s not exactly *Thelma and Louise*, but it’s, I don’t know, films like that do always intrigue me, and then the whole rape-revenge thing as well. Seen a lot of films like that over time. Just, just saw it because it was another, another sort of film in that area. And I liked it, and I watched it again, and I recommended it to a few people, and they seemed to like it as well. Yeah.” Rachael is aware of a difference but does not have an immediately available language in which to describe what she seeks.

Tim /Clare (Newcastle) on how being aroused ‘gets you’, and what kinds of pleasures are imaginable:

Tim: “the actual sex scenes I didn’t find sexy but the dancing was you know was quite um, sexy you know...(Phil:... It was the sexiest bit wasn’t it...) well, yeh, well they were dancing in their underwear obviously you know and, umm there is I suppose there is that it sort of taps into that guilt thing again you know because you sort of you’re just falling into this sort of stereotypical male and I think you know in that way the film is quite challenging whether you think that they intend to do that...”

Clare: “... Yes! Yes I do! I think they make you, all of us to enjoy it men and women to enjoy it cos then we’re taken along with them and that next scene is about their consent you know they decide how and who they’ll have sex with and when that guy asks to have a threesome or you in a foursome they say ‘no get out’ and it its its part of that I didn’t think those two scenes can be separated I think they’re really, strong scenes of ...”

Tim: “... You sort of said you’re meant to enjoy it but I don’t think you know it’s a film that you can I think it’s a film you can experience but not, maybe not I think enjoy is not ...”

Clare: “... Well I don’t mean you sit there with a big grin on your face [laughs].”

Clare, here, refuses any simplistic account of the kinds of pleasures that might be involved.

Kirsten, Aberystwyth – Ambivalent: “the whole thing with the violence, you ... what were the people who made this movie thinking of? They lost their message, whatever their message was, and you know, whether another sex scene came on, if you like, who’s got the crisps? You didn’t care any more, it was more sex [indistinct] [laughter] So in a way, in my opinion, by taking the mystery away, by showing everything, you

really took everything away. By showing us, you know, the penis going in, making the penetration, the rape scene for me was like, [slowly] O ... K ..., and it would have been more effective had the movement been there but the actual genitalia not been shown, because my, I've always believed that in the imagination there is a lot more. So by showing me, you in a way remove me from it." Again we see this group toying with the possibility that the showing might have been intended to foreclose against the audience using their imagination and wanting it 'removed', but she is not willing to go there. This is not conceivable as a form of pleasurable engagement. A few moments later, two of the other participants revisit the topic – Soumita: "With the thing about the imagination, I think it's interesting that they actually showed it because then one thing it does is it takes away the potential of imagination because it does happen when you watch a film, you do imagine a lot more, but with this film I didn't really like imagining anything because I was being shown everything." Karla: "But it's like watching an *actual* rape, that's what's so disturbing. Seeing it, he's actually having sex with her ..." Again Soumita, more tending to Embrace, tried out taking this as a conscious choice, and wondering what the film would mean on that basis. Karla's riposte comes very close to stating the precise position of those who Embrace the film, but finds the idea of adopting that position too distressing to contemplate doing so.

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to operate with a complex set of conceivable pleasures that can be gained from films.*

6. The issue of the explicit sex scenes. Inevitably the early rape scene which triggers the women's 'adventures' came under a lot of scrutiny, whether we had raised it or not. And there were very different views on how its showing – including the inclusion of the explicit penetration shot – affected the meaning of the rape. For Embracers, a distinctive way of 'reading' the scene emerged, focused on the notion that showing the penetration, in borrowing from the conventions of pornography, emphasised the way the women are being *possessed*. Therefore, to them, to cut the penetration shot weakened the very point of the scene, and the way it prefigured the women's rebellion.

Carole: (Leeds – Ambivalent, but becoming more positive): "it's the rape scene with me and I just pick up what Clare was saying it is a very good rape scene and that's probably the most positive part of it because what it does is, you have two very different rapes going on at the same time and it dispels the stereotypical myth of rape that you need violence and it's not real rape unless you've been hurt in some kind of way, one of the girls doesn't move she just does as she's told and just submits to everything in order to avoid the violence and yeh I think that's an excellent part of the film."

(Rachael, London – Ambivalent) presenting the rape as an Imperative moment through how she reads Manu's reactions: "Obviously the rape scene is, is probably the, yeah, it's the most graphic rape scene I've seen in any of these sorts of films, so that's, that *is* going to stick in your mind. But, it was probably just as much the, the characters' reaction afterwards that sort of placid, just, I can't do anything about this, you know, I don't care, they're just scum anyway sort of attitude, and the way she just...walked away from it. Obviously she was affected by it but her reaction was just

to say sod everything and, and kill an innocent person, you know, by a cash point, that's the way that experience sent her and that sort of sticks in my mind as much as the actual physical rape itself. It was her, the way she dealt with it that I really remember as being different from other films that I've seen at the cinema. Um, and yeah, the bleakness of it..."

(Rebecca, London – Embracer) on the penetration shot: "OK, well, the uncut version, there's a scene of penetration with the, with the screaming woman, and I think obviously it's cut by the BBFC, and I think, I can really understand why, but I don't agree with it, because I think it's quite important for the film, cause it's a film that deals with pornography, but, it, it uses pornography, and so, yeah, it brings in the whole genre of pornography and challenges it, and subverts it, and I think by having that scene in it just makes it so much more shocking and...you don't want this to happen to this woman, rather than a film like *Straw Dogs* where it's like the woman's complicit in her own attack. So, um, I think...and then of course there's Manu's reaction which is rather than being the screaming, terrified flake, flailing arms and this whole, um, kind of sensationalised rape scene, it's, she has a kind of passive reaction and her defiance of her rapist actually turns him off, and I think that's really important. [...] that scene really, really does build the character you know, you've seen the way she reacts, and you've seen the two polarised reactions of the two people as they're being raped as well, and that says something quite interesting because they're two completely different, and um, and it, and it just, you know exactly what type of person she is. And you follow her as she goes down that, down the rest of her journey. Err and you understand where she's coming from a lot more". Rebecca's sense is that 'porn' is more than a cinematic type.

Brian (Glasgow – Ambivalent, on aesthetic grounds): "Do you not think that the sex and violence is the film's *raison d'être*, and that the whole look of the film, the aesthetic of the film, is the aesthetic of amateur porn? That's the way it looks, and this is off the director's back, you know, they're called 'film-makers' and they've branched out on this and it's an interesting development maybe. I mean, I know that they, certain people will've approached thinking, oh, yes, this is like a Dogme film, something, but it really reminds me more of, you know, an amateur porn film. ... Cos this actually [indistinct], they've all come from pornography, so I almost see this film as being like a new kind of pornography, I mean like the old kind of pornography like back in the '70s when porn films actually had vestigial plots and rudimentary characters. [indistinct] even acknowledge that as a self-referential [?] thing, saying, [indistinct], they've got [?] sex, they've got utter violence, so, and that's just why I'm interested why the BBFC actually let this film through, and you know, I almost think it's going to be a next step in porn [indistinct] A lot of mainstream directors are talking about porn, even [indistinct] is talking about them, I don't know if he's actually done them ... This is a new interest, a genre, if you like" The key, here, is in the last sentence quoted – a feeling that a new mode of using explicit sex scenes may be emerging.

Kirsten (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent tending to Refuse): "For me the movie could have had, it had potential up until the rape scene. For me, the fact that the actors actually had intercourse during the rape scene turns it into porn. In my own classification. And to me, that's the point where the entire movie changed. It went from having a movie that might have had a point and yes, I wouldn't have enjoyed – I

don't enjoy graphic violence, but it could have done something. So somebody went, Huh! so *Natural Born Killers* needs *Debbie Does Dallas*, let's make a really really violent porn play. So then, what's the point of this movie? You're not going to sit down with, you know, the guy you're dating necessarily and go, [noise] [laughter and banter] You can't watch it as porn, because, you know, if you watch the sex scenes which are, in the States, definitely Triple-X, well, it's not erotic because it's just generally [?] ..." (Laura ... Can I just clarify one thing for the record? [laughter] We did not watch it as porn!!" [laughter]) This exchange captures well the double-impact of 'porn'. Explicit showing of sexual penetration is a marker of pornography, but is simultaneously associated with the *will to arousal* (hence the final laughing exchange). But with *Baise-Moi* there is agreement that its use in the rape scene has nothing to do with audience arousal. A genre-conflict spanning both conceptual and emotional expectations is thus set up. To put it simply, they can't decide *how to watch* the film.

An interesting London exchange over the penetration scene:

Reb: If anything they've taken something away from the film by cutting it because it makes it more horrific by putting something that, should, should normally be titillating in a film...

Mike: ...yeah, my initial reaction was, was it necessary, I thought, hmm, probably not, then I thought, well I don't know, in fact it was bringing home to you the more horrific it was, the actual penetration shot that was shown there was showing that you were, you know, how, how much he was, sort of, intruding on her, as such, and bringing it home more to the, you know, your actual view that how horrific what happens there is, you know, again we come at it from a different way, we give and you take and therefore, you know, it's not so easy for us to, or you probably to imagine the other way around as such, again it's a personal thing. Um, therefore....initially I thought well did it make much difference? Um, [did it need cut?] no I didn't, but then with a slight bit of reflection, it...putting it in there makes it more powerful cause the intrusion is seen much more, so much stronger, the you know, effect of the scene, of the horrificity of it, how terrible it was.

Mike is not alone in making this shift in perception, which also occurred with another Ambivalent, Brian in Glasgow: "Right, well, [indistinct] what you said, I mean, I kind of, you said it was, and I hadn't seen the [indistinct] British cut, and the way that the angle can change and the way the penetration was shot – I mean, I was worried just with the whole context of the film that the penetration was sexualised, but the whole way it was shot was so *odd*, and so unlike porn it was just alien and quite horrible and ... so, I thought the BBFC did make the right decision, you know, cos it was, you know, the whole scene is just, it's repulsive and, but again, I was worried that it might have been aestheticised in some way, but no, that was, it's just horrible. ... it's the way it was kind of, the way it was shot, I thought maybe because [?] the film did seem familiar to me just from conventional pornography, I was worried it might be like a conventional kind of porn scenario, and that might be why the BBFC cut it, but actually it was just really *odd* and *horrible* and [...] I mean the first time I heard of a cut penetration scene, having judged the rest of the film I thought the BBFC might have actually made the correct decision, but actually having seen the

scene it was so horrific, and just so unpleasant, I don't think they made the correct decision at all."

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more likely they are to see the early penetration shot as a sign of the will to intrude on their bodies, and as a possessing of them – and coupled with this, to see the scene as a commentary on pornography, because (among other things) of the contribution of the sound in the film. Its loss through the 'cut' is regretted since it reduces that awareness of the women's 'possession' by men.*

#### **4. An Overall Portrait of Context- and Moment-References in *Baise-Moi***

1. Embracers of *Baise-Moi* are perhaps most distinctive in what is *not* important to them. They decidedly are *not* interested in some intra-filmic coherence or consistency. They are unworried by the lack of some strict logic linking the initial rape to subsequent events – they decline to use the measure much adopted by Ambivalents or Refusers of the 'rape-revenge genre'. Only in one sense is it possible to see either intra-filmic or inter-filmic contexts in play with Embracers. This is the relation of *Baise-Moi* to pornography. For Embracers, pre-eminently the scene is effective because *visually* it shows what porn shows (actual penetration), but the *sound* of the rape scene flatly contradicts the possibility of pleasure. This marks their commendation of the scene, and the use of a specific real-world (Category 4) criterion: this is real, unpretended, random, everyday rape. For the rest of the film, if there is a generic criterion, it is not a filmic one, but a broader cultural one: a sort of punk aesthetic. The film is seen by many Embracers to be full of a raw, undirected *energy* which galvanises the women to seek revenge on men in general, to seek their own pleasures, and to career towards their own deaths in an entirely knowing way. Perhaps because of their own punkish orientation, Embracers simply don't care that others will dislike it – they decline to worry about other audiences, and their reactions. But they do care passionately about the two women at the centre of the film, and their situation.

Refusers are very diverse and hard to generalise. Some dislike its "grubby" aesthetic. Some dislike the explicitness of the sex. Some dislike its narrative "incoherence". And so on. Perhaps the one common feature is the willingness to measure *Baise-Moi* against the category 'porn' (Category 3). Here, however, the judgement essentially is that it has to be measured against the nature of that genre, but in doing so it fails. It does not arouse, it is too badly made even to function for that purpose. A minor theme is that there could be a possible "editing audience" (Category 5) who could attend only to the sex scenes, and become aroused by them.

As with *Baise-Moi*, interestingly, although opposite in their understandings and judgements on the film, Embracers and Refusers are much closer in their conclusions about the cuts. They are almost unanimously seen as *pointless*. There is so much sex and penetration that to cut a couple of bits is meaningless. For some Embracers, however, the cuts are more important. It was a theme in some of our focus groups that the sight of the actual penetration (including the recognition that the man has put on a condom) has a "jarring" effect, which they felt was important since it broke any kind of narrative spell, and insisted that you think the possible reality of this scene.

This combined with their heightened awareness of the *sound* of the rape scene, to re-emphasise the dull, quotidian nastiness of so much actual rape.

2. Memorialised Moments tend to be very diverse among Embracers, less so among the Refusers. Embracers' Resonant Moments tend to be of the "I've felt like that" variety to particular responses from the leading women – but these then have a strong idiosyncratic element. The opening rape scene makes a strong imperative contribution for them, since its flat and horrible ordinariness is felt to be a tipping point, but one that does not need strict narrative logic – it is a point of release of uncontrollable urges. For Refusers, on the other hand, the rape scene may be remembered, even acknowledged as powerful, and it *tries* to activate the rest of the film – but it fails. It is remembered as much for its failure as anything else.



## 18. *The House on the Edge of the Park* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980)

*The House on the Edge of the Park* is different from the other four films in a number of ways. By a distance the oldest of the five, its history is more chequered. Deriving from the quite distinctive Italian horror tradition, it was produced with little fanfare there in 1980. Refused cinema classification in the UK in 1981, it nonetheless circulated on the then-unregulated format of video. In 1984 it was included in the DPP's notorious 'list' of video nasties and indeed on at least three occasions was the subject of prosecutions in this period. Its circulation, thereafter, was entirely underground, in recopied versions. In 2001 it was released on DVD, severely cut, in the UK – but around the same time two uncut versions became available and were no doubt imported – especially by zealous collectors of the old 'video nasties' and participants in the more recently-named 'exploitation' circuit. Its reputation as a 'formerly banned nasty' tends to accompany it through debates.<sup>7</sup>

### 1. The Web Survey.

#### A Sketch of the Web Debates

This film has by far the smallest web presence – it is not a film you are likely to stumble onto by accident – but as a result of this those who do choose to write about it are generally positive (66%). For this film, more than all the others, the forms the writing took were very important. One aspect of this is the prevalence of listing cultures within horror and exploitation fandom. These are non-judgemental forms, which largely side-step deep engagement with socially unacceptable content, whilst still celebrating it. Another aspect became particularly apparent because although the film is sought after, and defended on principle, it is not always judged to be a complete success within genre terms. As such we wonder where the locus of pleasure was within the fan reviews, and came to the opinion that the prime pleasure was in the telling. Through the sensational rendition of shocking, horrific and scandalous acts the writer provides a) a service – information for those who have not seen / cannot see it (although observing spoiler conventions), and b) a vicarious experience, using descriptive pulp prose to replicate something of the viewing thrill, complete with teasing anticipation. This is in opposition to normal reviewing practices in which skill is determined by building your portrait of the film in a way which supports your judgements about it. Even those who ultimately find it disappointing can still revel in the telling of the tale, enjoy perversities of which they may even ultimately disapprove (a bit like reading the *Daily Mail* reporting on child sex killings), and crucially they extend the non-judgemental gift of pleasure to others. Tabloidesque, but less hypocritical with it.

Special Context for the Reception of Sexual Violence: In relation to the British reception of this film, listing practices connect directly to its presence on the DPP List, as a banned video nasty in the 1980s. This is a main reason for British viewers to

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed history of this and other such films, following their censorship in the UK, see Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2007.

seek it out, and results both in narratives of the path to possession, and in clear awareness of what is present and missing in different version. There is no question that the censorship history of the film, including the current huge quantity of cuts, is the defining context for its British reception, and within the international web forum this makes many appearances on non-British sites too. One upshot of this is that the keen audience for this film is forced to engage directly with the presumption of harm, and often directly challenges the logic of the BBFC, and to perceived models of viewing-arousal-action.

### **Key Discussion Points:**

1. Identification and Empathy: How people feel about the characters often determined the kind of relationship they can have to the film. Some struggle to have sympathy for any character barring Cindy, whilst others find their sympathies fluctuate between the invaders and the householders. This can either be the whole strength of the film in the most positive interpretations, or a real barrier to enjoyment.
2. Sexual Violence and Consent: The stripping and cutting of Cindy is usually regarded as powerful and shocking, although often described in a way that offers scandalous pleasure. The ambiguity of the sex /rape scenes between Alex and Lisa and Ricky and Gloria, however are seen as more problematic, and are usually dealt with through distancing moves – the movie is dated, of its time and of its genre. Sometimes it is worked through backwards from the set-up conclusion, transforming the victim status of the ambiguous women. Sometimes it cannot be reconciled, leading to some degree of Refusal.
3. Exploitation Pedigree & Genre History: The film has to be watched as part of genre knowledge. The directors and cast together are practically a super-group, and the performances and touches they bring and echo can be enjoyed. The plot, and David Hess's performance in particular, is almost always discussed in relation to *Last House on the Left*. Genre-fit matters. There is often a process of categorisation, as people work out if it works as horror, as rape revenge, or thriller for them. The broader and more horror-based the category, the more likely it is to fail. The film is unsuccessfully "passed off" as horror, it's a "poor mans slasher", being too slow, often containing too much sex, and lacking enough violent payoff, but it succeeds more readily as various types of thriller, from a "super softcore porn thriller". One of the most positive and high profile writers places it happily within a sub-genre of 'house invasion' and one poster take the specificity to humorous levels "without a doubt one of the ultimate films of 'psychos taking people hostage to violate humiliate, torture and sexually abuse them'".
4. Narrative & Ending: The ending is a huge sticking point for many. The twist is too implausible, and it calls into question the logic of the rest of the film. Why didn't they get the gun sooner? Why did they allow it to get so out of hand with Cindy? However it can be dealt with through recourse to genre and B-movie rules, and occasionally even provides genuine catharsis and relief for those following a thriller reading. However for some hoping for a horror film, the killing off of Hess' character, when he has not dispatched any of the obnoxious snob characters,

is particularly problematic. We suggest that this is because the anti-hero does not get to commit any crimes which can be properly enjoyed.

5. Models of the self, model of other viewers: For this film the viewer who is modelled as ‘other’ often is the self. Engaging positively with this film means enjoying Embracing something which you know to be socially unacceptable to the majority of the audience. As a result there are many self-conscious self-categorisations as ‘sick’. Rather than modelling other viewers specifically for this film, the opposition that matters is censorious forces. The Embracing audience does not feel that everyone should watch the film, or share their tastes, just that they should be able to see what they want in an uncut form.

### **Sample Analysis of Message Board Threads from *alt.horror* and *Rue Mortuary***

Through consideration of all three data streams we identified the concept of the ‘rape myth’ as particularly central to audience understandings of sexual violence within this film. Within the web survey the ambiguity of two of the female characters’ motivations (Gloria and Lisa) was frequently highlighted within citizen reviews as a Challenge Moment, requiring at least an acknowledgement of ‘real’ world values. This was often characterised as an odd or illogical anomaly; the film has a “strange turn when Ricky rapes the woman outside, she appears to be enjoying it!” However, although this aspect is key within many extended interpretations – at least made visible or notable by its absence in terms of the way events of the film are described – and might seem like a ripe subject for message board discussion, it was actually difficult to locate two sustained and explicit discussions of the issue, even within IMDb. What was visible instead was many fleeting, implicit, and sometimes humorous acknowledgements of these issues in conversations that focused primarily on cuts, available versions, genre comparisons and the effectiveness of the unambiguously nasty razoring scene.

One of the richest sources for discussion of this film was the *alt.horror* Usenet group, which featured multiple threads mentioning the film, and contained the most evaluative material (rather than just lists and technical comparisons of editions). However even here appearances of the topic tended to be distributed patchily across the threads, rather than concentrated. One reviewer of the film, who emphasised the class conflict of the piece, concluded by inviting a debate as follows:

The way he shoots the rape scenes are especially disturbing as he directs them almost as if they were erotic love scenes. And that is the point of the film, a tale of revenge, to shock and disturb which it does nicely. A perfect companion piece to Last House on the Left. What does the others of the horror community think of this flick?<sup>8</sup>

No one responded. The un-PCness of the depictions also seems to be a large component of one of the most frequent descriptors of the film, “sleazy”, and for fans of the film this is a very positive property. Knowing that the film’s depictions of the sexual encounters are inappropriately ambiguous, and possibly even designed to

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<sup>8</sup>[http://groups.google.com/group/alt.horror/browse\\_thread/thread/4049e9a013b353f7/ac121e280914b24a?lnk=gst&q=%22house+on+the+edge+of+the+park%22&rnum=2&hl=en#ac121e280914b24a](http://groups.google.com/group/alt.horror/browse_thread/thread/4049e9a013b353f7/ac121e280914b24a?lnk=gst&q=%22house+on+the+edge+of+the+park%22&rnum=2&hl=en#ac121e280914b24a)

arouse, is integral to the film's ability to be properly – indeed appropriately – disturbing. For others, this could be a barrier to complete enjoyment, requiring contextualisation as being 'of its time'. Narrative can also be mobilised to this end; the women's behaviour makes retrospective sense once the plot is understood. The scenes are then redefined. They are not sexual assaults, perpetrated against women in positions of weakness, they are tactics employed by women acting from positions of hidden strength. This reading retrospectively reinterprets the women as active agents, rather than victims, but it is not always a completely successful move, as this quote from a female identifying contributor demonstrates:

Anne Belle's character, Lisa. She's a little TOO into David Hess! I wouldn't even call what happened to her rape, since it was more like a love scene! David Hess' character was mean and despicable -- but given the twist at the end and what they were trying to accomplish, I found Lisa's interest in Alex a bit out of line. I don't think she had to go to the extremes she did – being she knew what an awful person he was!<sup>9</sup>

A response within the same thread, from a more complete supporter of the film, declares "I agree, this is not a rape scene". Previously this poster has positioned the yuppies as wholly unsympathetic and scheming: "they literally sacrificed poor Cindy to their plan!" Lisa's actions are those of a conspirator, not a victim, and ultimately they contribute to the suffering of the real (which is to say, entirely innocent) victim. The nearest thing to an engagement with the idea of the rape myth – that these are sexual assaults, but that women like it really – comes within a thread opened by a writer who introduces the idea of sexual arousal in the viewer:

[...] had that 'I'm really enjoying this but I know I shouldn't' feeling all the way through. I don't know about these types of film, I think they are definitely a guilty pleasure, particularly if you have fantastic sex afterwards. You end up wondering what it was you were so turned on by and, more creepily, what the fuck got HIM so excited!<sup>10</sup>

The poster knows that the response is potentially unacceptable, and this creates a very self-reflexive position – the poster foregrounds his own discomfort with his own reaction. This post does not stimulate a direct engagement with arousal. Instead other posters respond with their favourite, usually humorous, aspects of the movie. After an (apparently male) poster states that although he prefers to avoid films with rape in them he fears that he may be missing out on some good movies, the original poster retorts, "Yes you are – besides the dirty fucking whores love it!!" This garners the return "“\*grins\* That's entirely likely-but can't quite manage to get past them myself, what a poor wee sensitive soul I am \*grins\*. I just plain don't like them." Within this we can see acknowledgement of the existence of the rape myth, and the way in which the film could be read as contributing to it, and simultaneously, through comic over-performance, a refutation of the idea that it could be a convincing myth.

<sup>9</sup>[http://groups.google.com/group/alt.horror/browse\\_thread/thread/88b2a08631b26db6/3d599f927934b883?lnk=gst&q=%22house+on+the+edge+of+the+park%22&rnum=19&hl=en#3d599f927934b883](http://groups.google.com/group/alt.horror/browse_thread/thread/88b2a08631b26db6/3d599f927934b883?lnk=gst&q=%22house+on+the+edge+of+the+park%22&rnum=19&hl=en#3d599f927934b883)

<sup>10</sup>[http://groups.google.com/group/alt.horror/browse\\_thread/thread/8be6f388b16b0473/4c6a29fb3cd1f7af?lnk=gst&q=%22house+on+the+edge+of+the+park%22&rnum=1&hl=en#](http://groups.google.com/group/alt.horror/browse_thread/thread/8be6f388b16b0473/4c6a29fb3cd1f7af?lnk=gst&q=%22house+on+the+edge+of+the+park%22&rnum=1&hl=en#)

In the *Rue Mortuary* thread a couple of exchanges address the issue. In the first, a negative review highlights similarities to *Straw Dogs*, in the way the “rape scenes turn to love scenes and back again”, but although the intentions are deemed less noble than Peckinpah’s desire to “sucker punch” the audience, the “sleazier demeanour” is deemed no bad thing, in an exploitation flick. Part one of the second exchange lays out the rape myth. This is then countered and contained by the narrative argument:

1. the movie, in some cases, made rape look like "rough sex" and not one of the most horrific acts one human being can do to another. I mean in one case the chick gave in and they shot it like a love scene. I found this to be naive and ignorant. It was like a rape sex fantasy website put on film. 2. I agree that the rape in this movie wasn't all that horrible, especially when compared to *Last House* and *I Spit*, but I feel that's because the so-called victims in this film are actually the aggressors, and vice versa, as I've described above.

### **Citizen Reviews of *The House on the Edge of the Park*:**

Compared to the other four films, there are relatively fewer available reviews of *House*. The selection examined here are drawn from Amazon and Epinions. They have in common an awareness of the significance of the Italian origins of the film, its links with Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (with the David Hess link), and with Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust*. And beyond these is a shared awareness of the vernacular category of “cult exploitation”.

### **Embracers.**

The two Embracing reviews examined here are very long, and spend a long time recounting the narrative – in a way that does not in any substantial way propose any themes, or narrative bridges. The most favourable simply ignores the issue of the ending, which constitutes one of the biggest problems for many reviewers. Instead, the prime focus of the most Embracing is on the viewer as the context – the ways in which the film appeals and works: it “ranks up there as one of the best Italian exploitation movies I’ve ever seen. It’s an Italian film like none other I’ve experienced, and that’s saying something. The movie bases itself on a premise that seems to revolve a lot around rape and violence, but at the same time, it is visually erotic, incredibly well acted, and directed with a cool and simple pace.” A little later this review adds (as a response to watching the party scene): “This is a movie that not only holds your attention at an intense pace, but you wanna dance in parts”.

These kinds of comments suggest an unashamedly multi-layered response. An odd sub-theme is a perceived commentary through the film on what is ‘real’ and ‘not-real’. This informs the reviewer’s responses: “The film does contain some very shocking scenes. There’s a scene of Alex implying cuts all over a crying woman’s body. Another scene that may or may not be rape in which Hess admits on the DVD that ‘everything was real’. It also contains severe beatings and brutal vengeance, but this film isn’t like ordinary Italian exploitation film. It appears that there’s something under the surface of all of this ...” Or again later: “There is much more to this than meets the eye”.

There is huge praise for the central performances – to the extent that it becomes important to ask: what counts as good acting for an exploitation movie?

The moment one steps away from this rare appreciation, the ending becomes a barrier. It also becomes more measured as a horror movie, notably the “home invasion” variety. As such it is seen to have considerable power: “a mean-spirited and intense exploitation film, propelled along primarily by the power of Hess and Radice’s performance”. The valued nature of this performance is caught in the following: “Hess, playing Alex as an exceptionally sadistic, yet simultaneously charismatic monster”. From these, and indeed from the comments of those who dislike the film, it becomes clear that the style of acting required is not subtle, but flamboyant and exaggerated, slick and unsubtle.

### **Ambivalent.**

The Ambivalent reviews too recognise that this is ‘exploitation’ and to be measured against the criteria for this. But the film can slide into other generic categories, as here: it is “grim, unsettling and horridly disturbing. All in all, it actually does its job as a horror film – it shocks, chills and disturbs in equal measure, with enough blood-letting to keep many gore fans happy”. Its problem for this reviewer is the ‘sleaziness’ which makes it hard to sit through.

What is perhaps most interesting about the Ambivalent reviews is that they signal so little, overtly, in the way of judgements. The reviews depend heavily on agreement that certain quick forms of description will engender recognition of where the problem may lie.

### **Refusers.**

The Refusing reviews most strongly identify the logic of the ending as problem: “bordering on the ludicrous”, as one puts it. These reviews speak more generally about the nature of the genre, spelling out its logic and rules: “Deodato’s follow-up to his near legendary *Cannibal Holocaust* is along much the same lines, with the setting switched from the jungles of South America to an upscale New York suburb. His formula is intact: get a bunch of morally suspect people together and have them do sadistic things to one another. Full frontal nudity is essential and ubiquitous.” Having identified the “formula”, it confronts it with its problem – how do you get a “message” through that? Through a revealing comparison with *Cannibal Holocaust*, it argues that you have to have adequate characters to allow the formula to work – and *Cannibal Holocaust* didn’t and even more so *House* doesn’t. Without that, it is just “sleazy” – a word carrying strong connotations.

As with the Embracing reviews, there is again an emphasis on how well it ‘works on you’. A draggy pace, and the weak ending, “has the effect of distancing the viewer from the action on the screen” when presumably effective exploitation so shakes you, you are forced to think your reactions. Instead here, “Not only does this movie not make you think, it actively encourages you not to”. This is for certain not a moral condemnation, but a commentary on its weakness *as exploitation*. As another Refusing review says, “I do not oppose this type of exploitation movie in principle, *House* is just a very, very bad movie”.

The overwhelming thing to emerge from these reviews is that they make no sense at all if you cannot grasp the internal logic of an Exploitation position and community. This project is not in a position to deal thoroughly with this, but it does look sensible to place *House* at least partly within this tradition.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. The Web Questionnaire.**

Including the 79 who participated in our special screening of *House*, 165 completed our questionnaire. More than the other films, *House* shows a tendency for recruited audiences overall to quite dislike the film, with only 19 meeting our full criteria for Embracing. Although the numbers are very small, we note however that men and women Embracers are proportional to the overall population. And a more general examination of levels of approval of the film quality and film themes reveals a slight tendency for women to be *more* approving of the film's ideas (women 71.4% in categories 1-3, against men's 50.8%), while less approving of the film's quality (women 61.9% in categories 1-3, against men's 65.6%). The single most striking feature of the *House* respondents is that hardly any respondents had seen only the Cut version, and not one Embracer had not seen the Uncut version.

### **The meanings of 'context' for Embracers and Refusers of *The House on the Edge of the Park*:**

This is based on a close analysis of the forms of argument and discursive moves of a comparative sample of Embracers and Refusers, within the questionnaire's responses. In each case a set of 50 responses was sought, gathering their answers to two questions. The two questions were:

1. What contribution in your view do the scenes of sexual violence make to this film as a whole?
2. In the UK, a series of cuts were required to all the scenes of sexual assault, from beginning to end of the film. These were made on the grounds that they "both eroticised and endorsed sexual assault". Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

The sets were generated as follows:

A: **Embracers:** using 1-3 responses to Context and Special Questions (77 sampled to 50 using 'Sort Ascending' on 'Where and When Saw Ichi?' as a randomising device)

B: **Refusers:** using responses 4-5 to Context and Special Questions – generating 44 responses in toto.

## **Analysis**

### **Embracers**

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance Thomas Boyle, *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead: Beneath the Surface of Victorian Sensationalism*, London: Viking 1989.

A number of distinctive themes can be identified among the Embracers (although caution is needed with this term, since a number of people in our sample express cautions and qualifications about their acceptance of the film – cautions which are of revealing kinds, as we will see). Since gathering this sample required us to take responses spanning 1 – 3, this is not entirely surprising. But they do allow a fundamental tension to become visible.

- a) Perhaps the most commonly expressed explanation of the force of the scenes of sexual violence is their role in revealing Alex to be irredeemably bad. That he will do such things, removes any ambiguity or likeability from him. He is simply loathsome. (“They shock and provoke strong feelings of hatred towards Alex” (16)). This line of reasoning readily spills into its neighbour, that the depths of his depravity warrant the extremity of the revenge meted out on him. (Interestingly, among our sample of Embracers, we could find no trace of the otherwise often-expressed challenge that the ending of the film is badly managed – a narrative *deus ex machina* – which weakens the impact of all that has gone before. This could be simply because these people do not believe this, or it could be for two other reasons. Either they have absorbed the late-revealed motive for the revenge, so that it is as though they have known it all through; or they see this as mediated through the need to *convince the viewer* of the need for this degree of revenge – ‘we’ have to become complicit in it, for it to be most effective.
- b) This links to the second theme, one that is compatible with the first. This is that the length and strength of the rape and violence scenes are necessary to *force us as viewers* to fully acknowledge its awfulness. We need to be ‘made uncomfortable’ and ‘shocked’ and ‘horrified’ so that the reality of sexual violence becomes completely manifest to us. There is in here a recurrent theme that this kind of extreme representation may be necessary in order to counter the blander, and thus more reprehensible Hollywood representations of sexual violence – which, by sheer virtue of withholding, being censored – actually make it more titillating. Response 38 captures this theme particularly well, when the person comments: “It would have been pointless making the film without horrifically emphasising these points ... The point is to shock ...”. Both this, and the preceding point, of course work implicitly with a model of the ‘male’ viewer.
- c) This leads on to a way of liking the film for daring to do what other films have not dared – as respondent 21 says: “I admire it for its honesty”. Anything less than full-on explicit horrificity would be wrong. The point here is to “shock the viewer” into a state of “reflection and introspection”. And the last point is important – what it indicates is a conviction that the viewer is *potentially* like Alex. We need to remind ourselves that perhaps all men have tendencies this way. Alex represents a *kind* of man, perhaps even “human nature”. And by confronting us with the awfulness of what he does, we have to look inside ourselves and confront ourselves as potential demons. As one (34) puts it, after talking of Alex embodying the uglier side of human nature: “It demonstrates the power of sexuality and the differing boundaries on how far it can go”.
- d) A more film-savvy reading of this simply identifies the whole process as one of genre-play. You can’t have a rape-revenge movie without, first, rape, and then revenge – and the nature of the genre requires that both be melodramatised.



- e) All this requires of course that the film is utterly unambiguous in its showing. And this is where the qualifications several times enter. A number of people worry about certain aspects – that they are *not* part of the overbearing grimness. Two aspects in particular get picked up on. One is the simple amount of nudity – that this is in danger of being “gratuitous”, done for its own sake, rather than for a contribution to the condemnation of Alex as rapist. The other is the perceived ambiguity in two of the sex scenes, which can be read as showing the women’s complicity, even participation, in the sex acts. These worry a number, in as much as they cut across what the film otherwise does. What is interesting, mind, is first, that the Cindy-cutting scene is mentioned by none – that is just too horrible, even with the nudity, to be ambiguous. And one or two find a way to recuperate at least one of the ambiguous scenes. The garden sex scene is taken, by a few, to be a *counter* to Alex’s violent sex – this shows that consensual sex can be more pleasurable, and more satisfying, e.g, respondent 7: “NB Think it is important that the sex between the dark-haired woman and 2<sup>nd</sup> bad guy was shown as it showed mutually agreed sex to be more enjoyable than forced”.
- f) Another minor key of interpretation read the film rather differently, as having to do with *power* rather than sex. For some, this is as far as they went – eg, respondent 29 says it “emphasises power play”. Another (50) simply writes that “They help to illustrate that rape is about power and not sex”. But one or two hint at a further elaboration of this – it is a form of power-play by the powerless. The signs of a *class* reading emerge, particularly in one answer: “The rage of the excluded is often turned sexualised and turned into sexual violence”.

Particularly interesting in this pattern of ideas is a *dilemma* that people find themselves in, as a result of taking up this position. The dilemma is the oft-expressed discomfort at the film’s head-on showing of sexual violence, but coupled with their holding to a criterion that the *only way properly to show* sexual violence is to make it utterly unpleasant, loathsome, and shocking. So the logic of the dislike of the slightly ambiguous scenes is that they are *not shocking enough*, the hint that rape is *not always and entirely horrible*. This means that these respondents find themselves acknowledging that the film *has* to be like this – there is no film without it. The theme of the film is so unambiguously the nature and consequences of sexual violence that their belief in its utterly revolting nature appears to force people – even at times unwillingly – to agree that the violence is “integral”, that without it there is no film, that it would not be worth watching without them. So, those expressing reservations that it may have gone “too far” at the same time seem to *require* that it go that far – or it would be misrepresenting the reality of sexual violence. As one says in answer to the Special question, removing the sexual violence scenes would be “making a war film without making any reference to war”. The one way in which people manage the transition to a form of criticism is in the form of a very particular kind of excess, expressed by 3: “They weren’t all that extreme yet I do agree that for the cutting scene as it was too intense for an audience to learn from it”. The implication is that *too much shock* might get in the way of the pedagogic process.

## Refusers

In certain senses the Refusers show some surprising similarities to the Embracers. Crucially, they very often agree that without the sexual violence scenes there would be no film. But aside from one or two, whose judgements are almost identical with the Embracers (eg, 21, who agreed that they “establish Alex” and are “central to characterisation”, while the cutting scene puts “power” at the heart of the film), that does not lead on even to the reserved positive judgements that the Embracers offer. Rather, most often they suggest that the film is *nothing other* than the scenes of sexual violence. If this is said as more than simple assertion (in a number of cases, it is only that), the arguments tend to take the following forms:

- a) The only point of the scenes is to be “controversial” (3, 30) – they were designed to provoke and shock, and that is all. They wanted to be “talked about” (1). This is their only function: “Remove them and the film becomes even more pointless” (4). “Cutting them would leave almost nothing” (1). There is frequent use of words like “just” and “simply” to emphasise this – and the scenes are “gratuitous” and “for their own sake”.
- b) The most frequent recourse where people seek an account which explains this, is to the ‘poor quality’ of the film. E.g., one concludes that the film is too poorly made to achieve anything. In the absence of any skill, it becomes “simply a cynical way to ensure notoriety” (7). Another way is to decry the lack of any significant storyline (eg 10). A third (35) boils it down to “flat melodrama and miserable acting” without the violence. There was an ironising version of these, in the person (17) who complains that the sexual violence scenes “got in the way of enjoying the cheesy dialogue and horrible acting” – although the implication is that the violence scenes demanded at least a *seriousness* which broke irony.
- c) The most common next move is to classify the film as ‘porn’ (eg, 28, 30, 32, 38). What this implies about the film is not particularly spelt out – it does not, curiously, appear particularly to mean that it is intended directly to arouse. And certainly not one says that it *was arousing to them*. The invoking of the category “porn” appears to do several jobs: first, it connects with the theme of poor quality – it is expected that porn actors will not be able to act. It is expected to be quite mechanical. It is expected to be badly made.
- d) A couple do go beyond this, to refuse to condemn the film in any moral way – simply, it was too “inept” (41) to be worthy of any serious attention, but therefore not worth condemning; and another takes a further step to say that its weakness lay in *not going far enough* in the depiction of rape, compared with *Straw Dogs* or *A Clockwork Orange*.
- e) Perhaps the surprising thing is what unites all these, and recurs over and again in all the strands of criticism. This is an extreme dislike of the *music* – and this is by a long shot the single most disliked feature of the film. It is this which turns the sex scenes into porn. It is this which “eroticised” the film (37). “The use of music made it permissible” (28), “encodes pornography” (30).

It is very hard to find any pattern binding these judgements to responses to the BBFC’s summary judgement. Quite a number – even those who dislike the film very much – reject the BBFC’s account, arguing that it is impossible to find it erotic.

Those who classify it as ‘porn’ do tend to agree with the BBFC’s judgement, though. And those who otherwise spell out why they agree with the judgement point to the two scenes where the women either do not resist sexual intercourse, or even appear to participate willingly. But as with the Embracers, the only ones who mention the Cindy-cutting scene distinguish this as anti-erotic. One extreme Refuser even says that this is about the point at which the film becomes “realistic” in its presentation of sexual violence.

The issue of the music is curious. We found not one critical mention of it among the Embracers – for whom presumably it had merged into the overall tonality that the film had for them. The Refusers, becoming aware of it as a separate strand, regard it as a form of arousing commentary.

### **3. The Focus Groups.**

We conducted three normal focus groups with people broadly meeting our criteria for Embracing the film (in Leeds, London, and Glasgow), although those recruited through the questionnaire almost always turned out to have significantly critical views on the film – because, as we will see, they were most likely to measure the film against other films in the ‘canon’ of Italian exploitation cinema. Because this is the least well-known of the five films, we had to organise the special screening in Aberystwyth, from which our fourth group (with six women) derived. Precisely because they were not ‘natural audiences’ for the film, they called much less upon existing knowledge of Italian exploitation cinema – even, to a degree, ‘guessing in’ that broader context.

Because of the particular nature of these groups – very self-aware and very argumentative (these were exceptionally long focus groups) – it was a little artificial to separate comments under the necessary headings. Many of the quotes below could have featured under different headings because of the clear links between topics that people were making.

Although our position throughout this research has been that viewers always are and remain in all kinds of complicated ways social beings, nowhere is this more so than with the naturally-occurring viewers of *House*. It makes it impossible to account for their reactions without talking about their sense of being a community of viewers. People in this community measure their lives by relevant dates – most typically, ‘How old were you when you managed to see your first ‘exploitation film?’’, ‘how old were you when the DPP released its list of video nasties?’’, and so on. There is a powerful sense of growing into the community, and learning to share its knowledge, and its ways of judging films. For this reason, though, we must recognise an immediate complication in the idea of Embracing *House*. It is *not* Embraced as a brilliant film, in any sense – but its *right to exist*, even its *right to be poor*, is celebrated. It ‘belongs’ with them, and only they have the right to comment on it.

1. What is seeing *House* part of? More than any of the other films we studied, we became intensely aware of communities of viewers attending our focus groups – people with shared love and fascination with the kind of film of which *House* is just one example (and not necessarily in their eyes a particularly important one).

Thinking what kinds of practices and rules operate through communities of this kind is critical, we believe.

Begin with the obviousness of the fact that they will know all about the controversies over *House*: Denzell asks: “this might seem like such a silly question, because I know exactly what the answer is going to be ... Were you aware of any controversy surrounding *House on the Edge of the Park*?” (General group laughter). It is beyond imagining that they might not know, because it is the very ground of their interest and response.

Ant (Brighton – Embracer): “I was a teenager and...getting into horror movies and you had that wonderful DPP list with all the best films to go and see...so... which was lovely. Urm, wouldn't've- we'd never have heard about it if it hadn't been banned I'm sure, um, had seen *Last House On The Left*, and I'm a big fan of that so figured 'ah, it's a similar sort of thing', again had seen, had seen a very, very poor bootleg of *Cannibal Holocaust* and thought 'ah, it's by the same bloke, it's gonna be, it's gonna be pretty good, it's gonna be a *rush*'. Umm, and that was years and years and years ago, it was, it must have been like an eighth or ninth generation bootleg, because it's one of those where you can recognize David Hess from his hair and that's about it [Group laughter].” This is a very typical example of the ‘listing’ and ‘cataloguing’ mentality which is also very aware of the differences between versions, summarised by Ant as: “The thrill of the hunt.”

Dan (London – Embracer): “Um, I saw it for the first time, um, twenty-six now, so probably about ten years ago when I was about sixteen, and um, I came to see it, I suppose the special circumstances was that, the only reason for searching a film out was the notoriety about it and the fact that at the time it was banned. And that was the sole reason for, as I suspect is the case for a lot of people, for watching the film.”

Al (London – Embracer): “I first watched it about three years back, but since it was banned I couldn't get hold of it, err, but then I got it from a pirate seller in Camden, and it's a copy of an EC one, so un-cut, and I watched it and laughed all the way through it [...] It was really great titillation movie, cheaply done, I wish I'd seen it at a time when I would have *loved* it, absolutely been blown away by it”. There is a realisation here that there are best times, ages, and places for really ‘getting’ this kind of film.

Drew (London – Embracer): “I collect horror films anyway but in particular I have a lot of Italian titles. Um, it had been a film that I'd read about when I was very young and I used to buy magazines like *Halls of Horror* and *Fangoria*, but it was obviously never the type of thing that you'd find lurking on a shelf in [Birmingham?] (chuckle), err and sort of I despaired of ever seeing it, but to be honest, it became less of a priority as years went by. Um, I got it from a chap called K. who Alistair knows very well indeed, he supplied me with a large majority of stuff for purposes of lending and copying which, err, a lot of which is still in my house even though I don't live in London anymore and he's up the road, and err, it was un-cut because it was a version he had pirated some many, many years before, erm, from some bloke that had an original un-cut version of it. Um, it was on a tape with *Deadbeat At Dawn* I seem to remember, and the, *what* effects me about the circumstances of it was the fact that um, I seem to remember it was quite a miserable day and I couldn't afford to turn the

heating on at the time, but um, the, err, the tape didn't play particularly well because my video was a bit pants, and err, I think the first three or four times I saw it, it was, I had a lot of snow on it and it was quite pants, but that type of snow doesn't really exist, because as soon as you hit rewind/search it disappears, so you know, it's not really there, it's just some sort of by-product of the way the wheels are going round. Um, it, I first saw a decent, proper, clear print." The detail of remembering how the copies were obtained in all these cases is very characteristic and important.

Dave (Brighton – Embracer): "I remember when I – when I first saw it, I'd read that it was extremely shocking, and then it started and I remember there was a rape scene and I was thinking 'Oh my God what's gonna happen I'm watching this terrible forbidden film, are my senses gonna be raped? Am I ever gonna recover, and then at the end of it I thought – is that it?' [laughs] It was like, [laughs], I was expecting something a lot more extreme, and I remember it having some really cool music as well and I remember the main character beiiinnng...incredibly unpleasant and I thought what a bastard [sniggers from the group]. How could anyone be that much of a wanker! [...] I would watch it again with totally different eyes now, I di- I was a lot younger." The testing of self against a potentially shocking film, and coming out more 'knowing'. At the end, there is that sense that there are 'right moments' in your own development when things can be meaningful to you – and they pass.

Jennie (Glasgow – Embracer): "I was at an age when I was a lot more disturbed by things like that than I would be now, um, and then I remember there was a bit where they sort of, it was a series, it's like bits of impressions, um, that when you're at a party feeling a lot more sympathy for Alex and his friends, um, and a lot more sort of inclination to identify with them than with the other people there, because I think, um, I identified quite strongly from a social point of view because I didn't really want ... they didn't really have a lot of social interest in being at the party that I was at, those kind of gatherings I never felt that I fitted in particularly and I felt very much that I could relate to that situation, um, and, I think even at the point where he becomes aggressive identifying with that to an extent before it sort of disintegrated further than that, um, and then I think it was, I don't remember as much in detail of sort of most of the part of the film after that, which I think was probably because I deliberately avoiding paying too much attention to it at the time, because it was a question of, you know, not wanting to be upset by something in front of my friends, and probably was taking that approach to watching it in the group. Um, and then, towards the end, sort of getting an impression of who was setting up who, kind of thing, um, again it struck me again had, it was more interesting in terms of its social impact more had an impression on me than the violence, if that makes sense." Jennie's recollections are based on her experience of seeing it as part of a teenage watching ritual.

Nick (Glasgow – Embracer): "It's an interesting film to have seen, but it's not a film I would watch over and over again. Something I'd like to have in my collection, but it's not something I would watch too many times. I think, this film, amongst the pile that you're looking at, I feel this one stands out because this is more of a trashy exploitation movie. [...] I went through a phase of just trying to pick up all these movies. I had a bit of a theme about them because I'd [?? abandoned Britain, some of it annoyed me - ??], so I thought well, let's get it all out. Because of that. But again it's not, I mean, you wouldn't settle down in the evening and watch it with the family. But I've got a lot of those in my collection I just like to have. I think that's true of a

lot of DVD collectors. You just know who you should have, even though you're not going to watch them. ... Completism and because of the, its history and who directed it as well, who's in it, because a lot of these actors appear in lots of Italian genre movies so. [...] I mean I don't classify the way I divide up my collection, it's just a trashy Italian exploitation movie. I don't really think it says very much. Whereas *Cannibal Holocaust* which the same director did I think is fantastic, a fantastic film, which does have a lot of merit in it and is totally unfairly criticised." Nick is aware of having been a *kind* viewer who shares expectations on what to try to watch. He knows too that this is a 'special group'.

Jennie (Glasgow – Embracer): "the video nasty thing is an interesting angle because that came in when I was about 11 when it started, and I had newspapers and the television news and my parents telling me that, well, the media was saying that there were these hideous things out there which would corrupt our youth and destroy society and all that, and I said to my parents, 'What is all this about?' and they said, 'Well, it's just that there are some films which are too disturbing for children to see, and most people wouldn't want to watch these films cos they're too disturbing,' and I was fascinated by this! Um, I was quite willing to believe that there were things that were too disturbing, but I wanted to know where the line was and how much I could cope with, so I wanted to see things if I could so that I would know if there were things that I couldn't cope with cos I was curious about that as a concept. Um, and it was one of the reasons that I did try watching things when they were on, at parties and things like that, um, I think in general with all my friends there was just a general cultural desire to get hold of extreme films of one sort or another because that was made fashionable by the media doing it." The censorship debates produce for some a will to test themselves against the claimed risks.

Keith (Glasgow – Embracer) on awareness of being the 'right' audience (one which knows how to look at exploitation movies): "I think it's a film that I would sort-of hesitate to show to somebody unless you know, kind of, I was confident that they were sort-of 'get it' – I mean not, I mean like I have shown quite a few 'video nasties' and horror films and things to sort-of people in a film society, sort of thing, more general social groups, but, um, it's a film could very easily be taken the wrong way and, you know, I would not want in any case to show this film to, um, you know, sort of, uh, kind of, in a laddish context, I think that would be a completely inappropriate, and you know, I would not feel comfortable sort of if people were sort of drinking lager or, you know, really 'getting off on it', as it were, I don't think it's that sort of film at all. I, you know, um, it is a film I feel uncomfortable watching, more so than *À Ma Soeur*, for instance. [...] I'm just interested in this type of cinema and this is an example of it and, you know, I appreciate fully that it is a problematic film and I don't mind if you are, if you object to it or whatever, you know, just as long as you don't sort-of confuse me showing this film with, you know, thinking anything about me as a person,' as it were."

Keith (Glasgow – Embracer) on how precisely genre operates here: "it's another one of the same type, so, um, it delivers a familiar pleasure, if you like, of being at a Euro-trash video nasty sort of film. [...] Yes, it's trashy exploitation, but trying to go deeper than that's I think very difficult. It's not a slasher film, it's not a Giallo, it's not porn, it's not horror, ... or a Friday 13<sup>th</sup> film ..." Aficionados recognise the kind of film this is, its specificity.

*We propose the following generalisation, that the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to have encountered the film as part of an interest in a larger subgenre of films. This can be variously understood as 'Italian horror', '80s sleaze films', 'censored films' or most commonly 'exploitation cinema' – each slightly differently signifying what interests the viewer, and against what House is measured. This interest is heavily mediated by a sense of belonging to a community of such viewers, who swap knowledge, lists, and judgements, and enjoy debating their love of this kind of film.*

- 1a. 'Novices' reactions. In our Aberystwyth group, exceptionally, we had a group of Embracers and Ambivalents having their first encounter with this film, and to an extent films of this kind.

Elin ( Aberystwyth – Embracer) on why she values the film: “I really enjoyed the film, it was dubbed wasn't it? Was it? ... I didn't realise until afterwards when, Rebecca who I watched it with was like: oh the dubbing was awful. I was like: I didn't even realise! (laughs) And I think that's probably because I got, like, quite into the film, I think the first rape scene was so... very strong that I had to watch the rest of it. Um, the ending was a little bit clichéd for me, but I think it was also quite needed, to sort of wrap it all up, cause otherwise I think it would have been left quite open-ended. The idea of a rape-revenge is quite...nice (laughs). And then the Stockholm Syndrome kind of thing was quite relevant to what's going on now, um, with...you know the Stockholm Syndrome is where you fall in love with your kidnapper, and that Miss Muppet character when she sort of sleeps with Ricky out of choice and that's very much the Stockholm Syndrome to me, and, that's quite relevant to something that's been going on in Russia and things at the moment [high inflection], so I thought the film was quite relevant to now.” Elin was not grounded in the subculture, only knowing about the film through the special screening, therefore she has to 'reach' for all kinds of wider connections and comparisons which might provide a frame for it.

*We propose the following generalisation, that where viewers encounter the film more accidentally, or without this background generic knowledge, and still Embrace it, they are likely to sense, and seek to make sense of the fact, that this is 'specialist cinema'. But they do to a degree bypass the subcultural meanings and community-processes, and are more likely to treat the film as one on its own, while still being capable of 'guessing ahead' to what others in the genre may be like.*

2. The nature of House's characters. Everyone, of all shades of response to the film, is clear that it is hard to find a likeable character. But among the Embracers we found signs of a use of this fact which differentiated them from the rest. For Embracers this became a mark of their fundamental weaknesses, leading them to *deserve* some of the things done to them by Alex.

Georgie (London – Embracer): “it's sort of like bit of torture, bit of sex, bit of this, bit of that, and then you find out that the guy who's supposed to be the good guy, you actually *want* to die because he's set all his friends up, *that's* bad enough, you know, ok, you want to involve all your friends in your little sick plot, whatever, they all did, I don't know if Cindy did...all bets are off when Cindy gets involved, cause it's like

fine, if you and your friends want to set up this complicated plot; whatever, you're adults and you can make your own decisions, but you've involved somebody who's got nothing to do with this...so as far as I'm concerned you deserve everything you get right now..." The arrival of Cindy and the 'use' of her by the rich people means they now have lost all rights within the movie for her.

The London group discuss the other characters than Cindy:

Georgie: it would weaken it, because a) you wouldn't see, um, David Hess's character as particularly sadistic and b) you wouldn't see the brother as being a nut-job as well.

Al: And well, his friends, the only person who comes out really well is the really crap dancer at the end, and the, um, [??]

Georgie: They're all ciphers, they just stand around doing nothing...

Al: ...and the girl, is it Lisa? The one in the white suspenders...she's an evil little thing isn't she? You watch her character and she's enjoying it...

Pete: ...she's on the verge of licking her lips basically...

Drew: ... she's getting turned on by the fact that there could be some kind of poly-sexual activity within the room involving violence, and not only that, she seems to relish the idea of being violated by a bastard like David Hess in the first place. Well maybe that's something the BBFC have difficulty with, the idea that it looks as if one of the female characters is blatantly kind of egging on the protagonists...

Ant: "But –but with all Italian movies, they seem like rip-offs but they're not, they're kind of, it's – it's very different from *Last House [on the Left]* the – the politics are very different. The whole thing where...ahm, David Hess in *House on the Edge of the Park* is – is thoroughly reprehensible, he's just a complete brute, he's charming, as he always is, but absolutely, y'know, horrific...and yet (*clears throat*) when you sort of realize the twist, you start- you start going 'well, he's a monster, but he didn't know any better aaand the rich people who have- who have actually tor- who actually torment him, for, for quite a long time at the end, they shoot him...they, y'know, cut him up and they torment him, and the rest of it, and they let him drown in a pool in the end (*coughs*) and then one of them says, if I remember rightly towards the end, he goes 'ah, that was a bit of a high wasn't it?' It's like so cold. That's reeeally critical, y'know, y-you- it's- it's not as damning, it's not as clear cut as saying h-h-here's rape and here's revenge. Normally in films like that, in *Last House* you justify...their revenge because they head up and they've just realized they've just found it, these guys have somehow found out that who-who raped, I think it was his sister or his girlfriend or something, the the one of the – one of the blonde guys in it...they found out who did it, didn't tell the police, they – they managed to concoct this complicated scam where they pick him up, bring him back to the house, let him do his thing for a while, (*someone sniggers in background*) which gets- which gets a bit outta hand, then- then they come in and they kill him, and you just think 'well, that- that's pretty harsh on them, that's pretty harsh on that society, and although it's not a film about politics, it's a film about...y'know, violence and sex and – and cheap thrills, it seems somehow the story manages to have that and that's what Deodato has, it's like *Holocaust*, although it's exploitation...it does have that...depth to it whereas other exploitation films don't." Here a number of themes are set running and connected. Rip-offs are fine, and what distinguishes this from *Last House* is its amoral turn.



There are no unambiguously good or bad characters, and that is welcomed. Indeed that *constitutes* a depth in the film for him. It takes it away from being just a (rape-revenge) genre film into something which, by dint of forcing that reaction from him – that ‘sympathy with the devil’ – makes him think the different *politics* of the film.

Leanne and Rachael (London – Embracers) on David Hess as a kind of character:

Leanne: I really liked David Hess’s character, I liked him in *Last House on the Left*, I like the whole [face of?] that film, and that’s also why I really like it. I think it’s a good horror movie, like to any intellectual evaluation, I think it’s a bit redundant cause it is just a cheap kind of exploitation, sadistic kind of film and...yeah.

Rachael: Yeah, I kind of agree. I really liked, just how cruel David Hess is in some of his films, just he’s so *mean* and he doesn’t...*care*, and yeah, it is just entertainment and... yeah, it’s not that I enjoy seeing people being tortured or anything, I mean you know he gets his comeuppance in the end and all that sort of moral victory, but...I just, yeah, I just like the film.

There’s an intense awareness that you *can* make moral judgements on the characters, but that in this genre of film that is hardly the point.

*We propose the following generalisation, that the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to view almost all the characters within the film as flawed and compromised. This is a kind of film which does not fall into a simple opposition of good vs bad, rather, because of the inherent conflicts, even the worst character (in this case, Alex) is capable of winning a degree and a period of sympathy.*

3. What ‘knowing the genre’ means. In much of the talk in our very enthusiastic focus groups around *House*, we learnt about people’s viewing and re-viewing practices. And it became very evident that while even unpopular films within the ‘exploitation’ category will from time to time be reviewed, favourites are revisited to *remind* what impact they had on first viewing. What therefore you expect at first viewing conditions what you hope to get at second and subsequent viewings.

Ant (Brighton – Embracer): “Similar – similar situation really, w-watch it for kicks when you’re a teenager and being disappointed in one respect because I was more of a fan of, sort of, gore movies...and there wasn’t really any special effects, there wasn’t really- it’s –it’s...it’s horrific and shocking, but it’s not because of special effects, it’s because of what’s going on, and the sort of relentlessness of it, like women being strangled is always more boring than...someone having their throat cut ‘cause you get special effects and you get blood ‘n’ it’s all kind of more macabre, in that respect, so that was, it was sort of more...disappointing in that respect but...it was, it ran along at a fair old pace, and the bits that were shocking and I remember being shocking, and I remember the – th –the ummm, scene with Cindy –who I’d forgot, I know her name ‘cause I saw it last night, but I didn’t remember her name beyond blonde girl, who gets her chest slashed with a razor, and that was still pretty...that was actually worse when I saw it last night, than how I remember it, it was actually worse.” Again, the sense of the ‘right time’ to encounter something, and through this also the emergence of genre categories and refinement of one’s specific taste – but still retaining that capacity to be shocked at a particular scene (in this case, Cindy and the razor).

Tom (Brighton – Embracer): “so it was actually those bits I remember, oddly, the funny thing about the Cindy sequence, it kind of... the details go out of my head and when I see it I kind of think it’s always more shocking than I remembered it, ‘cause I don’t – it doesn’t quite s- for some reason it doesn’t stick in my mind, I dunno, it sort of slips out of the mind although it’s unpleasant at the time....sooo, it keeps its punch each time for me.” This nicely captures the sense that films retain their importance, in an odd way, by *not* being recalled too clearly – so that they retain that essential ‘punch’.

Ant (Brighton – Embracer), on the pleasures of searching and obtaining – an important aspect of the joys of the genre: “But I – I – I- it’s almost looking back at it nostalgically because I remember- you were saying about going into the back of Movie Fairs and ordering stuff from the back of *Darkside*, and it was exciting, and it was forbidden, and it was just wonderful walking round Movie Fairs, where there were a lot of smelly old men in macs, an’ – and my girlfriend would never come with me, whi- whi – wa-jus- and we’d go around – go around the boot fairs and it was really exciting having a look at all the lists and all the badly photocopied covers, an’ and trying to guess which would be a good copy an’ trying to remember who you bought off last time, who was a knob and sold you a bad copy, and who was the good one ...” this is an intensely *organized* community, but entirely without formal ‘rules’. Referring specifically to *House* he recounts a little later his struggle to get a contraband copy, and sums it: “I probably like the film more for that, maybe, than the film itself.”

Aspects of the film which could irritate Ambivalents or Refusers deeply – most notably the music – become ‘markers’ of its clever, dodgy impact – Keith (Glasgow): “for me it’s the counterpoint of the music, you know, when you’ve got sort of ‘Sweetly, So Sweetly’, and the disco song, ‘Do it to me once more’, and you’re like what? with the ambiguity as to what ‘once more’ means there. Very apt, particularly distasteful perhaps, but the ironic counterpoint to what’s on the screen, I think.”

Elin on how building an expectation can backfire: “Um, the bit that really stuck out for me was something that I didn’t think would [high inflection] but has. Um, where he’s slashing the quite virginal blond girl... where he’s like cutting all her skin and things, that really... it’s something that I didn’t think would stand out for me cause I’m trained to tattoo and piercing and... (general laughter) slashing skin and stuff, it’s a trend you know branding and things, and then this, this slashing thing, it just really stood out for me, because... I *think* I’d been lured into a sense that the women wouldn’t get actually hurt [spoken as a question], because the whole way through, apart from the first rape, the women didn’t seem to get particularly hurt [again, ‘question’ inflection on this word] apart the actual rape, it wasn’t like, um, a physical, like strangulation or hitting or really anything like really brutal towards her apart from the one slashing thing, and that really stood out.”

Laura (Ambivalent) on the contribution the music makes to the Cindy scene: “Um, same thing with the...err...blond girl, that I think that was probably the only point in the film where I actually felt a lil, a little bit uneasy, just watching it in general, I’m not a big fan of like, of like razor blades, and like knives and slashing and things like that, so watching that was a bit weird for me, where he’s actually slashing her because it’s like he’s going lower and lower, and, um, I was sitting there thinking how far is he

gonna go before he decides to stop, and that felt, that just made me feel a little bit weird really. Um, I thought, I can't remember, there was a song, at one point during the film, it was like...just the music was *really* out of place with what, you know, the tenseness of the whole situation of them *being* held hostage, and the music just seemed *really* out of place, which I suppose that's why it came, it came to my mind, like I actually took notice of it." Laura's discomfort at the music is a distinctive marker of her ambivalence.

*We propose the following generalisation: that the more a person Embraces House, the more likely they are to distinguish 'genre-moments' from the bits that 'matter' because they retain the required capacity to have impact. This, however, works differently for those who are new Embracers of the genre, who will be trying to build an account of its working rules while still savouring moments of impact. In addition, responses to the music sharply differentiate Embracers from all other respondents. This may be a key indicator of the kind of participation and pleasure House invites.*

4. The nature of the 'exploitation genre', and its central conflicts. This is, to us, a quite vital point in understanding the nature of Embracing responses to *House*. The term 'exploitation' is widely used, and without a single hesitation. Yet on the occasions when members of our groups asked themselves (unprompted by us) what precisely they mean by the term, they struggled to put its meaning into words. What is clear, is their awareness that this is their *own* term, and that simply to know that others in their community are willing to apply it to a film, makes the film attractive to them. Part of the difficulty of definition, we sense, is that the category is not just an account of the cinematic qualities, but also of the *intended mode of use*. What is equally important, to our eyes, is that this is repeatedly seen by Embracers as an overtly *political* genre.

Ant (Brighton – Embracer): "I think the reason exploitation films upset so many people is because there's an element of truth there. It's like you say Hollywood does action, does violence, but it's so far-fetched its fantasy, and you watch exploitation, and it's- it's real and it's harrowing and it's horrific like violence is in the real world. Why would you wanna make ah a rape/revenge film that was- that was dull, that wasn't ..." Ant is stating a very fundamental principle of this orientation, that 'exploitation' as a category of films does things that other categories cannot. But we will see that it is the very '*badness*' of the films which for him and others creates this space.

Tom/Ant: "you wonder if he'll survive each time, you think is this- (laughs), but y'know you'll come back to it, but i-it, y'know, and another thing i-i- to mention is the kinda, the politics around the world, kind of , kinda gets in, and it's a pa- not directly related to this film but I mean *Cannibal Holocaust*, there were these American pricks recently who raped that Iraqi girl at 14, and set light to her, and um they err- th- th-they- they, and they sort of raped the family and burnt her and that and then you thought 'Oh My God, it's *Cannibal Holocaust*', that is relevant, they really are that bad, annd....the kinda, the film becomes a bit more real, so ..."

Jennie on ambivalences of engagement, to class: "the thing that bothered me at the time was that I did find Alex quite sympathetic a lot of the way through, um, when I, that first attack made me certain it was somebody that I had decided to hate, and then

I found that I didn't hate him, and that was something that I wasn't ready to deal with at that stage of my life. Um, a particularly sort of, in the early bits of the party, um, before things sort of turn around the first time, then towards the end I was quite on his side, um, and also I sort of found him likeable so that the rest of the time when he was being aggressive I think because of the whole charismatic side of that um I think also to an extent because of the acting as I recall it, because there didn't seem to be, at least the parts of the movie that I concentrated on, any other really strong characters, um, any other performances that gripped me that way, so it was harder to see the others as much as people, um, but I don't think at that age I was ready to deal with the conflict of somebody being a dangerous person on whatever level and somebody that I could like, and I think that I wasn't ready to deal with a lot on my own. Anger issues and the whole teenage aggression thing, because it was a bit too close to home with my own feelings, like, the fact that I would get angry at parties [indistinct] like that! [laughter] Um, I think now looking back on it, um, is the sort of, the class aspect of it."

Zoe (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent moving to Embracing) on the class dimensions of the film: "I think what I found most interesting about the film for me was a sort of...semi-political angle that I felt, because I have my little...I'm not very Communist, I'm just, but occasionally I'm quite Communist and that's how it felt to me, I was very angry cause, I actually find Alex a very simplistic character, he's just...an evil, supposedly evil man doing these terrible things, but he ended up being trapped by, and the end sort of explains how consciously he [gets trapped by?] Sort of he and his friends are these working class, Americans trapped with these completely isolated, rich, Americans whose only aim is to...manipulate them and use them for entertainment and sort of abuse, the working class, and it sort of, *that's* their aim, and then it looks at this, it's going to turn on *them*, and their actually being attacked by the people they're trying to repress, but even at the end they still win and their aim was to...manipulate these working class people and they still...win sort of, it's like all their richness and their wealth just sort of lets them do whatever they like, and play games with people. And that's my impression of the film, some how it felt to me that the whole way through it was about power games between these really rich people and these really simple...*bad* working class people." (Amanda – who had liked the film but hadn't put into words why: "I'd really never thought of that, it's like, I used to do politics and when you mention it, I was like, 'oh yeah, oh my God', I can't believe I never realised that!") It is important in Zoe's response that there is no way to separate out whether it is the *characters*, the *film as a whole*, or the *implied reality* that makes her angry.

Ant elaborates on the implicit morality of the shocking scenes in *Cannibal Holocaust* (a favourite of all of them, and thence a test-case): "I 'member I went to one of the EuroFests and Deodato was there, an' I met him and he was- he was- he was a real clown, wasn't he? He was the most unlikely exploitation director, he came round and you'd expect him to have a big silly nose and a (makes a high 'brrrr' noise) thing, and do children's parties, because he was er- he was really cool, but he was saying about that turtle scene and it's like 'Ah yeah, I grew up on a farm, y'know, I grew up on a farm and they used to kill pigs, an- because that's what you do on a farm! And all this reminds us that we're so....kept out of all these horrible things, I mean, I eat meat, I'm not a vegetarian, y'know, we're – we're kept like, I don't reeeally know what goes on in a slaughterhouse, I know, I know the animals get killed, ah, I- I hope they

get killed humanely, I- I- some of them probably don't, but I- I- I don't know, I'm protected from this world, and like the scene in *Holocaust* is when these people go there and you watch it and you go 'God, that's horrific!' but then when you think about it you go well they're in a jungle, they're, y'know, extreme kind've survival of the fittest, th- this is what it is, this is the reality, this is a wake-up call, this is showing you what you don't wanna see and you have to thank him for it, but I agree with ya, I don't like the scene, I'd rather not have animal violence in there, but it's in there so I damn well want it in there to see it because....it has- it has a context for it." The meaning of 'Context' here really challenges our five-part model, but maybe thereby proves its analytic utility. This clearly is *not* simply an intra-filmic context, although that is part of it ('in a jungle it is extreme social darwinism'). It is simultaneously an impact on self ("showing you what you don't want to see and you have to thank him for it") and a broad philosophical context ("the world out there is mean and this is hidden from us today, so this properly represents that to us").

Drew (London – Embracer): "the one thing I can praise *House on the Edge of the Park* for is that it really does grip you into the like, as Pete and Rachael have said, the mood of the sleaziness and the seediness, and not let go. Not to the point where it kind of makes the hackles stand up on the back of your neck, but it *does* kind of drag you into the sort of perverse gawpiness, if there is such a thing, for the same reason that you might look at a car crash or a street fight to see exactly what's going on...

Al: ...this is how rich people behave...

Drew: ...yeah, I mean I suppose it is prying into the lifestyles of the rich and famous, but I have to say the cinematography isn't actually *that* bad. I think it's actually rather well done in places. Because they choose to shoot in a lot of bright, and washed out primary colours, it actually does convey the feeling of the 'emptiness' and 'crapness' of the lifestyle all these people lead, quite well. And there isn't a single one in the film with the exception of Cindy who you just feel sorry for, who you can relate to, or sympathise with, until maybe later at the end when Ricky starts to redeem himself. Um, and you don't really care that much if any of them live or die, um, and there's no warmth exuded from the whole thing, so, it's the unrelenting coldness of it, err, can actually be quite exhilarating." This idea of moral 'coldness' – which is partly the refusal to let us easily choose sides, partly also a result of the film's style – is a recurrent theme across the focus groups.

*We propose the following generalisation, that the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to see a central political dynamic within the category 'exploitation', and thence within House see a central conflict over class, rather than gender – and see the film as taking, to a degree, the side of the lower class against rich and hypocritical upper class people. The cinematic form of 'exploitation movies' has to reflect this – they are disreputable films fascinated by the lives of disreputable people.*

5/6. The question of violence, and sexual violence. All three categories of viewer, across all our strands of materials, found it hard to operate with the category 'sexual violence'. While Ambivalents in particular were uneasy at the two apparently consensual scenes, Embracers adopted the ambiguities of the situation without hesitation as a basis of an enquiry into the wider meanings of 'rape'.

Drawing distinctions among the kinds of 'sexual violence – Nick (Glasgow – Embracer): "The one at the beginning with the rape and strangulation, em, is the one where he rips off the black girl's dress, which I suppose that's humiliation in a way, and the one I really remember is when the other girl arrives at the house much later on towards the end of the film, Cindy, that's when he starts to take her clothes off and using a razor blade and so on. That's the one that sticks in my mind most of all, I have to say. ... There's also the scene where he seems to seduce the girl in the white dress – I can't remember her name when they go upstairs, but that turns into, it was not sexual violence but she seems to be quite happy with this, or whether she's just complying with him so as not to be hurt and so on, that part didn't really strike me as sexual violence at all."

Jennie on different responses to sexual violence: "I think I was not paying as much attention then because that was how I was dealing with it, um, and then later on the bit with Cindy kind-of got my attention again because it did just seem so basically unfair and it stood out separately from the rest even though, you know, you hadn't seen the ending at that point, um, I could understand aggression towards the other characters to an extent where I could see how the situation built up between characters and then she just randomly comes into it and that changed how I felt about it again."

Shanaz (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent), on the difference between the violence scenes: "Um, for me I think it was, err, the rape scene at the very beginning of the movie that stuck in my mind. Um, it was, for me, I think it was more in, in the traditional vein of horror, a horror scene, a typical horror scene, and I like horror movies, so, that scene really stuck in my mind and...um, but the scenes after that were more psychological and more tried to get into the mind of the main character, why he's doing that, and how, um, he's not a rational person, and how, he doesn't rationalize what he does, and that kind of turned me off really, I, I, just...um...enjoyed, um, the first scene because it wasn't, it was just the pure action, um, in the scene and it wasn't really, um, tried to get into his mind and detract from the actual, um, events going on on the screen."

Zoe (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent moving to Embracing) on the complexity of responses to the actual violence: "I found the, um, I found the slashing, a relief, because earlier when he was teasing her with the knife, and it's sort of going onto the breast and onto the nipple, I just, this picture that he was going to cut off her nipple, which he never did, but I thought that's what he was going to do, and I hated... the idea of that, I really hated the idea and because I thought that's what he's going to do I was thinking 'oh God, this is what he's gonna do, he's gonna attack her in this way', and then he stopped teasing her like that, and *then* when he had the knife with her again, and started slashing into the skin like that, but not doing what I thought he was going to do, I was really relieved because I thought I can take this slashing...but I couldn't have taken what I thought he was going to do, and I think, in that sense it's because of the anticipation of it, when he was teasing her that I was actually very relieved when he was actually doing something to her and I could see what was going on, what it was. It felt better." For Zoe, to have had him cut off her nipple would have made it sexual violence. Because this did not happen, it shifts to being another kind of violence altogether.

Talking the ambiguities of 'rape' (Aberystwyth):

Elin: I, I found the, um, there was a blur between whether it was sexual violence or actual consensual sex, when... Alex has sex with the girl that he was chasing before? The girl in the shower? Because, because she takes control of the sex, because she gets on top, and that was, that was like the control, the power had changed? And I wasn't sure if that was *actual* sexual violence or if she really actually wanted to be doing it? Because she teased him all along and then when they actually *had* sex she took control of it.

Amanda: But he initiated it and he like throws her down on the bed and stuff, so it is like..

Elin: That could be again the Stockholm Syndrome coming in [general laughter]

Jen: ...what saying now I'm here so I may as well make the most of it... [general laughter]

Mel: What were other people's readings of that scene?

Jen: Um, well I've said... I think, well to *me* it didn't *really* seem like sexual violence at all, I mean like the scene where they were in the kitchen together, the scene where they're in the shower together, it just seemed like that, you know, she's, she was *acting* at some points quite playful with him, and sort of like *leading* him on, and then, like when she ran out of the shower and, there was just sort of like... well, not her *wanting* it but she's sort of didn't really seem to... mind, you know, what was, *about his* behaviour towards her. Um, yeah, and then I said then when she got on top of him as well, it was, for me at that point, sort of like well, I don't really think this is rape. At all.

The Aberystwyth group on the erotic nature of the greenhouse scene:

Elin: Yeah, I can see why the um, the greenhouse scene would have been.

Jen: I think it's an erotic scene. It's a strange mixture of things I think... yeah, I think you don't really know *how* to feel about it.

Amanda: I think it's something that *would* be arousing if it wasn't inter-played with the Cindy clips. Something that has the potential on its own to be... erotic, but, it's, foreplayed the violence and it takes, it takes it, it takes it back to a contrast ...as opposed to just being erotic.

Elin: If it was just on its own, then yeah...

Zoe: ...it came across more strongly in the uncut version than it had done in the screening because it felt much more erotic because there wasn't cut into this thing that would shock you out of... that moment. Sort of potentially romantic and erotic moment. Uncut, sort of *felt* almost like that scene was more uncut, because in the film screening, it was cut in between these scenes.

They are exploring the possibilities of a cinematic account of the scene. Its place *among* the Cindy scenes shifts their perceptions of its meanings and possibilities.

Georgie (London – Embracer) wanting to question the simplistic categories of 'violence': "But why, why are there these sort of strange, unwritten sort of categories for different types of violence and certain ones have more weight and more gravitas than others? Why is it that certain types of violence are seen as worse than others, surely all violence is as bad, so if you sort of make the point of what would happen if they took out the sexual violence, well, so what so... do you see what I'm trying to say? Well *all* the violence is bad, and it's still violence, people still get hurt, they still

get cut up, doesn't make any difference whether somebody's naked, wearing a pair of stockings, a bloke [??] it's still violence [...] There does seem to be this weird kind of hierarchy that you can go and watch a war movie where guys shoot each other to death and there's blood and guts and gore and that's good and valid and yah, but if there's any hint of sex in a movie, that's a bad thing, that's disgusting..." She simply doesn't recognize these categories, from her own experience and interests.

Zoe (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent moving to Embracing): "I think for me it was probably the sense that they... it's the whole debate about the women in... whether the women were *enjoying* what was happening because I'd watched *Straw Dogs* and I'd heard about the debate with *Straw Dogs* about whether the woman that's... raped in *Straw Dogs* is enjoying it, so I remember being very... focused in on this puzzling concept of whether the women were enjoying...being raped and whether they're enjoying what was happening in the film and I was very interested in that and that stuck out in the mind for me because it made it more than just sort of... exploitative in that sense, it was either even more exploitative or...made it less exploitative and I was trying to work out which it was. I haven't come to a *full* conclusion, I felt it made it less exploitative for me, I found it made it less exploitative because...the women, it raised other questions for me, and social questions, and...that made it not about: watch this poor woman who's a victim being attacked and there's nothing she can do about it, it made it less of that: let's watch woman as a victim, but made it, raised questions about how much power the woman actually had." Rape is here given a socio-political edge, which couples with her 'communist' reading (above).

The Brighton group explore the connections between sexual violence and class – Ant: "he kind of forced her but she's such a...I mean again, it comes back to the complexities, y- y'know, you you hear...I mean I...don't know who's... I haven't spoken to any- any girls who've told me myself, but y'know, you hear that- that girls have rape fantasies. Doesn't mean they wanna be raped. Means they have a fantasy. That's what fantasies are! They're not necessarily something you want to do in real life, they're fantasies." (Tom: "There's a definite rape fantasy (indist) – middle-class thingy that's the whole issue.") "Yeah, and- and – and they're, they're yuppies and they like the idea of being taken by a rough guy from the streets. It- it pops up quite a lot in, y'know, films, across all genres, doesn't it. I mean, maybe art-house when- when women on their, like romance and stuff, when they're on their sexual journey or something and they put themselves into situations."

Jennie (Glasgow – Embracer) on the character of Cindy, as not really belonging in this world: "I'd forgotten how much Cindy looked like a Cindy doll, which was a popular toy at the time, and how that contributes I think to her seeming like an object more, and while you feel sympathy for her because of the situation she's in, her passivity seems enhanced by that. You sort of wonder what she's doing at the party. If she'd just go along casually with those people."

*We propose the following two connected generalisations, that the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to insist on the real ambiguities in the various kinds of interpersonal violence in the film. With the one exception of the treatment of Cindy, the recognition of class conflicts means that the insults and provocations, come-ons and arrogance of the wealthy means that they deserve a lot of*



*what happens to them. Within the 'world of the film', they deserve most of what they get – even if at the end Alex has to pay for his excesses;*

*and, the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to identify the character of Cindy as coming from 'outside' the genre's dramatis personae. Either she is simply seen as an innocent, not at all deserving what happens to her, or as not knowing what she is letting herself in for when she starts playing with the main characters. Either way, the attack on her is judged by other criteria than any of the other conflicts.*

7. The ending. To Refusers and Ambivalents, the ending evinced a really weak turn – a 'solution' to why the middle-class group had got caught up in this whole bizarre sequence of events. Embracers, because (as we hope we have shown) they are not particularly oriented to narrative coherence, hardly care – they had very little to say about it.

Laura (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent) on the end's impact on her: "I think at the time when I saw the film, when we saw the big, well the plot twist at the end, I did sort of think...oh, it's, you know, they just...um, that I think the end of the film that they just try to explain everything and for me I think in a way that ruined the film for me. Just like how they try to explain the *whole* reason why they did everything they did." Laura's perception that the ending is an attempt to alter the meanings of earlier parts undoes the entire film for her.

Cliff (Brighton – Embracer): "I'd forgotten about Cindy getting her – getting her breasts slashed up and I'd forgotten about the twist ending but what I do...remember about it is it just being so powerful, like really sort of intense erm sort of handling it and just erm with – with all the violence....erm, and I hadn't seen, I hadn't seen *Cannibal Holocaust* at the time, but, didn't see that at all, erm, 'til 3 or 4 years later, but – but having seen that, yeah, it's exactly why it's so powerful, 'cause Deodato when he's on form could just do the most amazing intense films and erm, yeah and it was serious, and yeah sort of unforgettable, so that - yeah, th- they're my memories of it really." Cliff, quite typically for an Embracer, hardly recalls the ending which has little salience for him.

Keith (Glasgow – Embracer) on ambiguities of violence: "Well, you have the David Hess-Annie Belle sequence where it isn't very clear, it's sort-of giving him turn-on and then, you know, sort-of, and then he's wondering what's going on and then goes on to attack her and then she seems to consent and, and then a similar sort-of scene with um John Morghen's character and Lorraine De Selle's character which in some ways I actually think is more problematic because it's harder to, um, know the extent to which her feelings for him are genuine, as it were, how far she's playing the part [indistinct] whereas the Annie Belle character is doing that much more, and, um, the really problematic one, I think, is the sort-of like Cindy arrives and gets slashed up, simply because that then means it's hard to have sympathy for the sort-of victims, if you like, because then they're just bringing in another person who they can victimise but who has no sort-of connection with it, you know. Cindy is the most sympathetic character in the film, of you like, because she's not connected with this, she just turns up and gets victimised, whereas [indistinct – noise] with Ricky as well [indistinct – noise] get their revenge on him and then in a sense, um, they all kind of, well, it's

because the other characters then involve Cindy as part of their scheme, or whatever, well, she happens upon it and I don't know the extent to which they sort of, I think it's implied that they thought it was going to be a lot easier to get the gun and you know, sort-of set up Alex to get killed, so that they didn't expect her to arrive or they'd expected by the time she arrived it would all be over or whatever, but it certainly, her presence as someone who is purely 'victim' and is not 'victim and victimiser' is, you know, difficult." Here Cindy's arrival retroactively predicts/explains how the ending is not really the unexpected 'twist' that many critical viewers found it to be.

Jennie (Glasgow – Embracer) speaks along the same lines to introduce a theme of character-foreknowledge – have they *planned* what will happen to Cindy?: "I also thinking about you know from the point of view of talking about it as a suspense film, if you approach it that way, [indistinct] to that extent is *The Wicker Man*, and the way that the character in that is set up and all the people in the village want to have a connection with him, and there seems to be a desire in all of them to have spoken to him or touched him or just been around him, so that they are connected to the whole process of the set-up, and I think, you know, there's an element that looking at this scene of apparently consensual sex in the film that kind-of gives the impression that it's maybe part of her excitement that this is going to happen to her, or that things are being set up that way, and it's her connection with the victim from that point of view. I mean, I think it's ... it's not a scene that I found difficult to watch, you know, other scenes I did but that not so much, but I think it, it maybe turns it around, and makes Cindy more of a victim in that scene because of the way she's associating with him knowing what's going to happen to her, knowing there's a plan for something to happen to her." As with Keith, this means the ending retroactively is no surprise.

*We propose the following generalisation, that the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to view the ending as largely irrelevant to the overall genre-measurement of the film. Whereas Ambivalents and Refusers view the ending as a mark of the failure of the film, the Embracers overwrite this with a celebratory definition of the film as having impact, and frequently see it as strongly prefigured by the callousness of the plot to use Cindy. There is therefore little concern about narrative incoherence.*

8. Attitudes to the 'cuts'. As we said at the beginning of this account of themes within focus group talk, it is vital to see the Embracers of *House* as a community. This conditions entirely their response to the 'cuts' to the film. First, for themselves, they simply sidestep them by obtaining uncut copies. Second, they regard the act of cutting as a predictable interference by those who (a) don't understand them, and (b) constitute part of the problem that the films were produced to challenge. To their eyes, there is simply no *point* to the film without the very things which the BBFC takes out.

Drew (London – Embracer): "the snobby attitude of the BBFC towards exploitation movies"

Ant/Dave (Brighton – Embracers) on the BBFC itself: "Yeah, there's jus- just no point. An' going- going back to the- to the sort of response thing an' - the BBFC always say 'ohh it's the harm thing, it's the harm this and it's the harm that and- i- i- it gets very- very frustrating when you try and- you try and say 'Ah well, I

haven't as yet managed to do something horrific like that' and it, kind of, completely, just fails to understand the reasons, of why we watch it because it's exciting, and there's- there's no kind of hidden agenda, y'know, and they'll say 'Ah it's a trigger'. Y'know, who is it a trigger to? And the people they always cite never seem to have been all there to start with. You wonder....what –why they weren't being looked after, why...th- there were gaps and 'yknow, maybe they should have been having help for their own various problems, an' - I mean, you talking about the violent porn thing at the beginning and that's- that's as close as you can get because it was a Brighton teacher wasn't it?"

David: (speaking over Ant) "It's- it's so blatant, the original motives behind this all, I mean it's...offensive to anyone with a brain. All censorship is political censorship, there's no way of getting around it."

Very typically they want to debate both the politics and the logic of the BBFC's decisions. They return to this later, in this comment from Ant: "But I don't understand how stupid people are so influenced? Because if- if we talk about this film, and you really have to think about, to try and work out what's going on, if – if you're really really stupid you ain't gonna understand the message anyway! Because you're too stupid to understand the message, how you gonna be influenced by it because you're too stupid to even read it, if you're- if you're that influential and stupid. It's kind of, the logic, it's like, make an argument and you go, 'but the logic isn't there, it doesn't seem to make sense'."

Ant following through on the problem with the BBFC's inability to understand them: "I mentioned earlier when you get bad actresses, and they go (*mocks voice*) 'no, no, no, don't do that, don't do that' and then you know, they get beaten and they go 'okay', and it's just like really poor acting or a poorly made film, that somehow you can read as justification for what's going on,, for glorification, but you can't read bad film-making in terms of glorification. It's almost, you almost penalize, the BBFC have almost penalized people who make bad movies, y'know they won't penalize *Irreversible*, which is a very, very, well made film, it's spot on, it's really artistic, and it's y'know, it- it's a really good film, well acted, big budget, but they'll penalize *Last House - House On The Edge of the Park*, because it's got, it's slightly cheap with the budget, the actors aren't as goooooood, y'know, you got the dubbing to contend with because obviously it's Italian, so it's almost as if there's that...penalizing thing going on, that the BBFC do. (*Pauses*) So if you are listening BBFC, stop penalizing bad film-makers."

Cliff and then Ant debate the BBFC: "like I said understand why the BBFC find that problematic, if- annd y'know, even today with the, sort of (?????) policy and that, I'd be surprised to see that passed, umm....but .....it, erm (sighs) I dunno, it –it is there's nothing actually wrong with it because.....yes, maybe the intention is to make you think 'oh, what am I supposed to do with myself, I was just happily enjoying this erotic scene' and then all of a sudden everyone's getting their tits slashed up, an' stuff....ummm, but, it's not like we continue to be aroused, is it? Because (laughs) it is- it does cut to something horrible, and um, I think...it's only problematic if you assume that some other person is gonna be turned on by the violence." (Ant: "It's always someone else, isn't it?") "Yeah, not me."

Ant: So it's never us right-thinking groups, it's always somebody else (says in mock suspicion)

They are exploring and mocking the principles of judgement of the BBFC. They return to this and develop it as a critique of the BBFC not just for being *wrong* but for *hiding* from difficult but important issues: Ant – “But I think...that’s- that’s why that’s problematic, I think; because of those two things. And it makes you go, ‘yes actually, there is, there is a kind of- he is getting his sexual kicks from this, this character and we have to acknowledge that, and we don’t wanna acknowledge that because having to acknowledge it happens to mean potentially doing something about it or discuss it, or...deal with it in any way and anything you are afraid, that you’re not gonna discuss, you hide, don’t you? That’s- that’s how...society works.”

And again they elaborate on what they regard as an impossible dualism in the BBFC’s model of the audience: Tom – “It seems that th-th-th- they’re like kinda either, violence is either- we’re supposed to say ‘Oh shocking. How dreadful. I’m crying inside’, or we’re supposed to, y’know get turned on by-“ (Ant: “Wha- What’s good violence? What’s the appropriate- what’s good violence?”) “It’s like there’s one or the other, there’s a huge grey area...between. I mean, we watch these films because we enjoy watching them, we get pleasure from them...and, you don’t stop getting pleasure from it because something horrible’s going on ‘Oh no, I don’t want to see that’.”

Rachael and then Drew (London – Embracers) on the BBFC’s view of them: “...and the word they used was ‘eroticised’, they picked up on that one word again, and that was something that all of us, no matter what our opinion was, we agreed that we just disliked the suggestion of that word, whether we enjoy this film or not, I don’t like people telling me that I may be ‘eroticised’ by something horrible, that’s saying something about my...”

Drew: “...exactly it’s up to you to choose what you’re ‘eroticised’ by anyway. Um for my evaluation, I mean, yes it is, it *is* exactly what everyone’s said it is, an exploitation film, it’s a bandwagon jumping film, err, obviously made to emulate *Last House on the Left* although it has to be said that he left it about six years too late. Although at least he went to the trouble of getting the same leading man which is quite a coup d’etat to pull off really. Um, it’s um, you can’t intellectualise about it.”

The exchange is important since once again it challenges the idea that arousal is something (a) mechanical and (b) just plain risky. Instead the simplicity of ‘it’s exploitation’ breaks the mould.

On the cuts to the sexual violence, Nick (Glasgow – Embracer): “I think that [indistinct] would lessen the impact of that scene, I suppose. I think if you can’t see what they’re actually doing, then you’d be ... you’d be quite sympathetic towards his character, cos at the beginning he’s quiet, OK, if that’s a good word. Then if they saw, if the audience saw what he was actually doing in that scene they’d probably change their ...”

Shanaz (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent) on the impact of the cuts: “It would have just been worthless in my opinion, it really would have been completely pointless exercise, you know, if you’re gonna cut out like pretty much, all the quintessential

key scenes to the film, you might as well have just said ‘nah, actually you can’t see the film’ instead.”

Zoe (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent moving to Embracing) on the consequences of the cuts, changing the women into simply victims: “...For me it would have made it a terr-, I would have hated the message of that film, especially with those whole scenes cut, then it’s about two people going to a house and they rape people, you know they rape them but you don’t see any of the ways in which they rape them or what’s going there, so it’s just these women get raped, they get attacked, it’s humiliations happen to them, but you don’t see the way in which it happens or how it feels for the women, or what their reactions are, because you just get the impression of it, so you just get this story where women are attacked and raped and... made to be victims without any of those subtleties that those scenes bring to it. Then it just becomes a story about...two men having their way with a house full of women, which I *would* object to.”

Elin (Aberystwyth – Embracer) following through her earlier comments on the *contrasts* of violent scenes: “I thought... also, just the cutting out of scenes, cause I thought the, the initial scene at the beginning with the rape and the murder of the woman, and then the other scene when you can question whether it is a rape scene or not, I thought the two scenes together worked together as a contrast, and so, if, you know, with the cuts in, I think, for me that contrasts from it being so apparent and so the film wouldn’t have impacted so much in general for me.”

The Aberystwyth group discuss the impact of seeing the cut version:

Jenny: ...well it’s still really powerful. I didn’t notice any...loss of effect...I don’t know it’s maybe hard to say cause we *have* seen it and we know what happens, *but*, I don’t know, it almost seemed, worse in a way because you *didn’t* know exactly what was happening. Your imagination, was, let loose so you could be imagining something a lot worse than what was happening.

Zoe: I didn’t understand what was happening at first, with sort of half of her forgotten that bit of the film, I thought it was him penetrating her, I thought it was him...

Amanda: yeah, it, it played out like a rape scene despite the fact that it wasn’t ... I found that really, really quite strange, it’s like, ‘despite what this looks like, I remember the version we watched, it’s not really like that’ ...

Elin: ...it looks more like a rape scene when you can’t see what’s going on with the whole slashing her at the end.

Jen: You needed to, you needed to see a scene, um not a scene but a section before, or the [slashing?] of him holding up the knife or something, so that you know...

Amanda: ...so that you have some sort of vague clue!...

Elin: ...you did, you *did* see him holding the knife and he held it...to someone else’s throat before it. Yeah, but then he also went ‘this is virgin territory’, so actually you were led to believe that actually he was raping her rather than cutting her. [...]

Zoe: It looks almost...*not* consensual cause she’s forced into it, but not like he cut them off her, but the way that he shouts at her ‘have you made up your mind’ and the next thing you know, she’s naked, or *he’s* naked, but you see the top shoulders, but you don’t see *her* naked till he’s yelled ‘have you made up your mind’. And there’s almost this half suggestion that he says ‘take your’, he’s

said ‘take your clothes off’ and she’s taken off her clothes, rather than had them cut off her.

Elin It looks more consensual. [...]...it took away some of the torment too ‘cause during the clothes scene isn’t that where he was singing ‘Cindy, oh Cindy’ bit? It took away that side of it too, so it, down-played the humiliation and the sort of...the torment and the power play.

Zoe (Aberystwyth – Ambivalent moving to Embracing) on it becoming horror: “Rather horror than porn genre, it’s possibly in that setting where you’re trying to work out, that’s very horror like comment, your imagination making up, it’s something about wanting to *scare* you or... it’s about wanting to *scare* somebody when they say in horror films or science fiction films ‘what you don’t see is scarier’, but I didn’t feel in the film like anybody was trying to scare me, more like they were trying to disturb me, whereas in *that* scene where you’re trying to make up half I think it might be more scary experience, which is more like horror.”

There is a direct awareness that *their* interest in ‘authentic versions’ cuts straight across how ‘versions’ can mean quite different things elsewhere. The London group discuss this:

Drew: ...oh, of course, if a film’s got subtitles, it’s err, obviously far more, you know, artistically...

Stuart: ...you could probably leave out about two lines into that film, and then the BBFC would pass it... I mean you just have to add two lines in suggesting some sort of cultural, some sort of like, like, you know it’s the rich/poor divide blatantly, but if you sort of suggest that the film is actually a vague comment on that, in like the society of that day, the BBFC wouldn’t have touched it.

Dan The only thing that suggests that the film isn’t going to be lapped up by the proles is I think...

Drew: ...I mean and the people, people from Crouch End wouldn’t be watching it. Um, that’s where all the cineastes ...

*We propose the following generalisation, that the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to regard the cuts to the film as pointless because the violence is what the film is, and what it is about. But they do more than this. They also, importantly, see the cuts as predictable – the BBFC is identified as speaking from the position of “respectability” which is incapable of understanding the pleasures and pursuits of those who value this kind of cinema. (Embracers are also highly aware of their own commercial exploitation, by ‘rip-off’ companies producing bad, or hidden-cut versions, of the films they value.) And in return they challenge the BBFC’s logic of claims about how audiences are affected and champion ‘bad films’ as distinctively valuable.*

9. How House Embracers present their arguments. The focus groups with the *House* enthusiasts were long and lively, and full of laughter of very particular kinds. An important feature of their community is its mockery and self-mockery. With a wealth of knowledge to hand, and also a wealth of understanding of how films such as theirs are made, they nonetheless delight in refusing to play intellectual games with their materials, and to laugh at their own occasional forays into

intellectualising. This is, we believe, an important feature of this group's orientation.

Keith (Glasgow – Embracer) on the impact of the cut on the paralleling of the two scenes (consensual and enforced): “the very fact that he’s juxtaposing the two scenes then means that you cannot then have one scene of pleasurable viewing, if you like, and then another that you’re supposed to find abhorrent, and instead you have the two of them being intermingled, so consequently the first one you can no longer just read as being oh, it’s a nice sex scene, or whatever, that’s for us to enjoy, as it were.” Keith is aware of two different ‘pulls’ in his viewing – towards a cinematic-relevance reading, and towards finding a ‘nice sex scene’.

Drew (London – Embracer) singles out the Resonant Moment that was very personal to him, where feelings became *specific* and obvious: “of course, being a bit of err...a typical bloke, erm, and blokes have certain fetishes, and I can say this in front of my girlfriend, err, certain scenes that did stick in my mind were for instance, um, the scene between Hess and the girl with the short hair, I can never remember her bloody name, in the shower, err, because I’ve got a bit of a fetish for white stockings (laughs slightly) so *that* kind of stuck with me a bit more than it should have done.” A personal fetish satisfied is par for the course in this genre.

Tom and Dave (Brighton – Embracers): “Yeah, yeah. You’re getting straight to what it’s all about, y’know and its like, there’s some.....I mean another reason for watching it, I must say, or the reason that stood out for watching these films, and probably still do, is that, they kind of d-do your head in, kind of like drugs, it’s kind of to sort of get- get the hammer and bang it up and down on your brain, and then you spend the next three days sort of wandering around in a sort of daze thinking ‘what the fuck?’ (Group laughter. David: “I can- I can identify with that completely.”)

Ant: “When you see a really good- when you see a really good exploitation movie, like the first time you see *Holocaust*, you just go ‘Oh My God! Wow!’ and you just, what the fuck!?” (Group laughter)

David: I got- I got into a habit recently of trying to get as high as possible before watching extreme cinema to try and freak myself out (someone laughs and someone hmms in agreement) and I ne- I nearly actually went insane watching *Hostel* (laughs heartily) I had to leave the room (laughs) ‘cause that is a really effective film (laughs) shocking.”

The almost-speechlessness in the face of recalling a ‘best moment’ – that the experience is beyond words, it is so visceral and thus so interesting to reflect on – is vital to our understanding. The key and recurrent word is “effective” – they don’t need to define what it means, because they recognize a shared set of meanings.

Cliff/Ant on the ways in which the scenes of violence implicate them:

Cliff: “Well I can’t say I’m surprised because clearly the intention is to turn you on with the thing between John Morghen and (????) and th...”

Ant: “It’s just to push the boundary isn’t it?”

Cliff: “And then – and then like cut to the violence and says ‘What you gonna do with yourself?’ You know.”

Ant: "I think that's the point though isn't it? That's what it does, it takes you in that place, where you go 'Oh my God' -"

Cliff: "No, no, that's clearly the problematic -"

Ant: "But it also clearly juxtaposes the two horrific- the right and the wrong, y'know, it's almost quite clearly saying 'this is okay' although clearly, y'know, the situation that they're in, you wonder how they're doing it, why they're doing it, but- but...but the fact that this is okay, and then the same music, this is- this is unacceptable, David Hess is- is an (?????) and he only gets his kicks from torturing and....and the power he gets over women whereas John Morghen's character is obviously a lot more, sort of, he's a lot more vulnerable, he's not all there is he-"

Here between them they trace out the cinematic logic, and the ways in which this challenges them to moral positions. But of course that runs the risk of appearing 'intellectual' so a short time later Tom has to return to it and 'reverse' the implications: "It kind of works in reverse, doesn't it? It turns you on with Cindy and then you have the scenes where you have to sit through John Morgan and his chest hair." (Group laughter) They celebrate the turn to group-inappropriateness.

Drew (London – Embracer): "...did anybody think that when he was singing the theme tune whilst he was torturing Cindy with the razor blades and singing Cindy, oh Cindy, did you ever think that was, I mean I suppose it's quite clever in a sort of 'ooh, self-referential' type of way, but um, I can't believe I just did *that* as well, what a wanker, but anyway, I hate people who do that (laughs). Um, did you think that there's, it was slightly kind of, a slight case of, um, theatrical overkill?" Drew knows how to do 'deep analysis' but knows to be self-mocking about that capacity in himself.

What would happen with the cuts? The London group discussed this in an exchange which simultaneously reveals how they think it would alter the film, and how they laugh perversely over their own thoughts:

Drew: If you took out the sexual violence...you'd, there'd be very, I mean you'd have to really pad the plot out with other things. I mean does that mean if you only took out the sexual violence but you just left the physical violence in so you'd still have people being punched in the face, and splattered against a table, but you couldn't have anything that kind of showed a sexual overtone...

R: ...it'd be more of the rich/poor thing wouldn't it, just leave it like that rather than...

Stuart: ...yeah, but then if you just had the actual violence, David Hess wouldn't look at all bad, because I mean...

Drew: ...he'd just go round beating up rich people ... and we're all happy with that...

Dave on their image of the BBFC's image of them, and how this links to the issue of 'versions' of films: "They always used to pass subtitled films but ... assuming that working class 'Ficko' people would never watch a (people laugh) subtitled film there obviously isn't a danger."



Pete (London – Embracer) with a simple celebration of the *badness* of the film: “Well, I mean, I always thought it was incredibly badly made film. Really, and totally good for the time, badly made but an enjoyable one cause the acting in it is on the whole absolutely terrible, the dialogue’s terrible, the music’s, the disco music is fucking atrocious [loud laughter from everyone else]... But David Hess stole every single scene he was in. I thought he was *phenomenal* I really did. He convinced me, the total sleaziness of the movie and everything, the torture scenes, the lullaby, um, when I say the soundtrack was terrible, the disco music was but err Riz Ortolani music was as it was in *Cannibal Holocaust*, deeply effective ...but, um... the sleaziness of the film, I just thought it just had that sort of like...if it could have been acted a little bit more...straight, and the dialogue had of been that little bit better, I thought it would have been a really, *really* nasty film. But it does make you piss yourself too many times to be taken totally seriously.”

*We propose the following generalisation: that the more a person Embraces House, the more they are likely to insist on the complexity of kinds of responses it is permissible to have, and to make a show of their responses – being at ease with acknowledging ‘inappropriate’ responses; simultaneously refusing as “pretentious” any depth-analysis of the film, its narrative and construction, and at the same time showing that they can do it; simultaneously drawing out impeccable moral logics from the film’s construction, and proposing and playing with the exact opposite. There is a running tension between seeing that the films that they love are ‘bad’ (in a series of senses), and knowing that if they were good (cinematically, morally) they would probably not like them. This is a position which refuses point blank to be respectable, for ‘political’ reasons.*

#### **4. An Overall Portrait of Context- and Moment-References in *The House on the Edge of the Park*.**

1. For Embracers, without question the most common and most important contextual component is the connection between Category 1: Impact on Self, and Category 3: the generic situatedness of the film. Virtually every Embracer measures the film against their knowledge and expectations of ‘Italian exploitation’. ‘Exploitation’ is a complicated vernacular category, combining at least three ideas: the making of rip-offs (cheap imitations of mainstream films); the deliberate playing up of themes of sex and violence, bending rules and testing limits; and the commitment to there being a regular stream of these, with their own distinctive ‘cult’ audience.<sup>12</sup> This inevitably leads to an examination of the *intra-filmic* characteristics to see how far it meets the criteria – how much gore is there? How predictable (expected down-market characters and situations) *and* unpredictable (exceptional ‘exploitative’ bits) is the narrative? But by the same token, Embracers see the scenes with Cindy as *exceptional* because she does not in any way fit the Cast-list for an exploitation film. She is too young, innocent, and “doesn’t deserve” anything that happens to her. Therefore her arrival and her suffering are an irruption from Category 4 – a reminder that exploitation is about *nastiness*. After her experiences, there can be no doubt about the awfulness of David Hess’ character. In the end, however, for almost all the

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<sup>12</sup> Eric Schaefer has written a very useful history of Exploitation films as a production category. Here, the point is that by and large such production has ceased, and ‘Exploitation’ has largely become a *category of use* for this particular audience. See Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True: A History of Exploitation Films*, Duke University Press, 1999.

responses we have seen, *House*, judged against its generic criteria, is not that good a film. And for that reason, for Embracers it simply cannot be very powerful – it is not good enough for that. It can be *effective*, no more than that – and for that reason it is not worth worrying about Category 5 – this film is simply not well made enough to impact on ‘Other Viewers’ (the same turns out to be largely true of Refusers).

This group sees *itself* as the primary context, in the sense that the exploitation genre is measured not so much by cinematic qualities, as by its capacity to hit them hard (disturbing, shocking, arousing, exciting, bothering). Not expecting (nor caring) that anyone else should share their interests, they have detailed systems for sharing information and knowledge about their favourite films. Therefore they also police against pseudo-participation (by those – including themselves, from time to time – who want to over-intellectualise the phenomena). Their first measure of the quality of a film is its ability to ‘get’ to you. But that is then shared and becomes the primary criterion for defining the nature of the ‘exploitation’ genre.

For Refusers, because among naturally-occurring audiences *House* simply does not circulate very widely, the film is mainly judged to be a *failure*. It is not sufficiently outrageous, not well-enough done, to qualify for much attention. At first release, or when first encountered as a ‘banned film’ that they have managed to see, it has novelty and outrage value. Thereafter, mainly, it is a *poor example* of its kind of film, and therefore “doesn’t affect me”.

In consequence of these positions, feelings about the cuts are complicated. First, because hardly anyone other than ‘specialist audiences’ have seen this film, and they see it as part of their engagement with exploitation cinema, no one is unaware that the UK version is cut – they belong to a community which talks about such things all the time. Both Embracers and Refusers of *House* tend to say that without the scenes of violence the film makes little sense at all – it is like having a war film without any war. For Embracers, however, the cuts can have a very particular effect – they appear to try to change the generic character of the film. From being ‘exploitation’ (overt, gory, gruesome, in-your-face), it retreats into being a *horror film* (horror and violence suggested as off-screen, to be imagined). Screened sexuality becomes on-screen nudity and titillation, off-screen victimhood. But every bit as important as these cinematic defences of the film, is the sheer question of impact. Embracers see this as a political issue – not just their right to engage with their preferred genre, but the denial of this is a form of social denial, a refusal to engage directly with important issues.

2. To our surprise, the cutting of Cindy is not automatically the most memorable part of *House*, although it is *almost always* judged the most uncomfortable (Punctuation) moment. Rather, for Embracers, Resonant Moments from the film are primarily preserved in terms of those which are ‘good/bad’ – that is, they are good examples of shocking impact, wince-making experiences, startling and disturbing images delighted in for their own sake. These are sought after, and then have *currency* among members of the group, who delight in sharing their recall of these. Such experiences almost always have a doubled-aspect: pleasure and repulsion; fascination and disgust; arousal and horror; and so on. This is summed up under expressions such as ‘seeing the dark side’, and ‘imagining the inconceivable’. For Refusers, on the other hand, it is something cinematically disruptive – the most commonly mentioned are the music, the quality of the acting, or the weakness of the twist-ending.

## 19. *Ichi the Killer* (Takashi Miike, 2001)

To our best knowledge, *Ichi the Killer* only had one screening of an uncut version in the UK, at the London Film Festival. Thereafter, in a limited cinema release, it was seen only in a BBFC-cut version, and the resultant DVD was similarly cut. However it is clear from both debates that we have seen, and from responses in our research, that a steady stream of, in particular, a Dutch DVD version, identified as probably the most complete, made it into the UK and especially into the hands of 'J-horror' fans. This J-horror connection provides, in our view, the predominant frame within which the film has been discussed among naturally-occurring audiences.

### 1. The Web Debates.

#### A Sketch of the Web debates

After *Irreversible*, *Ichi the Killer* has the second largest English language web profile, but here the proportion of positive responses were much higher (62% against 45%). Substantial discussion of the film took place across general, highbrow, and specialist Asian film sites, and although the film had a very low presence in the British mainstream media, it also had a considerably higher blogging presence than any of the other titles. Patterns over time within different strands of the IMDb (citizen reviews, message boards) demonstrate a steadier stream of attention, less dependent on identifiable publicity moments.

For this film the issue of cuts is not only a BBFC issue. There is a heavily cut Hong Kong edition, and both Rated and Unrated American editions in circulation. Unlike some of the other titles, this makes discussion of cuts a truly global phenomenon, and much discussion centres on how to get hold of the most complete version – also a global process. Knowing how to go about this marks a distinction between the serious Asian cinema fan, and the rest, as there is a well established internet sales culture for the Asian Cinema. Lists of precisely what is missing were created early in the release cycle and, of the missing sequences, the nipple-slicing has the greatest notoriety. Among fans the subtitled version is preferred over the dubbed version, and British voice dubbing draws considerable criticism.

The relationship to pre-existent manga texts and the subsequent Anime film version is important to many discussions, and a source of additional character information. This is film that has gone far beyond committed 'otaku' interest, reaching horror and action fans, and its reception is heavily marked by different levels of genre knowledge. In many spaces the reception agenda is set by a well-established internet based Asian film fan-culture. There is a real sense, with this film above all the others, of productive and co-operative discussion, particularly around the practical issue of locating a complete, uncut film, but also in relation to character-interpretations and the ambiguous ending, through the collaborative production of meanings.

Special reception context for sexual violence: Japanese-ness Despite the fact that, in the BBFC's eyes, the film contained many highly problematic points of sexual violence and violence directed towards women, this is actually a secondary issue across the wider English language reception of the film. A key point, which makes

this possible, is the distancing factor of ‘Japanese-ness’. At its most basic level, if this film bears a relation to real world attitudes to sex and gender they are not ours, they are Japan’s – therefore it is OK to enjoy it as entertainment at Contexts 1 (visceral) through 3 (generic). Moreover, for those who are fairly knowledgeable about Japanese film and culture, the film can be located as a) a not particularly extreme example, unlike the *Rapeman* or *Guinea Pig* series, and b) produced by a culture with a claimed rape rate lower than the UK or US. It can then be positioned by those with even more knowledge/authority, as the director, Miike’s deliberate and critical engagement with both the Japanese media’s representation of sexual violence, and with an under-reported problem within Japanese society at large. In this, the two kinds of violence theory (slapstick vs. realist) as put forward by the BBFC, is mobilised as positive evidence of intelligent critique, and the way in which the violence against women is not “played for laughs” is viewed as responsible NOT dangerous. There are some exceptions to this, notably the British-based Snowblood/Mandiapple largely critical message board thread on the film’s representations of sexual violence. Within considerations of sexual violence Miike’s authorship matters, but it is positioned as culturally specific, and therefore functions as a subset of Japanese-ness.

## A. Self as Context

### Shock & Gore (and laughter):

**Embracers:** The visceral power of this film is hugely significant, and rests primarily within its body horror. Embracing the film means embracing the gore and the effect it has on you. Narratives of preparation, anticipation, viewing, and comparing one’s own reactions to others, abound. These primarily centre on the tempura torture, the tongue slicing, and the nipple-slicing scenes, although there are also mentions of the beating of the prostitute. There is a ‘rite of passage’ quality to being able to take this movie, but the tone of such discussions is much lighter than their equivalents for *Irreversible* – the other incredibly visceral film in the study, and a frequent point of comparison. Both films feature heavily in message-board lists of the ‘most horrible/horrific/gruesome/disgusting scene’ type, but *Ichii* is also likely to be talked about in terms of ‘best/coolest death’ etc. For the most Embracing viewers, enjoying the film means embracing the black humour, and for many this provides a way to deal with the horrors.

**Refusers:** Predictably, those who refuse the film on visceral grounds are much less likely to find the film funny. Like shock itself, the “truly nauseating” type of refusal can function at two levels. Firstly at the most immediate level of visceral disgust: “made me puke”. Here the endurance and testing approach which works for many embracers is unsuccessful, and unpleasurable. For a few seeking the endurance experience, it falls short, and fails to be shocking enough. However it can also be Refused at a very immediate an emotional level which was more likely to focus on the torture rather than the gore: it was “sick and dehumanizing”, it “wallowed in pain”.

## B. Intra-filmic

The aesthetic of the film is of high importance, as well as positioning it within genre, it is also a source of direct pleasure, particular through the colour palette and sheer kinetic speed of the movie. However, for those who seriously Embrace the film,

character motivation and logic are ultimately more important, and this process provides the main context for understanding the scenes of sexual violence, and clear causal links are drawn. As a result sexual violence is more likely to be a problem for those who try to engage with the film purely as a horror movie or a violent action flick, and have little interest in character psychology. For many Refusers, the characters remain superficial, and the complex plot of the film is a distraction, rather than a meticulously built world. This leads to the film being presented as “style over substance”, and the indisputable filmmaking skill on show becomes a demerit.

### C. Inter-filmic

#### Embracers

Cast: Kakiyama is the star! Whether or not this is a first encounter with Tadanobu Asano, this character is always read as the central protagonist, and frequently as impossibly cool and very sexy. He has particular appeal for female fans, but also those in subcultures interested in piercing and body modification. Those who can, mobilise their knowledge of *Asano*, *Alien Sun*, and occasionally on specialist sites/threads Shinya Tsukamoto and Nao Omori too.

Miike & Genre: Miike is recognised as a fully-fledged auteur, with a variety of styles, and the film is discussed in relation to his other works. Here, one crucial opposition defines what kind of Miike fan a writer is: do they prefer *Ichii* (kinetic and stylistically excessive throughout) or *Audition* (comparatively restrained social (black) comedy, with horror for emphatic punch)? Something which also came up in the groups, was the comparison with David Lynch, in discussions of uniqueness and impenetrability. Both function rather as one-man subgenres, but *Ichii* is also discussed in terms of a wider spectrum of J-Horror, Asian Extreme Cinema and Yakuza films.

**Refusers**: Disappointment with the film came in many different forms. Depending on the genre that was hoped for, the film could fail to be a proper horror (too much slapstick, visible CGI), or to be a proper piece of world cinema. Negative comparisons with *Audition* were illuminating, here. The earlier Miike film was seen to have more to say about contemporary Japanese society, and particularly, to have more acceptable gender politics.

### D. Relations to the Real World

**Embracers**: There were two main real-world readings for this film. Firstly as an insight into Japanese culture, enhanced through its expression in a Japanese form. This could be asserted at a number of different levels: it showed the dark world of the Yakuza culture; it either showed or critiqued strange Japanese attitudes to women. The second major feature is to consider the film a meaningful consideration of sadistic and masochistic desire. The ability to open this topic up this is sometimes linked directly to the otherness of Japanese cinema. A third, more minor strand is the theme of bullying and manipulation and its psychological repercussions..

**Refusers**: Apart from accusation of misogyny, criticisms were more likely to focus on a perceived absence of connection to the real world. The film is merely a “comic book splatterfest”, it has nothing to say about anything, real or meaningful.

## E. Relations to Other ‘Audiences’

**Embracers:** There was a general acknowledgement that the film would not be for everyone. Indeed for the Embracing audience, the existence of another audience that was too square, too ‘wussy’ to enjoy it, or too culturally uninformed to understand it, was very important – it confirmed their difference. However there was some tension between different types of Embracers. Those who wanted to enjoy the film purely at the Context 1 level of action, exhilaration and endurance horror were often looked down on by those making more elaborate Context 3-based readings. Here knowledge of genre and Japanese-ness could be invoked. Conversely the Context 1 audience could make accusations of “pseudo-intellectualism” and hollow one-upmanship.

**Refusers** For those recognising the genre, and appreciative of filmmaking skill, even if personally grossed out by the film, it was possible to recognise that this was one “for fans only”, without making personal judgements. However for those who were morally repulsed, the embracing audience was characterised as ‘sick’.

### Sample Analysis of Message Board Threads from *Snowblood* and DVD forums

In the BBFC judgements on *Ichii the Killer*, the concept of there being two kinds of violence and that the “scenes of violence against women are more realistic and less ‘cartoonish’ than the other violence in the film” carries great weight, influencing the cutting decisions. However, in wider reception, although there is evidence of different perceptions of the violence depicted in the film, individual responses tend to stress one or the other aspect (serious or comic), with an emphasis on the sexual violence towards women (a subset of what gets defined as serious) often being a precursor to a viewer rejecting the film. For most who do note two distinct registers of violence, the gender of the victim is not usually the defining feature of that difference – the comic violence, slapstick, and particularly the gore, is set against all the more sustained attacks and torture sequences. Indeed, for fans of the film, both male and female identified, one of the key retorts to accusations of misogyny in *Ichii*, is to claim the film as displaying equal opportunity sadism. In the main, the male victims are not perceived to get off more lightly than the female ones. However, the two threads explored here are extended examples of explicit engagements with both the duality of the violence, and its meaning in relation to the depiction of women.

For some Embracers who perceive the treatment of the female characters as particularly brutal, this is contextualised as a facet of Japanese media, and possibly Japanese culture at large. Thus it is generally distanced from western experience, and the necessity to judge the representations is less pressing. There are a few exceptions however, most notably the long *Ichii* thread on the *Snowblood Apple* forum. This is a British-based, specialist Asian Cinema/Horror site, and the two voices most critical of the violence to women were the forum administrators (who declare as a husband and wife team). This grants them a certain authority within the fan culture, and particular authority within the forum in question. It also creates a situation in which the writers clearly have a high investment in the future direction of the genre. They position themselves as neither firm fans nor detractors of Miike, and although they have certain reservations about the film they are generally impressed by *Ichii*. For the female administrator the problems of rapes and beatings “without fanfare” connects to

a wider problem perceived in Miike's work to marginalise female characters and deny them agency. She calls for a more equal treatment to be meted out to the male and female characters in Miike's future work. For the male administrator there is a more direct discomfort with viewing the violence directed at women, and he finds that "the problem I have with it is that it's all wrapped up in a semi-joke style." Here the comic element is felt to undercut the seriousness of more brutal attacks, but this proposal draws a response which is eventually elaborated thus:

By juxtaposing violence played for laughs (pimp split, guy in TV, doorway and face slide) with scenes of distressing violence (almost every scene with a woman) I felt that Miike was questioning why it should be acceptable for some form of torture and pain to be funny in some instances but not in the other. Surely all violence should be taken seriously (at least it would be in real life) yet in film we can easily chuckle at violence at one point yet be totally horrified at others. So for me it works perfectly as an examination of our differing reactions to the same source material differentiated by contrasting approaches.

The BBFC is a clear presence within this thread, shaping the terms in which the film is discussed. Its judgements are raised by the male administrator early on, and returned to by this poster, who claims to have analysed the sections removed from the UK edition. He proposes that Miike is actually more restrained in his visual depiction of violence towards women than viewers might think, he is stressing the importance of what accompanies the images ("but we still get the feeling that we are seeing a whole lot more. The sound, and the editing all adds up to make a powerful often harrowing sequence yet using shots that are far from titillating"). Even the nipple-slicing sequence is given as an example where the camera cuts to a wider shot. This last bid is contested, but it is acknowledged that sound "makes all the difference", the beatings/rape of the prostitute are not titillating, and the kicking to death of Miu Miu (out of shot behind the sofa) is done in a way which is implied.

In a shorter *Ichii* thread, within a more general forum *DVD Forums*, the same issue arises. The opening poster begins with a long review, stressing the integral nature of the relationship between the violence in the film, understanding of the characters and the overall meaning of the movie. It is notable that in the final summary, this serious analytical approach is explicitly positioned as the means to counter a common and acknowledged accusation: that "there is no plot and that the principle of the film is to shock and glamorise violence and abuse of women".

Responding to this a more Ambivalent viewer raises the contrast in the violence:

I don't have a problem with the violence, presented as it is here in a cartoonish, over the top way (which is why we all loved *Braindead* so much right?). But as to the treatment of women... well the rape scenes were in no way titillating and were seriously horrific and very, very unpleasant, but the scenes that I think seriously undermine the film are those of the torture of the prostitute. They were absolutely appalling and I can't think of any justification for it being there. That girl wasn't even a character in the film and didn't serve any purpose to the story (or "the message") whatsoever... anyone care to comment on that?

The original poster responds:

Again I think this is deliberate and meant to be shocking so as to distance the act from the others especially from the point of view of the assault from Kaneko. Quite clever really as it shows that we are not actually desensitised after all?

It should be noted that the assault from Kaneko is acknowledged in both these strands, and elsewhere as a powerful scene. A reviewer on moviemartyr suggests a reason for this power:

For me, the most disturbing moment in the film was a beating that took place just off screen (though it was troubling more because it was perpetrated by the closest thing the film had to a moral center up to that point than because it was violent.)

This view that the beating by Kaneko is of particular significance because it transforms our view of a previously-moral character recurs in our other materials.

### **Citizen reviews of *Ichī the Killer*:**

In the case of *Ichī*, reviews were sampled from a range of sites, including some very specialist ones devoted to horror films. This was important since *Ichī* attracts that range of interest. And it is important to see, we believe, that many of the more critical reviews of *Ichī* that we located look ‘upwards’ to the enthusiastic reception that the film has received from certain kinds of Japanese/gore/horror fans. That is to say, whereas with a film like *Baise-Moi* Embracers find themselves defending the film against criticism, with *Ichī* Ambivalent and Refusing reviewers find themselves declining (often to their own surprise and disappointment) to take part in an enthusiastic response. All three kinds of response appear to agree in simply declining to be interested in the kinds of ‘taste judgement’ that would find the film unacceptable because violent. The shared terms ‘gore-hounds’, ‘violence fans’ and the like mark this as a semi-enclosed world of enthusiasts for a *kind of cinema*.

In the same vein, it is important to note that all shades of review tend to be very aware of the context of production of this film (Japan, Miike (and his other work, especially *Audition*), Anime (and its film offshoots), even if they use these differently in forming their judgements.

### **Embracers:**

In the Embracing reviews, perhaps the most striking feature is how sexual violence takes its place, without special distinction, among an array of other kinds of violence and mayhem, as in this quotation: “This movie is littered with body parts, stuffed with sexual violence, dumped with humanly insides, saturated with insane murders and finished off with a sprinkle of really graphic dialogue (oh yes, even the dialogue in this film can make you uncomfortable). If you thought treating a woman like ‘shit’ in *Dead of Alive* was bad, prepare yourself for some just as bad if not worse.” (It is worth pausing on that “Prepare yourself ...” – there is an element of sharing warning/attractions in many of these reviews.) It is the *concatenation* of these that marks the reception the film gets. As another review puts it, “visceral and intense ... comedy ... deep psychological trauma”.



The most enthusiastic review we could find appeared to be very aware of indulging in a 'game' of "finding meanings", which runs counter to the expectations of 'gore-hounds' who simply delight in films which give over-the-top "bloodbaths". But its accounting with the film, which in particular emphasised the impact of the ending, *required* it to run that risk: "Many will say that people who find deeper meaning in *Ichi* are simply making it up. How can there be meaning in this blasphemy? I don't know if Miike intended to do so (he claims he wasn't trying to comment on the social roles of men and women in *Audition*, which the film actually *did*), but in *Ichi* he's done perhaps his best work at unravelling a tortured soul I've ever seen. Ichi is in deep denial of what he really is. He is a true and pure sadist and his body is sexually aroused by what he does, but he can't understand why he loathes killing. Throughout the movie you watch his transformation from a scared and confused butterfly, to a matured and accepting butterfly. It's one of the most splendid psychological roller coasters ever to be captured on film."

A number of themes are noticeable in this account. First, the acceptance of a separation and tension between bodily responses and sense of self. Second, this account grows retrospectively around a recognition forced by the ending of the film: "Sure, *Ichi* can be considered a violent opus, but the way he ends the film completely discredits the violence as pointless in the film. He doesn't just take you on a trip of insanity and let you go when the credits roll, he makes you WANT to go back to that world to figure what the hell just happened, what it all meant. In *Ichi* you may not want to revisit what you have just seen, but you are almost left with no choice. The ending is baffling and extremely open-ended." This astonishment at and forced reconsideration by the ending is the most significant feature not shared with the Ambivalents and Refusers. And the Embracing reviewers are almost aware of this likelihood – they offer it as a 'worthwhile task' to try to do this: "for those of you who can see past the violence in this movie, and embrace the beauty of it, you'll be treated to one of the most best-made movies of our time".

There is a strong recognition among Embracing reviewers that there are several powerful characterisations in the film, and none more so than Kakiyama, Ichi's manipulator. He "steals the show", is "undoubtedly one of the coolest bad guys since *Reservoir Dogs*". This sense of complex characters provides a point of intersection with the attitude to cuts. Revealing a 'list-making' tendency, fans of the film like to detail what has been cut from it in different released editions. The 'hurt' done to the film is seen to be both a loss in its ability to make you "squirm in your seat" at the violence (something accepted and desired) and in its "character development". [This point recurs in other kinds of evidence we have, regarding perceptions of Kakiyama.]

### **Ambivalent and Refusers:**

As noted at the beginning of this analysis, Ambivalents assess the film in terms of *disappointed hopes*. (An example: "To me, *Ichi* sounded like a total bloodbath and one I was most interested in".) There are some disagreements over the particular things hoped for, and what does survive the disappointment, but all those we sampled reference upwards, in this sense. Unlike other films, there are very strong relations between Ambivalents and Refusers, and in what follows we largely report the two together, since the criteria for their judgements are almost indistinguishable. The

most discernible difference is that the Ambivalents are willing to credit sheer virtuosity of filmmaking in itself, while for the Refusers the denial of their 'gore' pleasure is the sole operative criterion.

Very importantly, Ambivalents (and indeed Refusers) do not like the ending, and the way that challenged their planned mode of participation in the film, as here: "I guess the film mainly appealed to me because of my occasional bloodlust. I don't even mind if the gore is senseless and irrelevant sometimes, as long as it's depicted realistically and fits somehow, even symbolically, into the context of the plot. In the end I found this film was really about pain which fills the empty void in life, illustrated in a sort of twisted s&m/fetish, murder and rape way. I find that the director sorta likes to experiment on the viewers, and his films are the idyllic sort of stimulus medium in which to 'freak us out' and then make us think about why we watched his film and probably why we enjoyed it and watch to watch another." For this Ambivalent reviewer, there is a powerful textual 'drag' against how s/he wants to watch it – a drag towards a kind of self-examination.

The ending is very much part of this: "I think the biggest let-down was the ending, it seemed far too unplanned and incoherent". It is striking how hard it is to determine what the failing is from this – a problem that recurs with the same reaction among Refusers, as here, in an assemblage of complaints: "The ending was unclear and confusing, the sets were average, the atmosphere of the film boring and not at all gripping in any way, shape or form".

There is a powerful urge among this kind of reviewer for "realism" – the blood and suffering must convince. On these grounds, what is taken as comedic, and therefore as part of the 'good mix' by the Embracers, turns into a major criticism for Ambivalents (and indeed Refusers): "It has a lot of CGI. Not only do I hate CGI to begin with, this had some of the worst CGI I have ever seen. In one scene, Ichi cuts a guy in half then long way with his stupid blade shoes. The guy splits and the 2 halves fall. These effects were extremely poor. Apparently the guy's body was a solid red all the way through with no brains or organs." Lack of 'realism' means that the hoped-for 'gross' reaction is not achieved. Another reviewer (a Refuser), having again said that "the big selling point of *Ichi* for most people will be the gore", calls it "cartoonish and over the top", with a resultant lack of "any sense of jeopardy for the characters". It is not *dangerous* enough, in other words.

It is possible to say with some certainty that the more enthusiastic people are about the film, the more likely they are to see the characters as complex and fascinating, while the more critical they become, the more likely they are to see them as "2-dimensional". For the Refusers, this extends to the plot, which is in their eyes "paper-thin". Once again, although it is not articulated, there is a sense of an assumption that true 'gore-hounds' know, and do not need to say, what constitutes a rich narrative – and has also to do with the demands for 'danger and jeopardy' in the narrative.

More than any of the other films, *Ichi* appears to us to belong in a relatively self-contained world of people who share criteria for assessing films. They very much address each other (as "I" and "you") through their reviews, debating the worth of the film to their sensibility. *Ichi* sits half-in and half-out of that world.

## **2. The Web Questionnaire.**

In all, 343 people gave us their views on *Ichi* through our questionnaire, of whom 305 were male, 38 female. But for all the heavy male emphasis in those responding, the proportions of male and female Embracers exactly match the overall proportions. There are two striking tendencies revealed by our quantitative considerations. First, *Ichi* has attracted a younger than usual audience, with (as one indicator) 24 reporting themselves under 18, and a higher proportion than expected of 18-25 year olds. This tendency is curiously repeated but varied from when we consider the Embracers. Here, the very young are much in evidence (with over half the under-18s Embracing the film), but they are joined also by those of greatest age. The drop-away from Embracing occurs most among the middle-aged, suggesting to us that it is here that the encounter may have been most accidental – or that the range of films with which it was compared may be greatest. For the most striking figure occurs when we examine responses to our Kind of Viewer question. Here, *Ichi* viewers overall and Embracers as a group within them show a large swing (over 55% in both cases) to reporting themselves as Extremely Knowledgeable.

### **The meanings of ‘context’ for Embracers and Refusers of *Ichi the Killer*:**

This is based on a close analysis of the forms of argument and discursive moves of a comparative sample of Embracers and Refusers, within the questionnaire’s responses. In each case a set of 50 responses was sought, gathering their answers to two questions. The two questions were:

1. What contribution in your view do the scenes of sexual violence make to this film as a whole?
2. In the UK, eleven cuts were made to the film, all on the basis of the argument that the film created an association between sexual arousal and violence, and could therefore produce a “harmful response in some viewers”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

The sets were generated as follows:

A: **Embracers:** using [1-2] responses to Context and Special Questions – 120 sampled to 50 using Sort Descending on ‘Where and When Saw *Irreversible*?’.

B: **Refusers:** using [3-5] responses to Context and Special Question, generating 74 responses sampled to 50 after randomising using ‘Where and When saw *Irreversible*?’.

### **Analysis**

Embracers of *Ichi* are particularly enthusiastic about it, celebrating and welcoming it as a kind of film-making not to be found in the West. The first way in which this shows is in the virtual absence of very short answers simply saying the sexual/violent scenes are ‘integral’. Just about all of them give reasons. At the very least they refer to Miike as a film-maker, or to Manga as a *kind* of story-telling – of which *Ichi* is an exemplar for them.

There is an interesting relationship between the Embracers and Refusers around *Ichi* – with some strong overlaps in judgements on the role and significance of the scenes of sexual violence, but still sharply divergent judgements on the results. There is also a strong separation on *how* people know about the film – with *all* the Embracers clearly knowing the uncut film in detail, while a substantial proportion of the Refusers have clearly only seen the cut version, whether they know it or not.

### **Embracers:**

A number of evolving and interrelating themes link together the Embracers:

- a) The first, and simplest, is to say that the characters of Ichi and Kakiyara make no sense without the contribution to our understanding of them given by the violence scenes – including the scenes of sexual violence. (13) articulates this very simply: “The sexual scenes are important to the plot as the persecution of Ichi as a child and his subsequent need to use violence to reach sexual pleasure are integral to the story.” But this is by no means all of it. The theme of character-expansion picks up on the *kinds* of character they are, as in this example (1): “Sex and violence are the primary themes of the film. In looking at the sexual violence Ichi gets involved in its defining his masochistic self. As does the violence Kakiyara does.” The idea that both Ichi and Kakiyara reveal their *flaws*, their *obsessions* through their tendency to violence is vital to an understanding of this aspect of the film for Embracers. Here, (2) articulates this very clearly: “They convey the different personalities of the lead characters. Ichi has the fantasies and is in denial of fact that he is really a nasty person whereas Kakiyara knows what he is about and has no qualms about hurting men or women. Again our perception of what is acceptable behaviour in entertainment stems from our media. Violence against men OK against women - bad.” That recognition that while violence is endemic in this cultural world some aspects of it are condemned while others are ‘lived’ is important – this is a world of complex ethical judgements.
- b) This extends to an idea that the (sexual) violence scenes particularly work precisely because they take us into modal realms where the line between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’ blur and become complicated. In this realm, Ichi’s history of delusions, the damage done to him by observing and not intervening in the rape of the schoolgirl have corrupted him – and we watch the playing out of that corruption.
- c) A powerful theme running through the Embracers is the positive taking on of the category ‘Manga’. Only rarely are the content and the implications of this set out (eg, 3, “it was made by manga, so it tries to be like manga” – the entire answer), but it is clear that Manga is the ‘other’, a sphere in which people can work through ideas and issues that are not permissible in our culture. Thus Ichi and Kakiyara are ‘read’ as *kinds* of people we would not meet here – it is their Japanese-ness which marks them off, as in (32): “This is the world of the Japanese Mafia. They can hardly go around handing out flowers and preaching peace if we are to understand the honour system and the degree of violence they use to control and extort money from people.” The relations between the unarticulated and articulated versions can be seen in this comparison of accidentally adjacent

answers: (12) “I don’t think you could have made this film without them. It’s an integral part of the plot”; (13) “The sexual scenes are important to the plot as the persecution of Ichi as a child and his subsequent use of violence to reach sexual pleasure are integral to the story.” Japanese culture allows us to “confront the taboos” in our own culture. So (2) writes, as part of a critique of the BBFC’s position: “The reason we feel uncomfortable with this kind of film making is that it comes from a different culture where subjects can be explored and the blurring of good and bad is seen as a judgement to be made by the viewer as opposed to the state.” There is a politics in here, that a turn to films of this kind is partly as a reaction against a perceived refusal of our society/state/systems to permit or explore moral ambiguities.

- d) There is one curious disjunction. On one side are those who insist that the scenes of sexual violence are differently filmed and presented than the scenes of pure (inter-male) violence – the sexual scenes stand outside the predominant black humour of the others. On the other side are those who identify the necessary interconnection of the themes of sex and violence – that indeed something that Japanese Manga allows to think through is the fact the violence is often erotic.

### **Refusers:**

The Refusers to some extent repeat what the Embracers say – but without the criterion that allows them to approve of the results. Not one of the Refusers uses the categories ‘Manga’ or ‘Japanese-ness’. It is not that these viewers are not aware that this is particularly Japanese, or of Miike as director – they simply do not inhabit that world in the same way as the Embracers. This absence coordinates with the alternative presence of some entirely generic criteria.

- a) There is a strong sense of ‘outsider’ criteria in the responses of many of the Refusers. Eg (5) talks of Ichi as a “sick puppy” – very much a non-participant measure. Eg (6) which uses a joke about Ronseal “doing just what it says” to sum up the contribution that the violent scenes make to the film. There are also generic objections on various grounds. Phrases such as “visceral pulpy amoral” (7) are to be found, which assess the film against quite universal moral/cultural criteria. In the same way, Ichi is described by some as a “psychopath” (eg, 15) – which again uses a general psychological criterion rather than a culturally located one. This comes to the fore in (40)’s summation of it as follows: “They didn’t help the film because the whole thing was built on an unbelievable psychological premise.” Without an agreement to see ‘Japanese-ness’ as a distinct/different world embodied with damaged characters of this kind, participation becomes difficult.
- b) On the question of ‘cuts’, a large number of the Refusers simply say that they “don’t remember any” – and that raises an interesting question. It seems likely that they had seen the cut version – but that associates with them *refusing* the film.

We suspect that the clearly distinctive feature sharply distinguishing the Embracers from the Refusers is the issue of Manga, Japanese-ness, and the perception of these as offering a ‘cultural Other’ which explores that which is almost unexplorable in our own culture.

### 3. The Focus Groups.

We conducted four focus groups around *Ichi the Killer*, in Leeds, London, Manchester and Edinburgh, involving 9 men and 7 women. Almost without exception, and with few caveats, all 16 turned out to be strong Embracers of the film. However, some distinctive patterns did emerge from these four focus groups, and also some possible relationships between the patterns.

The following key issues appear to us to arise from the focus groups:

1. Belonging to a distinctive group. Not unlike what we found very strongly with *The House on the Edge of the Park*, Embracers of *Ichi* were likely to talk about their participation in a community of practices – a community which shares ideas and knowledge, and knows ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to watch and use films of this kind. It is a specialist community, and knows itself to be so – because of the extreme nature of the films.

Ross (Edinburgh, Embracer): “there’s something about it that just kind of struck me about the controversy surrounding *Ichi the Killer* is because it’s a foreign film ... the controversy doesn’t seem to reach the mainstream press if you will ...if for an English language film [Pause] you’ll sometimes read the newspapers and the mainstream press about this ... this film is extremely violent ... is coming out and err its ... it’s been cut by the BBFC or its being released uncut or what have you. But umm it was ... it was more in specialised film magazines or on the internet that I read about the controversy ... to do with *Ichi the Killer* I’d not ... I don’t think I recall reading anything in the mainstream press about it.” Ross is very aware that his knowledge of this film derives from specialist publications.

James (London, Embracer): “Umm I saw it when it was released on DVD - the cut version of it, erm I’d seen a trailer for it on the web and I watched the DVD err and it was *very obvious* that it was the cut version ‘cause there was stuff in the trailer that wasn’t in the film, err I saw it at home and I bought it but I haven’t actually watched since [Pause] cause haven’t happened to...but I got the uncut version as well ‘cause I wanted to see all the extra stuff.”

*We propose the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more they are likely to inhabit an aesthetic judgement-set which celebrates the visceral, and the extreme, and in doing identify themselves as a distinct group with as a result distinctive practices of viewing.*

2. The ‘J-horror’ category. Although this kind of talk was not absent from Ambivalents, it was certainly more present and active among Embracers: a will to talk about Japanese film-making as distinctive not only in style, but in having the courage to deal with topics ignored or avoided by ‘Hollywood’ cinema. This is a cinematic culture unafraid to talk about dangerous topics – this is greatly welcomed by *Ichi*’s Embracers.

Lisa (London, Embracer): “You can’t just make nice films, though, there has to be films about the dark side of human nature cause it’s there and you can’t pretend it’s not. (Dan: Completely.) That’s all I have to say.”

(London group)

James: “He’s his own genre isn’t he?”

Phil: ...yeah they’re just all weird...

Lisa: ...they’re all just mad yeah...

Phil: ...crazy...

Dan: ...but there are other Miike film’s you can group with other movies...it’s...

Lisa: ...the pure gangster stuff...

Dan: ...yeah...

Lisa: ...the pure gangster stuff is...is kind of much more sort of straight isn’t it...

Dan: ...yeah...

Lisa: ...just...just violence but...

Dan: ...it’s...it’s I reckon it goes in with *Dead or Alive*...

Phil: ...*Dead*...yeah...

Dan: ...well *Dead or Alive* two and the last ten minutes of *Dead or Alive* [Laughs]

James: mmmm

Dan: ...but it’s yeah...it’s...you can’t really group it with anything else he’s done.

*We propose the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more they are likely to welcome and celebrate Japanese horror cinema (or “J-horror”) as a distinctive tradition offering explorations of “dark” ideas, themes and characters largely ignored within mainstream (and especially ‘Hollywood’ cinema).*

3. Testing self against extremities. We found among Embracers of *Ichii* a tendency to watch *serially*. The important thing was that the very first viewing was likely to one which celebrated bodily impact – the shock to the senses of seeing extraordinary, extreme scenes on screen. A great deal of the talk about the film turned to particular scenes, and their immediate impact. It was a form of *test* to put oneself through – with three implications. First, that it is unlikely to be repeatable – and if the film is to be rewatched, it will likely have to be within a different interpretive frame. Second, the film to a degree *fragments* and becomes a series of set-pieces. Third, films are rated at least at first in a hierarchy of impact-achievement.

Ross (Edinburgh) ... “the set piece torture scenes” ...

Phil (London, Embracer): ...err but it is just for the most part just comic book all the way through, it’s just like how can you top the previous scene? What are we going to do to try and do to, you know, out do it?

James ((London – Embracer): ...it’s kind of funny on one level, cause it’s like it’s kind of over the top violence but then on another level you just think...can’t believe someone’s sat down and thought...thought this up and filmed it and got away with it...isn’t that cool!

Ken (Manchester, Embracer): Umm .... Wff ... Umm It’s about how films work, I think. If I start thinking about something like CGI or an acting style or some, some

continuity error, then the film hasn't gripped me. I don't know why some films grip me and some films don't grip me. ... If I start thinking about those sorts of things then the film hasn't worked as a film. To see a film first time I want to be in there with the film and have my critical bits switched off. If they've come on, then it hasn't worked. But I don't know why some films work for me and others don't. It's just some magic that takes place from the opening reel – god, that's an old term, but the opening scene then develops and if you forget all that stuff then the film's worked.

Compare Abigail (Leeds – Ambivalent): “Yeah, I mean I'm interested in all films, I *do not* have a special interest in horror, I don't particularly like horror but I do watch horror films and I do have a particular interest in, sort of, Japanese and other Oriental cinema, pan-Asian cinema, but yeah, not knowing what to expect, I suppose when it... (pause) I didn't I suppose recognise the clues, if you're watching sort of an American teen horror movie you just pick up, look at the types and wait for them to go one by one and maybe I just didn't pick up the signals that... erm, I was, yeah, shocked!” With ... Rosie: “You know... I hadn't seen *Audition* but I had heard all about it, “you must see it, oh my god it's so shocking” so I, erm, so I erm, so I was just expecting this, I was expecting to be shocked, and when you're expecting to be shocked you... you often aren't so shocked.” (laughter)

Ross (Edinburgh, Embracer): “I certainly remember a feature on *Ichii the Killer* and possibly on...on extreme cinema around that time and in *Empire* magazine when *Ichii* came out maybe to coincide with it err...it certainly rings a bell umm where as just from what [Pause] from yeah there would be the internet and film websites and *Empire* magazine...it actually did make me want to watch it...just because of [Pause] yeah the extreme nature of it just...I do remember thinking...yeah...my god what film is this that could lead to an image.”

*We propose the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more they are likely to perceive the film as constructed around a series of set-piece extreme scenes, measured first by their Impact on Self. Thereafter several distinct strategies of further meaning-making emerge – from (at one extreme) (a) the examination of stylistics, to (b) close attention to character-formation:*

(a) Dan: “...thinking about it, the other bit that stood out and I think it was the partly the style in which it was done was the flashback to his school his childhood friend being assaulted and partly because it was done on DV and was just dropped in, so, you know the film is so vibrant and colourful and done with this crazy kind of comic book look to it and then suddenly a visit to cue grain and unpleasantness but also because it's all handheld and POV it throws you in there and makes you feel that your somehow involved in it and that was I thought also really impressive, I don't know if that's in the English version.”

Ben (Manchester, Embracer): “Stylistically it's just so impressive. It moves between different styles just ... it's amazing, like the tongue-slicing scene is not just about the tongue-slicing, there's vivid reds in the background, and he's wearing a purple suit and he puts a green napkin around himself, just so visually exciting, and then you get other bits that are more documentary-based, I think they're going up the stairs to find someone in the apartment block and it's just a hand-held camera and it's all gritty and [indistinct], so you get that, and it's a jarring effect of the human mixed with such



blatant horror as well. Because if you get the genuine horror of the [indistinct] but you also see the grotesque. It's incredibly exaggerated, the make-up on her as well, so it detaches it again, it makes it hyper-real, so it's beyond ... it's beyond what you expect and therefore it kind of makes it more ...more horrific but less so at the same time. It's hard to sum up exactly what ..."

(b) Anna (Leeds, Embracer): "Erm, yes, so I just like to watch things that are going to draw you in and pull you into a whole different world that you're never going to be part of, kind of see though.... For me, the director pulls you into a completely different world and you get to be a part of it however (laughs) mental and crazy it is. And erm, for me, that was the most interesting part, you actually felt like you were a little bit a part of it and it was all going on around you and you felt compelled to watch the whole thing through to the end, whereas a lot of films (whispers) "oh yeah, ok that's a little bit", but for me I was just drawn into the whole thing. Erm, I think it's a great film. I think the plot's interesting, it's a different take on things, I think the style's fantastic, erm, even the sort of music, the, I think the whole package is polished off fantastically."

Greta (Leeds, Embracer): "Erm, it was the oil on the man while he was being hung er, and the tongue when he, the character, slices his tongue (laughs), sort of like, it was like, who is this man that he would do that and also, he's cutting off his tongue! (laughs) You know, so..... I think the point that the guys [indist.] I think that's the whole point of cinema, is we go, and I want this director to make me feel something, I want him to shock me, I want him to.... Cos, I mean, if you're not going to feel any different emotions then you might as well just sit in an office and watch people at work... (laughter) You just want to be dragged into a different worlds and you want to feel things that you're not going to see in real, well hopefully! You're not going to see in real life or be a part of and I think that's..."

Rob (Edinburgh – Ambivalent): "Yeah gut reaction I think from the outset you...you know you're going to be watching a film that is kind of [Pause] close to the bone I mean it kind of wears its heart on its sleeve in that why so the initial response is your like *whoa* where's this going and so you do get those extreme...so like the gut being cut in half you there kind of there a bit on the edge of your seat umm I think having gone back was useful cause it's then that I realised that it's...I think it's quite tongue in cheek I think because it is like a comic book it is *that kind of violence* so the initial thing of it watching it and possibly being a little bit shocked when you go back over it you do realise and I think they say on the err *commentary* that it's quite tongue in cheek you know, so it is extreme and it is violent but at the same time it's not [Pause] totally realistic violence. ...I mean...I haven't got anything against it I don't know how much... watching it again...how much I enjoyed it the...at...compared to the first time. I think cause the first time it is also new and fresh you can be that kind of being a little bit overwhelmed as something that gives it a...a sense of something that you come away from and you think...but...watching it again I think getting a bit clearer in my head how it works it's not as...it's not as interesting as I thought it was, it...it's still a good film but it's not...not the best film you know. ... I mean there are things like the ending and that which I think I finally sussed out what's happening there but in some ways it's not entirely resolved and there's something's about it which don't completely sit together."

4. Violence and sexual violence. It was a point of similarity across Embracers, Ambivalents and Refusers that people did not appear to want to see all extreme scenes involving women as 'sexual violence'. Because the film as a whole is identified as being about sado-masochism, and both men and women are both givers and receivers of violence, there was no will to separate particular scenes as needing separate consideration as 'sexual violence'. How much this mattered to people, clearly varied greatly.

Lisa: "I think [Pause] it doesn't feel kind of massively misogynistic because there is kind of sexual violence for everyone, err you know Kakihara is obsessed with S&M isn't he? And he's always wanting something more extreme to happen to him. So while there are all these horrible scenes of sexual violence towards women, there are quite horrible things happening to men as well, so at least you feel [Laughs] that its evened out a bit [Pause] it's not all kind of directed at women and also [Pause] there not massively sexualised are they? Quite trying to remember and I think there's kinda a blow job and stuff isn't there and before he kills the one and has the realisation that she wants him to do it and you know he thinks *oh she wants me to but she doesn't want me to*, and goes ahead and does it and it all goes horribly wrong but err [PAUSE] I don't remember there.. being really disturbed about kind of his treatment of women because it felt kind of like [Pause] it's a bit more across the board, men were getting in the neck as well, so."

Greta (Leeds, Embracer): "I think there were two kinds of violence in that movie which was violence that was practical in terms of gang bosses needing to torture people for information and then Kakihara and Ichi kind of violence which was for the most part based on their sexual desires, for the desire for pain, erm, and I think, it's, it's mainly the gas... er, the gang and the bosses, that's all part of the plot but the, the two main characters, that's what you're, you're interested in as well as the main part of it so... If you didn't have the kind of sexual violence then there wouldn't be any point to the film". (laughs)

Abigail (Ambivalent) "I agree, I think that the sort of beatings of the woman er are almost sort of what the film's about, the way the characters respond that's what this film does appear to be about, erm, the, the torture scenes that I've described, I have a little difficulty with what the definition of sexual violence is, I mean, pretty obvious if you're beating a woman to get sexual pleasure, erm, even in you're not doing anything of, what anyone else would consider to be of a sexual nature, that's surely got to be sexual violence, erm, whereas I'm not actually sure that the, erm, the torture of the woman was really sexual violence, it's just that she is a female victim, and they're torturing her in a way that it's easy for a man to torture a woman."

Ross: "...that's actually what I was going to mention that in terms of *Ichi the Killer* in...in a wider context of other films that contain sexual violence and the example I would use would be *Irreversible* which umm...the...I found the rape scene in *Irreversible* infinitely more difficult to watch than any of the sexual violence in *Ichi the Killer* umm as...I mean...as a male viewer umm watching the prolonged rape scene in *Irreversible* I found that it...it...extremely uncomfortable to watch, [Pause] in that it was a male inflicting this violence upon a woman umm and just so prolonged err yeah the...it was much more difficult than in *Ichi the Killer* where the scenes aren't as prolonged they're much shorter, although there are scenes of women getting

beaten up there's also elements of men receiving sexual gratification from being beaten up [Pause] and...and yeah as I said err as you mentioned the...the scenes of sexual violence in *Ichi the Killer* were swamped amongst this...this other excess of violence in general umm. In terms of watching *Ichi the Killer* as a male [Pause] I didn't...I didn't...I don't know how to express this...I didn't find it as difficult to watch as...as *Irreversible* or certainly even less graphic scenes umm..."

*We propose the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more they are likely to deny there is a clear way to separate the general violence of the film, from supposed scenes of sexual violence.*

5. Character-relations, and the implications of the 'cuts'. On this point there were some substantial differences between, in particular, Ambivalents and Embracers. The latter talked to us repeatedly about having a sense of something important *lost* from the film, and in particular from the scene involving the policeman Kaneko. Because Ichi himself is seen as in important senses a 'puppet', there is great interest in the motivations of other characters, and vital information about this character in particular was felt to be lost by the 'cut'.

Ben (Manchester, Embracer): "It does make it more challenging in your interpretation of the character, which is probably why it was in there. I was going to say about *Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, it's similar because it's a very striking vision, but it's also similar because you kind of get the two protagonists and you see it from *both* their points of view, so it's *very challenging*, *who* you associate with more and *who* your sympathies should lie with, and so you sort of carry the twin things into the ultimate showdown at the end. It's very ... it's *there* to make you feel uncomfortable on a different level and you do not know where to place yourself. I think."

Finlay (Edinburgh, Ambivalent): "the kid's father because I thought he was put in the film to be the sort of one person you could sympathise with, 'cause he seems like the one reasonable decent guy in this horrible...you know...gangster underworld, he's a family man he seems to just...he got kicked out of the police for losing his gun, fell on hard times. But yeah that introduces a whole new element that...you know...for whatever reason he's...he's become a part of this horrible cruelty that goes on, umm which I think is pretty significant...you know... it really changes the way you think about things."

Sarah (Manchester, Embracer): "I think I said earlier about, Ben said the same as Ken, just said. It totally changes your perception of the character who was doling out the beating, I mean it made me wince, but lots of things in the film made me wince. I don't know if it was specifically because it was violence against a woman. It might have been, but I'm speaking as a woman so I don't know if other people would react to it as much as I would."

*We propose the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more they are likely to relate to a variety of characters in the film, and seek to follow the story-arcs of several.*

6. Genre-relations and the issue of the 'cuts'. More generically than the above, we found that audiences – both Ambivalent and Embracers – experienced the 'cut'

version as requiring them to ‘fill in’ what might have happened – and in some cases getting it wrong. But aside from issues of accuracy or inaccuracy, the concern was that a film which *withholds* information belongs to a different tradition – the Hollywood horror tradition which operates by suggestion. This requires a different set of audience traditions and practices than J-horror.

(London Group)

James: ...I think the only thing that was removed was in it you kind of saw outside the room and he saw her being a bit freaked and then went back outside the room again... so you didn’t really know what was going on and it was...actually a bit more disturbing rather than [Indist] stretched nipple...

Dan: ...that happens a lot though like unless the effects are spectacular and the director a genius its often the case that cutting away makes things worse...

Lisa: ...it seems more sinister...

Rosie: “Yes...But I only became aware of it today when I was searching on YouTube actually, erm, to er, because there are points, that is the point when you do think, oh, I have missed something that, that something has been cut and it is obvious, I think, erm, that that scene was cut, erm but I don’t think it necessarily, I mean I’d have to watch the uncut version to know if it took anything away from the film. Erm, but erm, but I erm, it’s weird because when I saw the scenes before and after er, (pause) I... I kind of thought, Oh my gosh it must have been something really bad, and the thing that came to mind was that they cut her breasts off, so, I think that is obviously something that every woman must think, it is the most, one of the most awful things that could happen (laughter), erm, I don’t... maybe I just thought of that because I’m a bit twisted but that’s (laughter) that’s what I... that’s something that I imagined might have happened in that gap.”

James (London – Embracer): “mmmm yes I mean...that’s the first time I’ve seen the...full uncut version of that scene ummm having seen the...seen the cut version the scene seems to be more about the girl and what terrible things were happening that we didn’t see umm we saw a tiny bit of it but we didn’t see any of the nipple stuff we could just hear screams umm but seeing it there it’s much more clearly about him and his kind of decent into madness and hell you just see that he’s completely corrupted by all this and...like you say just kind of taking it out on this...this poor tortured innocent person...”

(London Group)

Dan: Oh it definitely counts the erm but it’s not the nipples that’s the worry it’s the kicking...and that’s because its not about the violence to her it’s about the you know...destruction of him...

James: ...but you take out the cartoonish nipple bit and then leave in the brutal realistic kicking bit...

Dan: ...mmmm...

James: ...and it becomes much more disturbing...”

Ken (London, Embracer): “It, it um, it makes it a very different scene from the one which I think I saw, er, I was beginning to think I was suffering alcoholic blackouts, because I just cannot remember that at all, but of course that’s because it’s not, its not there. I mean that’s just horrible, I mean, um, ah, I don’t know which is the worst bit,

I think it's when he's battering – er, when he's kicking her is more horrible than the first bit, actually, cos of the sustained nature of that attack. It's horrible. Yep. It changes my view of the policeman, ah, who I hadn't thought of as being particularly associated with baddies, he obviously worked for them, but there were things which rescued him, in your head, from the way you felt about him, but with that, that turns that, that turns that around, and you want him to be dead. So it changes the ending because as I recall when I saw him killed at the end, er, I was kind of sorry that he was dead, but now I'm not. I'm glad he's dead. [...] as I say, it's really changed the meaning of the ending for me about how I feel about one of the characters at the end, since I wished that the, that some of that had been there, er, even if had been, even if it had been cut, uh, because I think it's quite significant about the way you feel about somebody who's one of the few sympathetic characters in the film. They're all, they're all dreadful now, there's nobody to root for in the end! It's just all hell."

*We propose the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces the film, the more they are likely to perceive the key cuts as withholding or altering important character motivations, and as transforming the film's genre.*

#### **4. An Overall Portrait of Context- and Moment-References in *Ichii the Killer***

1. A key to understanding the pattern of responses to *Ichii* is how the film has circulated and among what kinds of communities it has found responses. This is a film hardly noticed by mainstream film reviewers and followers, intensely known among bloggers (compare mentions on LexisNexis with those on Technorati). It is a film known almost entirely via DVD, and among those who seek out films of this kind as part of a specialist knowledge-enterprise.

Even so, within the Embracer group, it is possible to discern two distinct strategies, making different uses of context-categories. On the one hand are those for whom this is to be judge simply as skilled extreme cinema: the colour, the camerawork, the exaggerated situations. As such, it can fall short: the noticeable CGI, for instance, are disliked; the slowing of some scenes for character-development are an intrusion (strong anti-reactions to these lead through Ambivalence to Refusal). What was wanted was Category 1 impact on self – an inescapable visceral experience brought about by pure auteurist film-making, with an emphasis on the film's *surface* (declining interest in any deeper thematics). The vernacular category (Category 3) 'Japanese cinema', understood as a set of aesthetic strategies, plays a substantive part here.

A second group sees 'Japanese cinema' somewhat differently, as an arena where kinds of characters, human tendencies, and social situations which are sidestepped in western (and especially Hollywood) cinema, are addressed. For this position, the slower elements of the film in between the visceral are points of both reflection and revelation. This is where we learn about character's natures and motives.

In the focus groups we see evident examples of these being used *serially*: first, you go for a Context 1 viewing, with visceral Impact on Self; then you rewatch under a Contexts 2-4 schema to search for the motivational principles of characters who are interesting because they are so bizarre and unconsidered in the standard canon.

In both camps, there is a disinclination to separate sexual violence from other representations of violence. With occasional exceptions, the predominant feeling is that the women are treated neither better nor worse than the men.

For both groups, the circumstances of watching the film are important, in a distinctive way. To watch this film is to watch as a member of the community of extreme Japanese film lovers. Among such people, there are relations of experience, and of expertise.

Attitudes to cuts here vary. Since, often, Refusing takes the form of turning and walking away – either on grounds that it is not well-enough-done, or on grounds that it is too-well-done and I don't want it thank-you, there is no inclination to worry about others – it is just not wanted, personally. For Embracers, however, and in particular Embracers of the second stripe, the cuts do a distinctive kind of harm to the film. They disrupt understanding of secondary characters. One cut in particular stands out for this – the cut to the scene where Kaneko the policeman beats the prostitute Myu-Myu to death. This is seen, by many Embracers, as denying them access to his motivation, and to the point where he is revealed as a flawed figure. This interest in secondary characters, and away from the figure of Ichi, or even of Kakiyama (argued by some to be the central figure of the film, despite Ichi's eponymous status), runs counter to traditional notions of 'identification' with films.

2. Processes of remembering often focus on those elements of the film which were found to be particularly Challenging – the moments where a viewer has to brace him/herself or look away. These are, we suspect, particular to the person and his/her sensibilities. Beyond this, there are undoubtedly Imperative Moments where, in particular, the second Embracer group feel forced to re-evaluate their position, to think again a character, or a theme.

Beyond these, among many Embracers – and especially among those who move to the second mode of exploring character-motivations – what is Memorable is the overall switching between high-energy, and slow close-up, scenes.

## 20. *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noë, 2001)

Of the five films we were asked to study, this one has had by far the widest cinema release, and of course in an uncut version. This led, unsurprisingly, to a greater public attention, particularly in professional reviews of the film, and in debates on the wisdom of releasing a film built around such a long and challenging rape scene.

### 1. The Web Debates.

#### A Sketch of the Web Debates

Although overall, *Irreversible* seemed to garner more positive attention than negative, the debates generated by this film on the topic of sexual violence have been more heated, more extensive and more sustained than for any of the other titles in the study (*Ich i the Killer* also has a continued high volume web presence but discussion of sexual violence is not its dominant feature). The primary site on which longevity of interest in *Irreversible* can be observed is IMDb, where the message boards continue to thrive through the activities of a mixture of committed long-term debaters and the interjections of more casual commentators.<sup>13</sup>

Of all the films in the study, *Irreversible* is the one which succeeded in travelling most fully through a number of different reception environments. This is apparent from looking at the depth and breadth of discussion to be found across different kinds of sites. Unlike some of the other titles, it registered significantly in mainstream spaces, and this may be partly due to the fact that the film was the only one to feature an internationally recognised star: Monica Bellucci. It is also attributable to the intense controversy that accompanied the film, starting when it hit the festival circuit in Cannes in May 2002. The successive audience walk-outs (or at least the anticipation of these), as it travelled around the world, combined with the public statements of Gaspar Noë and the cast to stimulate a high level of media buzz. This appears on sites for individual festivals, aggregate festival news sites such as [www.indiewire.com](http://www.indiewire.com), in addition controversy would be reported in local and national sources from the respective festival locations. These elements, along with discussion of the gruelling contents of the film, became part of the anticipation narratives developing online, something visible in both the early stand-alone reviews and within contemporary message board threads. As a result, early responses from festival viewings, from before censorship decisions were clear, are often marked by a sense that this could be the last/only chance to view the uncut version. In such versions the writer is constructed as privileged reporter, not just seeing the film early, but possibly capturing a rare viewing experience.

One aspect which helped to sustain discussion of the film beyond the initial waves of festival and censorship related hype, was the rising star of Bellucci. In the same

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<sup>13</sup> The number of postings on the IMDb *Irreversible* message boards does not represent the total gathered since the film's release. Regular pruning by moderators tends to keep the number to under 1000, although in April 2006 it had reached over 1500 (As this was done on my old computer - the one which died - I'm not sure I can retrieve a date for this high figure). The policy seems to be to delete older strands which have become inactive.

month as the limited US release of *Irreversible* (March 2003), her first American action feature *Tears of the Sun* was released, and although this does not seem to have registered significantly in the online discussions, the release of *The Matrix Reloaded*, just two months later, was a different matter, bringing the actress and her films to the attention of a wealth of new film viewers. Another common Bellucci-based 'route in' to *Irreversible* which crops up in discussions is *Malena*, while her casting as Mary Magdalene in *The Passion of the Christ* also arises, although not normally as a reason to view the film.

### **The nature of discussion**

However, the sustained interest in the film cannot be simply explained by the oxygen of publicity and the power of its star. As is clear from both the volume and the personal tone of many citizen reviews, and from the length of the exchanges in discussion threads, this is a film that many people genuinely feel a *need* to talk about. A common feature within message board discussion are mentions of the negative reaction (actual or assumed) of a partner/friends to either the viewing the film or even the possibility of viewing the film. For those viewers who feel unable to watch or discuss the film with anyone in their immediate circle, the internet is providing the only outlet for discussion of a film that they feel compelled to talk through. However, there are also others who discuss the debates they have already had with friends/partners about the film, and this widens the circle of opinions to include representations of people who are not present in the online space.

Some people feel the need to test out the waters in advance of viewing – just how bad will it be? Will they be able to take it? Will it have been worth it? Although some are reassured and post again with their own experiences after viewing the film, not all go on to watch the film. Whatever the outcome, non-professional reviews and opinions are being valued highly as alternative sites of authentic information - their emotional honesty making them superior to professional reviews as a basis for determining ones own potential viewing experience. The following quotes give a sense of the motivations of both information seeker, and original reviewer/information provider in one such exchange:

Enzian, thank you thank you thank you. You just saved me and my wife from watching a movie we would not have enjoyed. I was considering trying this out (mainly for Monica Bellucci), but I know we would not like it from what you describe. The last thing we need to watch is a brutal depiction of human ugliness and tragedy.<sup>14</sup>

This was in response to a very lengthy mixed review and thread opener, which did not ultimately come to a negative conclusion about viewing the film:

“Just writing this has helped me put this film in its place. I /despised/ watching this film, but I like having seen it. How’s that for weird?”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <http://forums.dvdfil.com/showthread.php?t=45911&highlight=irreversible>, post 10, by reapersaurus, 27/6/04

<sup>15</sup> <http://forums.dvdfil.com/showthread.php?t=45911&highlight=irreversible>, post 1, by Enzian 16/6/2004



## Tone and Tolerance

Although there is a more macho endurance culture in other forums, we have been struck by the degree of tolerance within most sites. This is a film which almost all acknowledge will 'not be for everyone', and in relation to discussion of the film itself (as opposed to those discussions which sidetrack more fully into discussion of rape) differences of opinion are expected and usually respected. 'Good netiquette' is often invoked by third parties, if a fan or a foe of the film makes personal attacks based on another Poster's opinion on the film - the main exception to this being when someone expresses arousal at the rape. This is something which can be dealt with quite differently from site to site. On the loosely moderated IMDb boards it can quickly descend into flaming, with 'inappropriate' and abusive posts being reported to the moderator and removed reactively. Dedicated horror sites can be very interesting, as there is often a default tolerant culture towards extreme views and so other posters can collectively try to guide the poster towards the limits of acceptable expression, rather than shunning or attacking them.

In fact, the model of the inquisitive but apprehensive potential viewer becomes the dominant imagined reader, at least within reviews, and less recent discussion posts (on IMDb's recent ongoing message boards it is largely assumed that people have seen the film now, and have made up their mind about it for or against) structuring the positive reviews and review style posts. These go out of their way not to minimise the power and horror of the film - all potential viewers should be fore-warned and thus be able to make an informed choice - but they also try to explain how enduring this experience is central to the eventual emotional rewards of the piece. The fact that this link cannot be taken as obvious results in a vast amount of material which is very rich in terms of connecting together film content, viewer response and viewer pleasure (negative reviews, more frequently assume obviousness, are often more curtly dismissive, however there are also more clearly 'worked' examples available too). This kind of explanation - a journey through the viewer's emotions - is also the means by which the Embracers can position themselves as not 'sick' for taking eventual pleasure from such a disturbing film.

It should be noted that although the need to communicate the relationship between viewing and feeling, in combination with the reverse structure of the narrative, makes the normal observation of 'spoiler' information avoidance very difficult for this film, many Embracing writers hold off from revealing what is often considered to be the film's ultimate reward: the closing overhead shot in the park. The number of angry responses to the disclosure of plot information is lower than might be expected for other films, suggesting that either the posts in question, or other sources, have prepared people not to expect the pleasures of the film to be narrative ones. As a result, the expression of irritation about plot revelation functions as a defiant stance: as a minor example of a 'gross' reading - evidence of a determined attitude to approach the film with the same values with which one might approach a conventional thriller.

*Irreversible* has also gained substantial and sustained attention in those serious film-fan arenas dominated by art-house and horror discourses. This dual 'art' and 'horror' genre engagement is particularly clear if we look at the range of films that are commonly mentioned in conjunction with *Irreversible*. This adds real complexity to

ways in which the film is both attacked and defended. Not only can it be seen as a piece of art, horror, exploitation, or any combination thereof, it can also be perceived as a success or a failure in all/any of these terms by those with an investment in (or resistance to) any of these categories.

Gender is clearly an issue within responses to this film, but while the film seems to be a more complete success for male-declared Embracers, and some within the anti-camp define themselves as women within a feminist tradition, these are not hard and fast divides. Rather people articulate themselves consciously within gendered debates and it is perhaps also useful to think of certain online spaces being dominated by the argumentative positions associated with one gender, largely regardless of the physical sex of the writers. The *Guardian* forums, for instance, could be considered as an educated liberal environment and stronghold of feminist ideas, while the identity of the JoBlo (ArrowInTheHead) site is more self-consciously macho: a somewhat laddish, fan-boy space. In both, writers of either sex must articulate themselves within the dominant framing discourse of the site: something which combines attitudes and expectations based on gender, with other elements, such as notions of art, entertainment and the purpose of film, and of the appropriate language for discussing these things.

### **The Rape Scene as Cultural Phenomenon**

This is core across the spectrum, from those who love the film through to those who feel it should not have been made. It is also a discussion point which straddles all five of the main Context categories, often connecting them together (particularly common patterns link 1, 2, & 5 and 2, 3 & 4). There are two distinct aspects which mark responses to this cinematic depiction of rape in exceptional and specific ways:

- *The long, unedited duration of the rape:* ‘the nine minutes’, in conjunction with its filming. This is a huge factor in visceral response, causing Embracers, in particular, to explore the filming of the scene in depth. Both impact and technique are evaluated against other cinematic depictions of rape. The precise number of minutes that the rape scene is claimed to last for is a point of dispute, particularly in earlier discussions. For those seeking further information before deciding whether or not to watch the film (a frequent occurrence on message boards) the numbers clearly loom large.
- *The star status of the actress playing the victim.* The fact that Monica Bellucci is an established star and sex symbol not only increases the number of viewers, it also impacts on interpretations in a number of ways. In relation to professional and formal reviews it gives rise to narratives of craft, devotion to art, and extreme bravery. These elements continue into more informal writing, but are joined by often uncomfortable negotiations around arousal and attraction to her as star. Details about her life, particularly her real relationship to Vincent Cassell are invoked, and layered into interpretations, whilst her beauty and glamour also become an issue. Do they function to make her more than just anyone – the essence of innocent womanhood as victim, or do they make her an impossibly glamorous victim, undermining the responsible representation of realistic sexual violence?

### **1. Self as Context**

Two key scenes: Shock, Endurance & Visceral Response: The debate surrounding the film is heavily dominated by the two most extreme scenes, the staving in of a man's face with a fire extinguisher, near the start of the film, and the rape of Monica Bellucci's character, Alex, in the middle of the film. Both produce highly visceral, physically embodied responses in the majority of writers, and unless strongly predetermined by a principled moral stance on either the screening of rape/violence, or the cutting of films, how each writer feels about that intense experience seems to largely define the overall responses they are able to have to the film. While the fire extinguisher scene is often discussed in terms of shock and instant repulsion, the rape provides a different kind of horror based more on endurance. Although these aspects are a feature in professional reviews, it is in non-professional writing, particularly in forums that the force of feeling really shines out.

The responses to these scenes are also closely related to how people feel about the last portion of the film – 'the beginning' – where we get to know more about the characters before the violent events occur.

### **Embracers**

The main prerequisite for embracing this film is about being *willing* to be 'made to feel'. This is not a film you can have a non-reaction to (or at least for dominant Embracers the concept of a 'numb' audience is a serious Context 5 problem). This is a film that does things to you, and you have to be willing to let it. For many, and from the very start of the film – as the camera moves through The Rectum accompanied by a discordant drone, this means being willing to feel nauseous and severely disorientated. For truly successful Embracers, Context 1 is the most important way in which to respond to the film. This usually intersects with other categories - exploration of technique, of themes and narratives, and assertions about the real world - but it doesn't have to. The film's power to move and to shake them can be enough in itself. Within horror sites, discussion of this kind of power finds a particularly natural home. There is a shared assumption that cinema should be able to – even ought to – do this. However, in other fora people often feel the need to explain why this might be desirable, or even express surprise in their accounts of their own journeys as viewers

Responding to the rape: Writers often construct endurance narratives around the rape scene, with different emphasis on empathy for the victim, frustration at their impotence and inability to stop the situation, and anger at the man who walks away. The development of these on message boards is particularly rich, and here male identified embracers are often the most deeply affected. The dominant Embracing position is dependent on embracing the full horror of rape. This is rape depicted 'as it should be!' Disgust, revulsion, anger and feeling physically sick are commonly reported, and these experiences although unpleasant in themselves, are strangely comforting because they are understood to be the right responses to a horrific act. Within this there are perhaps two (not totally mutually exclusive) subsets. Firstly a position that is dependent on an intense sense of empathy with the victim, Alex. Here it is not unusual for male writers to discuss feeling violated, feeling 'raped as a viewer'. This emotional connection perhaps gives the scene its strongest potential to be considered a transformative experience – a means of knowing that which is normally unimaginable (although, of course, a number of people highlight that anal

rape is not just something that happens to women). This 'co-victim' response also raises issues of appropriate viewing, guilt, and the public performance of cross-gender empathy and understanding.

In the second version viewers construct themselves as powerless witnesses rather than helpless co-victims. Here a notion of collective male guilt is central, and for many men, the process of the responding to the scene can be an act of refusing the totality of the 'all men are rapists' argument (our gut feeling here is that the division between these two responses to the rape may be very gendered and that while both models are open to male Embracers, for female Embracers the model of sympathetic 'witness' works, whereas the model of intense personal empathy to the point of co-victimhood is perhaps just too close for comfort, and is likely to be an aspect of female Refuser responses instead.). The recognition of women as especially vulnerable and in need of protection is positioned as important in the witness model, and in this narrative the figure at the end of the tunnel is often raised: the onscreen agent who could have acted but did not. This figure can be important in both male and female responses. On message boards the privileging of this figure often seems a prompt a move towards the real world considerations of Context 4. This can be at the level of a personal alternative projection; heroic male "if that'd been me" rescue and punishment narratives are frequent, sometimes drawing responses from Posters who challenge the likelihood of such an intervention in an event seen from the other end of dark tunnel. Alternatively it can prompt a more symbolic, and frequently feminist aligned, interpretation of the figure as a comment on the (male) public's complicity in permitting rape to happen.

Arousal and the star body: Bellucci is a major draw for this film, but prior knowledge that someone whom numerous writers assert to be 'the most beautiful woman in the world' will be brutally raped for nine minutes, adds a particular kind of trepidation into the mix for many men. For some heterosexual male viewers, viewing the scene becomes a challenge, and it is important to be able to assert that they were not turned on by the rape scene - despite Monica. This can be negotiated in a number of ways: this is a particularly flippant example.

Oh, speaking of that, I managed to sit through the entire 9 or 10 minute rape scene without popping wood, against all my expectations, so I'm extremely proud of myself that I'm not demented. However, the scenes that followed with Bellucci in bed and the shower - schwing! [JoBlo - BakeTheMooCow on 06-14-2004]

This writer is unusual for his willingness to voice the self-doubt so explicitly. More usually the possibility that arousal could have occurred, or at least could have continued beyond the start of the attack must be 'held away', as we have suggested. In accounts which do this, there is often again an assertion of realism and a recourse to the examination of technique – an exploration of how the film either denied arousal from the outset, or set it up only to cut it dead. This has a two-way logic, it is both a relief not to be turned on (or to rapidly cease being turned on) – proof they are 'normal' and not sexually deviant - and conversely, having tested the film on someone with a 'normal' heterosexual male response, this is also confirmation that the film is made responsibly: it is 'not designed to titillate' – and thus anyone who is turned on by it must be inherently deviant already (see Context 5).

Although not as prevalent, there are also a spectrum of other responses acknowledging arousal. There are admissions and examinations of shame following arousal (often leading to deeply ambivalent evaluations of the film), but also in the defiant ‘Gross’ response: embracing and defending the right to enjoy watch the rape scene for the purposes of sexual stimulation (see particularly persistent posting on IMDb and occasional threads on video sharing sites). These posts are often deliberately provocative – e.g. “the rape is so HOT!!” and here it is hard to separate Context 1 and Context 5 – they are built from each other. Such assertions are used by others, as evidence in the battle of claims over Context 4 (how real is this, is this how rape ought to be shown to make it undeniably terrible?), and those who make such claims are fully aware that this will be the response.

For some dominant, ‘responsible’ Embracers it is possible to acknowledge arousal, and through an exploration of Context 2 – the intra-filmic – reconcile it, as being deliberately set up by Noë in order to deepen the sense of horror as the scene progresses. The confident working through of this model requires the writer to have some of the resources of art-house reading practices at their disposal, and it enables them to displace responsibility of their arousal onto the director (playing on natural male responses), and then incorporate it into the emotional journey towards an ultimately ‘responsible’ viewing experience.

Resonance and Reflection: This is a film with visceral effects that bleed through into viewers’ lives. The film’s ability to continue to resonate within them, long after other gruelling films would have faded, is commented on by many. For numerous viewers this is simply the most disturbing film they have ever seen. People are haunted by images from it, a number of people talk in terms of ‘flashbacks.’ Fears for partners and other loved ones (particularly male Posters discussing female family members) are also discussed in many forums, and on one board – [www.hometheatreforums](http://www.hometheatreforums) this is even expressed in terms of the film prompting tactile, physical and emotional interaction with others. It is also worth noting another common factor in this exchange: the shared sense of viewers needing time to come to terms with their responses to the film, in order to be able to formulate and articulate a response.

I’m curious about our threadstarter, Justin S, and his thoughts. Although I can understand the delay...I spent a few days intentionally trying to disassociate and exorcise myself from this film. [...] My wife and toddler son looked at me askance in those following days as a result of my excessive hugging - I had to replenish my sense of humanity. [Peter – post 17 – 11/3/2003]

Hey Peter, its nice to know my thoughts are being looked forward to. :) Anyhow, I’m still trying to combine my thoughts into a nice whole, and I’ll post them as soon as I’ve done so, which shouldn’t be too much longer. Simply put, this film is a very grim and emotional experience, and let’s just say I have a new film to call the best of 2002. The rest of my more in depth thoughts will come later. [Justin – post 19 – 11/3/2003]

[...] Interesting, Peter...I too have spent the last few days with a LOT of hugging of my wife and daughters... [Quentin – post 21 – 11/3/2003]

Emotion and outcome: Reactions to the film can take time to develop and for some who have engaged strongly, this involves coming to terms with the confused and shell-shocked state they find themselves in at the end of the movie, often through processes of active interpretation, diving back into plot and technique, and ultimately coming away with at least the rewards of the interpretative process itself. However for those who are most unswervingly positive about the film, their immediate response to the ending is often deeply emotional, rather than reasoned, and retrospectively constructed. Although for many the late revelation of pregnancy adds heartbreaking poignancy, and real tragedy to the film, the ending, particularly the very final scene in the park, can also be experienced as redemptive, cleansing, and strangely uplifting.

Irreversible/Indelible – projections of continued impact: The resonance of the film is often felt to be so great, that even its most enthusiastic supporters can declare a wish never to watch it again. Many do this because they are confident that their experience of film will not fade with time. It is described as being indelibly burned or etched onto the viewer's mind, rendering further viewing superfluous. Here people can declare to have hated viewing the film, but to feel glad, even grateful, for *having* seen it. These are responses which privilege the experience highly, and do not wish to dilute it. Other viewers, who repeat-view, feel the need to delve further into the techniques, narratives and themes of the film, expanding on Contexts 2 and 3.

## **Refusers**

Many Refusers are actually experiencing the same visceral things in the film as the Embracers, and are describing them in remarkably similar language – shock, horror, disgust, nausea, revulsion – however how they proceed to respond this invasion of physical and emotional sensations within their very being is quite different. They are not willing to be overwhelmed in this way – at least not without good reason. Some Refuse the film purely on the basis of the nature of impact it has on them. Either or both of the extreme scenes are simply too much, and there is no way to deal with the film: ‘just too horrific, I couldn’t watch it’ or ‘I couldn’t see what was going on, and I thought I was gonna hurl’ The reasoning for this is likely to be constructed at the level of absolute limits – degrees of violence that just shouldn’t be shown, or filmmaking technique, i.e. bad camera work. Others, meanwhile, are not opposed in principle to the notion of a viewing experience being gruelling and are willing to withhold judgement, and consider the film as a whole. Particularly for those who value character development and humanist social comment most highly, the film can fall badly short, and the endurance experienced in the first half of the movie can result in real resentment by the end, leading to charges of pretension, and style over content. These Refusers often construct themselves as art film and/or thoughtful horror fans.

For Refusers who dwell on character, the big emotional pay-off of the film can never be enough, however it is hard to say how this works, precisely. There are others for whom the film disappoints because it is not as shocking or extreme as expected. Some truly desire the ultimate visceral experience, while others adopt a combative position against the film, at once expecting to be hard enough to be untroubled by it, whilst being willing to admit it as a new horror high if it is disturbing enough. For those who have watched a great deal of uncensored material, there is no surprise when, as a BBFC-passed film, it fails to deliver. This is a significant mode of approach for horror Refusers - and for some Embracers who find the film works for them in spite of their

doubts. It is within these disappointed Refusers that a traditional ‘third person effect’ can be located – they begin to ponder its effect on ‘others’.

Arousal: Unsurprisingly there are fewer clear rejections of the film which deal in first person arousal. Some honest souls discuss feeling uncomfortable about their responses to the rape, and remain deeply ambivalent towards the film, however it is more common for Refusers - male as well as female - to discuss arousal in terms of projected effects on others, or to abstract the issue into claims about the film (‘it is filmed in a titillating way’, rather than ‘I was titillated by it.’)

## **2. Intra-Filmic**

### **Embracers**

For those who engage positively with the film, the process of comprehending one’s own bodily response often involves – even drives – an exploration of the techniques by which the film was able to *make you feel*, at an intense and visceral level. This is often explored with reference to the director: how has Noë achieved this impact? Here the swirling and then static camera work, the discordant sounds in the Rectum club, are usually identified as contributing at least as much to the impact on the viewer as the special effects used to collapse the man’s face. Information is shared, Noë’s interviews are cited, and a collective understanding is built.

For the fans of the film, the fact that the rape scene is so long – when taken in conjunction with the newly immobile camera – validates the film. By forcing you to watch beyond the point of comfort, to stay on the floor with the victim, in real time, they give the scene integrity and purpose, making it ‘real’, un-titillating, and unlike Hollywood by refusing to cut away. This can create a sense that to watch responsibly is to watch unswervingly, not turning away as that would at some level reinsert the kind of ‘Hollywood’ edits the film refuses.

For Embracers the backwards structure of the film is simple but profound, enabling visceral rather than narrative engagement, or at least being viewed as an effective device, denying cheap revenge, and enabling greater emotional involvement. Although not all Embracers buy the ‘time destroys everything’ legend, it usually does not matter, because the structure facilitates the emotional payoff at the film’s conclusion, producing an *experience* which feels profound, even if the headline philosophy doesn’t.

To truly Embrace the film it is necessary to accept the characters at the level of archetypes. Here the star-casting can be hugely helpful, with Bellucci in particular, but also Cassel bringing layers of meaning with them from past performances (the sexually ripe and fecund uberwoman, the volatile hothead). Most importantly, their relationship portrayed in the latter part of the film can be viewed as more than is on the screen through knowledge of their real life marriage. This adds an emotional realism to the piece, which counteracts any criticisms about dialogue and character development. The Bellucci fansite is particularly interesting for responses to the possibility of such an insight into their intimacy. The underwritten characters also leave room for the enjoyable audience construction of their motivations. For those

who have chosen to engage the glimpses of event can provide a means to construct the more rounded characters that the Refusers lament the lack of.

## **Refusers**

This is a film which can fail both those who desire an ‘art-house’ experience, and those seeking a more conventional thriller film (or edgy horror, as already discussed). Here Refusers with different tastes, and languages for expressing them, can perceive the structure and slogan ‘time destroys everything’ to mark the film as pretentiousness in a particularly adolescent manner. This is a feature in many professional reviews and in some longer forum posts. Highbrow version responses are often marked by a somewhat patronising tone towards Noë, and towards those who venerate him. Sarcasm is often mobilised.

Another common accusation is of style and shocks over substance, and here substance can be defined in terms of the characters needing to convince as fully rounded onscreen creations. Here the absence of character development for Alex is a real problem, and Bellucci’s presence is not enough in itself to provide meaning, or establish care rather than pity. Here the pregnancy can be criticised as being a substitution for character. Stars can also be seen as granting the film more attention than it would otherwise merit. Here Noë can be cast in a negative light with respect to his motivations for putting his actors through such things, and in one or two IMDb stands in particular, for voyeuristic intrusion into his stars’ marriage.

## **3. Inter-filmic**

### **Using Comparisons to Embrace and Refuse**

This film received quite a range of recurrent comparisons. With some overlap, the films mentioned in conjunction cluster differently, depending on the aspect under consideration. Comparisons can be classificatory – genre claims - or judgemental (comparisons in either direction) The ways in which comparisons are mobilised are dependent on the interpretation being made of the film *and* the prevalent discourse of the particular forum in which the film is being discussed.

Embracers tend to stress the degree to which the film is a unique experience, drawing on other films to try to give others a sense of what to expect by way of tone and bleakness (*Salo* – highbrow and some horror), emotional experience (*Requiem for a Dream*), structure (*Memento*) gruelling screen rape (typically *I Spit on Your Grave* to *The Accused* – depending on the forum, the writer’s knowledge, and their expectation of the readers) before frequently qualifying the ways in which *Irreversible* is better than the other film referenced. However, Refusers tend to use comparisons with other films to attack the idea of the film’s originality, painting it as a hodge podge of well-worn shock and techniques rather than a new artistic vision. Although for Embracers the depth of the Context 1 experience makes the film a far richer reverse narrative than *Memento*, for or those who privilege plot and character development – and possibly perceive but reject a fatalist message – *Memento* is the prime example of a good, narratively-driven use of reverse narrative structure.



don't even get me started on the "Memento" type shooting of the film. there was absolutely no reason to do that at all. It added nothing. Just another way to gloss over the complete lack of plot or character development [frithjh  
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0290673/board/flat/60356798?d=60501901#60501901>  
1 (Sun Dec 3 2006 18:24:18]

Comparison with other films in the study is also significant, *Ichu* is mentioned in terms of current extreme experiences across the spectrum, but *Baise-Moi* is often raised explicitly by Embracers to make a negative contrast: an example of irresponsible, and ineffective filmmaking. Here the relationships between virtuoso technique, impact, and meaning are very clear, and conversely, for those (minority) who value representations (particularly of feminist gender issues) over the viewing experience, *Baise-Moi* can be held up over *Irreversible*.

#### **4. Relations to the Real World**

**Embracers:** For most Embracers the film presents rape as horrifically and violently as possible. This is 'as it should be!' For those most positive about the representation of the rape, Alex's attire enables the film to comment on her absolute innocence despite her dress, challenging common perceptions of rape (for other Embracers however this can be a sticking point). However, counter or 'gross' Embracers can perceive her appearance as 'asking for it'. She is 'dressed like a whore' and moreover she was stupid enough to take the underpass on the recommendation of a whore. This to some degree seems to make it OK to enjoy the rape. A third option also exists, the film is to be taken seriously, and the rape is a terrible event, but it is a universe in which no-one is totally innocent. In these three positions some online discussions are clearly complicated by the fact that the internet is a global sphere, and within different facets of different cultures, gender expectations, culpability and the relationship to 'appropriate' clothing are defined differently. The whole thing can be evidence of where western values lead, or where decadent European values versus American Evangelical Christian ones will take you.

For many, particularly those who appreciate the reverse structure the most, the representation of chance and fate is key. Here the notion that 'a tiny decision' or a moment 'changes everything' is received a positive representation of act and consequence. The film can also be seen as a positive and meaningful representation of gender differences and particularly of masculine violence and behaviour. Within this one can either embrace the representation of Alex as essentially feminine – gentle, sensual and vulnerable – or accept (implicitly or explicitly) that the film as having nothing larger to say *about* women, because *men* are really its subject.

**Refusers:** While the film often works for those seeking critical representations of masculinity or those seeking representations of chance, it fails horribly for many seeking positive representations of female or gay characters' lives and motivations, or statistically likely portrayals of sexual violence. Here the knowledge of the 'real world' allows criticism of the representation of the rape as *unreal*. Women are raped by heterosexual men, not homosexual ones. Women are more likely to be raped by people they know than strangers. Here the extended time of the rape perhaps allows a lot of space for the amassing of realist criticisms.

The construction of Alex is also problematic. Can the viewer believe that a smart woman would take that subway, dressed like that (some mention, particularly, if she had just discovered that she was pregnant)? Is the fact that she was distracted by emotion enough? When the answers to these questions are no, the construction of Alex is deemed irresponsible; she is not a real character, she is just a screen victim (and a stupid one). This is Noë's fault. Is the director trying to 'keep women scared'? Although not the most widespread grounds for rejection for many Refusers the film is perceived as deeply homophobic, and although Embracers mention Noë's inclusion of himself in the Rectum scene, this is often discounted as tokenistic.

## 5. Relations to Other 'Audiences'

**Refusers:** For those who Refuse the film, however (often identifying as female), the notion that someone would need to see a rape for 9 or so minutes in order to understand how bad rape is, provides depressing evidence of a failing in that viewer's pre-existing levels of empathy, understanding and imagination. Although Refusers do not allow for the fact that the film could enable someone to make a meaningful step between knowing that rape is bad, and feeling it at an emotional and visceral level, for many other, more positive, female responses, the hope that the film will have precisely this effect on 'responsive' male viewers is where its value lies.

Evidence of others' arousal is often claimed as proof of the film's danger by those who reject it, with the apparent immaturity of the posters proclaiming 'rape is hot!' being a particular cause for concern, and being incorporated into arguments about media shaping of sexual landscapes. This argument is then used to try to convince the film's responsible supporters to change their views. This involves a notion of a dual audience very like the BBFC's, those who do not pose a threat and those who do. Another familiar feature is the different degrees to which 'corruption' is viewed as possible. Does it operate at the level of social climate, or at a more personal 'trigger' level? Whatever the view, the rhetoric is likely to involve drawing on authoritatively asserted knowledges of real world effects as a trump card, automatically of more value than individual response. Although the Embracing viewer might be seen as personally perfectly responsible, through their privileging of a valuable personal experience, and wilful ignoring of the 'facts' they are cast as socially irresponsible.

**Embracers:** There is a counter-attack to those who claim superiority over the fans of the film (either through dismissing it as not intellectually challenging enough or not extreme enough). This is to suggest that the unmoved viewer is somehow lacking in compassion (usually used on the former), has bad motivations (usually used on the latter).

I am sorry you found the rape scene 'boring', perhaps a bit more titillation would have made you 'enjoy' it more... [AV forums – KRRK 28-05-2003]

Online, it is impossible to avoid the fact that some others are viewing the film differently from you, perhaps clipped on a site like YouTube, or deliberately as a source of erotic pleasure. While this is not an actual presence in all forums and threads, the knowledge of other online spaces (either directly or as reported by Refusers) means that the possibility must be managed. When others venture their arousal at the rape, Embracers are brought into direct conflict particularly within the

open, and only responsively moderated forums. For those who have made an analysis whereby they are normal because they were horrified not aroused, and that the film is inherently not arousing in structure, these claims are highly problematic. The film is responsibly made, as proven by the fact that it has not corrupted the writer, thus evidence of others' arousal is often claimed as evidence of prior deviance.

Without wishing to preempt any other respondents, it sounds like what you're really after is a porn film, I wouldn't expect any titillation from *Irreversible* if I were you, unless you are some kind of sex offender. It's grim and nasty and supposed to be that way [AnchorBay - the13thman 30-05-2003 02:03 PM]

### **Sample Analysis of Message Board Threads from Jo Blo and IMDb**

Most of the argument about whether *Irreversible* is an acceptable and responsible piece of filmmaking hinges on the rape scene. Is it inherently arousing or inherently aversive? What effect does it have on the viewer, and how much of the cause of this effect can be located within textual evidence? What is the scene designed to *do*? Particularly within web forum discussion of the film, the possibility that the scene arouses some people is impossible to ignore, and so for those who Embrace the movie it becomes necessary to manage this in some way.

This analysis will focus on two threads. In the first, arousal is largely notable by its absence – it is 'held away'; with a few exceptions, the ways in which the accounts of the film are structured and phrased work to exclude the possibility. In the second the possibility of arousal in the early part of the scene is acknowledged, and then through an account of how the scene progresses, a number of writers suggest that the film works to deliberately move the male viewer beyond a natural arousal response. As the later discussion takes place within the IMDb message boards, this takes place against a wider message board backdrop containing many deliberately confrontational "gross" assertions of arousal, which position the absence of consent either as an irrelevance or a turn-on (e.g. "the rape scene is HOT", "up the bum, no harm done" "surprise sex" etc...).

The 'Gaspar Noë's *Irreversible*' thread on the JoBlo boards (a particularly masculine space) is opened without a firm expression of the posters' own opinion, only an invitation for views on any aspect, but one which specifically calls attention to a few topics: "the camera angles, the extreme nature, the disturbing nature, the rape scene, meaning...anything like that". From the outset this presents the possibility of making the connection between filmmaking technique, affective power and overall meaning. Over the course of a long (58-post) thread, various people move towards doing this. Initially the way in which the film shows the rape remains quite obscure, or focused at the level of content: "People criticize this rape scene, saying it's not necessary to have in the movie; however, rape isn't an uncommon thing and I feel showing it such as this way (so violent) gives us a taste of what it's really like." Another poster responds describing how the film held his "emotions hostage":

Problem is the gut wrenching part. There is no fucking way I could sit through "that scene" again. I just couldn't. But my hats off to the filmmakers for pushing the edge and doing it well.

Here the whole rape scene is held away through language, referred to only as “that scene”. The poster (male – on this site, sex declarations are usually explicit although, as always, not guaranteed reliable) acknowledges both its emotional impact and what this owes to the filmmaking skill, but the mechanics of that relationship remain closed to view; they seem self-explanatory.

Another poster draws out the elements that contributed to his sense of shock: “it went on forever and was SO brutal and nasty and hard to watch... yeesh...”. The combined focus on duration and brutality leave no space for the rape to be anything other than repulsive. A more elaborate version appears later in the thread:

Then “that” scene itself: A beautiful woman raped and beaten unconscious simply for being a beautiful woman, in the wrong place at the wrong time. It made me flinch throughout, feeling hatred for the perverted perpetrator, crying a river of tears for Alex. I felt so violated as I watched, obviously how Alex’s character herself would be feeling. A silhouette of a man in the background, walking in the other direction, not wanting to get involved when he sees what’s happening. Is that how we, the viewers, are meant to feel? To see a woman being abducted so brutally and not do anything about it, for fear of being powerless to stop such acts?

Here the scene invoked two emotions: a sense of co-violation recounted as the direct experience, and an awareness of the possibility of experiencing the scene as a powerless co-witness. The latter is interpreted as the preferred identification point being offered by the film/filmmaker. However, both of these positions, although unpleasant to experience, are relatively uncontroversial. They are both responsible responses, leaving no space for the possibility of arousal, and as a result it is not necessary for the poster to further explain the way in which they were made to feel them. The same is not true of another poster who is driven by his lack of an appropriately affected response, to explore the technique of the film in order to find an explanation, which will pre-emptively close down the potential accusation:

The most disturbing thing about this movie to me was my reaction to the rape scene. It didn’t do as much to me as I knew it should. I knew I was supposed to be horrified and hurting, but I wasn’t and it took me a while to figure out why that was. During the entire first third the camera is flying around, half the time you don’t know what you’re looking at, a guy’s head is beaten to pulp, everyone is frenetically screaming all the time and it literally makes you sick to your stomach. With the rape scene however the camera is steady for the first time of the film and the entire 9 minute rape scene is shown from a single unmoved perspective. When you want the camera to turn away, it doesn’t, and it shows the whole thing without ‘blinking’, but at the same time, the sickness leaves your stomach and you’re almost happy to be watching this.

The need to be able to understand, and justify one’s response becomes even stronger in situations where the sense of inappropriateness does not stem from a relative lack of emotion, but comes instead from experiencing sexual arousal.

In the IMDb Irreversible thread “Rape Fantasy” the thread opener boldly requests a serious (flame/troll free) engagement with the possibility of arousal in the sequence.

This follows a personal admission he had made in another *Irreversible* thread a few days earlier (“My male friend got shamed by this film..”):

I must admit that I have a somewhat sadistic streak in me and was initially aroused by the first 30 seconds of the rape. But then it just kept going. And going. By the end I just wanted it to stop. I wasn’t turned on, just horrified that I’d felt that way. This is exactly the way rape should be portrayed.

In the new thread he carefully lays out how he feels this transformation occurred:

I think that the genius of *Irreversible*’s rape is that at first it appears as a kind of rape fantasy with the camera swooshing around Bellucci in her very sexy dress before coming to rest totally leaving the rape fantasists with nothing left to find sexy. Just a poor woman, on the floor, in a great deal of pain and discomfort while they are forced to stay and watch for another few minutes.

He credits Noë both with deliberately playing up the eroticism, through casting and costume, and with destroying it “by using a totally edit free, movement free shot, from the male perspective; but from a voyeur’s point of view just in front.” In this way the viewer’s arousal is both accounted for, and closed down through the agency of the director. Other Posters interject briefly asserting only the arousal, and undermining the thread opener’s evaluation of Noë’s motives: “It sure turns me on. I think Noë may have gotten his kicks outta this kind of thing. We’re the same.” In other threads this tone wins out, but here the analysis continues. A new poster offers a version which includes what they see as the important absences from the scene:

By not moving the camera we endure the event with the character, the camera won’t flip to another shot of the pelvic thrusts or a close up of Monica Bellucci’s face. These would be seen as breaks from the sickening act. No we are not allowed a break, I think the shooting of this states ‘if you are going to watch this then be prepared to watch the evil nature of rape’.

This is followed by another assertion of arousal, although it is one actually which wishes for a slightly different scene: “This scene made the movie. I just didn’t like all that beating her up stuff. He could’ve just felt her up, etc. instead.” Crucially this poster asserts that the erotic aspect of rape lies in power, control and dominance – a direct counter to the oft repeated assertion the rape isn’t about sex, it’s about control and power. For this poster and others across the IMDb *Irreversible* boards (male and female) sex is about control and power.

Across these two threads there is a move to greater attention to the technical aspects of the filmmaking according to how disturbed the poster is by their own response to the rape scene (as opposed to how directly disturbed they were by the rape scene). Moreover, in the way the scene is recounted those seeking to exclude or move away from any potential eroticism, do so by emphasising the violence of the rape.

### **Citizen Reviews for *Irreversible*:**

This analysis is based on a selection of reviews for *Irreversible*, most of which were taken from the Epinions website, where these were particularly plentiful. Reviews tended to be particularly lengthy for this film, which we sense is the result of two things: (1) the strong public presence of the film and its relatively wide mainstream release; (2) a recognition that in certain conventional terms (cinematic qualities, unusual narrative structure) it calls for serious engagement. Unsurprisingly, a great deal of attention is paid in all reviews to the central rape scene, and also to the ‘opening’ revenge attack. The most common comparison, again unsurprisingly, is with *Memento*, seen as the obvious precursor to *Irreversible*’s adoption of a reverse narrative.

### **Embracing:**

The Embracing reviews very much take up a position of *championing* the film, not simply pronouncing on its qualities, but urging people to go and see it, and that its ‘message’ is an important one – that therefore there is a value, virtually, in undergoing the pain of watching the rape, because it must teach us something. (In this, it reminds us of the way in which religious reviewers recommended *The Passion of the Christ*.)

Among Embracing reviewers, there is a strong awareness of the shifting stylistics of the film and the consequences of this for viewers. Opening with shaky, disorienting camerawork, fast editing and loud music, the film progresses through the rape scene with its fixed-point camerawork, to the much smoother movements of the last third of the film. An important theme emerges from the way this is accounted for – “the viewer” (a figure on which we will have more to say) is the prime context for making sense of this feature, as in this account: “The film is wisely split into two halves. The first half, or the second depending on your point of view, is shaky and wobbly, filmed with a handheld camera almost to the point of making you sick. This is done, I believe, so that the viewer takes on the persona of the main characters. You become frantic and unsure, you think about nothing but the now, you are not even using your brain to think things out. You are not even thinking. The second half of the film, or the first, once again depending on your point of view, is still filmed with a handheld camera, but in long tracking shots that try and capture the personage of the characters, and who they really are.”

This sense of ‘the viewer’ as the key variable, whose relation to the events of the film shift as its style changes, also informs how Embracing reviews view the rape scene, as in this: “After the chaotic camera movement of the first part of the film, the camera takes on a static view during Alex’s rape. It takes on one position on the floor, looking at Alex as La Tenia rapes her, as she reaches out and grasps and stares helplessly. We take on the point of view of the impotent voyeur, we can only watch and are unable to act, only able to see Alex ravaged and destroyed by the vile Tenia.” This idea of the ‘impotent voyeur’ recurs in a number of Embracing reviews.

Embracing reviews tend to be aware of the charge of homophobia, provoked by the opening scenes in the sadomasochistic club ‘The Rectum’. Typically, they guard against this by insisting that it is “just a choice” to set the scenes there. If there is a way to thematise this, it is by reference to a “darker side to human sexuality” generally.

### **Ambivalent:**

If the Embracing reviewers positively champion the film, the Ambivalent reviewers advise strongly to prepare yourself before seeing it. A long quotation from one qualified review well captures this, and shows that again, in important fashion, a vision of ‘the viewer’ is in play: “Let me tell you right now, if you shuffled uncomfortably in your seat during the likes of *Straw Dogs*, then you’re sure to be downright nauseous during the sequence where Alex is anally raped by a stranger for nine uninterrupted minutes. I want to draw attention to this moment for the only and only reason to make it 100% clear that this is NOT A PLEASANT SCENE. At all. Though not nearly as explicit as the sex club murder, this sequence is far, far more hideous. Bellucci remains clothed and our attention is purely drawn to her face for the whole time, but the anguish visible there and her accompanying screams for and pleads for mercy – at times she even seems to reach out towards the camera in search of our help, which draws us into her torture even more – make for one of the most difficult experiences film audiences have had to sit through. So brutally horrific, but also disturbingly accurate, it’s a moment that will haunt members of the audience, regardless of their gender, for a long, long time.”

Ambivalent reviewers tend to report experiencing the film as too dominated by its cinematic devices, overwhelmed by the ‘cleverness’ of the reverse narrative, too stridently using features such as handheld camerawork (which produce, for them, an exaggerated and excessively uncomfortable physical response, getting in the way of any ‘message’ the film might be trying to convey (“I was distracted from the story”, as one puts it; another reports that despite all the stylistics “*Irreversible* actually possesses a storyline of truly basic proportions”). Along with this goes a feeling that the rape scene is simply too long for its purpose. One Ambivalent reviewer seeks to explain this by suggesting that Noë has bitten off more than he can chew – while it may be well-intentioned, the film is simply out of control (he has “saddled himself with a story he can’t complete” – a judgement that leads on to regarding the idyllic ending as too out-of-kilter with the rape-revenge theme of the first two thirds. So, by contrast with *Memento*, which used the reverse-narrative in ways which continually prompted a viewer to revise his/her views of what was going on, in *Irreversible* it is “linear, visually graphic, and ultimately hollow”. And its outcome is “actually ending on a soporily merry note”. It remains a *device* rather than an integral part of an achievement.

### **Refusing:**

Refusing reviewers are unusually long (on the other films, they tended to be shorter and more quickly dismissive). Here, there is a sense of outrage (“If I sound like I’m ready to vomit up rage, that’s because I’ve just finished watching *Irreversible*”). And comments focus in on the two violent scenes, to describe them as just too much, too long, and “just gut-wrenching” – with the implication that this is not a useful or productive reaction. “To its credit, this film aspires to more than the crass exhibition of violence. In fact, treating it in reverse has a tendency to undo the point of the revenge plot altogether, since the first part of a typical revenge plot is the ‘justification’ while the second is the ‘bloodbath’. To enjoy the bloodbath, the audience needs to be properly conditioned. Without that conditioning, the bloodbath turns out to be naked violence, full of ugliness.” It is striking how, again, a strongly-

articulated figure of ‘the viewer’ is called upon to warrant this conclusion. But the figure is different this time.

In some reviews, the dislike of the film is contextualised by levels of Francophobia – either political (look what the French have given the world, generally) or cinematic (the weird peculiarities of French cinema). But there is also a sense within the Refusing reviews of identifying a ‘weak spot’ in those who do like this film. They are seen as very male, and as responding with a typical male emotion, captured in this explanation of the prevalence of rape in revenge movies: “probably because no urge to violence is more romantic in the male mind than the defense of womanhood”.

## **2. The Questionnaire.**

In all, 405 people completed our questionnaire, of whom a quite high proportion (53.3%) met our criteria for Embracing. Women constituted 19.3% of the overall response population, and 16% of the Embracing population – an indication of a slight drift towards greater male approval. *Ichu* aside, this film attracts the highest level of claims of film knowledgeability. But the most striking thing about the overall population, however, is its age, with an above-expected concentration in the 26-35 age group, for both men and women. This population also has the highest rate of adoption (77.9%) of the ‘It depends on context’ response to our censorship question. Therefore looking at what ‘context’ means to *Irreversible* viewers becomes especially interesting.

### **The meanings of ‘context’ for Embracers and Refusers of *Irreversible*:**

This is a close analysis of the forms of argument and discursive moves of a comparative sample of Embracers and Refusers, within responses to the questionnaire. In each case a set of 50 responses was sought, gathering their answers to four questions. The four questions were:

1. What contribution in your view do the scenes of sexual violence make to this film as a whole?
2. In the UK, after a lot of discussion, the film was released uncut to both cinema and video. The central reason for this was that although the film contains such a long scene of rape, the Board considered that the scene was “not designed to titillate”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

The sets were generated as follows:

A: **Embracers:** sorting within the questionnaire by [1] answers to both the opening multiple choice measures of response (“*as a piece of film-making*” and “*ideas it was dealing with*”). This located 81 responses. Using a spare column, and Access’s ‘Sort Descending’ command, these were randomised, and the top 50 selected for analysis.

B: **Refusers:** sorting within the questionnaire again, use of [5] alone located only 4 responses, and even adding [4] answers did not significantly expand the set to allow me a matching dataset of 50. Therefore the group was extended to include [3] answers on both dimensions. This generated a group of 77. Thereafter the same procedure was followed..



## Analysis

### **Embracers.**

There were some clear and distinctive patterns among the Embracers. It was possible to identify one dominant core pattern of responses, and then two subsidiary ones – one of which, importantly, was regularly prefigured within the dominant pattern. In the dominant pattern, the film's showing of the rape is *welcomed* and *celebrated* for its exceptional qualities, in the following ways:

- a) The figure of Monica Bellucci adds something special and exceptional to the film and the scene. The fact that she is so famous, and so beautiful, makes the rape far worse. In many senses we might say that she causes it to rise above the level of being an *individual* being raped, and she becomes the very *idea* of a raped woman – beautiful and damaged, exceptionally deserving of better and thence suffering even more. She is herself an important contextual theme.
- b) The manner of the filming contributes in a very curious way. Its *position within the film* (midway in a reverse film, with the consequences (a brutal, ultra-violent revenge) already known, the scene *had* to be awful to provide a sufficient account for the brutality of the revenge. Its *manner of filming* is vital too. People write as though in some way it had become completely transparent – they talk of its 'realistic' nature, of its lack of 'special effects' – by which they mean, interestingly, the *lack* of any standard Hollywood emotional intensifiers. These in some sense *put us there*. We *have* to take sides. Yet there is at the same time a realisation that this is a *constructed effect*: we are *made* to respond in this 'gut-level' way. So, it is simultaneously real and constructed. This very quality allows the film to be *exceptional*, to *force a reaction* in the way that 'Hollywood films' never do. Through this, some say, it can even change you forever – at last experiencing what 'rape really is', and awakened to the fact that cinema can bring about this kind of transformation. One indicator of this is the *gratitude* which people evince towards the BBFC for allowing them to see this, because otherwise they would not have been changed in this way.
- c) This connects with a third part of the dominant view, which reflects in curious ways on the ways in which the rape scene is contextualised by the *structure* of the rest of the narrative. We sense a really curious complexity around the cause-effect relationships – captured in the sentence "just the one scene of violence triggers the events just seen". The narrative reversal plays on people's sense of causal relations, producing tensions around what is 'before' and what is 'after'.
- d) In the dominant mode, there is *almost always* an implied 'other', the person who is 'titillated', the one who is aroused by the scene. This is of course partly the result of thinking about the BBFC's position on this (provoked by the form of our question). But we don't think it is entirely so. It is also that this is a *possibility that must be acknowledged and held away*. Mostly, people express this 'othering' as the impossibility of imagining how someone could be titillated by the scene (it has been "designed" (interesting term) to ensure that you are not), yet somehow 'knowing' that there might be people out there who might be – and who therefore

define themselves as ‘sick’, ‘needing help’, etc. But some even express this in a way that acknowledges a doubled possibility: that the scene can ‘provoke’ in a way that is ‘uncomfortable’; that its real-time filming ‘gets to you’ in some ill-defined way. And a few directly say that they found it *simultaneously* arousing and horrifying. We proffer very tentatively this proposition: ***that it helps to have at least the experience of the possibility of arousal, in order to experience the horror of its uncontrolled expression.*** One interesting marker of this is the infrequency with which people talk about “I” in their discussions of this. Mostly they use the term ‘we’ or ‘you’, indicating that this is *positional* rather than personal. The only person we can find who uses “I” is the person who most explicitly says “I found it arousing but also horrifying”. (We note later, however, that in other parts of their answers there are *exceptional* uses of “I”, to describe the general impact of the film.)

The ‘other sides’ to this dominant view – in our sample, very much in a minority – are two-fold: first, a militant ‘gross’ view which celebrates the right to imagine the unimaginable and enjoy it; and second and quite differently, a class-based view which discerns a theme in the narrative within which the rape may be itself an *act of revenge*.

The **Gross** view is deliberately rude, dismissive of objections, short, and offensive – typified by “Ass-fucking is great”. It revels in being the ‘other’ that others tiptoe around.

The **Class** view challenges the idea that Bellucci constitutes beautiful/suffering woman. Here she becomes an *example of a kind of woman*, rather than ‘universal woman’: perhaps rich, perhaps provocative, therefore *putting herself at risk* – and the question of the side you are on is therefore more complicated. The world becomes a dangerous place for women, who need to be careful. And that means that in a different sense the film *might* be titillating, because we get inside the emotions of the threat/danger.

## Refusers

Because we did not manage to recruit a strong phalanx of people very opposed to *Irreversible*, the pattern of responses in our ‘Refusers’ group is decidedly mixed, but for all this are still revealing. So, for instance, there is evidently a strong strand among our Refusers who agree with the Embracers in saying, broadly “Take out this scene, and there is no film. It is so much the centre, and the point of the film that without it. It explains the boyfriend’s extreme revenge we’ve already seen. And its central position and manner of showing makes the rape wholly horrible, and therefore cannot possibly be titillating.” But even as they are broadly agreeing with this position, these respondents evince signs of other positions.

Criticism of the film comes in several forms:

- a) The scene is just ‘too long’. (There is a hesitation over whether to call it ‘too graphic’, since there is no nudity, fondling, or visible penetration.) This apparently obvious criticism is in fact quite complex. It is not centrally an aesthetic/artistic criticism (although it partly appears that way). Rather, it is in

terms of continual and unmanageable impact. It is simply *too hard to watch for so long* – because of (a) physical disturbance, (b) feeling like a voyeur – and these two are compatible. There are quite a few who acknowledge all the *purposes* of the scene, but still feel the need to say ‘too long’, because of its impact – for example, [50] wrote that “I don’t think it was designed to titillate but that isn’t a reason not to cut it”.. One response in particular shows the uncertain nature of this criticism: [12] wrote that “it could have been less or more brutal without hurting the movie”. Anything but the way it is ...

- b) A further step beyond this is to query the director’s intention. This takes a number of forms. One respondent tells a story he heard which partly led to him revising his first response (which was to approve the scene) – he ‘heard’ that the director gave Bellucci fake nipples to suggest she was aroused by the rape (he didn’t see them, but was led to wonder ...). *If* this were true, it would undo what he had decided was the point of the scene. Several deal with it by detaching the scene from the rest of the film, declaring that it was done “simply to shock”. The scene has its own distinct, separate purpose – and an unacceptable one. It was an “obvious ploy” to create controversy. What is interesting is the process of imputation, and the fact that this is seen as an ‘obvious’ point.
- c) Behind this lies a broader concept: ‘pure exploitation’. This recalls Janet Staiger’s discussion of this via Pauline Kael’s critique of *A Clockwork Orange*.<sup>16</sup> To call that film ‘pure exploitation’, argues Staiger, was to put it in the realm of the simply commercial – just made to make money, and thus outside the purview of the concept of ‘art’.
- d) Within this set of approaches, Bellucci ‘performs’ very differently. Those who mention her see her from a distance as an ‘extremely beautiful woman’ – and that is in some sense a problem, or a criticism – especially where [32, eg] this leads to a query about the film-maker’s intentions in using her. One [36] even imputes this to a “hatred of beauty and bitterness about it”.
- e) There is, also associated with this, an ‘art’ argument. Films of this kind are denied entry to the ontological category ‘art’, because ‘art’ is predefined as focused on ‘enlightenment’. Since this film does not – it only ‘shocks’ – it cannot be art.

We note that few of the answers are as elaborated as those of the Embracers. This could be because we have fewer committed Refusers. Or it could be, as we have found in other contexts, that a critical argument – often because it draws upon concepts experienced as ‘obvious’ – appears to need less elaboration and justification than a celebratory answer.

### **Overarching criteria:**

It is possible to identify some general differences and associated criteria separating the two groups:

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<sup>16</sup> Janet Staiger, The cultural productions of *A Clockwork Orange*, in her *Perverse Spectators*, NY: New York University Press, 2001.

1. Embracers see the Impact on Self as the primary context – the rape scene for the way it ‘hits the viewer’ – and this then explains and warrants the film’s structure. But the more a person moves toward a Refuser position, the more s/he detaches the rape scene from its filmic context and measures it against other criteria (artistic appropriateness, impact, ‘rightness’).
2. Embracers accept the film as a ‘given’, and engage with it as such. Refusers ask first what a film about sexual violence *should* be like, and measure the film against that template.
3. Embracers see Monica Bellucci as an accentuating feature, intensifying and focusing the significance of the rape. Refusers worry that she is being ‘used’, making the rape too special, or herself being too beautiful, to allow generalisation of the rape experience.

### 3. The Focus Groups.

Four focus groups were held with *Irreversible* viewers, two in London, and one each in Manchester and Edinburgh, with 6 women and 10 men. It is not accidental that it was easier to recruit men than women to these groups – this film (along with *Ichi*, but for different reasons) has more readily attracted enthusiastic male than female responses. *Irreversible* appears to viewers to set some serious challenges. These are not simply to do with the presence or even the length of the rape sequence, but with the ways in which it is felt that this film is a challenge to certain conceptions of masculinity.

We summarise these challenges under the following separated issues – although perhaps even more than with the other four films, in the case of *Irreversible* each component tends to be tightly bound with the others:

1. The issue of the narrative form and structure. The reverse narrative structure was commented on and discussed by almost everyone. Not well received by the Refusers, and hesitated over by the Ambivalents, it was a powerful force in the understanding and response of the Embracers. In their conversations with thus, they both reported, and undertook, imaginative exercises of trying out playing the scenes the right way round, and then thinking the difference made by the reverse telling. In particular, it appeared to add two things: a sense of horror at seeing the revenge before you know why it has happened – and realise that they may even have attacked the wrong person; and seeing the end, and knowing how ‘lost’ this beautiful scenario already is. It also coupled with an acute sense that different parts of the film use shifting cinematic devices.

Al (London – Embracer): “it was the start of the movie, well the *end*, the golden sunshine and the ideal-ness, that made the rest of the movie so horrifying.”

Ross (Edinburgh – Embracer) on the logic of the film’s backwards narrative: “I know when myself and my friends were talking about it, you know, three of us were at the pub and we were talking about it, and we did talk about it, like you said, in the chronological order. And it wasn’t until my friend Stephen turned round and says, and he’s actually said the same thing to me, and well why did we do that? And I’m like well I don’t know, it just, it made more sense to talk about it that way now, rather than saying the start of the film, and the end of the film, and we found ourselves, and we

just got into it... um, but I don't know. I don't know why we did that actually, it was quite odd. In a kind of logical sense, it makes sense to talk about the film chronologically, but certainly in gut reaction terms, I still think about the film as being told backwards, deliberately. Deliberately told backwards, and in the resonance of the ending beginning."

Stephen (London – Embracer): "I just thought, it's a really unique structure with the film, to start by plunging into this, this nightmare of hellish violent crisis and then spooling back to this beautiful, peaceful ... it's like an aftermath, but the aftermath is beforehand. I just think that's a brilliant way to unsettle your normal expectations of happiness and crisis and resolution. And the resolution was, that 'time destroys everything' ... I'm left thinking why has no-one done that so powerfully before? It seems obvious now. And that's the *first* time I'd seen it really. I saw *Memento* which spooled backwards but it's the first time I'd seen it done with such intent about taking like you say, a quite content middle-class couple and plunging them into this life-changing moment."

Ross (Edinburgh – Embracer): "the things that were disturbing me would be the scenes of extreme violence in it, definitely. The two standout scenes, the one at the club at the start and the rape scene. Um, again, definitely the nauseous feeling throughout, ...the camera constantly spinning, constantly moving, the, the monotonous, kind of drone, over and over again, erm, definitely, especially in the club scene, because it was, the volume was enhanced so much, because it was in a club, erm, definitely, that stuck in my mind, and I mean, the rape scene for completely different reasons. The complete opposite, in that the, the camera was completely static and unmoving, and ... from what I recall, no ... there's no score at all..."

William (London – Embracer): "I erm (coughs) I was also thinking about that, you know the contrast and erm this narrative structure which was very striking, this sort of *reversed*... erm... sort of telling of the story, and I was thinking about it... now because since then I've seen one other film which was similar that, er is on ssss, erm, I think you'll say...which also started with a rape and had quite an idyllic ending. Erm, but which was a very different sort of film. And one of the *main* differences I thought was that with this, this erm *Irreversible*, erm, the way which the sequences were separated it always, it felt quite *violent* every time it sort of erm *jumped* to another... er, it made sort of a jump to another chronological bit, it felt like you were continually *jerked*. Erm, and I thought that was very effective, it sort of had a very, erm, it sort of had a very sort of alienating effect to it. Erm, and that's not something I've had in many films I've seen, and I thought that actually, erm, went very well with this whole idea of people who have such a... erm... er, sort of comfortable, sort of quite... middle-class life and then they're sort of *jerked* out of their sense of.. complacency really, and their lives changed completely, in a very unpleasant way. I thought that was.. very effective."

Stuart (London – Embracer): "I like the way that it's reasonably experimental, coz I mean it has, it's umm, with the moving camera work, and then it has the shots where, like the main things happen, like umm, the scene with the fire extinguisher and the scene with the rape, where it's like perfectly like stationary, and they've kind of like contrasting like camera.. it's just sort of really good. And I also like the way the scenes run backwards, because er, not enough films play around with things like that,

and not enough films play around with narrative and all that sort of thing – which is a shame coz they should. (Laughs) Coz it's like umm, you get all the action at the beginning and it's like a reverse, umm, of oh when's this gonna happen when's this gonna happen when's this gonna happen, coz umm, they kind of like tease you and say 'Oh, it's gonna happen here,' but it doesn't, and then 'Oh, it could happen here,' but it doesn't kind of thing, so it's kind of a reverse which works just as well, but people assume it wont coz you already know what's happened, but you don't know when it happens, which is the trick."

Leanne (London – cautious Embracer): "I also like it because it's quite different, and (pause) because it.. well like [indistinct] exploitation films often they're just for violence but it is.. it's got like other things underneath it like, err, breakdown of a relationship and like the revenge, how we see it from a different perspective. And I liked how it does it with that because of the reversal, uhh because it's not just played for the violence, it's got like other issues going on and umm, violent films often are just about like the violence... So, like I like that bit about it."

Nick (Manchester – Embracer): "I think that's really central to what he tries to do in the film though, cause in a 'normal' film where you get...erm...the rapist punished, and you get pleasure from that cause you see, you know, some sort of cruel rapist getting his head [pumped?] in, or shot, you know he gets his just desserts at the end, and you don't get it in this film. Even when someone is, does get his head caved in, it's not the right person, you know the Vincent Cassel character goes to, there are two men there and he goes to the wrong one. You don't get that pleasure, and the fact that it's done backwards as well...if it had been done in a straight narrative way, you'd get, you know, horrible rape, then you can follow the hero dish the justice out to the rapist, and you don't get that. He deliberately denies that sort of pleasure to the audience..."

Eleri (London – Ambivalent) self-consciously registering the techniques that 'hit' her: "I remember the beginning and the end bits, the contrast between the opening, you know going into the Rectum club and all that sort of chaotic camerawork, and the noise and things."

Hannah (Manchester – Embracer) "It's interesting that the music is ... watching from the DVD, that's the music that goes on whilst you've got the credits on the screen and I was messing around trying to find various remotes and stuff, and it was *really* getting to me, (various other, what sound like chuckles of agreement) and it was starting to make me feel a bit sick before it even started, and then when the guy gets his, his head bludgeoned-in so viciously, that was making me feel a bit queasy, and I'm not kind of easily, sort of nauseated by things so, although there were two *horrendous* scenes in it, they're not the things that stuck with me, and I think it's because it does go backwards, you sort of get shocked by those at the start, and then you're given time to recover yourself, and the thing that I was really struck by, and I don't know if it's because they're just superb actors or whether they were together in real life at the time, was the, the *beautiful relationship* portrayal that they had whilst they were just being *so* easy with each other in the room. And I know it's not like completely integral to the story, and it's not the bit that censors will be bothered about, but *that* was the bit that really stuck with me, I don't think I'd seen a portrayal of a, a *natural* relationship like that on screen before, and I was just really glad that

we were kind of given the chance to *see* that, so in a way, well it didn't obviously lessen the impact of the things that had gone before it, it gave *them* more pathos because you were like, you've just destroyed something beautiful, but, erm, that was, that was what's really stuck with me." Again the fluid movement across a range of responses: from the disturbing music, through the 'obvious' horror of the two most violent scenes, to the way in which the narrative structure impels her particularly to remember something quite different: the real intimacy (accentuated even further for Andrew by the external reality of the actors' relationship) 'about to be' destroyed.

Ross (Glasgow – Embracer) "I would say that the consensual sex scenes at the end of the film are ... they do, on one hand provoke arousing elements, they are erm, your more standard sex scenes, and they do seem genuine, there's an air of genuineness to them, possibly because they are a couple in real life, erm, that it comes across as quite real and quite natural, and it's fun, like, they're having fun and they're laughing and joking and there's a real loving nature to it, which I think is, I think, it, it's good to see a sex scene reflected like that in cinema, it's not all glossy and by the fireside, and your standard sex scene, and it does have your more arousing elements, but it's difficult to feel aroused watching it, knowing what happens to the characters. So that's kind of troubling, in terms of watching it as a film, because, if it was told in chronological order, I think you would think that's a loving sex scene, it's... it's a good scene and it's really happy to watch, but it, where it comes in the narrative, in the time frame of the film, the way it plays out, it doesn't have those elements which it normally would have, I would say." (Rhona "I think it's more poignant, almost, that this is what they had, and you don't see that happening again...") "but, that takes away from the ... the more arousing elements of it..." Ross reflects on the way the reverse structure undermines standard emotional, indeed sensuous responses to what is shown.

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces Irreversible, the more likely they are to experience a dovetailing between narrative form and structure, the contribution of cinematic components such as sound, camerawork and editing, and the resultant filmic message, to constitute a warning to the viewer to look at his/her own life.*

2. The issue of the central rape scene. What is the purpose of the unbroken length of the rape scene? What is the nature of the demand it is making of the audience? Inevitably this became one of the major topics of talk in all the focus groups. To the Refusers it was simply unnecessarily long and insistent – why would anybody need to watch something so awful for so long? To Embracers, the scene's length was its exact point. If *we* could only just survive it, we could know just how impossibly awful it would be for a woman. But also the manner of its showing to us proved vitally important to the Embracers.

(Alex, Edinburgh – Embracer): "it needed to be something that brutal, and it needed to be shown, to, to, one, as a shock value, and two, just to make you think..."

(Al, London – initially Ambivalent): "For me the, the sexual violence against a woman was just, ah, it's hard to say the best rape scene in a film but probably the *only* rape scene that I've left thinking about, really, *genuinely* thinking about. Most rape scenes that are, it seems, hampered by all the rules about how you do a rape scene and

that one didn't seem to accept those rules. Now prob- it was too long in dramatic terms but for me it was *just right* because I felt completely, you know the end of that scene couldn't happen soon enough. So, the end of that scene is such a, thank *Christ* that's ended. So maybe the length just adds to that, in fact."

(Rhona, Edinburgh – Embracer): "what was interesting I thought was in the rape scene, particularly, the camera was completely static, it doesn't zoom in, it doesn't zoom out, just stays there. It doesn't spin round, it doesn't do any of the stuff he does through almost the whole of the rest of the film, it's just completely on it, so it forces you to just completely, to have your gaze completely on this scene the whole time...."

(Martin, Manchester – Embracer) on the length and character of the rape scene: "If you made it any shorter, um, er, erm, I would see no point in watching the film at all actually. I don't want it any longer either, but who knows? Maybe if I'd watched it and it was twelve minutes long then I would be sitting here saying 'you couldn't cut a moment'. And it would negate the whole, (stutters), I have no idea, I'm *really* glad it isn't, but I might be saying that. It, it, ma, matters *hugely* that it's looong. What long means, I don't know. It matters hugely at the same time that it's a *single* camera shot, that is *completely* unblinking, that nothing you can do about it. It's not that it's just not cut.. but there's no movement, there's nothing, and there's no soundtrack, no, nothing, nothing, that isn't part diegesis, it's... it's as *real*, and that is very much an in inverted commas to. It's not, it's not, neo-realist, it's nothing like that, it's not stylised, it's just... you almost feel that if you'd left your own camcorder lying on the floor by accident, and you came back and picked it up, you, you'd have that on tape. And I'm sure that's partly to do with the acting as well, but it's, that's, that's what makes it, I mean and it's terrible to say, both unwatchable, *and* impossible not to watch." The doubled reaction indicated in the final sentence was very common.

(David, Manchester – Embracer) measures the length of the rape by necessity, but adds an extra: "I think I'm..., certainly, the, the opening murder sequence, I mean, not just the fact that it, it's a brutal murder, it's kind of the way it's done and when the camera is swirling, almost gives the impression really that you've actually been walloped in the face by this fire extinguisher as well, and you just spinning out and out of control, and out and out of focus. And, I think, I also remember vividly the credits, 'cause they go backwards don't they, we start at the end and, and that was just so unusual, that stuck in my mind. With the rape sequence, it is a case of, you want it to end but I'm *glad* there was no cuts in it, I think the minute you start cutting a sequence like that, you almost make it *less* powerful, um, because you cut something and you don't have that limit of time, I think the fact that it's a *long* sequence without cuts is really important. I also think that the most shocking thing about the rape sequence was when the men rolls off her and you get a glimpse of his erection. 'Cause at that point it's a case of, somebody has been enjoying, you know, something that is, which is just so horrible. And that kind of .. made me gasp a bit, cause you're not used to seeing that kind of, you know, someone's actually taking pleasure out of rape. I have to say, it was a brave thing to do, and I'm glad it's there, because it made the entire scene all the more horrifying for me."

Al (London – initially Ambivalent) on sound: "And you see the really graphic rape scene and for me the, the disturbing thing about it is not the inference of what he was doing, but what he was saying? Yeah, and him *grunting* all the time."



*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces Irreversible, the more likely they are to experience the rape scene in the following distinctive ways – as needing to be too long, such that we will be “tenderised” by it; as simultaneously unwatchable and needing to be watched, as unbearably voyeuristic and a proof of our helplessness to intervene.*

3. The issue of masculinity. How are men shown in the film, and how this does relate to the ways male audiences are conceived and commanded by the film? On this point there was considerable unity among all three groups. Men, even the men who are with Alex, are presented as dangerous, and animalistic. The difference between Embracers and others is that Embracers welcomed the challenge of this image – and particularly male Embracers report powerful feelings of challenge, and guilt, at realising these tendencies in themselves.

Andrew (Manchester - Embracer) “I think that’s *really* interesting cause from a male point of view by the-before she actually goes in the tunnel, you’re kind of watching the bum going, you’re like that’s really good and then you feel *guilty* as hell as a male, because there’s that thing of arousal as it starts up, I think, because you’ve watched her go into the tunnel. And that’s being *really* honest (chuckles uneasily). Um, But it’s the sense that it’s, kind of the *shock*. But I think the – and that was the thing, that they were objectifying Monica Bellucci from the party onwards to that point...” On the ambivalence of attraction and arousal, and being made guiltily conscious of his maleness.

Stephen (London – Embracer) on the issue of Alex’s sexiness – he’s aware of *his* positioning, different from the rapist’s: “... he doesn’t follow her to look at the shimmering dress either, it’s the *audience* that get shown the beautiful back and the lovely hair and the perfect dress. So it’s like the *audience* are the voyeurs. The *rapist* never gets that lovely tracking shot ... So you’re right, the rapist isn’t spurred on by the beauty of the dress and the hair and the back. The rapist is just there waiting to rape, you know. ... It’s *us* who get that. Which is kind of weird.”

“I find Monica Bellucci very attractive, and again, I think she’s a fantastic actress. I’d seen a lot of her films before, but in the lead-up to the rape scene, I couldn’t find it, erm, even though it was following her from behind, I couldn’t find it attractive, because there was this foreboding in my mind, because I knew what was about to happen, that ... I almost felt that I couldn’t, I couldn’t even think about that, because I was thinking, I know what’s about to come...” (Alex, Edinburgh - Embracer)

Ross on how and why rape does something to a man: “I mean, yeah, the rape scene is obviously the lynch pin that holds the film together and I was just thinking, would it be the same film if they had cut down the rape scene to make it just she gets beaten up, and then most severely beaten in this subway. I think what the, to my mind, what the rape represents, is this, the loss of masculinity, I mean, the, for the male I think the fact that his girlfriend, the mother of his unborn child has been raped, is, is kind of seen as more of a violation it’s a much stronger violation that if she had just been beaten up, which, which could ha just been a kind of random attack, I mean, it was just a random attack, I don’t know the way to put it, but it, it wasn’t, she wasn’t just beaten up and had her purse stolen, or what have you, there was something much

more important taken away from her, if you will and I think that's what the rape scene, that's why it holds the film together, because it, it provokes, provokes presumably a different reaction in Marcus that if she had just been beaten up and mugged..."

Alex (Edinburgh – Embracer) on recognising a possible version of himself in the film: "I personally know a lot of guys that would. (laughs) I know myself, that at that moment in time, at that very, at that very moment, when you've seen this person, that you love, blah, blah, and, and mother of your child to be, whatever. If somebody gave you that, that out, to say, you can have revenge on that person, that's done that to that person, I know, at that moment of weakness, I would probably turn round and say lets do it! I'd like to cause as much pain as possible to the person that has just done this. And that, again, that's as a man, that's where that comes from. Cause it is a, it's about that violent reaction to a thing - that's how men generally deal with these things. You know we're ... that's what we are!"

(Stephen, London – Embracer) on male shame: "I guess the gendered thing is to see a woman is pregnant, lying in the park, in that contentment before the men ruin it with their rage. Erm, there's definitely a gendered thing, for me watching that. I felt *ashamed* for men, seeing that film kind of ashamed for the partner, and obviously ashamed for the rapist, so there *probably* is, I'm seeing it as a man, and feeling ashamed for them and looking at that at the end and thinking, that's a relief, the male violence may have ruined it but for a time ... this woman was happy."

On becoming 'animal', Rhona (Edinburgh – Embracer): "what I think is the most interesting about that part, is that he is the person who ends up just doing this act of unspeakable violence – he doesn't just hit him once, he hits him, so it's like something, the floodgates have opened and just all this, this, all this repressed, and I think it kind of, when you go, when you go back to the end of the film and he's having that whole thing about he can't make her orgasm and all that conversation on the tube, and erm, and that bit, and you think that this is all, that he's obviously got all this pent up rage, and he can't express it, and suddenly it just all shwoom, comes out, whereas Marcus seems like somebody who much more just acts on instincts, so he doesn't really bottle things up, he just like, I feel this so I'm going to punch you now, or I'm gonna have sex with you now, or I'm gonna whatever, he seems much freer, which is presumably why Pierre thinks she's going off with him, because he's more animalistic (said in lowered voice), and it's mentioned quite a few times."

(Stephen): "I actually felt physically sick during the club sequence. I thought, I may vomit, I felt so kind of induced to be stressed and tense and.. the camera was flying around so much. And the music was so kind of insidious and insistent and merciless. And I think that whole sequence was brilliantly done. Really visceral response I got from that, that's kind of unlike any film I've seen. And then the rape scene where again a real physical.. jangling there of some, so a visceral experience, but then flattened out and it kind of just a dreadful, monotonous, this is horrific, I'll admit to finding certain scenes quite sexy. There's some scenes I think that are designed to make the party for example, some of those scenes I think are shot for me as a straight man watching. ... But there's definitely a gaze at Monica that's probably designed to be quite arousing to people. Erm, and I won't deny it, she's really beautiful and the

dress, like we've said so there *are* elements of sexiness in the film ... so, as I say there, there maybe that's to make me feel complicit in what happened after."

(Rhona, Edinburgh – Embracer) imagines a male response: "from the moment she gets in the ambulance, she's just not, she's barely given a thought! It's all just like oh, must get this evil person, who's done this. I find this all very extraordinary, that was what was my, and again, watching it the second time, because I knew, because I had seen it before, I was more, kind of, this is ridiculous, go to the hospital, my gosh! (laughing) but, but I guess the whole, I mean, I guess I can see that from a male perspective, but I can't, I can't feel it. Because it is not something that I would think of doing."

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces Irreversible, the more likely they are to probe certain discourses around masculinity – simultaneously as represented in the film, and as provoked in the viewer 'himself'.*

4. The issue of femininity. What image is created of 'womanhood' and its values by the film? For Refusers, but most especially for Ambivalents, the figure of Alex is unbearably 'sweet'. For Embracers, she embodies a kind of ideal – capable of being free, perfect, beautiful, and still safe (except for male animality). She embodies values for everyone. And for many male viewers in particular, Bellucci's beauty, her perfection and star qualities, multiplied this sense.

Alex on the force of the twist: "You know, I think that the other scene that would stick in my memory the most would be the very final scene, or scenes. Because you are left with this happy ending, (Rhona: yes, yes!) which is, is sort of placed knowing that, that foreshadowing what's to come, and it's all the more, it sticks in the memory all the more because it comes right at the end of the film and it's this scene of bliss, kind of, she's lying on the, the grass reading her book, everything's happy, there's children running around..." ("And she's pregnant..." (Rhona)) "and she's pregnant, yeah, and you're knowing what's ... what's going to happen to those characters..."

Compare: Rachel (Manchester – Ambivalent): "I'd find it harder to...um...to sort of put the *emotions*, rather than the analysis, I would say that, I mean, it, it is a good film. I think that he slips into oversentiment, too much sentiment for certain scenes. I would, I *wish* she wasn't pregnant, it's just too much for me to just say, 'oh yeah, she's had this horrendous experience, she's in a coma, will she live, oh – and there's a *baby*' It's just a bit, *that* was just a bit too much as well... Err, it's, it's as if he's *really* tugging, *really* manipulative, the film *is* manipulative, and that's one of its strengths, but I think for that bit, you couldn't possibly get anymore clichéd than a woman, who's been murdered, and *raped*, and, *just* found out she's pregnant, probably not even had chance to tell the man, I mean he might not even know, and I just think that's over-egging it a bit."

This contrasts with Hannah's (Embracing) "Also adding to the whole, 'oh god, isn't it tragic, this has happened to those two people', the transformation of Marcus, because when you see him in the first few scenes, he's a *nutter*, and you think 'I'm not sure I can cope with much more of him being an eejit, then you see, you see him putting up with the other guy talking about having, err, shagged his girlfriend on the train, s'going like 'aha', ... then you see how, just beautiful he is when they're in a

couple on their own and again that adds to the whole...perfect dream thing that's just blown apart, and it makes it worse than it might have been."

William (London – Embracer) presenting the beginnings of a class reading: "I was just thinking that in this film there's a lot of conflict, and aggression right through. And I mean, it's not just all about sexual violence, it's also about social conflict and about class, and about, this is a beautiful dress, the successful couple, all these things. This murky underworld, and there are lots of conflicts all, all the way through. And erm, there's a lot of rage everywhere in the film, but all the men get to discharge it in this very physical sort of way. Whereas the woman is the only character who doesn't get to discharge any of this aggression. And I do think there is something about, you know, sort of automatically makes.. erm, you know, there's something that you know, sort of makes it almost impossible for a woman to *express*, well in this film."

(Andrew, Manchester – Embracer) "without question the nine minutes are something that is gonna be, [intake of breath, slight laugh] um, cauterised on my eyeballs for quite some time. I think it was .. absolutely horrific. Erm, I think, but, I think the sort of, more so actually the scenes of her walking and just being by herself and not having any male presence, I find that quite powerful, and again that resonated. Because I think with it opening in err, The Rectum, err, nightclub, that there's this very, err (slight pause) sweat-soaked world, essentially. And then as you roll on in the film, it's very rare that you get her without the Vincent Cassell character, I think he was called Marcus, or the guy that's the friend that's trying to err ingratiate himself with her, so when she's actually walking, it's almost like she has a freedom, and that freedom is taken away in the tunnel to a certain degree, and I think it's just one of those things in the choice of... well, it's the power of choice of costume, and setting, but also, err, this sense that, it probably could have done more to the actress herself because there's also a thing of, um, the attraction of Monica Bellucci, but also that's, there's this very serious screen presence and I *wish* I saw it in the cinema to see that, erm, because it certainly came through on DVD." The interweaving of elements here – the debate over her right to wear what she chooses, the issue of her relations with her two male friends, the nature of the masculinity on display, Bellucci herself as a screen presence, and thus the theft of her 'freedom': these capture themes that many others share in.

Stephen: "I think for me the film is so complicated that I don't really identify with *any* of them, to be honest. I identify with *myself* in the audience, thinking *Jesus*... What an *intense* experience. But.. the *man*, the partner was compromised for me. The woman, I guess was *blank*. You don't really learn that much about the woman."

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces Irreversible, the more likely they are to perceive Alex as primarily a 'figure', symbolising a lost idyllic possibility.*

5. Bellucci's beauty, and the issue of gay men. To quite a number of critics of the film expressed at least discomfort at the film's presentation of gay men – both the gay pimp who rapes Alex, and the sex scenes at the Rectum club. Was this simply an intrusion of homophobia? Was the implication that gay men are sexually insatiable, and therefore dangerous *per se*? Responses from Embracers in our focus groups suggest that they say this aspect differently.

Eleri and Stephen (London – both Embracers):

- Eleri: Going onto the way (coughs) excuse me, the way it's lit and, and the colour of the dress in some scenes, including some of the party scenes I think, it almost looks like she's got nothing on.
- Stephen: Yeah.
- Eleri: And you're kind of looking and think, you know, what, oh it's the way the.. lighting sort of comes off it as well.
- Stephen: She's...
- Eleri: ...that's quite interesting.
- Stephen: She's definitely made for you to look at in those, in this dress and in those scenes, but I don't know how much it's... what's it doing to the rape? I dunno, because when the rape starts, none of that's really relevant. The dress, you can't see it. You can't see how, how.. she looks because she's on the floor and her face is in the camera. So, I'm, I'm not sure how much impact it has on me... it's not like he stalks her because she looks beautiful. He f- she stumbles into the alley and finds him.

Here, La Tenia's assault on her is understood as almost accidental – and this can increase *our* guilt, in being the ones who know what will happen.

A general discussion at the Manchester group:

- Hannah: You also saw... a logistical aspect of it as well because you know that he fancies blokes anyway, and he had difficulty getting himself started, and then because it was tight, he couldn't do it, and you just sort of see the practicalities of him getting on with it, rather than: oh, I really want this woman cause I'm sexually charged for it, cause you know he doesn't really like women, it's a punishment.
- Andrew: Also the sadistic element that we see at the beginning, it's very similar actually, which basically turns the whole film into a sado-masochistic .. environment. But I would say that it's more sadistic, than it is masochistic.
- Mel: So are we back to question five?...
- Dave: ...But isn't that about what [he/we/people] find[s] sexual? ...
- Charlotte?? ...Yeah, i-i-is (female voice)...
- Dave: The *power* of it. That's what I mean...
- ?? Yeah (female voice)
- ?? Yes! (female voice)
- Andrew: [indist – agreement]
- Dave: he actually finds the sexual power of it, turns it into a sexual thing.

The group returns to the topic a little later:

- Martin: And actually I'm not sure it matters who she is at all, cause I, I, I can't, I can't quite .. remember, but it's almost as if someone else had been standing there.
- Rachel: There was someone there though, he [casts?] her aside... (another female voice in agreement)

Martin: ...yeah absolutely, but that's, but that, but th, that, that's kind of done and he's like, he seems to be vaguely pleased that he gets to-to rape someone of this sort. But *actually* (high tone emphasis, rest of phrase articulated in a measured way for emphasis), if there'd been someone else there, they might well have done as well.

The Edinburgh group addressed the issue at some length:

Rhona: You could make the argument that if they'd used a plain actress, and she'd been dressed, you know, in a polo neck up to here, would that not have happened, is that we're saying... cause that's just the kind of thing that pisses me off. [she and Ross laugh] .. and I can see ... you know kind of like, maybe if she had been wearing something very covered up, and she'd been plain, would he not have attacked her? Would that not have happened, would he have just let her go on her way? Is that what we're saying, because Monica Bellucci is beautiful? And scantily clad? Then obviously....you know, whatever happens is fine? But I think what's clever about the scene is that ... his hand is over her face, most of her face, for most of the time, so you can't really, you're not like, focusing on, .. or look at that beautiful face, or... and I think part of that must, is, is not, is the fact that it's not just [lidoush?] .. you can't really see her. And she's trying to,... You're just aware of her struggle to try and scream, or try and say something, but you can't see her face, so she's very much an object to this person, and that's very much the ... feeling I had, watching it – she's nothing to him, she's completely meaningless, he, it's just he is just exacting this, and it's an anal rape, and he tells her that, and so, you know, it's hideous, it's even more hideous and ... you can't really see her. You can hear her reaction, and you can see her struggling, but you don't really see the face. You know, so I think that...

Mel: Hmm, I mean, how does that work as Monica Bellucci, you know, male Monica Bellucci fans, in terms of the way in which she appears in the rape, you know, the ...?

Alex: [sighs] er, it's difficult...

Ross: you completely, well certainly, I didn't think of her, her attractiveness at all throughout the rape scene...

Alex: ... it's more... [indist] ...under it, it's more you completely identify with, you know, this is going to sound so base, but, you don't think of her as Monica Bellucci the famous star, who looks gorgeous whenever you see her on the red carpet, you just feel like this poor woman, who is being horrifically raped, and that, that's almost ... [indist] ... for the edge, you know, it's no longer Monica Bellucci, and that's what it is, .... Aye, that's it, you just ... you're just shocked. You know....

Ross: I agree with that 100%, yes...

Alex: ... it's got nothing to do with ... it wouldn't have mattered, like you say, it wouldn't have mattered if it had been Monica Bellucci or could have been anyone else, even if she was wearing a polo neck or you know, dressed in a carpet, or something, it wouldn't have mattered, you know, cause you just identify with the character, I mean you just can't believe it's happened.

*We propose the following generalisation: that the more a person Embraces the film, the more they are likely to consider La Tenia's homosexuality as an indicator that at*

*the point of the rape Alex is detached from her 'star' beauty and qualities, and becomes 'any woman' – it is not her beauty that has caused her to be raped.*

6. The centrality of Impact on Self, leading to a problem of repeat-viewing. What can be and should be gained by seeing the film more than once? For Embracers, this film is in an almost unique category – it has to be experienced, rather than watched. Its job is to change us. But having been changed by the horrific experience, then to return to it is a problem. And for that reason, the question of whether, how and why one might watch it more than once is quite problematic.

Ross (Glasgow – Embracer): “I want the film to provoke this reaction in me”. In this one-line quotation we see, not just a reference to what the film *did*, but what it should *continue doing*. But to rewatch such a gruelling rape scene puts a viewer’s self-perception at risk, as in the following exchanges:

Roger (London – Embracer) on the impossibility of separating the emotional and the cognitive: “Well I suppose my personal feelings is to do with this idea of revenge, what happens when, it’s about cause and effect and all that, and I think that has an emotional charge and then you can look back at the film and say yes it’s well done, I don’t really know how to how to divide the two things up, really...”

Andrew (Manchester – Embracer), on the *shocking immediacy* of this film compared to most, and his welcoming of that: “with sort of training in film, and working in film, I’m, I’ve got the curse of sitting there and as soon as a film opens, going ‘that’s wrong, that’s good, that’s wrong, that’s good, where’s this going, what’s going on with this’ and it’s the first film I didn’t do it with. And that *shocked* me because I expected it because of the technicality of it, that I *would* do it, but I think Charlotte kind of nailed it. It’s almost, it sounds slightly... blasé but it’s almost like, it inhabited your skin, and took a walk round, and then .. bugged off at the end. That’s how I felt about it, is a fact that it, er, just... it’s as if my eyes were *truly* drinking it in, and it was reverberating, and then went, and sort of got expelled again, but left something, and I think it is a fact that...in its *simplicity*, it makes you question and think about love, (quickly) it almost shakes you out of apathy, in effect. I think with, erm, film making in general, we’re getting sick of being manipulated, and with this it felt that...it appealed to me, as an adult and as an intellectual. And it didn’t try and sort of, be a kind of parent, or a kind of...talking down to you in any way, it was kind of like this is what I’m gonna be, but the sense that it kind of ... lived separate from...erm...it’s kind of what Martin’s saying, the fact that... that there’s an intangibility to it, because it’s...you can take off a thing of how well it’s made and the music, and the acting, and things like that, but there’s something else in there. And without sort of *really* studying it, I cannot find what that is. And I don’t want to study it.”

Martin and Nick (Manchester – Embracers) considering the soundscape at the start of the film: Martin “The other thing I wanted to say though, just because you talked about the disorientating fact of the opening, and it’s just ‘cause (exhales), already I think we’re only focusing on, on, the visual, um, the musical effect of the opening is *unfeasibly* powerful. [...]” Nick: “I think I’ve forgotten all about that... [...] I’d forgotten about that, being in the scene, that the sound had... until you just mentioned it now, I’d completely forgotten about that. I was just thinking about the narrative,

when I came to do the questionnaire. I'd completely forgotten about it. Now that you say it, I can remember *that*, and that's, or from memory it was just like two alternating notes. And err I can remember that was sort of part of, it was like you, as well as the characters bludgeoning each other, you felt like you were being bludgeoned in the cinema, by that sound." The music is measured for the depth of its physical effects.

David and Andrew (Manchester – Embracers) on the rape scene: David: "I think, I mean, I feel quite opposite with a lot of it, I think the rape scene, the longer it went on, the more uncomfortable I was with it. But I don't think that was a bad thing, I think that was a *really* good thing and I think it really made me appreciate the film a lot more. And, yeah it might be a bloody-mindedness sort of thing to say: yeah, I'm gonna show you something, but .. I admire a filmmaker that does that, that does something different. And I think that...even though the opening sequence is very violent, that the length of the rape scene still really stands out for me, and one of the reasons why I think I haven't seen it again, is because I know the rape scene is *long*. I know it's an endurance, but it would be a *crime* to fast-forward. It's that *long endurance* that-that...even if not, of just happening, something to look at, it's just, all of a sudden you're in real time, and things, when you're waiting for something to end, time seems longer. To me that rape scene's..." (Andrew: ... you have to endure it, but it's hard...) David: "...an essential part. Yeah, it..." (Andrew: "...you have to go through it...") David: "...I just find it really, really difficult to sit through. But I know I have to."

Charlotte (Manchester – Embracer): "Erm, and then, after that, I mean the rape scene, it was pretty horrendous, but it wasn't, it wasn't actually *that* that upset me, it was, cause the film went on, and then got to the end, and I really remembered the scene where they're in bed because it is really intimate and lovely, and it was at that point that I started to feel sick, at that point, because you obviously know what happens. Erm, and the other bit I can remember when she's sat on the toilet doing the pregnancy test, and again, horrendous, just I think at that point, just the whole thing of, I don't know if it's a female thing, just things about bodies, and... internal, and intimate, internal things and intimacy, and just that is *so* in your face at the beginning, and just. Afterwards, when I watched it again, I realised that a lot of it's really symbolic about all that kind of thing. But I think the first time I watched it, it was just this kind of horror [upward inflection], you know. I actually did this thing where I was thinking about it too much in bed, and I had to create a little... right, 'I'm-not-thinking-about-this-box' to put it in, cause it really got to me, which I found really interesting, cause as I say, I don't usually have that kind of reaction to films."

Al (London – Embracer): "I would probably have to try and watch it again. But er, I don't know, it's.. it's as I said it was all the noises that, eugh, just.. and you know. You just *know*, it really feels like he's.. he's *violating* her, but just in, in.. it's... ah, it's hard to s, hard to say it. It's just.. you know, er, you can feel her pain so to speak, and it's not enjoyable experience, unless you're a *sadist*."

Rhona (Edinburgh – Embracer) on adopting the 'right mental attitude towards it' if and as she rewatches: "I mean, it's just such a, a hideous scene (murmured agreement from men) that if there was any kind of sexing it up you would just, wanted to avoid that accusation, I guess, and that's why I think it's so hard to watch, because the camera is just completely – you are the camera the whole time, watching it, can you



turn away, can you not turn away? I find that really, and the second time I found it just as hard to watch. I had to force myself to watch it, all the way through, and it goes on for so long. But in a way I think that's what's commendable, I have quite a lot of problems with the film, in general, I wouldn't say I particularly liked it, but I think that's what's commendable about that scene."

Alex: I suppose that's the whole point of the film, it's designed to invoke a reaction, and the thing is, ... you don't really want to experience that again. You know, once you've experienced it once, you're like ok, yeah, like I say, I'm glad I've seen that, I really don't want to have to see it again any time soon. And ...." (Rhona) "I think there'd be something wrong with you if you wanted to watch it over and over and over..." (Alex and Ross: "yes".) what would that say about you?"

Participants in the Edinburgh group managed this differently. Rhona, as a woman, did so by suggesting that her rewatchings had allowed her to enter more fully into the male characters – and especially Marcus, whom she felt she had not sufficiently attended to at first viewing. Her repeat-viewings were therefore motivated by *need for greater character-depth*. Ross, on the other hand, explained his wish to rewatch as wanting to find out more about *how* the effect was gained – it became an *exercise in aesthetic investigation*. But all three of them emphasise that the film should only be rewatched if it continues to have its visceral, unnerving, 'guilty' effect – otherwise we might be tainted.

*We offer the following generalisation: the more a person Embraces Irreversible, the more likely they are to be caught in a paradox over the idea of repeat-viewing of the film – it is only justifiable if on re-viewing it continues to be as hurtful to watch as the first time.*

#### **4. An Overall Portrait of Context- and Moment-References in Irreversible**

1. Among the five films, this one is surely the most distinctive, and in many ways. It is of course the one film where, on a balance of considerations, the BBFC decided to make no cuts. But it is also the film which receives the most distinctive forms of audience engagement. This film has the smallest interpretive range. Embracers and Refusers are evidently *seeing the same film*, just valuing the experience it seeks to impose in opposite ways.

For both Embracers and Refusers, we would argue that it is Categories 1 & 5 (impact on self, and on other possible viewers) which particularly characterise audiences' responses. For Embracers in particular, measuring the film in terms of its impact on oneself is paramount. It is not just a visceral response, but precisely a visceral response which forces philosophical life-responses as well. It makes positive viewers review themselves, their own responses, and their relationships in some very striking ways. But if this applies particularly (but by no means only) to men, it couples interestingly with a ready acceptance that this film is not for everyone. Many people – and perhaps many women – will not be able to 'take' it. And no blame attaches. (Al, London: "Oh the interesting thing about that was when I seen it at a cinema audience, I thought all the women would have *walked*. Especially in the rape scene, But the, but people didn't walk out when you expected them to.")

Embracers engage with the narrative in some striking ways. They will revel in the reverse narrative structure, at the same time they play mental games of working out what the film would be like, and how it would be different, if it was watched ‘the right way round’. But even having done so, there is a preference for the reverse version, since it produces a particular kind of ‘valuable hurt’. Category 2 thinking is tightly bound, for Embracers, with Category 1 thinking.

Attitudes to the rape scene, and to its length, are woven in with the broader response. The rape scene has to be ‘endured’, it is gruelling. But the outcome is a realisation, and a self-realisation that goes deep into viewers. Watching the rape forces a combination of two experiences onto Embracers: a sense of voyeurism – we should not be watching this; and of being helpless – we ought to be able to intervene, to save Alex. And it is important that viewers do feel “forced” – there is a real and undeniable power to *Irreversible*, and some real “effects”. But it is central to our understanding of these that the visceral and the cognitive are inseparable. Even the erotic is melded in. A not uncommon response was to note how sensually attractive Alex looks as she approaches the tunnel where she will be raped. Men’s response to this was often to acknowledge the arousal, but double it with guilt at their awareness of what is about to happen to her. The arousal is not thereby simply negated, it is turned into something requiring self-scrutiny: how do you now feel about the way you felt? How do you feel about being made to feel this way?

For Refusers of the film, responses to the film tend to fragment into two scenes: the murderous attack at the Rectum Club; and the rape in the tunnel. And these in turn fragment as scenes, in particular with the first being recalled as “nauseous” because of spiralling camerawork, and because of a weird soundscape. These are not experienced as integrated into a “tenderising” narrative impact – they are simply too much, exaggerated, *too* purposeful. For Refusers the reverse narrative becomes a ‘ploy’, a weak copying of *Memento*. It is a Category 1 *refusal* to let the film affect you as you are aware it is trying.

2. *Irreversible* does not generate much in the way of remembered Moments, for Embracers, other than those which are absorbed into the ‘whole’ of the film. But there are points to note.

In fact this film displays one memorialising tendency found much less with the others: those involving Circumstantial Moments. Many Embracers remember when, where, and with whom they saw *Irreversible* in detail, but also recall with that how they ‘managed’ watching it – down the extreme case of one person who recalled in detail his spreading the viewing over several attempts before he managed to watch the whole thing.

## 21. Comparing Judgement Sets

At the beginning our analysis we noted that we could find little evidence of any generalised interest in screened sexual violence *per se*. Rather, each film appears to have its own ‘clientele’, responding with different particular criteria and judgement-sets. Having examined each film’s audiences separately, we thought it would be valuable to compare how each film looks from the perspective of its own adherents, with how it looks from the perspective of those embracing the other films. To what extent does such a comparison confirm our statement that sexual violence *per se* is not an issue here, but rather its incorporation in particular filmic contexts? And what might we learn further about the specificity of each film’s core audience, through identifying the ways in which they are distinctive?

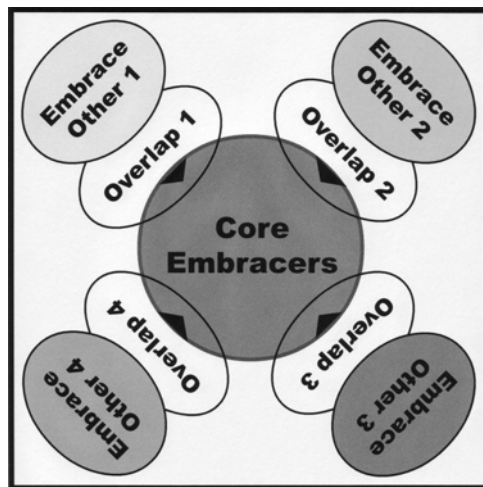
In this section we present the results of a special form of analysis developed in order to allow us to examine how each film is visible to its own Embracers, and from the perspective of Embracers of the other four films. The aim is thereby to bring into view the ways of understanding and judging (and thence, the measuring criteria) that are most ‘local’ to each film. On, in other words, for those who are most interested in and committed to just one of the five films, how precisely does it mean and matter to them? The methods used for this analysis were innovative and to some extent experimental, but the results coordinate in striking ways with our other strands of findings.

The method drew on the web questionnaire response-set, in a several-stage process:

1. A set of single-film-Embracers was isolated for each film. To be included, a respondent had to have reported an Embracing (under our working definition of this term) response to just one of the five films. For each film, this constituted the Core Group.
2. For each film, four groups around it were then sought, comprising those who had given Embracing responses to both the core film and one other.
3. For each film, four groups were then sought, comprising those who had given Embracing answers to one of the other films, but Refusing (in our meaning) answers to the Core film.
4. In each case, respondents’ answers to two questions were gathered for exploration. These were: the question immediately following respondents telling us their cinematic and thematic evaluations of the film (“Could you now tell us in your own words, at whatever length you want, what you meant by these two answers?”); and the Most Uncomfortable Moment/Aspect question (since this, we had determined, tended to elicit responses drawing on people’s *ethical* criteria).

This gave us, for each film, potentially nine groups of responses for analysis and comparison. These were analysed by listing and summarising the nature and grounds of their judgements on the film, in order to see how far it was possible to identify a *core* set of responses and understandings that associate with Embracing each film

alone. For ease of presentation, we have summarised our findings into five Venn Discursive Diagrams. It should be emphasised that these Diagrams are digests of digests, displaying only the main tendencies in the sample sets which we isolated. Nonetheless, we believe they add a useful further dimension.



Our analysis of these reveals a number of interesting patterns, which were not as visible through other methods:

*À Ma Soeur:* in the Core Group there is a vital shaping relationship with Anaïs, as a knowing and aware character, a relationship which diminishes as we move away from the Core. There is an associated loss of the sense of a rhythm in the film, which affects also its disruption by the shattering ending. In the Core there is also a sense of collaboration between actresses and director not displayed

elsewhere. Overall, there is a strong sense of the film as a whole, with very positive themes and issues explored – but this is not simply a “message”. Rather, ‘message’ is embedded in characters, relations, and audience responses.

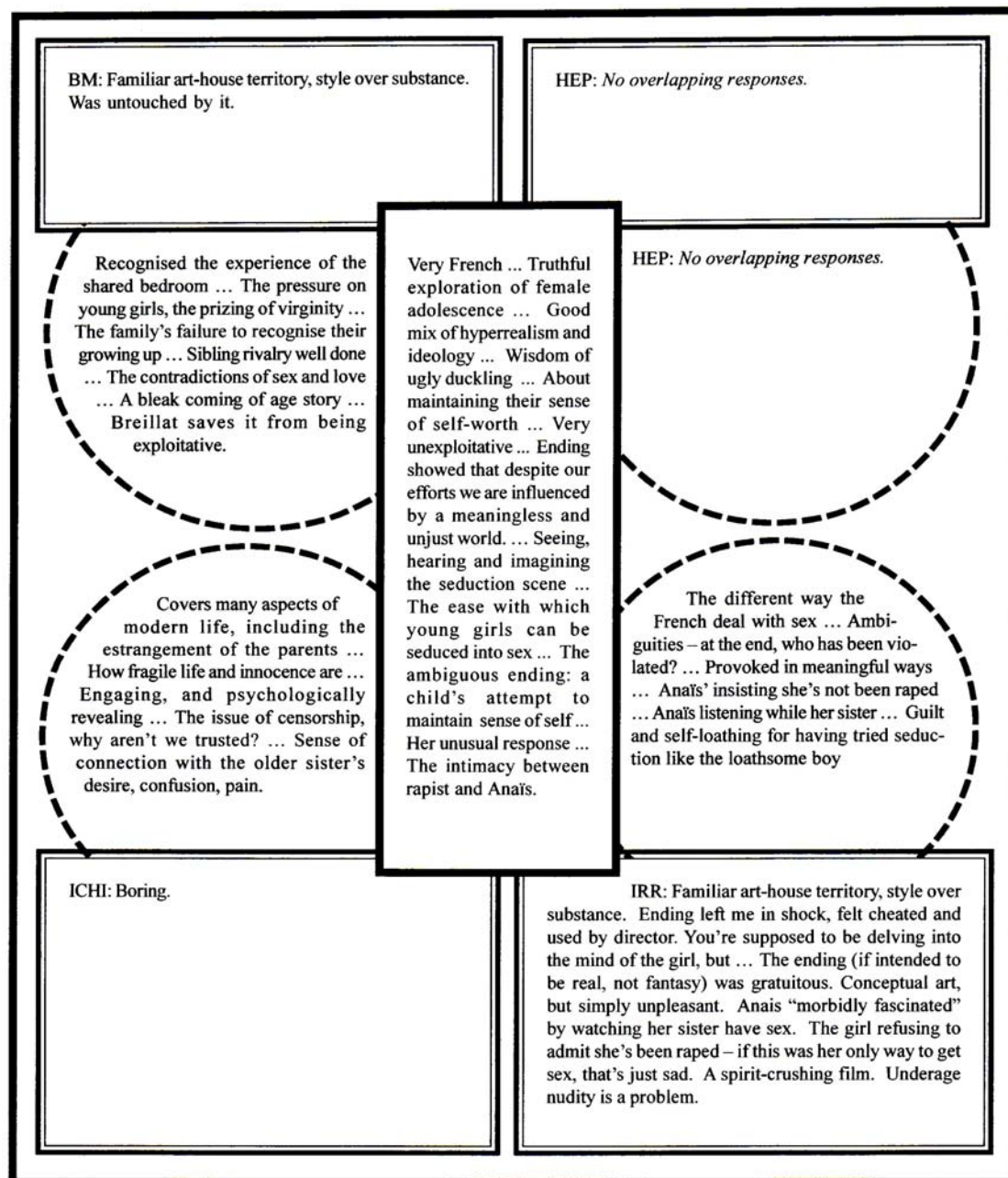
In partial contrast, *Baise-Moi* Overlappers stress emotions displayed and felt, and – most interestingly – a bleakness to the film.<sup>17</sup> The *Ichi* Overlappers stress modernity, and social themes, with some building a link with the older sister Elena. *Irreversible* Overlappers stress the guilt that should be experienced by male viewers – something which decidedly does carry over from the other film.

Refusers variously see a separation of director and actresses (reversing the judgements on exploitation, and introducing concerns about nudity). The film is placed in categories, notably art-house, and suffers critically as a result. Slowness, a positive feature for Embracers, now becomes boring. Different psychological motivations and understandings are imputed to Anaïs (reading her bedroom reactions as “morbid fascination” for instance). Alternatively the film is just dismissed as a failure.

There is little here that we had not already seen through the other research strands. Perhaps the most striking things are the re-emphasis on Anaïs’ role for the film’s Core Embracers, and the sense of integration of the film’s ‘point’ into its structure and process.

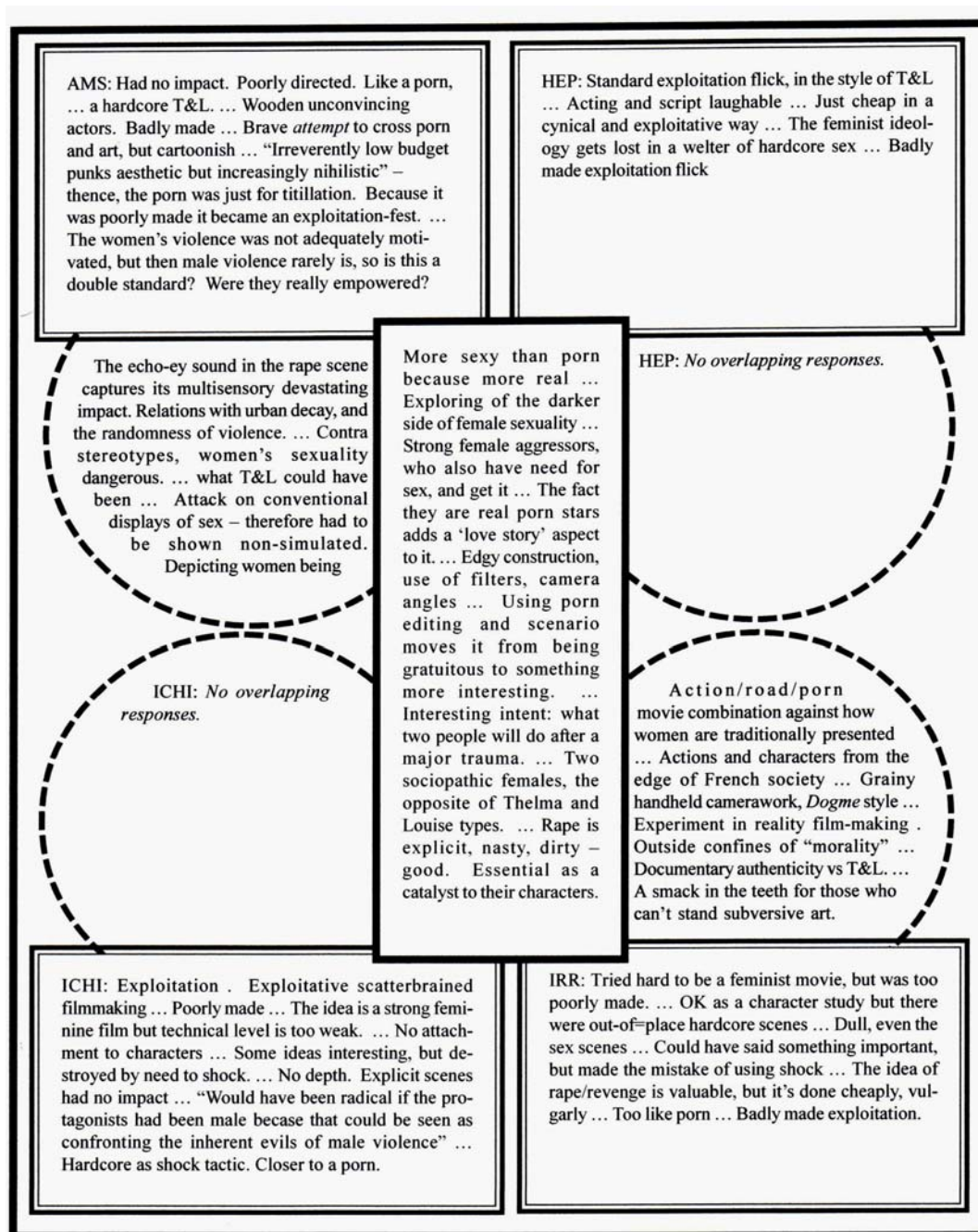
<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to compare this with the following exchange in the Hull focus group between Bruce (Ambivalent) and John (very Positive): “Well, I wasn’t turned on by it. Quite the opposite. I do think the film is a, as I say, it left me cold, and I mean that in all kinds of senses, physically, emotionally, I think it’s a very bleak, you know, there’s nothing there.” (Bruce) “I think it’s a wonderful, anarchic, feminist, optimistic and a part of the necessary world to change.” (John)

### Venn Diagram 1: *À Ma Soeur*.



**Baise-Moi:** the most striking difference between the Core Group and the Overlappers is in the degree of importance attached to *intra-cinematic* factors. While Core respondents use complex measures of the 'reality' of the film, Overlappers are more prone to making specific filmic comparisons, generic placements, and cinematic quality judgements. The assertion that the film displays "women's dangerous sexuality" set loose, as a positive feature needing showing because of the absence of other outlets for this, is entirely restricted to the Core Group – aside from the *À Ma Soeur* Overlappers, who interestingly further politicise this.

## Venn Diagram 2: *Baise Moi*.



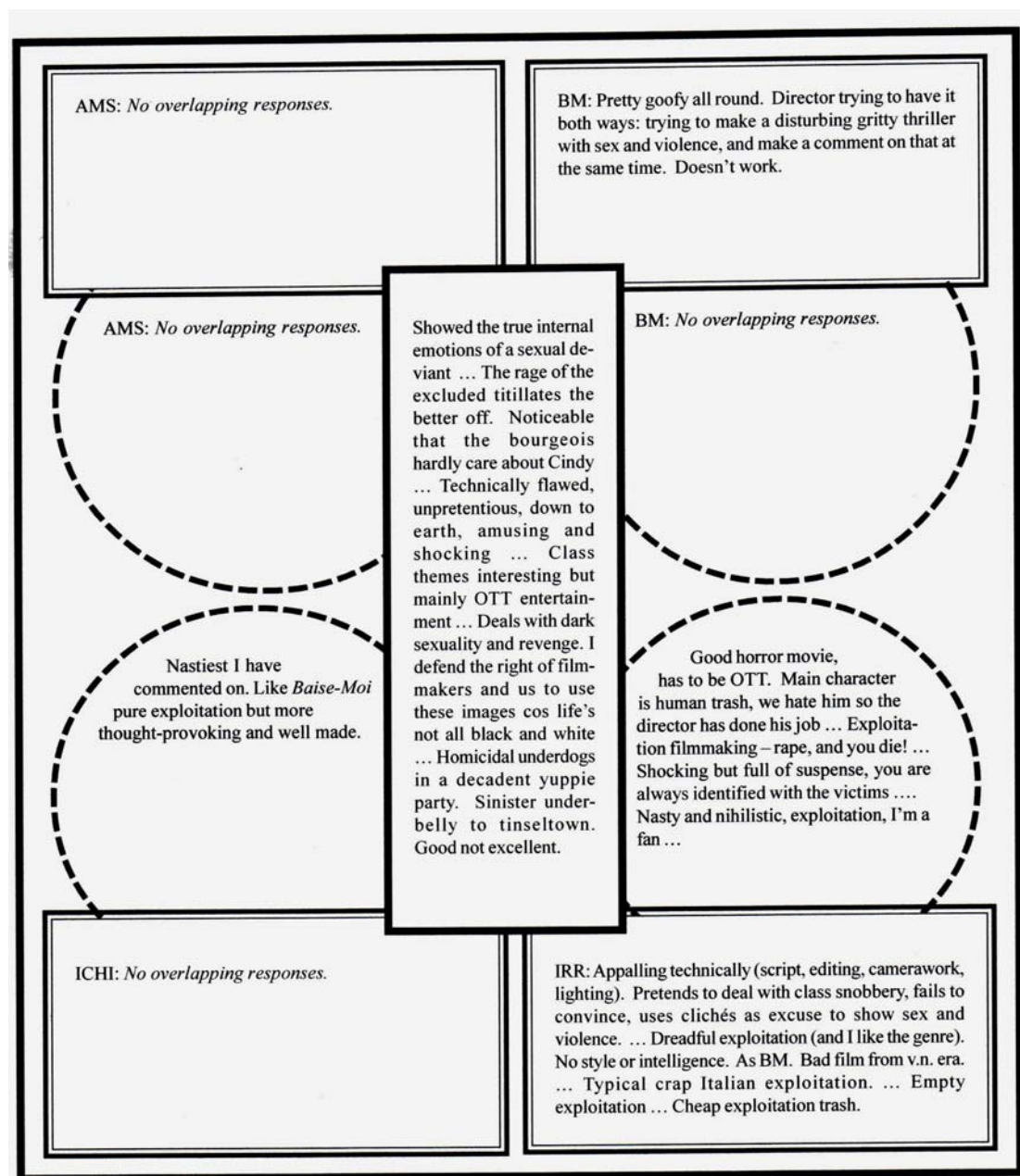
The frequency of comparisons with *Thelma & Louise* continues here, for both Overlappers and Refusers – but of course it is used to different critical effects. Perhaps the central theme to emerge from the comparison with the Refusers is the quite different valuation placed on the ‘ordinariness’, the non-flashiness of the film. To the Refusers, this is a sign of failure. To the Embracers, it is of the essence of the film (as are the use of porn actresses, the graininess of the film, the ‘realism’ of seeing the actual penetration) because it is a film *about* the casual awfulness of this part of French society.

***The House on the Edge of the Park:*** with *House*, there is the lowest number of either Overlappers (Embracing or Refusing), emphasising our feeling that this is



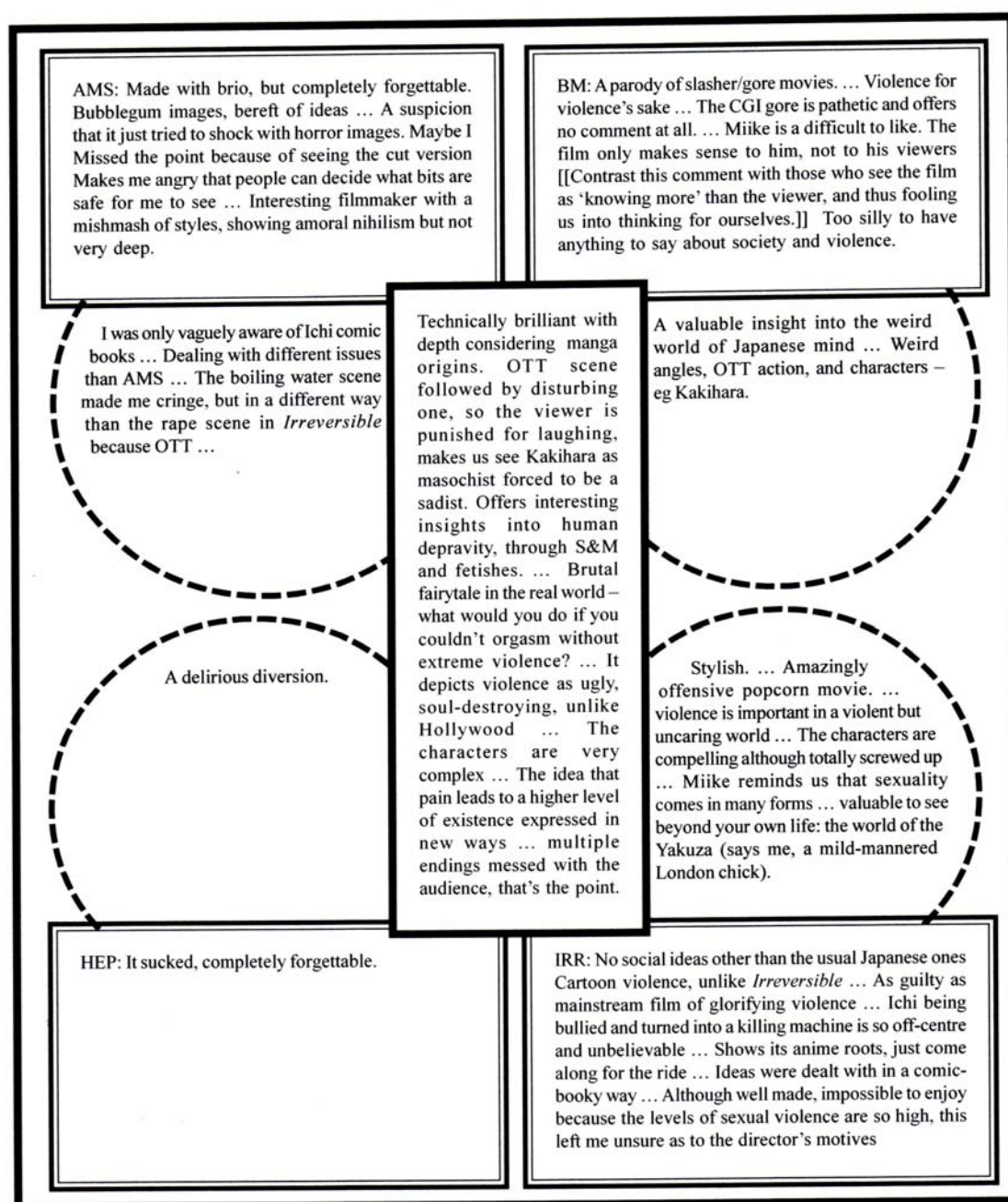
something of a ‘film apart’. For those that we do have, here again, the comparisons do not reveal a great deal that is new, except these things: (1) in the Core Group there is a willingness to speak of sexual response, to having found certain parts of the film a turn-on; (2) the political strand of judgement is at its strongest here, with the film being presented effectively as a melodrama of a clash of classes. The category “exploitation” is shared between all groups, but with different critical results.

**Venn Diagram 3: *The House on the Edge of the Park.***



***Ich1 the Killer:*** some relatively new things do emerge from this set of comparisons. First, in the Core Group, there is a repeated suggestion that the film catches audiences out, by shifting register at high speed. There is also much more talk about ‘the audience’ than in the other groups, and a recurrent sense that the film is forcing thought about issues not usually addressed.

#### Venn Diagram 4: *Ichi the Killer*.



Two quotations from the Core Get capture these references to the audience particularly well:

“It was a technically brilliant film but it has a lot of depth too considering it is adapted from a manga comic-strip. The director often offsets the violence in a certain way; a more comic and OTT violent scene is usually followed by a much more realistic and disturbing violent scene as if the viewer is being punished for laughing at this screen violence. We enjoy it but we are punished for it afterwards something helps so understand the lead character of Kariyara a masochist who has to act as a sadist due his profession.”



“I thought the film was good rather than excellent because it was such an uncomfortable experience. Think this was the point of the film though This is why in answer to question Q4 I have said that I think the ideas the film was dealing with are extremely valuable. I think the film was concerned with confronting the viewer with cinematic violence in different contexts and subject matter - verbally violent the suggestion of violence and the depiction of violence in both a stylised manner and a more realistic manner ie confrontational documentary style. The film plays with the viewers expectations from the violence - personally I felt excited by the way the film opened (thumping techno music and flashy camera work) I was slightly sickened by some of the images and subjects that followed (rape and torture) and then confused by what to expect from the finale - it confused who I felt I should align myself with as all the characters are pretty nasty and it's difficult to decide if they are morally justified.”

These kinds of judgements do recur outside the Core Group, albeit not so strongly. In this case, Embracing respondents' strong awareness of Miike pulls their responses in these directions – with the difference that the Overlappers are the ones likely to describe the film as “over the top”. It is excessiveness, rather than abrupt shifts of tone, that the Overlappers notice.

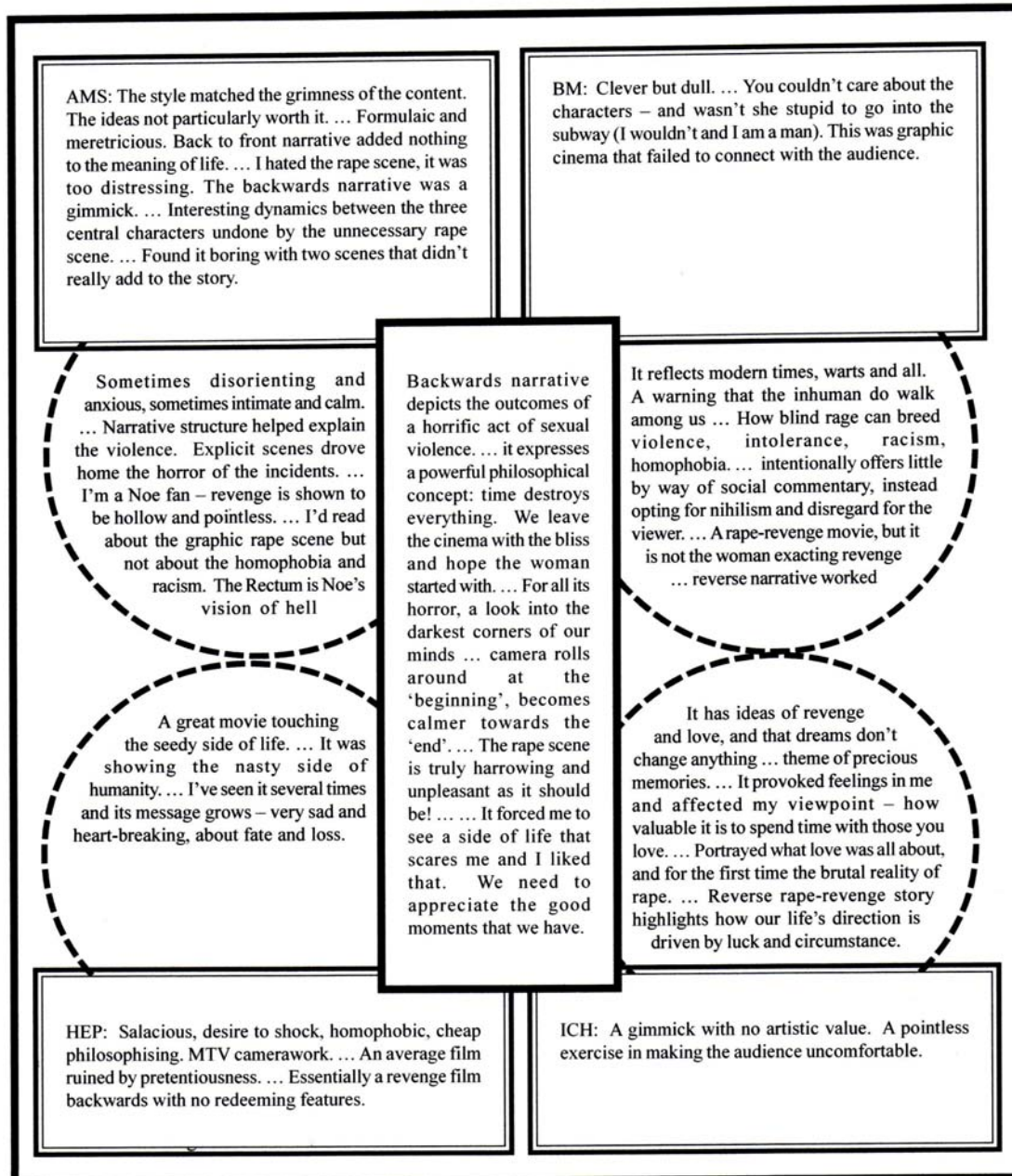
The Refusers challenge the film for being too ‘comicbook’, not taking its topic seriously enough. If it has comedy in it, it cannot be dealing appropriately with its themes of violence.

***Irreversible:*** it is in this set of comparisons that the most striking new features show. In the Core Group something not very visible before emerges – a theme of *personal change*. A number of people tell of finding themselves realising the importance of something in their own lives – the importance of spending time with your family, of enjoying good times while they are with you, and so on, because from the film they have taken the message that at any time these could be taken away. In the very awfulness of what they see, they have found a philosophical message. It may not be overstating it to suggest that their very helplessness to save Alex from rape, and their realisation that revenge fails the film's protagonists, turns into a determination to live their own lives better.

The personal resonances almost entirely vanish with the overlapping groups. *À Ma Soeur* Overlappers are among those who see the film as grounded in contemporary life, and tend to see the film's structure as a key component. *Baise-Moi* Overlappers notice that the woman does not get the revenge – unlike many rape-revenge movies. This doesn't lead to condemnation, but it is seen as an important *difference*. Interestingly, given our comments above on the *Ichi* group's tendency to think the persona of the viewer, this tendency carries over here – not now as personal reports, but as thoughts on what “you” are led to question by the film.

There is much less to be learnt from those who Refuse *Irreversible* from elsewhere – their judgements are short, dismissive, and see the film as “pretentious”, the reverse narrative a “gimmick”, and the rape scene as simply excessive.

### Venn Diagram 5: Irreversible.



## 22. Some Possible Implications

In writing this Report, we have been aware at many points of working hard to restrict ourselves to our proper business, which is simply and only to supply good and trustworthy evidence on the character of audiences' responses to the five films, with particular view to understanding (a) how in general audiences respond to the screen presentation of sexual violence; (b) in what ways, and with what meanings, audiences use 'contexts' to explain the scenes of sexual violence; (c) what consequences can be identified for the 'cuts' imposed on four of the four films by the BBFC; (c) how in particular do the most positive audiences engage with, understand and appreciate these films? We have tried to avoid addressing attitudes to the BBFC itself, its policies and actions (except where, especially in the case of *The House on the Edge of the Park*, these directly informed how a film was perceived and understood); and we have not sought to indicate any policy implications. In these closing remarks, we do not propose to 'break these vows', but merely to point to certain issues which are relevant to the very evidence which we have gathered, which we put forward for consideration:

- A. The BBFC, its existence, role, public presence, policies, and particular judgements impact a broad way in the thinking of audiences. This can be very complicated. It is not merely that some audiences would like to 'push' against what they would regard as the 'nanny-ism' of the BBFC. It is just as much that they feel watched, measured and judged. This can lead in several directions: to angry denunciation, or to 'bad behaviour', or to a certain self-watching, for fear that you might appear to be as you fear others see you. This particularly showed, for us, in the ambivalence that men, especially, felt towards "admitting" (the word itself speaks volumes) that they might find it at some level sexually arousing to watch screened sexual violence.

This was a particular topic and issue within the focus groups (and wider web debates) around *The House on the Edge of the Park*, as we have shown. The BBFC is identified as belonging with a middle-class suburban mentality which not only rates films by culturally inappropriate criteria, but thereby belongs within an establishment which is a threat to the pleasures and commitments of this kind of film viewer.

- B. As researchers, we knew we were working in a field dogged with moral fears and preconceptions. A good many of these take the form of claims about what 'audiences' must be doing if they watch and enjoy screened sexual violence. From our knowledge of the field, we are sure that there is little existing research to draw upon, and even less that we would regard with any confidence. Yet we do know that, in certain ways, the BBFC's judgements are guided by some such claims. Although we have only had sight of abbreviated versions of the BBFC's judgements in the case of these five films, we could see clear evidence within these of such criteria at work. We do not wish to imply that the mere employing of such 'figures of the audience' is automatically a bad, or reprehensible thing. But where the criteria remain implicit, and any research or 'expert opinion' upon which these are based remains unavailable for critical scrutiny, it is very hard for research to put them to any test.

- C. One larger issue has emerged: one of the frequent responses we met, was anger not so much at the fact of a cut, but at the fact that these can be *hidden*. A contradiction is identified. On the one hand the BBFC has moved to a considerable extent in the direction of advising on content issues, giving guidelines and warnings as to possibly upsetting or disturbing scenes in films. On the other hand, there is no requirement, when a film is released in some format, to indicate any variation from its original form. This, we have found, angers people even more than the cuts themselves, since they feel personally “cheated” – a word frequently put to us.

This is not simply a question of information flows, but of something quite fundamental to watching a film. We are sensing that where audiences become sufficiently unsure about the status of what they are watching, they are effectively *deprived of the opportunity to make sense of the film at all*. Two quotations show how this came to our attention:

“I’m listening to you guys discussing a film that two of us haven’t seen. So myself and Ilaria are talking about a completely different film with a completely different impact because someone has decided we’re actually going to watch a different film ... the way it’s cut there’s a hugely different implication in what it’s saying.” (Sean, Edinburgh – *À Ma Soeur* Embracer)

“It does kind of set me up, thinking, well no what else has been cut? And that’s going to change my perception of the film – what else is there that’s been withheld from me, that might have altered the way I view the film? I don’t know.” (Ross, Edinburgh – *Ichi the Killer* Embracer)

What we see here is audience members’ sense of the *instability* of the ‘film’ they have been watching and trying to estimate. The revelation of hidden cuts begins to undo their capacity to make meaning at all. This is to us a matter of serious concern, and wide wider implications than may at first appear.

# Appendix 1: CODING STRUCTURE FOR RECORDING EXPLORATIONS OF WEBSITES

## *General:*

Kind of site: **1 = professional review, 2 = citizen review, 3 = discussion board, 4 = newsgroup, 5 = festival**

Name of site: **front page web address**

Self-description: **Key words and expressions from home page**

Site range of films discussed: **1 = very broad, 2 = eclectic, 3 = very selective**

Discursive range: **1 = high, 2 = broad, 3 = low**

Degree of openness to contributors: **1 = very open, 3 = very circumscribed.**

## *By film:*

Balance of discussion: **1 = predominantly positive, 2 = predominantly negative, 3 = broad spectrum of debates**

Key expressions **representing positive attitudes**

Key aspects **mentioned connecting to positivity**

Key expressions **representing negative attitudes**

Key aspects **mentioned connecting to negativity**

Scale of discussion: **1 = 100+, 2 = 30-100, 3 = 10-30, 4 = 3-10, 5 = 3 or fewer.**

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# Appendix 2: STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF WEB QUESTIONNAIRE

**Website name:** [www.extremefilmsresearch.org.uk](http://www.extremefilmsresearch.org.uk)

## Welcome

Thank you for visiting our website.

We're trying to find out people's responses to films that include scenes of sexual violence.

This is a topic on which everyone has an *opinion*. It's also a topic on which public opinion makers write, and censors and classifiers act. But actual knowledge is much harder to come by.

You can help us by completing our questionnaire. The questionnaire is pretty short – there are just nine questions for each film.

At the top of the page are the titles of five films which, in the last few years, have given particular problems to the British Board of Film Classification.

If you've seen any of them, just click on that title, and it will take you straight into the questionnaire. You may have seen them for all kinds of reasons. You may have had all kinds of responses to them, from really loving them to outright loathing. We want to know why.

If you have seen more than one, and have the time, please, tell us about your views on all the ones that you've seen. The questionnaires will be pretty much the same – but of course your responses to the films may be very different.

When you've completed all the questionnaires that you want, you'll be taken to a page which will ask you to tell us a few things about yourself – but your questionnaire will, we assure you, be entirely anonymous.

We are not only interested in the responses of people in the UK. We would love to hear your views, whatever country you are living in.

If you'd like to know more about this research – why we are doing it, and what we will do with the outcomes – just click [here](#).

Thanks!

Martin Barker (Project Director)

Kate Egan

Russell Hunter

Ernest Mathijs

Melanie Selfe

Jamie Sexton

(If you would like to know more about the people conducting the research, please click [here](#).)

## **What is the purpose of our research?**

The issue of sexual violence on screen is inevitably controversial. It is something on which many people hold strong views. But it is a topic on which there is far more opinion than reliable knowledge. Perhaps the most common view is that it is obvious what these films do: "Filmed sexual violence frightens and debases women. And it risks arousing men to violence." If this were right, then the only remaining questions would be: how much harm is done, and how much should be done to control it?

To date, there have really only been two kinds of research. Either researchers have polled the general public for their views on what should be allowed or not allowed. Or they have done laboratory researches, to see what impact such films might have on

a randomly chosen set of people who are shown such a film – or even, just a part of a film.

We aren't satisfied with this. And one main reason is that these kinds of research don't hear from the people who choose to watch these sorts of films for themselves. We just don't know who watches these films, where and why they see them, what they see in them, and how they respond to them.

This is what we are trying to do here. We want to gather the thoughts and responses of people who have chosen to see these films of their own accord. You may have seen them for all kinds of reasons. You may have had all kinds of responses to them, from really loving them to outright loathing. We want to know why. And, of course, you may have quite opposed views on different films.

This research project is being funded by the British Board of Film Classification (with further support from our University at Aberystwyth). The five films in question are all ones over which they had long debates. In each case there were scenes involving sexual violence on which they had to make difficult decisions: whether to cut, what to cut? In making these decisions, they are partly governed by legal requirements. But also they have to make judgements about the films, and make interpretations about the place of the sexual violence within them. To do this, they take what help they can get from available research.

The research that is available doesn't begin to answer all of the BBFC's questions. For example, how does the context in which sexual violence is shown affect people's understanding of it, and response to it? What impact do their own cuts have on the ways people see these films? They are funding this project because we showed them that there were ways to find out.

But although the BBFC are funding the research, we control it. Good research depends upon a clear separation between the interests of a funding body and the research itself. The BBFC have guaranteed us that we have absolute control over the methods and findings, and that we can publish the outcomes in full – whatever they show. We promise that we will do this. In previous work, we have not been afraid to be critical of claims and arguments that we considered to be driven by moral or political claims, rather than by convincing evidence. Right now, on this topic, we don't have any view at all, because we don't yet have the evidence. That is what this project is aiming to produce.

So, please, help us to get answers about these challenging films. Whether you like or hate them ... whether you approve or disapprove of them ... tell us about your thoughts and responses to any of these five films that you have seen. We will make sure that the outcomes of the research are widely available, including (if we can hold onto it) via this website. Otherwise, we will make sure that our own websites (at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth) point you to where you can read the results.

You can access any of the questionnaires by clicking on one of the titles below:

*À Ma Soeur / Fat Girl* (2001)  
*Irreversible* (2002)

*Baise Moi / Fuck Me* (2002)  
*Koroshiya 1 / Ichi the Killer* (2003)  
*La Casa Sperduta nel Parco / House on the Edge of the Park* (1980)

## Researchers Information Page

**Martin Barker** is Professor of Film & Television Studies in the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. He has researched and published widely on film audiences. He has gained five major national research grants for this research. His researches have included: a study of responses to action-adventure films; an examination of the controversy over the film *Crash*, investigations of audience responses to *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Straw Dogs*; and – most recently – a world-wide study of audience responses to the film of *The Lord of the Rings*. His publications include *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes* (1997, with Kate Brooks); and *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception* (2001, with Jane Arthurs & Ramaswami Harindranath).

He has also researched extensively into the history of debates about media effects. His work here includes *A Haunt of Fears: the Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign; Action – the Story of a Violent Comic* (1984); and *Ill Effects: the Media/Violence Debate* (1987, co-edited with Julian Petley). He is Director of the Centre for Audience & Reception Studies at Aberystwyth, and is joint editor of *Participations*, the online Journal devoted to audience and reception studies.

**Dr. Ernest Mathijs** is moving from a lectureship in film studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, to an Assistant Professorship at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. He still directs the Centre for Research into Extreme and Alternative Media in Aberystwyth. His research projects include the worldwide reception of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the receptions of David Cronenberg, *Ginger Snaps*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Big Brother*. He has published in among others *Screen* (2005) *Social Semiotics* (2004), and *Cinema Journal* (2003). He has edited books on *Cinema in the Low Countries*, *Big Brother International*, and *Alternative Europe* (all 2004). He is editing three books on the reception of *The Lord of the Rings*, and writing a monograph on David Cronenberg. He coordinates two book series: *Contemporary Cinema* (with Steven Schneider), and *Cultographies* (with Jamie Sexton and Xavier Mendik), and he is chair of the editorial board of the online journal *Particip@tions*.

**Dr Jamie Sexton** is a lecturer in the department of Film, Theatre and Television at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. His research interests include alternative and extreme media, and British film history. He has published articles in the journals *Screen*, *Scope*, and is currently completing a monograph on alternative film culture in inter-war Britain. He is also co-editing (with Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik) a book series on cult films for Wallflower press, entitled *Cultographies*.

**Dr Kate Egan** is Part-Time Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. She has previously worked, as research assistant, on two projects – The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption (funded by the AHRB) and The *Lord of the Rings* International Audience Project



(funded by the ESRC). Her major research interests are in British film culture, fan cultures, censorship and horror; her forthcoming book, *Trash or Treasure: Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties* (MUP), focuses centrally on the changing politics around British censorship in the last twenty-five years, and on the fan cultures around video nasties and horror that have developed in relation to this.

**Russell Hunter** is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, following a career in Operations Management.. His research encompasses a cross-cultural (Italy and the UK) reception study of the films of Italian horror director Dario Argento.

**Melanie Selfe** is the project's Research Assistant. Over the past five years she has researched different aspects of British 'art-cinema' culture. This has included a contemporary audience study, an analysis of the early development of *Sight and Sound* magazine, and she is currently completing a PhD at the University of East Anglia, examining post-war provincial film society culture. Central to all these projects has been a concern with identifying the different, and often competing, meanings that foreign films carry within British culture. She has presented her work at a number of conferences, and has an article and two book chapters forthcoming.

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## Questionnaire

### By Individual Film Title

1. First, can you tell us what version of this film you saw? Was it ...

Cut                      Uncut                      Not sure

Original language      Dubbed                      Subtitled

(If you've seen the film more than once, you may of course have seen more than one version – if so, you can check more than one of the above.)

2. What can you recall about when and where you saw this film? Did it have any impact on your feelings about the film?

*Now, two connected questions, but to which you may have different answers.*

3. Could you tell us what you thought of it *as a piece of film-making*?

1. Excellent    2. Good    3. Mixed feelings    4. Poor    5. Awful

4. Could you tell us what you thought of the *ideas it was dealing with*?

1. Extremely valuable    2. Quite valuable    3. Mixed feelings    4. Little value  
5. No value at all

5. Could you now tell us in your own words, at whatever length you want, what you meant by these two answers?

6. If you had to name one bit of the film that has most stuck in your memory, what would it be?

7. If you had to name one bit of the film that was most ‘uncomfortable’ to watch, what would it be? (If this is the same bit of the film as for question 5, could you particularly tell us what made this part of the film so difficult for you?)

8. What contribution in your view do the scenes of sexual violence make to this film as a whole?

9. *One specific question for each film:*

*[À Ma Soeur / Fat Girl]* In the UK, although the film was released uncut for the cinema, one substantial cut was made to the very end of the film when it was considered for video release. This remove most of the scene in which the younger sister is attacked. The major reason given was that the scene “was similar to material which paedophiles use to groom their victims”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

*[Irreversible]* In the UK, after a lot of discussion, the film was released uncut to both cinema and video. The central reason for this was that although the film contains such a long scene of rape, the Board considered that the scene was “not designed to titillate”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

*[Koroshiya 1 / Ichi the Killer]* In the UK, eleven cuts were made to the film, all on the basis of the argument that the film created an association between sexual arousal and violence, and could therefore produce a “harmful response in some viewers”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

*[Baise Moi / Fuck Me]* In the UK, two cuts were required, the most important of which was to remove a shot showing explicit penetration during the rape scene. This was done on the grounds that it could be seen to “eroticise sexual assault”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

*[La Casa Sperduta nel Parco / House on the Edge of the Park]* In the UK, a series of cuts were required to all the scenes of sexual assault, from beginning to end of the film. These were made on the grounds that they “both eroticised and endorsed sexual assault”. Do you have any thoughts on this argument?

## Checkout Page

Finally, could you tell us a few things about yourself?

A Are you male / female?

B Your age group: Under 18 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 Over 65

C Which of the following comes closest to describing how you think of yourself?

- I consider myself very knowledgeable about film, and watch accordingly.
- I watch films frequently, and across a wide range.
- I mainly choose to watch a few particular types of films.
- I watch films fairly frequently, but with no special preferences.
- I only watch films occasionally, as they catch my interest.

D Could you name for us: two favourite films?

E ... and one favourite *kind* of film?

F What is the most troubling film that you have ever seen for its treatment of sexual violence? What was it that made it so for you?

G Do you have an overall view on the question of the sexual violence on screen? Which one of the following comes closest to your current view?

- Sexual violence should never be shown.
- Sexual violence should never be shown explicitly.
- There are a few special cases where it could be a problem.
- My response depends on the way it is shown, and the context in which it is shown.
- Showing sexual violence on screen should not be a special issue at all.

H Finally, is there something about you which you would regard as most important for understanding your response to the film(s) you've told us about?

I Where do you live? (Drop down list of countries)

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## Appendix 3: SCHEDULE OF FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. A few factual things first: can you each say who you are, and when and where you saw X? Was there anything significant about the circumstances of seeing it, do you think, that affected your response to it?
2. What can you recall of the film? What parts of it particularly 'stuck', and why?
3. Can you each sum up both your personal feelings about the film, and your evaluation of it as a film? When we have heard each person separately, we'd be interested to see how far you feel you are agreeing/disagreeing with each other.
4. Obviously we are particularly interested in your perceptions of the scene(s) of sexual violence in X – what can you particularly recall about these? How would

you describe them, and what did they contribute to the film? Suppose they had been left out: how would that have changed the film?

5. Were you aware of any controversy around X? What sorts of issues do you remember it raising? And what did you feel about those issues yourselves?
6. Here are some examples of the kinds of comments (pro- and anti-) that people have made about X – what are your thoughts on them? Which comes closest to expressing your view of the film? [Sheets of prepared extracts.]
7. It is inevitably pretty hard to talk about issues of sexual violence without acknowledging that we are male/female. What are your own general feelings about this, and how did this work in the context of this film?
8. It's also hard to think about films which display sexual activity without considering physical effects. Can you say what effects, if any, the film had on you physically?
9. Are there any other films that X reminded you of, or that you would class as being of the same kind? What common features link them?
10. Here is one of the bits that was identified as problematic/cut by the BBFC for one form of release. Obviously we are seeing it out of context, but what would you say about it? In terms of its place in the film, its filming, the responses it might arouse?