

Straw Dogs



Film information

Straw Dogs

Director: Sam Peckinpah

Status: 18 uncut

Year: 1971

Genre: Drama, Thriller

Sam Peckinpah's 1971 film, *Straw Dogs*, has been described by critics as a kind of 'Cornish Western', transferring Peckinpah's usual concerns about violence and masculinity from the Wild West to the West Country of England. Dustin Hoffman plays an American professor, David Sumner, who moves away from the States to the Cornish village of his English wife, Amy, played by Susan George. However, the locals prove to be rather less welcoming than expected. First the couple's cat is killed and then, when David is lured away to join a shooting party, Amy is raped at home by her former boyfriend, Charlie, and his accomplice. It was the complicated nature of the rape scene that led to censorship difficulties for *Straw Dogs*. What starts off as a violent assault gradually transforms into a complex scene in which Amy appears to first accept and then respond to the attack.

Her seeming acquiescence is then turned around dramatically when one of Charlie's friends decides to join in. The film climaxes with a pitched battle in which Dustin Hoffman's weedy academic picks off each of the villagers one by one, after realising that violence is the only language such people understand. Quite apart from the fact that the rape scene involves elements of strong violence and nudity, Amy's complex reaction to the attack makes for uncomfortable viewing and could be seen, particularly if presented out of context, as a dangerous endorsement of the male 'rape myth' that women secretly enjoy being raped.

The film was originally seen by the Secretary of the BBFC, Stephen Murphy, at the post-production stage. Stephen Murphy recommended a number of small changes to the film to reduce its levels of violence (a reduction to the second part of the rape scene and the toning down of some of the climactic violence, in particular that involving a man trap). These changes were incorporated into the finished version, which was classified X without further cuts for cinema release. Although the film was popular at the box office, it attracted the wrath of a number of leading critics, who saw the film's presentation of violence as gratuitous and its attitudes to violence (ie that even the most pacifist individual can justifiably be forced to respond with violence) borderline fascistic. The film was campaigned against by Mary Whitehouse's Festival of Light and banned by a number of local councils.

During the early 1980s *Straw Dogs* was made available on home video in the original cinema version. Prior to the introduction of the Video Recordings Act (VRA) in 1984 it was not necessary for video releases to be separately classified by the BBFC and so *Straw Dogs* was released on video on the basis of its existing X cinema certificate. After the introduction of the VRA it became necessary, however, for *Straw Dogs* to achieve a separate video classification certifying its suitability for 'home viewing'. Under the staggered system for classifying the huge number of videos already on the market it was necessary for English language films classified by the BBFC between 1 January 1970 and 31 December 1974 to receive a video classification, or be withdrawn from circulation, by 1 March 1988. *Straw Dogs* was therefore legally available on video in the UK, uncut and without a video certificate, until March 1988.

Along with *The Exorcist* and *Death Wish*, *Straw Dogs* was ultimately removed from video shops in 1988 because the BBFC's then Director, James Ferman, did not feel that it would be appropriate to classify this particular film for video release 'at that time'. Partly this was in response to the recent Hungerford massacre which led to increased sensitivity about video violence in general, but also because concerns about sexual violence in films had increased since the 1970s, with the BBFC being inclined now to take a far stricter and more cautious approach. Of particular concern was the fact that the new technology of home video opened up the possibility of scenes being played - and replayed - out of context. In the case of *Straw Dogs* this was particularly problematic because Amy's ambiguous reaction to the rape could be viewed out of the wider context of the film, fuelling the fantasies of potential offenders. In 1997 *Straw Dogs* was submitted formally for video classification. Unfortunately, the version submitted on that occasion was an edited version prepared for the American market, which lost most of the unambiguously unpleasant second rape. The cuts made for American distribution, which were intended to reduce the duration of the sequence, therefore tended paradoxically to compound the difficulty with the rape rather than lessen it. The audience was left with the impression that Amy enjoyed the experience. The distributors were finally offered an extensive cuts list (totalling some 3½ minutes) at the beginning of 1999 as an alternative to rejection. By the stage cuts were agreed, however, the distributor in question had lost the rights to the film and was unable to consider making the cuts requested. *Straw*

Dogs was therefore rejected formally by the BBFC for the first time in March 1999. Meanwhile, the original uncut version of *Straw Dogs* was submitted for video classification by another distributor. However, on the basis that the BBFC could not very well pass a more complete version of the film so soon after rejecting an edited version, this version was also rejected.

In 2002, the uncut version was submitted once again. By this stage the BBFC had introduced new classification Guidelines, which placed greater emphasis on the right of adults to choose their own viewing. The BBFC showed the video to leading clinical psychologists specialising in work with sex offenders and to a panel of members of the public.

The response of the clinical psychologists was that the present version of *Straw Dogs* was not harmful and was not likely to encourage an interest in rape or abusive behaviour towards women. The psychologists agreed that the ambiguous first rape was in fact a fairly realistic depiction of a quite complex situation. They also agreed that, by the end of the second rape, any general messages reinforcing 'rape myths' were undermined by the lack of ambivalence shown in Amy's reaction to the second attack. It was also noted that Amy's flashbacks to her distressing experience later in the film further undermined any impression that she might welcome rape or that it has no serious effect on its victims. The psychologists commented that the scene was filmed in a relatively discreet manner, with limited potential today for titillation.

The issue of context was also important to the members of the public to whom the video was shown as part of a research exercise into the acceptability of images of sexual violence. A focus group of 26 people viewed *Straw Dogs*, with 20 people accepting 18 uncut as the most appropriate category, five suggesting only minor cuts, and only one favouring rejection. No respondent asked for major cuts of the kind required by the BBFC in 1999.

Discussion in the subsequent focus group about the film was generally very positive, with most members finding it a powerful, compelling and well made work. The controversial scenes were not considered to be a gratuitous exploitation of sexual violence. It was felt that the quality of the filmmaking and the narrative context allowed the director to explore through them some difficult and complex issues.

Significantly, respondents saw the manner in which Amy copes with her experience also as essentially positive and concluded that the full version of the scene - as well as the flashbacks shown afterwards - reinforced the idea that rape is not to be taken lightly because of the serious effect it can have on individuals. No concerns about possible harmful effects were identified.

The BBFC recognised that the rape scene in *Straw Dogs* has lost only part of its power over the years, despite the age of the film. Nonetheless, in the restored version, and in the light of the evidence of expert opinion, the BBFC's conclusion was that, in 2002, the film had no significant potential to cause harm to viewers or, through their actions, to society as a whole.

In 2011 the BBFC was presented with a modern remake of *Straw Dogs*, this time set in the USA. Although the remake also features a version of the double rape scene, the presentation of sexual violence was considerably less problematic than in the 1971 version. Firstly, Amy's response to the first rape (by her former boyfriend) is less ambiguous. Secondly, the scene is presented without any breast nudity or other potentially 'erotic' elements. Thirdly, the remake spends more time than the original providing a clear back story for Amy and her former

boyfriend. The remake was classified 18 uncut for strong bloody violence and one scene of sexual violence.

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