

# Cultural Daily

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## Straw Dogs Then and Now

Garner Simmons · Thursday, September 15th, 2011

It has been 40 years since the release of Sam Peckinpah's troubling but brilliant *Straw Dogs* starring Dustin Hoffman and Susan George. It is one of those films I never expected to see remade. It seemed much too personal, too revealing both of the fictional characters at the core of the story, and the man who chose to bring them to the screen. Yet, director Rod Lurie has done just that. Sony will release Lurie's version of Peckinpah's original on September 16, in the full wake of the 9/11 anniversary media coverage, presumably in the belief that we may have reached a point where audiences are so desensitized (or perhaps addicted) to violence that the film will do well.



For the record, I knew Sam Peckinpah for the last dozen years of his life, and I wrote about *Straw Dogs* in detail in *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage*. I also know Rod Lurie, though not nearly as well. As a result, Lurie recently invited me to attend a screening of his remake of Sam's film. The contrast was striking and provides useful insights into the ways in which audiences, movies, and our society have changed over the past four decades.

Each film is a product of its age. Working in 1970, Sam Peckinpah saw *Straw Dogs* as an opportunity to dramatize two critical emerging issues that dominated the American scene in the late 1960s: the violence surrounding the Vietnam War and the burgeoning sexual revolution. Lurie's film, in my view, is an attempt to dramatize sex and violence as it exists today, specifically in the kind of closed societies found in rural small towns of the American South.

The title, originally chosen by Peckinpah, is intentionally obscure. It refers to a quote from the 5th century BCE Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu: "*Heaven and earth are ruthless and treat the myriad of creatures as straw dogs; the sage is ruthless and treats the people as straw dogs.*" In other words, as Nature is impersonal and ruthless so is the wise man. Never allow your emotions to rule your head. For Sam Peckinpah, this title was meant to be ironic. His entire life – and by extension, his films — was ruled by trusting emotion over intellect. In fact, few if any in the audience back in 1970 were familiar with the quote. And for Peckinpah, that was just fine. In looking at Lurie's version, however, it seems fair to say that he is uncomfortable with such ambiguity. At one point in the current film, Lurie, who also adapted the screenplay, goes so far as to have his David (James Marsden) literally explain the term "straw dogs" in detail to his wife Amy (Kate Bosworth).

So it should come as no surprise that these two interpretations of the same material could not be more different. From the opening images, we have a stark contrast. As Jerry Fielding's darkly intense Academy Award nominated score begins, Peckinpah opens with a high angle out-of-focus

shot that eventually resolves itself as children playing in the graveyard of an ancient church in Cornwall. Expanding this to the town itself, Peckinpah presents what on the surface appears to be a quiet English village, the last place one might look for violence.

Lurie, on the other hand, begins along a pastoral bayou where a deer grazes, then hesitates as it senses something in the air. A moment later without warning, the deer is shot dead by men whom we will come to know as the town bullies led by Charlie Venner (Alexander Skarsgard). Unlike Peckinpah, Lurie wants to establish right up front the violent nature of those who live in the fictional town of Black Water. He then proceeds to underscore this violence at every turn. From bar fights to the local high school football team to the brutal finale. In this part of the world, Lurie seems to be saying, violence is a learned response to the unfair realities of life.

It is also valuable to compare the way in which each director explores character. In Peckinpah's film, Dustin Hoffman's David begins as a man in denial. He has come to the town where his wife grew up in rural England ostensibly to work on a mathematical treatise for which he has received a grant. In truth, he is running away from the violence and unrest that plagued American college campuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s. What he fails to recognize is that he has brought the violence with him – in essence, it is part of his DNA.



This is a key difference between the two versions for Lurie disputes the validity of the notion of “territorial imperative” that lies at the core of Peckinpah's film. In 1970, Peckinpah read two books by Robert Ardrey: *African Genesis* and *The Territorial Imperative* which posit that in high-functioning primates, including man, there is a drive to mark one's territory and defend it to the death against all outsiders. In Ardrey's view, this is a primal urge that will surmount all others. Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* reflects his agreement with this thesis. Lurie, on the other hand, believes that violence in man is cultural, not innate. Hence, Lurie's film portrays David as a non-violent man who is forced by circumstance to rise to the level of the violence he encounters. For this reason, Lurie chooses to transplant the story to the rural South where, in his view, violence is endemic, passed down to each new generation as a kind of rite of passage. In his version, David is not running away from anything. He is simply trying to work.

At the heart of the story, of course, is a notorious rape scene. It forms the centerpiece of both films. Without getting into detail, once again the contrast is dramatic. Peckinpah intentionally undermines the relationship between Amy and David revealing him as distant and cerebral, using his work to avoid contact with the rest of the world. Conversely, Amy is a complicated woman-child in search of a playmate. Into this comes Charlie (Del Henney), Amy's former boyfriend, who failed to consummate their relationship before Amy left for the States. Over the first half of the film, Amy flaunts her independence and sexuality, a modern woman confident that she is in control of every situation. The result is that the rape, while both brutal and graphic, is not straightforward. Like everything else in Peckinpah's world, Amy's motives are ambiguous. She lets Charlie into the house. She begins by resisting him, but then succumbs to the complexity of her own sexual needs and desires. Yet in a Peckinpah film, nothing is precisely as it seems. And no sooner has Amy given in to her darker impulses than Charlie betrays her, holding her down while his cohort, Norman, does much worse. The sequence is harrowing in part because of the incredibly layered performance given by Susan George. It is a powerful scene that, along with the violent confrontation at the end of the film, resulted in the film being banned in the UK by the British Board of Censors for nearly twenty years.

Lurie, on the other hand, sees no such complexity. He clearly supports the position that rape is rape, and no means no. Hence in his version, Charlie forces his way into the house and overpowers Amy, violently forcing himself upon her. Then, once he's finished, he compounds the crime by stepping back and allowing Norman to take the violation and humiliation further while Charlie occupies himself with putting on his shirt. This, too, is a difficult scene to watch. But in Lurie's version, Amy is a victim throughout. It is interesting to note that while Peckinpah's film was threatened with an "X" rating by the MPAA (the kiss of death at the box office of the time) forcing him to make certain cuts before being granted an "R," Lurie's version, according to him, received an "R" rating without a challenge. Again, each film is a product of its era.

Asked by a woman in the audience of the screening I attended why Amy doesn't tell her husband that she has been raped (the same thing is true in Peckinpah's version) Lurie offered what was perhaps the evening's most insightful moment. "Because," he said, "And this is the answer I gave to Kate Bosworth, who plays Amy: she's afraid that if she does, David will do nothing."



Today, violence in film is much more overt. Subtle nuances are lost on the mass audience. People pay for exaggerated thrills. And the studios of the 21st century rarely make any pretense of attempting to explore the troubling truths of human nature. Money is the name of the game, and today's films are designed to play to the greatest possible audience in order to maximize the box office grosses. Thus, it seems even more ironic that, in visual terms, Peckinpah's portrayal of violence on film is far less graphic than Lurie's. This is not to say that violence does not lie at the core of both films. It does. However, Peckinpah's intent is psychological and emotional. In the end, Dustin Hoffman's David is a changed man. In Lurie's version, David is a survivor. Moreover, the violence in Lurie's version is, in keeping with current vogue, graphically and unyieldingly in your face. By the end of Lurie's film, there are no subtle revelations. The house is awash with blood and engulfed by fire.



Clearly the final question rests with us. What, if anything, can two such different films based on the same material but made four decades apart tell us about ourselves? Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* makes no attempt to provide us with easy answers. To be human, he seems to be saying, means living a life bruised by contradictions and ambiguities. Nothing is certain. But despite this, in the end, we cannot escape the need to take a stand. Conversely, Lurie's is a world where ambiguity does not exist. His is a tale of a non-violent man who blinds himself to the brutality around him. Finally, forced by circumstance, he briefly becomes as savage as his attackers, killing them all. Yet his actions never give rise to anything even approaching self-examination. Having made no serious sacrifice, he is satisfied with just coming through the ordeal alive. But then, in a world where our leaders are risk averse and doing nothing is the obvious political act of choice, perhaps this new *Straw Dogs* is simply a reflection of the nation we have become.

*Images: Top two, from Peckinpah's version; bottom two, from Lurie's.*

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