

The Pleasures of Watching an "Off-beat" Film: the Case of Being John Malkovich

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It's a real thinking film. And you sort of ponder on a lot of things, you think ooh I wonder if that is possible, and what would you do -- 'cos it starts off as such a peculiar film with that 7½th floor and you think this is going to be really funny all the way through and it's not, it's extremely dark. And an awful lot of undercurrents to it, and quite sinister and ... it's actually quite depressing if you stop and think about it. [Emma, Interview 15]

M: Last question of all. Try to put into words the kind of pleasure the film gave you overall, both at the time you were watching and now when you sit and think about it.

J: Erm. I felt free somehow and very "oof"! [sound of sharp intake of breath] and um, it felt like you know those wheels, you know in a funfair, something like that when I left, very "woah-oah" [wobbling and physical instability]. [Javita, Interview 9]

Hollywood in the 1990s was a complicated place, and source of films. As well as the tent-pole summer and Christmas blockbusters, and the array of genre or mixed-genre films, through its finance houses and distribution channels also came an important sequence of "independent" films -- films often characterised by twisted narratives of various kinds. Building in different ways on the achievements of Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), all the following (although not all might count as "independents") were significant success stories: *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *American Beauty* (1999), *Magnolia* (1999), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004).

One important feature was that a number of these have been "breakthrough" films for new directors, functioning as demonstrations of their potential, and allowing them to enter the studio world. Not art-house, although sometimes dependent on the small circuits of art-house cinemas, there has been no obvious nomenclature for these films. They have tended to be described by what they *aren't*: they are "not mainstream," "off-beat." For some audiences, at any rate, these kinds of films became markers of a kind of cinema they seek, and the kinds of experience to be gained from watching these films deserves exploration. What demands are made by them, and what pleasures do they provide in return? Of course, these films are not easily groupable. Some are like variants on a clearly-referenced genre -- *The Usual Suspects* clearly plays with the conventions of the heist movie; *Blair Witch* may have renewed, but it clearly belongs to, the horror genre. Others are less readily classifiable.

Being John Malkovich (henceforth *BJM*) was a surprise "hit" on its release in 1999. Made on a budget of \$13m, with a director (Spike Jonze) better known for his music videos, and

widely promoted and reviewed as a bizarre indie movie, *BJM* grossed over \$22m in the USA on a very limited number of screens (at most 600). *BJM* quickly attained a critical reputation as a whacky, but simultaneously thought-provoking film -- and found outlets and audiences in the UK in particular at independent venues. Its weird and complicated storyline delighted many people, and a strong current of word-of-mouth support accompanied it.

I saw *BJM* early in its first run at Brighton's main independent cinema, the Duke of York's, which subsequently brought the film back for a second sell-out run. Fascinated by the film, and by my own responses to it, I gained permission to poster the cinema and leaflet the second-run queues. My leafleting had only limited success, resulting in just eighteen people willing to be interviewed about their responses to the film. [1] With the inevitable tentativeness that must follow such a small-scale piece of research, I believe that these interviews do reveal some striking features, about film-audiencing in general, and about the meaning of *BJM* in particular as a type-case of these recent "off-mainstream" films.

The Research Frame

In this essay I explore what it means to the people whom I interviewed to watch a film of this kind. What kinds of pleasures are involved in this, what senses of identity and community are summoned up in the process of watching and then discussing *BJM*? And what light might this throw on how we think about the concept of "art-house" audiences? In particular I argue that findings of this kind challenge the theoretical claims of, for instance, David Bordwell, whose approach presumes an ability to demarcate cognitive "cues" from the motivational structure with which audiences approach a film. [2] In suggesting how we might move beyond this, I draw on ideas being developed within reader-response research, to argue that viewers of *BJM*, importantly, *wish to be part of* certain kinds of community, and that this shapes how they want to employ their imaginations around the film. Of course, the "kind" of film involved is also an issue here. Recent genre research has begun to emphasise the ways in which genre names may be "owned," and carry within them vernacular meanings (see for instance Altman [1999], and very recently Ferriss and Young [2008]). My argument is that "off-beat" is just such a vernacular label: temporary, unstable, seeking to include films providing the right kind of challenge and sense of belonging to a wished-for interpretive community.

Remarkably little research has been done to date on the character and practices of "art-house" audiences. Such work that exists is limited by the survey methods that were used. In the 1950s Dallas Smythe and his colleagues (Smythe et al., 1953), and then later Bruce Austin (1984) undertook surveys of people patronising particular cinemas. Perhaps the main remaining interest of these surveys is the point at which they almost outrun their origins. Austin, for instance, introduces a distinction between "frequent" and "occasional" visitors, to try to explore the *difference* from mainstream cinema-going that art-house cinema-going might be associated with. And he does find that the more frequently people visited art cinemas, the more likely they were to say they would not miss Westerns, pornography, and foreign films if they no longer had access to such cinemas. This is potentially interesting, but what is missing is what might have been included under these headings, and what these films are experienced as offering -- an understanding that could only be gained through more intensive methods. But that would almost certainly have occasioned a shift from a *quantitative* distinction about frequency of attendance, to a *qualitative* distinction about levels of commitment to the activity.

Some other and more recent pieces of research offer more immediately valuable links to my argument. Janna Jones' (2001) investigation of the audiences for a Tampa Bay art-house cinema bears close consideration, especially her finding that people often reported that they didn't understand the films they saw there, but enjoyed them precisely *because* of the challenge this posed to them, which related to their rejection of the perceived nature of "Hollywood films." In a rather different vein, Thomas Austin's study of audience responses to the French documentary *Être et Avoir* found clear evidence of an audience for whom "honesty, simplicity, and specialness" were desired characteristics, for their contrast with an otherwise "omnipresent media clamour" (Austin, 2005).

These research contexts are crucial in singling out the importance of *committed* as against *average* audiences. Over a series of tranches of research, I have been developing both a conceptualisation of audience responses, and an associated research methodology which closely informed how I approached *BJM*. This lineage of research began with work on comic book audiences (*Action* [1976], *2000AD* [1977-]), then film audiences (*Judge Dredd* [1995], *Crash* [1996]) and more recently audiences for a stage adaptation of *Crash*, responses to the re-released *A Clockwork Orange* and *Straw Dogs* (both 1971), and most recently the international *Lord of the Rings* (2001-3) audience research project, and our Aberystwyth research for the British Board of Film Classification on audience responses to screened sexual violence. One central claim to emerge has been that the audiences we most need to understand are those who display the most unalloyed and enthusiastic participation in a film (what I have called "highly invested" audiences) -- because they claim *rights and ownership*, because they pay closer attention, and *work harder* than other audiences at making it meaningful to themselves. (It is entirely an empirical issue whether this process is singular or plural.)

But the difficulty is that those members of the audience who do adopt such an unconditionally positive response are, by virtue of their delighted participation, often least capable of expressing in words the very relations to the film which they achieved, and which the research wants to uncover. [3] Therefore research has to adopt crabwise tactics, approaching a statement of the conditions for a positive response through looking at those audience members who through their talk and their responses acknowledge the possibility of an unconditionally positive response, but for various reasons decline or fail to achieve it. This then allows the possibility, at least in principle, of developing a model for any film (or indeed other cultural offering) of the *conditions required for an unconditionally positive response*. If and when research arrives at this point, what it can reveal is the available cultural role or roles which a film's narrative thematics address.

A second strand of this argument utilises a concept which I have, with others, been developing for some time now: the concept of a *strategy of response*. In brief, this refers to the interconnections between prior knowledge and expectations of a film (or, again, any other kind of cultural expression) that a person has; the conditions under which viewing takes place (choice of company, cinema, immediate environment of viewing, etc); the processes of meaning-making during the immediate encounter with the film; and the unfolding processes, after viewing, of thinking and talking about it, and through these arriving at a more or less determinate judgement of the film -- assigning it a place in memory, in significance, and allotting it a position as a potential resource for thinking about other things. I will not try to justify this conceptualisation and methodology here. I am content to let its worth be judged from the findings which emerge from its use. [4]

The confluence of these two concepts ("investment" and "strategy of viewing") dictated how I needed to conduct the interviews and indeed analyse them, afterwards. First, because this approach examines people's willingness or otherwise to enter available cultural *roles*, I have no immediate interest in generalised demographic data about my interviewees. Where I include such information at all, it is because, in the course of giving an account of their responses to *BJM*, people felt the need themselves to point me to these. My schedule of questions was designed to encourage people to see their own accounts as "expert evidence" which only they can provide. I wanted to see in what ways people's different viewing strategies worked on the film, how they encountered and coped with the demands of understanding particular moments in it, what emerged as the most memorable aspects of the film, what if anything disappeared from view, and through all these, how people wanted to describe and weigh their own experience of *BJM*.

Overall then, I followed a five-stage methodology:

1. drawing up individual portraits of the specific ways audiences make links across the four broad aspects of a viewing strategy;
2. comparing portraits, to see what typified links they might reveal which can indicate supra-individual processes at work;
3. from these, beginning to formulate a higher-level portrait of what, in the organisation of the film, sustains or disappoints certain kinds of "reading";
4. through this, identifying the conditions under which a rich encounter with the film is possible, and what conditions appear to inhibit this;
5. through this, again, identifying in what way the film is constructed and received *modally* -- that is, what uses beyond the boundaries of the cinema does it sustain?

In line with these methodological stages, my argument here is built primarily through four individual portraits. Portraits like these, I believe, allow us to capture the relationship between parts of people's responses, and their patterns of judgement. Analysed in full (which I do not do here, for space reasons), they can disclose the structures of vernacular meaning-making -- the encounters, moves, exercises of choice and judgement through which people manage their experiences of a film and arrive at their assessments of it. Of the four portraits given here, only one claims for herself an unreservedly positive experience. The other three are hedged about with reservations and qualifications which are of just the kind to allow us to see more clearly what the most positive response amounts to.

A case-study of four contrasting viewers [5]

1. Richard [Interview One] was a scientist in his early thirties. [6] Married, and with two young daughters, he doesn't easily find time to go to the cinema -- certainly not as often as he would like. Therefore to go at all is an exquisite "luxury," and his hopes and expectations are always high. They were particularly high on this occasion because of his strong attraction to independent film-makers, such as the Coen Brothers or Jim Jarmusch. But *BJM* came with a problem -- it was part-spoiled for him by feeling that he knew too much before he went. He had encountered reviews which "gave a brief synopsis, which I dislike intensely, it often

ruins a film for me ... I wish I hadn't known [how wonderful they all said it was], I wish it had all been a surprise." With *BJM*, he took the opportunity to go with a male friend -- who in the end enjoyed it much more than he did.

Richard "dropped out" of the film about a third of the way through. He wanted very much that it should be brilliant, but for a combination of reasons, he found himself "watching objectively" -- to him, the opposite of the kind of viewing experience he wanted. With *Independence Day*, he contrasted, it had been the opposite: "I made a choice, an actual choice, to go along with it." As a result, *ID4* had "no objectivity, it takes you away." *BJM* by contrast was a "wonderful idea," but in the end caused him some real, quite long-term anguish.

His reasons for frustration with *BJM* are complicated. First, a physical reason -- he had a very full bladder, but desperately wanted not to miss any of the film. But beyond this very powerful interrupter there were filmic reasons. He began very hopefully. Watching Carl's arrival at the 7½th floor, "I thought, I'm going to love this, it's so bizarre... How are they going to get through this, how are they going to justify this madness?" So what went wrong for him? It was not, he was very positive, that he couldn't make sense of the film -- on the contrary, he felt he understood everything about it. No, his problem was on two levels. First, he took an intense dislike to Catherine Keener's character Maxine -- a very particular dislike. For Richard, she simply couldn't have had attracted John Malkovich, yet the plot presumes that she establishes a hold over him. This is how Richard describes his dislike for her: "I thought, this isn't John Malkovich, this is a puppet." Thus he felt he wasn't able to "forgive" her. In other words, his dislike for her became a force because it was measured against a sense of the *deserts* of Malkovich. The motive became clear when he said: "I have this fantasy that he [Malkovich] is a happily married man with two children, I don't think he's got divorced yet."

He then expands his dislike of Maxine/Keener into a significant generalisation: the characters "have no outer life." By this he did not mean that there might not be real-world counterparts, but that he was unable to conceive what their lives would have been like when they were not on-screen.

His second turn against the film came right at the end, via the scene in which we see the young daughter, and realise that she is now "inhabited" by Carl. This disturbed, even shocked him. It was "very nasty, very unpleasant... it stayed in my mind a lot, and I found that irritating." He couldn't help thinking of what this would have meant, had it been his own daughters -- that would have been "ghastly," "very abusive."

Richard's case reveals some interesting linkages. His prior knowledge not only raised his expectations too high, it also activated a fantasy-picture he had of Malkovich as a "perfect family man." It therefore set up a cinematic ideal with which the film then conflicted. *BJM* became a *kind* of fantasy he could not stomach. That didn't stop him acknowledging how clever it was, how well-made the film was. It split his judgement in two, in fact, between appraisal of the film-makers (to whom he was concerned to be fair), and his inability to lose himself in the film.

We can sketch several things from this. First, there are signs here of the functions of this kind of cinema in his life. It is not simply an escape -- it is time-off from family responsibilities. But independent films function in a special way, as a gateway to a world where ideals are

realised. This, I acknowledge, is only hinted at, and is anyway very particular to him. What interests me more is what happens once he encounters a conflict between his cinematic ideals, and his experience of the film. In dropping out of the film, and becoming "objective," he finds himself measuring the film against *both* his own wider fantasy-ideals, *and* his protectiveness towards his daughters. The film becomes, in this sense, too *real*. Once having lost his connection with the film, there was no way back in for him. But he is conscious of his own grounds for quite intense refusal; he recognises that generally his scientific interests lead him to look for films dealing with "conceptual" issues -- even though these can stop him becoming totally involved.

2. Katherine [Interview Six], a woman in her mid-twenties, had recently moved back to Brighton -- a fact of considerable importance to her watching *BJM*. She went to see the film *in spite of* not liking the actor John Malkovich. (This was incidentally a part of a wider common response. Of my eighteen respondents, twelve told me of some reason why they might not have enjoyed *BJM* -- from disliking Spike Jonze's work, to bad experiences with one or another of the cast. This does hint at the possibility that the film was seen as having the potential to *reverse* such experiences.) Katherine knew very little about *BJM* before she saw it, except that it would be a complex plot, and she very much wanted to understand it all. This mattered to her -- it would be a sign that she "belonged" in the world of alternative cinema, which to her means Brighton as against Surrey where she used to live. This will to make sense was sufficiently strong that she took away one part which bugged her -- Carl's inhabitation of the daughter at the end -- and carried on thinking about it until she had an explanation. She then rang her friend with whom she had gone, to explain and test the explanation.

But for all this, *BJM* was a film to be seen only once -- to be savoured as an occasion, not to be revisited, lest it pall.

A powerful ideal guides her sense of "alternative" cinema -- an ideal of imaginativeness. The film is essentially an entrée to the world of alternative people with which she desperately wants to identify. Along with this, she loves to watch a film, and have to think: "I wish I'd thought of that!" The fact that the film is independently produced means it can be a place where she can fantasise more broadly: "I felt it probably tapped into some fantasy that I probably hold, of somehow becoming famous, you know" -- famous, that is, for being a certain kind of imaginative person.

"Imagination" is a complex affair to Katherine. Several times in the course of the interview she equated it with being "unconventional." Within the film, it encompassed three things: the striking, "simply beautiful" images of the puppeteering; the narrative's twists and turns; and likeable unusualness of the characters. Ideally all three should be present -- and were, in *BJM*. She would love these to describe herself. Katherine emphasised how sorry she felt for Carl, at the end -- thrown out of Malkovich's head, alone, and desperately seeking a way back to Maxine. But half-way through the interview, she realised that Carl could be "read" differently, if she stopped to think about the scene where Lottie is "caged" with her pet monkey, while he goes off to experience Malkovich having sex with Maxine. It disturbed her to realise that she hadn't thought that this might count for some people (and people whom she respects) as abusive -- she had read it only for purposes of the narrative. The reason she hadn't? "I guess because I knew it was all going to be OK. I just somehow knew, I felt confident in the film that it wasn't going to be something really awful."

Katherine rated the film "fantastic," one of the best she had seen in a long time. Her summary of her experience is interesting: "I wanted it to be complete, I wanted to totally understand, and then I thought, that it may have been the intention that you don't, I don't know, it might... because then I did go away, thinking, thinking, thinking, rather than having everything on a plate." She felt the film gave her *permission* not to understand everything right off -- but it also put a *responsibility* on her to work it all out. This is, in a small way, a felt bargain. Completing her part allows her to become the right kind of person. Making sure I knew she was being slightly self-mocking ("so that I don't appear big-headed, that I think I'm special enough to be the kind of person they thought would enjoy it"), she proclaimed that meeting its demands on her allowed her to feel a "superior" kind of person. "This is one of many strands why I moved back to Brighton last August, to have that sort of thing readily available."

There is a powerful sense in Katherine's answer, of her responses to the film being part of a project for herself -- to become more of a certain kind of person. This film tested her imaginative reflexes, and let her see for herself that she *deserved* to be back in Brighton. That she could demonstrate this to someone else, by phoning her friend with her "solution" to the narrative enigma, was a legitimately earned bonus.

3. Emma [Interview Fifteen] was known to me as a mature student of media studies at Sussex University. She had loved *BJM*, found it "fantastic," particularly enjoying the "sheer beauty" of the puppeteering sequences, and found it as a whole "a quite unique little film" which she had rated 10/10 for the sheer experience (though she added that she felt she tended to overrate films she had just seen). She had heard about the film because of the rave reviews it got at the London Film Festival, had then won two free tickets from a music magazine offer, so took a friend with her to see it. Her foreknowledge, and her way of handling that, was very complicated:

E: Em, I'd managed to avoid most reading too much, I slightly found I'd missed out reading the synopsis, 'cos I often do that and it ruins the film for me, but I had read one review that em went on about discoveri .. bringing in sort of issues of sexuality and how... what's her name? anyway it said sort of how she discovered that if she's a lesbian blah blah blah, and I thought I wish I hadn't read that because that's I would have preferred to have just gone to the film and worked things like that out for myself. I tried to sort of forget about that and watch it. So ..

M: So did that impact on your viewing?

E: I think it probably did, and I wish I'd not read it, 'cos I, as I say, I'd like to work things like that out for myself, or not even read issues like into that, just sit back and watch it and let it entertain me. Because it's such a clever story anyway, start thinking too deeply about it, I like to do that on sort of second or third viewing but the first time I just want to watch it to see what it does for me that way.

Emma lived a double-bind. She needed to know enough to be able to make the decision to "get off my backside and go and see it," but not so much as to predetermine her viewing. Finding herself straying to the latter side, she tries to "manage" her viewing, to "sort of forget" what she knew and just watch it, innocently. Only in this way can she "see what it

does for me." This process of voluntary submission to a film is very important -- what I have elsewhere called "strategic passivity" (Barker and Mathijs, 2007: 15). It isn't however at all incompatible with certain *kinds* of activity: forming judgements, making predictions, taking sides, feeling hopes or fears emerge. Emma found herself making some speedy shifts of gear as she watched, beginning with the 7½th floor:

That instantly changed my entire perception of the film, that moment, 'cos it sort of plodded along till then, then I thought this is really going to be a very peculiar film, and it sort of took the twist of the comedy on... So it sort of put a twist of humour and a bit of uncertainty as to where it was going, so it suddenly changed the whole outlook of the film, I think. You suddenly realised this is going to be quite silly, but...

That closing "but..." signalled something which startled Emma. As my opening quotation from her shows, this was a film which shifted terrain, became "dark" and in the end "very uncomfortable." There were several components to this. She had partly gone to see the film because of knowing that John Cusack was in it -- she both admired and fancied him. She hardly recognised him, and he turned out to be "not the likeable character I thought he was going to be... he was quite a bastard really."

The second component is complicated, and emerged in response to my asking her about how she made sense of various key moments in the film where strict internal logic appeared to fail. Emma's response was in part to deny the relevance of the questions: "it was obviously, it's not a true story, it's a fantasy story and I was quite yeah prepared to follow along with the story [*and later*] if you start questioning too much it all starts falling apart!" Yet asked about the film's presentation of the two women choosing to use Malkovich to create a child for themselves, Emma hesitated:

E: Mmmm. (Pause) They were saying that she was the sort of father of the child, even though it was only within John Malkovich's head, so it's nothing to do with her at all, it's John Malkovich's child and.... yes that did bother me.

M: Did it? Tell me how.

E: 'cos if you, it's not quite logical enough, although the story is not a logical story, to have that sort of twist in it, it kind of, mm, it sort of took it out of the fantasy story in a way.

This for Emma was the beginning of the film's darkening, and led to an unease which recurred during the Malkovich-within-himself scene, of which she said:

It was the wrong sort of weird, yeah, it didn't quite fit at all. No, I wasn't, I didn't really like that in a way. It was very funny and very well done, but not sure about how I would have done it. [Laughs] Can I say that? If I'd made it, I would have done it differently but I don't know how! Yeah, I didn't know what I was expecting there, but that's not, I remember just thinking that's not what I would have expected to see there at all.

Three related things appear to happen here. Emma becomes "uncomfortable" (her word) at various developments. She doesn't (as Richard did) lose her relationship of pleasurable

fascination with the film. That may be because, unlike him, she doesn't find herself directly measuring the film against her lived world. Instead, she finds fault with the *logic of the fantasy* at this point. And, in putting this into words, she wonders how she herself might have done things differently. But as a result of all these, *BJM* crosses a line for her. Whereas she says that in general films that she rates highly definitely have to be seen more than once -- the first time for the sheer encounter, then further times in order to weigh the film up properly and to make sure that its narrative and sense and argument are properly understood -- with *BJM* there is now a question mark over the idea of watching it again:

I'd love a second viewing. Although I think it's a fantastic film it's probably not a film I would sit down and watch again and again and again, but it would be up there as one of my sort of favourite films of the last year. But not a repeat viewing film, 'cos it's... 'cos I don't like films that make you leave, make you feel a bit sort of empty at the end of them. I like a good happy ending, and that is certainly not a happy ending.

The experience was wonderful *and* uncomfortable. She stayed with the film out of admiration, but it was almost too much. This was not a role she could bring herself to play repeatedly.

4. Graham [Interview Eleven] introduced himself to me as an *imaginative intellectual*, greatly caught by notions of virtual reality (he had visited California to see, and try out, Timothy Leary's VR suite), and by debates about identity in contemporary psychological and philosophical theory (mentioning in the course of the interview both Kenneth Gergen and Jean Baudrillard -- the latter with some derision). His interest in *BJM* was exactly that: an "interest." Graham repeated the term with emphatic force: he found the film "interesting" -- fun too, but the key point for him was the *ideas* that it embodied.

It meant that the moments in the film that were most magical to him were different from those of the other people I interviewed. Graham was unimpressed by the 7½th floor (a moment, as we've seen, capable for some people of setting the tenor for their watching of the entire film). He found it "fun" but no more than that -- and not simply because he had seen this in the trailer before he saw the film. Rather it was irrelevant to the way he was going to attend to the film:

Well actually I had seen that in the trailer. I had already decided I was going to see it before I saw the trailer so it didn't affect my intention to see it -- although I have to say the trailer didn't seem that interesting to me, it didn't, it... you know, I was seeing it through the filter of what I had heard about the film.

This meant that he was also not that interested in the film's own explanation of its events. He allowed that it had its own sense, but that was hardly the point: "I mean, I felt I understood the movie as far as the movie had the intention or the pretension to be understood." When I asked him directly for his reaction to the point in the film where Lester explains the "logic" of the ripening of John Malkovich's brain, Graham dismissed it as the film's "McGuffin":

To me it was a McGuffin, you know. It was like, I mean I subsequently saw *The Matrix*. You know, the developer or the scriptwriter or whoever has an idea that they want to play out, and then there is an attempt to kind of justify

it, and that's never as interesting as what they are playing out, and looked at in what seems to me you know cultural terms or, erm, the culture of concepts, it's also a lot less interesting because if a lot of people get interested in a particular idea, that idea is going to bear fruit in some way and the McGuffin just... I mean, it did justify this whole bunch of people there and all waiting so I guess there was the suspense thing, and it had its amusing side also with also this idea that there was this mass of people were going to rush through this portal (laughs)...

His own exploration of the possibilities implied by *BJM*'s presentation of identity-issues took him further and elsewhere -- but had consequences for his manner of attending to and responding to the film. There is a clear, tight separation operating here between what is *interesting* about the film, and what is *amusing* about it. The one point of total fusion for him happened at the point where Malkovich enters the portal into his own brain, and finds himself in a world of Malkovich's. This to Graham was totally unexpected, completely "right," and a complete "Whoaaaa!" But everything that happened after that was a lessening, a retreat to formula film-making.

This was true to the extent that the Graham simply couldn't remember the end of the film at all. The "real climax" was afforded him by the "million John Malkovich's." And that was because at this moment a certain reserve in his relation to the film was overcome. In the main, he held a distance, a distance which showed another way in which his responses differed from the others'. With one exception, Graham did not involve himself with the characters. Rather, he watched them being performed by the actors. This showed with startling clarity in his answer to my question about the challenge of trying to watch John Malkovich playing being inhabited by Carl -- an actor having to play "being controlled by someone else." Graham was self-aware of the complex "call" on his responses:

Well, I suppose it's a bit like *Face/Off* ... and I thought he did that well. Um. He, obviously one's sense of Malkovich is built from what one knows of him before plus the earlier parts of the film, but then when he's Cusack, yeah, it was different and so you are responding to it in that double sense.

Only in one respect did he move towards involvement with the characters, and that was through his evident attraction to (the previously unknown) Catherine Keener: "the woman was a big factor in the way I did respond to her. But of course with males, I don't experience it as, do I identify with this person or not? But some male actors I just find, I suppose I enjoy their company, I enjoy spending time with them." This slight distancing is part and parcel of the broad viewing strategy he follows, which entails an unwillingness on his part to allow his reactions to be subordinated to the process of the film. But the result of this unwillingness meant that the film might be *perceived* as weird, but it wouldn't be *experienced* as such. The rules of its world were not to be lived, only cogitated upon.

Extracting Some Very Tentative Conclusions ...

I wanted these case-studies to illustrate a number of points. First, the sheer complexity of processes involved in enjoying a film. Sometimes the most important thing about the cinema is its sheer *difference* from being at home. Choice of company, of cinema, of occasion are vital -- and of course being physically comfortable! But ideally the film will collaborate in this process. Cinema is a site -- or better, a range of different kinds of sites -- for letting

oneself be taken off into distinctive cultural scenarios. Managing one's preparations for such visitations can be very complicated. In some ways these are entirely commonplace observations. It is the processes involved, and their implications, which are not so obvious.

Implicit within these responses, and worth the extraction, is one double-headed feature. To engage successfully with *BJM* required a quite remarkable swiftness of response, the ability to see that things were happening and to guess ahead in such a way that whatever then did happen had the clear imprint of being "not what I expected." Again and again, in response to my questions about how they had coped with and made sense of certain moments of transition in *BJM*, people were able to tell me in detail of expectations they had begun to form, either detailed predictions or organised wonderings about what might be going to happen. In being prepared and able to guess ahead at high speed at crucial moments, audience members put themselves in a position to estimate over and over again *what kind of film is this* and *what kind of world is this*. It was, if you like, a condition of participation that they stay on their toes for each new twist, transition, as they sought to stay abreast of the film and keep *experiencing* its strange logic.

Compare, for this, two summary responses -- the first from a viewer who had a split reaction to *BJM*. Carol's [Interview Seven] main demand of a film is that it should be a "good night out." For this purpose, *BJM* was fine in as much as it was "hilarious" in parts -- but that is just it, they were *parts*. Carol didn't build a model of expectations of the film as she went along, indeed she found she couldn't, it was "too fast-paced" for her ("I just sat and watched it"). So Carol separated her enjoyment of the film from anything further -- the film didn't make much sense to her, but in the end she just didn't care.

Compare this with someone who was happy to award *BJM* 10/10: "one of the best films of the last two years." Valerie [Interview Four] made her ability to get in ahead of a film's development one of the valued conditions of her participation: "I enjoy checking just before things happen what's going on, I enjoy that." *BJM* tested her, in ways that thrilled her. And it did this by its entertaining seriously the bizarre and the grotesque -- Valerie's responses were peppered with paired opposites: "hilarious" and "horrible," "funny" and "sick," "beautiful" and "gross." The resolution of these was indicated in her response to the 7½th floor. As she watched it, she worried -- it looked for a moment that it might become too "silly," too Gilliam-esque. But the film did something different with it, it became "saner." But what does that word mean when couple with her reading of the ending? "Dark, just dark," as she put it: "because if they're not ripe, you can't get any sort of control over them. Not because you can't get in. So Emily, because she's not ripe, he's banished to the back of her mind just observing in this lifetime of horror."

I want to suggest that there is a significant combination here -- one that confirms yet simultaneously puts at risk the approach to film viewing proposed by David Bordwell. As is well-known, Bordwell centres his approach to films around the concept of "cueing": that films demand cognitive operations of a viewer, who must participate sufficiently in order to construct an apposite coherent account. At one level, what I have found confirms his approach. A viewer like Valerie is alert to the connections and implications in a fashion that enables *BJM* to become "whole." But beyond this point, Valerie and my other engrossed viewers do something significantly more, and different. Their ability to pursue and engage with the film's "cues" is not just some expression of a generalised mental ability. Valerie is not a more intelligent, or even a more educated person, than Carol. Her ability is a function of her *wish for certain kinds of experience, challenge and emotional participation*. This in turn

is an expression of her participation in a particular social position. Or, if we consider the second quotation which mastheads this essay, Javita becomes pleurably disoriented and wobbly *because* of her cognitive engagements with the film, which in turn links with her sense of who she is, her perceptions of her own world and of *BJM*'s world -- these aren't separable. Film comprehension is always and everywhere a *social* and *historical* act. But that flatly contradicts Bordwell's intent to separate off the cognitive skills of making filmic meanings, from the affective parts of responding, and suggests rather that we need a way of exploring the skills required for understanding and responding to films (and of course other modes of cultural expression) that locates them socially and historically. [7] What kinds of knowledge we might need about individual audience members, however, thereby becomes complicated. Standard demographic information (age, sex, sexuality, occupation, and so on) may well prove researchers' conveniences, rather than meaningful resources for understanding film responses. [8]

We can see a related aspect of this by examining my viewers' responses through another comparison. Horst Ruthrof, in a sadly neglected book on the role of the literary reader, analyses the ways in which written stories prefigure through the combination and interaction of what he calls the "presented world" and the "presentational process" of literary forms (Ruthrof, 1981). Competent readers build up a construct of the world they are encountering from both the information provided about the story's world, and from the manner in which that information is provided. His book is a detailed elaboration of the concepts involved here, and a demonstrative application of them to a number of literary forms. But Ruthrof proposes that readers, to manage this process, have to settle on an interpretative strategy:

If we were to draw inferences from all the details available in a narrative, i.e. the visual impression of the printed text, text signals, presentation world, the presentational process, and their concretized analogues, we would obtain a large number of general statements many of which would make sense in terms of the rest; some would be difficult to link with others and some might be completely isolated. Such statements we are referring to as high-level interpretative abstractions. But except for a research worker with a special aim, nobody reads stories in this manner. Instead, at a certain stage in the reading process and more or less consciously, we tend to take far-reaching interpretative decisions, we choose an interpretative standpoint towards which, more or less obstinately, all our further interpretative activity is oriented. Consequently, our interpretative abstractions will not only be reduced to those appropriate to our chosen interpretative stance, they will also appear as structured. This structured set of abstractions we should understand as a narrative's work ideology. (Ruthrof, 1981, 48-9)

I have always found this summary statement a particularly apt account of the notion of the "implied reader" -- and not least because of the final sentence, which takes us back to considering the text *in light of* the work that has been demanded of the reader. But in two respects, Ruthrof's account falls short of what happened with *BJM*. Here is a film to which people *did try* to attend with something like the devoted attention to detail that a "research worker" might give -- there was an impulse in those most devoted to it to find/achieve a fantastical unity across the film, even as that required a quite exhausting speed of prediction. And perhaps the most remarkable thing is that *BJM* works best with audiences who are willing to be perpetually unsettled.

I am wondering if this may not be important, a "trace" of a wider relationship. It seems possible that for some viewers there is an un-verbalised feeling that this is a film that *belongs* to them in a way that many others don't. This permits, just, these viewers to imagine doing it themselves -- joining in to write or rewrite the story. Emphasising just how tentative this is -- because the evidence is slight -- I do still note, because the implications are just so interesting, that the more positive my respondents were, the more likely they were to say, in one way or another, things such as these: "I wish I had thought of this," "I wondered if I could have come up with an idea like that." Their acts of prediction are, on this surmise, acts of momentary appropriation.

So, how from the patterning of these responses might we deduce and characterise the role which the film invites its audiences to play? What must audiences be willing and able to be and to do, and what do they get in return for a wholehearted participation? The notion of being "off-beat" is important. The film identified itself, and with that identified its *audience*, as being at or beyond the margins. Its characters defy easy categorisation -- and that seems to be the point. Its stars play beyond themselves -- they don't play themselves *as stars*. Malkovich himself *submits* to the film and its requirements. Diaz and Cusack (are seen to) vanish into their roles. Spike Jonze directs against type. In enjoying the film, my audiences seem also to invest in the notion that they are the kind of people who do this. But in doing so, they put flesh on the quite soft concept of the "off-beat" and the "non-mainstream."

The film seems to play on questions of "identity," but in quite particular ways. This is not a politics of identity -- audiences who came to the film with notions of the proper politics of gender, for instance, found the film too uncomfortable. The same can be said for those who chose to evaluate the film with other moral requirements -- concern for children, or for whom representations of lesbianism rub awkwardly. [\[9\]](#) But at the same time it wasn't a rationalistic attitude to identity. It isn't an interest in the *science* of personality or virtual reality that sustains an unalloyed pleasure in the film. It is more a serious stepping outside oneself, aided by humour, going off-centre. It is a *will to be other than you are* and *for the world to go differently* even if, right now, they can only conceive of this in bizarre, dark ways.

There is a dearth of research to give context to findings like these. I close, therefore, by examining the usefulness of one in which I see potential value. There is a small but interesting tradition of work into the psychological conditions and processes of literary response. Gaining a little prominence in the 1980s, through an international conference and a book of its papers, this tradition has sought to bring cognitive psychology to bear on the field of literature. This is in effect the same field of psychological research which David Bordwell has sought to tap, to parallel his work on the ways in which films "cue" audience responses. The essential question asked by this tradition is: what patterns may be identified from researching the ways in which people process those peculiarly formed materials that are aesthetic objects? In the main, research has been done with written stories. But nothing in principle prevents the extension of these approaches to other media (other than an assumption that it is "great" literature that will be accompanied by the most intense personal connections. That is one conjecture I would be happy to see tested!)

Take as one sample piece Seilman and Larsen's (1989) investigation of the role of "reminders" in literary response. They wish to avoid appealing to hypothetical entities such as the "self" or "personality" in understanding how and why people can become emotionally involved in literary works. Their starting point is the obvious -- yet curiously taken-for-

granted -- point that our mode of response to literary works is of a different order to that to materials which we identify as non-fictional. They call this a distinction between being concerned with the "veridicality" (truth to the external world) of non-fictional materials, as opposed to the "verisimilitude" (convincing semblance of life) of the fictional. This distinction leads to a further one, they suggest, between textual *comprehension* in the case of non-fiction and literary *appreciation* (suggesting emotional and aesthetic response). The problem is that, although work exists on comprehension, little attention has been given to how to research appreciation:

If literary appreciation is different from ordinary text comprehension, how can we approach the difference? From the perspective of cognitivistic psychology, one would start looking at the kinds of knowledge that the reader mobilizes during the process of reading and brings to bear on comprehension and appreciation. (Seilman and Larsen, 1989: 166)

Their approach is to identify the kinds of "world knowledge" which literary readers mobilise which have some kind of personal resonance. Their technique involved getting an experimental group to read two pieces -- one literary, one not -- marking every occasion when the text *reminded* them of something in their own lives. Afterwards, participants were interviewed in order to identify, and then classify, what these reminders were in each case. Seilman and Larsen classified people's reminders under three headings: those involving experiences they had personally had; those involving experiences they had observed; and those involving experiences they had heard about from others. Their findings were that literary reading tended to summon up many more personal than either observed or reported experiences. This, they suggest, relates well to the notion that literary appreciation involves making cognitive connections with aspects of our own remembered lives. They further found that "the mobilization of knowledge, as indicated by reminders, occurred particularly in the beginning of the texts. This is consistent with the idea that reminders indicate recruitment of knowledge for the purpose of constructing a framework of understanding, specific to the text at hand" (Seilman and Larsen, 1989: 175). But unlike the first finding, this was as true of expository as of literary texts, which strongly suggests that such mobilisations of connections work to get us going, and into the right mode of attending.

There is much to be said about the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of research. [\[10\]](#) Here, I only note one problem: they are working with a model which is essentially *backwards-looking* -- that our pleasures in imaginative worlds are to do with what we have *already* experienced, learnt, achieved. If that were to turn out to be true of people's pleasures in "great literature," it might raise some disturbing implications about great-literature-as-essentially-nostalgic, which I doubt they would want. For my purposes here, I only want to add to their stock of possibilities that some imaginative forms might *remind us of the kind of people we want to be* and the *kinds of world we could imagine inhabiting*. *Being John Malkovich*, if I am right, provided a fragment of such an experience to those who heard and welcomed its call. Understanding this entails both a psychology of film appreciation and a sociology of imaginative lives.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) One interview was unfortunately lost through a tape-recording failure. Two others were conducted with pairs, resulting in 15 transcribed interviews with 17 people.

[2] I am of course very aware of the substantial growth in cognitive film research since Bordwell's original definitions of the approach. But I would argue that, although many subsequent scholars (Murray Smith, Ed Tan, and Torben Grodal, among others) have sought to integrate an account of emotions and other affective responses into their analytic frame, their determined inattention to actual audiences, along with the assumption that viewing "begins" with the opening credits, means that they are unable to consider the ways that the motivations for watching inform and shape viewing practices. See my (Barker: 2005, 259-61) essay for a consideration of Murray Smith's work in relation to this.

[3] This recalls Ien Ang's evidence in her *Watching Dallas* (1986), that fans of the soap opera were less confident about stating and explaining their reactions than those who were hostile, or mocking. In my essay on cross-cultural comparisons of responses to *The Lord of the Rings* (chapter 9 in Barker and Mathijs, 2007), I explore the difficulties of understanding and evaluating exclamations like "Wow!"

[4] I have felt encouraged to set out this methodology in this way by Janet Staiger's (2000) essay, "The cultural productions of *A Clockwork Orange*." Her essay unapologetically gestures towards a wider body of theory (in her case, reception studies) which both guides her questions and shapes quite closely the analytic procedures she will follow.

[5] In the following section, the words appearing in "double quote marks" are taken directly from interview transcripts.

[6] Elsewhere (Barker, 2003), I have addressed the issue of the false informativeness of social profiles in audience research. It has been an issue implicit within much of the criticism of David Morley's *Nationwide Audience* (1980), in as much he deployed a snapshot notion of "class." On the problems of such snapshot versions, see E. P. Thompson: 1965, 9-10.

[7] Perhaps the best and clearest statement of Bordwell's position occurs in his (1992) essay "Cognition and comprehension." In this essay Bordwell demonstrates with great force the way a film such as *Mildred Pierce* (1945) sets tasks and puzzles that a viewer has to integrate into some kind of coherent whole, in order to comprehend it. This involves, crucially, constructing accounts of "characters" (which Bordwell usefully defines as "person" plus "roles"). His approach thus makes film comprehension into "an expanding elaboration of cues located in the text." As a procedure for unpacking the formation of a narrative, I find his account very compelling. But the problem comes in his closing remarks on emotions: "Up to a point, setting emotion aside is a useful methodological idealization: in principle, you can understand a film without discernibly having an emotional reaction to it" (Bordwell, 1992: 196-8). Part of the problem here lies in the very word "emotion" -- what my viewers display towards *BJM* is not primarily emotions (although there are undoubtedly *moments* of that), but rather a *willing interest* which associates with *kinds of caring* and *inclination to involve themselves in determinate ways*. These are simultaneously cognitive, affective, sensuous, imaginative, and emotional.

[8] This issue became a critical one in the international *Lord of the Rings* audience research project. Wanting to try to gather such basic demographic information, we faced the practical difficulty that occupations were in danger of being unresearchable, because of the vast differences in structures of work across the world. Our solution was to "group" kinds of occupation into categories where a person's *attitudes towards* their work might play a part. For instance, the decision to call a job "professional" or "creative" or "administrative" was

left to respondents. This proved a quite effective solution -- see Barker and Mathijs (2007) for some of the main findings that emerged.

[9] It was not only gender politics which could have this effect. Valerie mentioned another: "No, not shocked, I wasn't shocked by it. Yeah, it was gross, it was disgusting, it was gross definitely. Yeah, yeah, amusingly so. Absolutely. 'cos the writer had to think of something to happen when he went inside his own head, and I think that was a ... I didn't, I wouldn't have chosen that myself 'cos it kind of doesn't make any sense, why would it be like, it would be more likely to be some infinite regress thing going on that would really confuse you or something. But ... you know, for kind of just general kind of comedy-horror, it was great. But you're asking me what other sorts of things other people picked out. Was there something with a chimpanzee at some point? Now a friend of mine who's very right-on picked out that scene as the most kind of, she was just kind of oh, oh, I wonder if the chimp's cured of his neuroses now?" To be directly concerned with animal welfare and politics imposed another, too direct measure on the film, and disrupted participation. This is a point to bear in mind in considering a recent instance of meanings and responses being imputed to audiences. Charles Taylor, in a brief (1999) essay on the supposed attractions of recent indie films (admittedly not mentioning *BJM* specifically), dubbed them cynical operations, creating a "club for which blasé disaffectedness is the only criterion for membership." Taylor proceeded to describe the audience: "Audiences for indie films now affect the same put-on toughness that used to be de rigueur for audiences at exploitation movies. They're there to show they can take it. And the moviegoers and critics who reject these pictures find themselves accused of not being strong enough to accept dark or daring works." Yet again we see this unchecked willingness to "figure" an audience an author clearly doesn't like, or want to be part of.

[10] The tradition of work to which Seilman and Larsen belong is well-represented within the pages of the journal *Poetics*, which has long published empirical work on readers and reading practices. Rooted in developments within cognitive psychology, this work appears to combine concise quantitative methodologies with unblinking conceptual naivete. Take as an illustration of the latter the opening two sentences of another essay in the same tradition of work: "Thrillers, detective, and spy novels are always high on best-seller lists. These books are not read for the information they contain, but for the pleasure they provide (you do not read John Le Carré for the history of the cold war)." (Hoeken and van Vliet, 2000) The adoption of such a simplistic and unquestioning distinction between "information" and "pleasure," untouched by discussions of "representation" or of "modalities of truth," is remarkable.

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