

Bait

UK : 1999 : dir. Tom Shankland : : c10 min
prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:
[Adrian Coates](#) [d]
Adult cast unknown

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Radio Times (inaccurate) listing:

“Mark Kermode presents the short film showcase. Tonight’s theme is kids. A young man takes pity on a homeless man.”

[no listing in "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001"]

Broadcast in the Channel 4 “**Shooting Gallery**” slot for short films November 12th 2001. An unemployed Geordie father and his small son are packing sandwiches for a day out, and the child, Clint (!), is allowed to carry them now that he’s such a big boy. Dad takes him into town and immediately parks him in a café “for ten minutes” before disappearing into an amusement arcade across the road for a job interview, or so he says. The boy sits and waits, clutching his Tupperware sandwich container and watching a tide of unappealing adult life ebb and flow round him. A job vandalising a gambling machine is thrown out of the café, and spitefully knocks the boy’s box onto the floor as he leaves. While the boy retrieves it, a young couple move in on his table, faces clamped together as the one attempts to suck the clitoris of the other up through her teeth. The boy watches in disgust and resentment, but will not allow himself to be dislodged. Later, as the café empties, a drunken derelict wanders in, furtively snatching scraps of bacon from abandoned plates. He eyes the container the small boy is hoarding so diligently, and motions that he should hand it over. The boy obeys nervously, and watches the derelict dive out of the café the moment a waitress reappears.

Now dad returns from across the road – he didn’t get the job, he says – and asks for the sandwiches. He loses his temper when the boy can’t explain where they went, and marches him out for a long walk home. Around the corner from the café, he spots the derelict tucking into their lunch and pounces on him. There’s an undignified scuffle between the two of them, watched by sniggering schoolchildren along the arcade, until dad collapses in tears of humiliation and wretchedness. The puzzled derelict ambles off, leaving dad and Clint to make their way home on foot. Their spirits rise again as dad boasts of turning down the job because its perks and prospects didn’t meet his demands.

As always with short films, it has taken far longer to write this description than to watch the film itself, and as very often with shorts, one is left wondering what on earth the point was. This was the first of five shorts in a single “**Shooting Gallery**” session, notionally on the theme of the child’s perspective on the world. Three of the others – “**SAFER**”, “**DONUTS FOR BREAKFAST**”, “**FOOTBALL**” – were all to a greater or lesser extent infused with disgust of men, while the fourth – “**3-MINUTE WONDER**” – was a stunningly pointless exercise about three girls at a swimming pool, one holding her breath underwater.

It's commendable that Channel 4 give an airing to short-film-makers through this slot, but although resident Channel 4 film buff Mark Kermode interviews the makers of several of these before they're shown, his shirtcuff interviews shed light neither on the individual films and their purpose, nor on the aesthetics of the 5 to 15 minute feature as a genre. All that we learned from Tom Shankland, director of this one, was how the actor playing the dad went on a pub crawl with him to pick up the required accent, and how the actor struck up a rapport with the six-year old debuting as his son (by tugging at the boy's protruding ears). Well, thanks Tom.

The title "**BAIT**" implies another layer of meaning to what is actually seen – the boy as a hook with bread attached, the café punters as the fish – but if so it is a second layer of meaning without meaning. It's a short essay on the degradation of unemployment and its consequent economic castration, by all means a valid subject, except that two or three well-chosen still photographs could speak more eloquently about that than this – like so many other "**Shooting Gallery**" entries – shaggy dog story. It also suffers, inevitably, from a static quality, most of the action taking place around a table in a greasy spoon diner. A short film should not be competing with the still image, but making an interesting observation in a brief but novel way.

See subject index under **SHORT FILMS**.