

Irréversible

Sarah Yeonkyung Choi

Introduction to Cinema Studies

Helio San Miguel

Irréversible, of Paris-based Argentine filmmaker Gaspar Noé, is absolutely terrifying and terrifyingly well-done. It is the story of vengeance, attempted by Marcus (Vincent Cassel) and Pierre (Albert Dupontel), subsequent to the rape and assault of Alex (Monica Bellucci), the former's girlfriend and the latter's ex. Because of its experimental quality and unapologetic brutality—namely, a graphic scene in which a man is visibly bludgeoned to death with a fire extinguisher and a 10-minute long uncut rape scene—many people have found it in the least blasphemous and at most unbearable enough to leave the theater. In fact, its screening at the 2002 Cannes Festival was a major scandal, with almost all of the audience members leaving at one point or another. I, in the first couple of days of seeing it, was still haunted by Noé's images and in awe of the emotion and determination to write that he had compelled in me.¹

Where to begin? *Irréversible* is true to its title in its two definitions: it recounts an unrepairable event and does so in a reverse chronology. Thus, it focuses not on the aftermath, but on the event itself and forces the audience to live through each moment with the characters. Noé is particularly successful in the creation of his film world, as he chose to depict a niche underground culture, that of the tenth arrondissement of Paris. Through his choice of language, he demonstrates the contemporary racial and cultural identity of this 'ghetto' Parisian neighborhood that is home to immigrants, minority groups, and poverty, a direct result of recent gentrification. In a rage of hate, on a hunt to track down Alex's aggressor, Marcus speaks in a vulgar familiar language, constantly cursing and throwing out racial slurs. He and Pierre get into a cab of an Asian driver, which ends

¹ I do understand the severity of the topic at hand and do not wish to be insensitive in my objective reflection of this film.

with Marcus yelling *niakoué* ('gook'), and *espèce de chinois* ('chink'). Furthermore, he is told that the alleged aggressor can be found at a gay club, inciting him to say *pédé* ('fag') almost every minute of the first half of the film. Perhaps the French slur is meaner than the English, for it comes from the word *pédéraste*, designating the older man in the ancient greek relationship between him and an adolescent boy, but also is a close homophone to *pédophile*. The rapist himself uses such language, calling Alex *gonzesse* ('chick') and *petite bourgeoise* ('little rich girl'). His words reveal that he not only belongs to a low social class, but also has a personal, uncalled for hate for the bourgeois. Hearing such vulgarity, simultaneously makes the audience tense and authentically expresses social tensions of modern-day Paris.

In fact, Noé quite crudely calls attention to numerous social and political issues through his narrative choices and his transparency, notably his use of shots in real time. As the director, writer, producer, and editor of this film, even the smallest details were conscious decisions on his part. He likes to provoke. He reveals to his spectators their moral positions; his depiction of sexual assault brings into question women's rights, his blatant homophobia asks that of gay rights, and his idea of vengeance challenges the notion of legal justice. Once Alex is found and taken away by an ambulance, Pierre and Marcus are questioned by the police but unable to provide any information because Alex had left a party that they were at earlier. Immediately after the questioning, two men come up to them offering Alex's aggressor's name for money. One of them says, "*La vengeance est le droit de l'homme*," "Vengeance is the right of every man." He goes on to explain that cases like this have happened before and that the policemen are inadequate—they're not that interested in finding him and even if they do, they will put him in prison, where the aggressor will have free clothes and free meals. This is a story about men taking what they believe is rightfully theirs, about a man's choice. The sexual assault scene needs to be ten minutes long because this is a reoccurring incident in our society that many people like to gloss over or be in denial about. Perhaps the most

significant moment of the film is when from the top-right corner of the frame, you can see a vague blur of a man come into the tunnel, realize what's happening, and leave. It's awful. It's sickening. Yet we need to address it. As Perkins observed, "A movie cannot be both absolutely self-contained and meaningful. It draws non-stop on the values and knowledge which we bring to it. Recognition and interpretation of the film's experience both depend on an immediate responsiveness at the level where meaning is given rather than created." Noé shows us our hatred and violence in the ugliest manner, urging us to reflect and speak up.

What's most curious is the relationship between gender and sexual orientation. First of all, Alex was sodomized by a gay man. The pleasure wasn't from her sexuality, but rather, it was the pleasure of taking advantage. Secondly, Alex is also objectified by the ones who love her most and even by the camera. When Marcus admits that he feels awkward to be near Pierre because he believes to have "stolen his girl," Alex explicitly says, "I am not an object!" She, being the subject of objectification, is literally evinced by the movement of the camera. The first time we meet Alex, it's only her back. The camera trails her from behind as she walks the street of Paris, long enough for the audience to be fully aware of their act of following. Most of her screen time doesn't show her face. Therefore, it can be concluded that our cultural idea of 'man' oppresses both man and woman regardless of love, sexuality, and sexual orientation, and most unfortunately, this repression often manifests into violence against women.²

Throughout the film, the camera has a movement of its own, rotating, spinning in circles, exploring an apartment in one shot, almost like gymnastics. Because these movements make the camera's presence prominent, spectators understand that they are within the world of the film and

² Of course, the idea of colonization cannot be compared in scale and severity to sexual assault; however, how Glauber Rocha writes about violence in "Aesthetics of Hunger" comes to mind: "Cinema Novo teaches that the aesthetics of violence are revolutionary rather than primitive. The moment of violence is the moment when the coloniser becomes aware of the existence of the colonized. Only when he is confronted with violence can the coloniser understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits."

that they are safe. Yet, the film isn't as self-contained as theorist Hugo Munsterberg suggests. The noumenal material world and the phenomenal mental world collide and at moments morph into each other because of these very athletic camera movements. The camera shows 360° perspectives and details of the set that operate with the same logic and depth that our reality does. We, as an audience, understand that it is a staged scenario, but a very real scenario. One that didn't happen to us, but did happen to one of us.

In terms of technique and symbolism, Noé truly deserves Sarris'³ recognition as an *auteur* and Mitry's⁴ respect as a poet. To be brief, Noé conveys his central idea that "*le temps détruit tout*," "time destroys everything," by having a random character say it in passing in the first scene, by placing the text in reversed lettering at the end of the film, and by using repeating symbols. Before her attack, the morning of, Alex tells Marcus that she had a dream that she was in a tunnel and that the tunnel split in half. Even earlier, she, Marcus, and Pierre are in an elevator discussing their opinions on fate. In the second to last, or second in terms of chronology, scene, a poster of *2001: A Space Odyssey* is explicitly shown, and in the last scene, Alex is reading a book called *An Experiment with Time*. As a matter of fact, in the beginning, the camera is hardly ever still, almost to the point of nausea, but as the story progresses, the camera stabilizes more and more and the scenes become not only longer, but also uncut. There are a couple of scenes in which Mitry's claim, that the effect of montage can be achieved in an uncut scene, is proven: the infamous rape scene, the scene in which Alex is taking a shower, and the scene in which she finds out that she is pregnant. There are also a number of experimental scenes that Perkins would find innovative and meaningful, particularly, the transitions between each snippet of the story that gives an impression of time travel.

³ Sarris' premise of an *auteur* comprises of the technical competence of a director, the distinguishable personality of the director (which cannot be fully argued in the context on one film, but is applicable to the body of Noé's work), and the interior meaning the director creates.

⁴ Mitry, similarly, had three factors for 'great and artistic films' that are essential for the construction of abstract meaning beyond the obvious storyline: perception, narration and image sequencing, and signification beyond that of creating a new kind of world, that produces pure poetic meaning.

For instance, in one scene, we tag along with the three main characters on their metro ride, and once they leave, the camera follows the metro through the tunnel in an array of speeding lights and twisting angles.

Yes, his portrayal of sexual violence was unexpected for modern cinema, but it is far too easy to say that it was unnecessary. To the critics who say it was disgusting and who would not sit through it, the women, who are victims of such an act, would say it is disgusting that this was reality and that they had no choice but to bear it. Moreover, the women, who are not, could in-a-heartbeat explain their eternal fear of it easily becoming their reality. This is a film that needs to be seen.