



**CRUEL FLESH:
FILMS OF THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY**

Irreversible

The films of the New French Extremity and the accompanying focus on Gaspar Noé examine an important, controversial and highly violent cinema movement. They are not suitable for all.

The film you are about to watch may contain very dark themes, graphic imagery, and scenes of a very upsetting nature including sexual violence and body horror.

In his introduction to the Edinburgh screening of *Irreversible*, writer/director Gaspar Noé told the audience that certain scenes may prove unwatchable, but asked them to stick with it, joking that the reverse narrative meant the film actually had an ironically 'happy ending'. While his comments were interpreted by some as a William Castle-style come-on (daring the audience to endure the horrors ahead), they were clearly based in experience, the director having observed many patrons trying to make it through *Irreversible* and failing, whether through choice (disgusted walk-outs) or sheer physical obligation (those who could bear no more). The fact that it is already becoming fashionable to bemoan how 'unaffected' one was by *Irreversible* stands as proof of its extraordinary impact, to which the studiously cynical are now affecting imperviousness.

Such responses are crucial to understanding and appreciating *Irreversible*, which is first and foremost a bravura slice of exploitation cinema that exists at least in part to batter the viewer into awed submission, its roots based in the grind-house markets forged by such 1970s American slashers as *The Last House on the Left* (a film whose tagline dared the audience 'to avoid fainting'). Like Noé's *Seul contre tous* before it (whose incestuous anti-hero is here found in cameo languishing in prison), *Irreversible* is a belligerent work which deliberately forces sights and sounds upon its audience that some will find intolerable but others will endure with a growing sense of challenge. While this endeavour may seem pointlessly puerile to some, one has only to recall the thousands of avowedly 'unbearable' exploitation flicks that have generally failed to alarm in the promised manner to appreciate the level of Noé's achievement. And all this without resort to cruelty to animals, mondo 'reality' footage of documentary death and suffering or even censorably explicit images of actual human sexual activity. No mean feat.

According to Noé, *Irreversible* came into existence when, in true B-movie style, the filmmakers found themselves with funding available for a project only if it could be turned round in a matter of weeks. Looking for a twist on the reliably saleable rape-revenge genre, Noé seems to have opted randomly to cross-pollinate Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* with Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, an intriguing technical exercise that reaps some peculiarly (and probably accidentally) insightful rewards. Constructed as a series of single-take interludes which are individually linear but are collectively assembled in reverse order, the film *begins* with a bloody revenge, proceeds to a grotesquely harrowing rape and ends finally with the promise of a new birth, *before* the horrors begin. Unexpectedly, this contrived inversion actually

facilitates a neat deconstruction of the rape-revenge narrative, laying bare its prejudices.

Most obviously, since the film opens (rather than closes) with a head-crackingly brutal act of violence, the audience is denied the usual retributive pleasures of the genre; we have not yet witnessed the original violation for which this (misguided) act of destruction would traditionally be seen as providing inevitable closure, and thus we are unable to feel justifiably engorged by its excessive wantonness. Instead we are faced with the spectacle of violence in the abstract, uncontextualised by narrative, unjustified by 'previous' action. Whereas the traditional *Death Wish* narrative invites us to rejoice in lawlessness in response to sexual violation, *Irreversible* causes us to recoil from the almost incomprehensible carnage which constitutes its opening act. This is the realisation of Wes Craven's dream of creating a movie in which violence is seen as a wholly corrupting force, reducing everyone to their basest level.

From here the film spirals backwards through an increasingly muddled web of retributive frenzy in which the audience is required to endure rather than enjoy the unfolding carnage – which is not to say that there is no pleasure in endurance, but simply that the pleasure is masochistic rather than sadistic. By the time *Irreversible* arrives at the notorious rape scene, Noé has conjured such a pungent air of disaster that the audience is primed only for unpleasantness and horror. It is significant that, just as Jonathan Kaplan's overtly 'moral' mainstream movie *The Accused* sought to undermine any sense of titillation in its depiction of rape by portraying the consequences of the assault *before* the attack, so *Irreversible* brings us to its central scene of violation with an awareness of the utter catastrophe of this horrendous event. Rather than showing a glamorous woman dancing tantalisingly towards sexual capture (a worrying feature of numerous rape-revenge movies), Noé brings us to his grim underpass with nothing but trepidation and fear.

As for the scene itself, the use of a single low-angle shot, which foregrounds the face of Monica Bellucci as she is sodomised by an attacker whose obscenely pornographic rantings battle with her gut-churning cries of pain, clearly highlights *her* suffering rather than *his* pleasure – if it can indeed be called such. Crucially, Noé goes out of his way to depict rape as an act of violence rather than of sex, unlike in many more mainstream depictions of such assaults. No wonder the BBFC concluded that this sequence was 'a harrowing and vivid portrayal of the brutality of rape [which] contains no explicit sexual images and is not designed to titillate.' When I looked away, I did so not in disgust but in horror; unable to watch (as indeed one should be), but certain of the justification of the display.

While it would be fanciful and naive to claim that *Irreversible* is a 'socially responsible' analysis of sexual violence (it is an extremely tactless movie, designed to inflame rather than investigate its audience's sensibilities), it perfectly conforms to that peculiar anomaly which so regularly renders lowbrow exploitation fare less morally contemptible than its mainstream counterparts. As every exploitation-film fan knows, it is far easier to defend the grimly relentless horrors of the long-banned *I Spit on Your Grave*, which portrays rape as a protractedly ugly affair, than the glossily palatable assaults of *Jagged Edge*, *Basic Instinct* or any of the other Hollywood hits that trade on the promise of consumer-packaged, titillating sexual violence.

What we are left with, then, is a breathtakingly efficient exploitation flick that uses a barrage of incendiary sights and sounds to beat its audience up, then ends ironically with an upbeat opening that serves only to reinforce the sense of tragedy to come. The true meaning of the film's title lies ultimately in its depiction of the damage of violence as being utterly irreversible, suggesting that (contrary to generic law) a rape-revenge movie can *only* have a genuinely happy ending if you play it backwards. While directors as diverse as Wes Craven and Abel Ferrara have wrestled with this concept in the past, it is Noé, with his unashamedly simple and derivative narrative device, who manages most succinctly to reveal this basic truth without betraying the visceral thrills for which his audience are ultimately paying. *Irreversible* is a film which attempts to knock you out, literally, but in doing so also achieves a level of artistic honesty that belies its base motives. For that, we should all be thankful.

Mark Kermode, *Sight & Sound*, February 2003

IRREVERSIBLE (IRRÉVERSIBLE)

Director: Gaspar Noé

©: Nord-Ouest Productions, StudioCanal

Production Companies: Nord-Ouest Productions, Eskwad

In co-production with: StudioCanal, 120 Films, Les Cinémas de la Zone

With the participation of: Canal+

Producers: Christophe Rossignon, Richard Grandpierre

Co-producers: Brahim Chioua, Vincent Cassel, Gaspar Noé

Production Managers: Serge Catoire, Eve Machuel, Duigou,

Romero, Naret, Bainouti

Assistant Directors: Olivier Thery-Lapiney, Stéphane Derderian

CASTING: Jacques Grant, Leroux

Screenplay: Gaspar Noé

Director of Photography: Benoît Debie

Camera Operator: Gaspar Noé

Steadicam Operator: Eric Catelan

Special Effects: Rodolph Chabrier, Jacques Bled, Ramdam, Delphine Le Roch, Cros, Patrick Rouxel, Alex Kolasinski, Xavier Fourmond, Richard, Loïc Boineau, Allegre, Coureau, Louis-Marie, Machuret, Roussel, Vidal, Charrier, Delcloy, Valdu, Saïd Hajjioui

Graphics: Pontecaille

Editors: Gaspar Noé, Araud, Cauchy

Art Directors: Alain Juteau, Soler, Bayart, Castello

Costumes: Fred Cambier, Calandre, Eric Bigot, Ly Cheng Born Tea

Special Make-up Effects: Jean-Christophe Spadaccini,

Denis Gastou, Sylvie Ferry, Moreau, Petit

Hairdressers: Pierre Chavialle, Ghislaine Tortereau

Sound Recording: Jean-Luc Audy, Olivier Busson

Mixers: Cyril Holtz, Eric Bonnard, Damien Bera

Sound Editors: Mac Boucrot, Valérie Deloof, Bonneyrat

Stunts: Ayrola, Arnault

Cast

Monica Bellucci (*Alex*)

Vincent Cassel (*Marcus*)

Albert Dupontel (*Pierre*)

Jo Prestia (*Le Ténia*)

Philippe Nahon (*Philippe, ex-butcher*)

Stéphane Drouot (*Stéphane*)

Jean-Louis Costes (*Maso, man beaten to death in club*)

Gondouin (*Mike*)

Mourad Khima (*Mourad*)

Hellal (*Layde*)

Nato (*police chief*)

Fesche (*taxi driver*)

Jaramillo (*Concha*)

Le Quellec (*inspector*)

Isabelle Giami (*Isabelle*)

Adoum (*Fatima*)

Foulaux (*Janice*)

Gaspar Noé (*Rectum Club masturbator*)*

France 2002©

97 mins

* Uncredited

FOCUS ON: GASPAR NOÉ

I Stand Alone (Seul contre tous)

Sun 1 May 18:10; Fri 20 May 20:40

Irreversible: The Straight Cut (Irréversible)

Mon 2 May 18:30

Enter the Void

Sun 8 May 14:30; Sat 21 May 20:00

Love (3D)

Sun 8 May 18:15; Mon 23 May 20:20

Gaspar Noé in Conversation

Tue 10 May 21:00

Gaspar Noé's Mixtape + Q&A with Gaspar Noé

Thu 12 May 18:00

Lux Æterna

Fri 20 May 18:40; Mon 23 May 18:40

Climax

Fri 27 May 18:15; Mon 30 May 20:50 + extended intro by season programmer Anna Bogutskaya

NEW & RE-RELEASES

Croupier

From Wed 4 May

Vampyr

Thu 5 May Preview 18:15; Mon 23 May 14:00 Seniors' Matinee + discussion

From Fri 20 May

Cabaret

From Fri 6 May

Vortex

Tue 10 May 18:00 Preview + intro by Gaspar Noé

From Fri 13 May

Get Carter + The Frighteners: The Manipulators

Mon 30 May 18:00 + intro by Douglas Weir, BFI Technical Delivery Manager

From Fri 27 May