Timothy Nicodemo

Cinematography and Sensorial Assault in Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible*

This article will focus on the aesthetic element of *cinematography* in Gaspar Noé's 2002 film *Irreversible*, and its function of affecting the spectator on a physiological and psychological level. The methodology used for this purpose poses aesthetics as a confrontation with the spectator, and studies the resulting direct physiological and psychological modulations. I wish to move away from what Herbert Zettl terms "applied media aesthetics," in which media elements "clarify, intensify, and interpret events for a large audience" (14). Instead, this article will approach formalist studies of cinema from a more radical direction: the field of "haptic cinema," a model for theories of spectator affect. While the concept of haptics, derived from the Greek verb "haptesthai" meaning "to touch" ("Haptics"), is discussed in a range of fields (mechanical engineering, psychology, literature), I propose that its significance in cinema must be examined more closely; as my frame of reference I will use Laura Marks's extensive research into the subject, in which she posits the image as evoking the sensation of touch within the viewer (162). No longer the codifier of a set of ideas or feelings, the image *becomes* the feeling in this approach, and instead of establishing a connection between aesthetics and content, the viewer receives the image on a purely visceral level.

One aspect to be specifically examined is the relation between camera movement and induced *kinetosis*—more commonly referred to as motion sickness or, more precisely for my purposes herein, visually induced motion sickness (VIMS), a by-product of exposure to optical depictions of inertial motion (Bardy et al. 1). In *Irreversible*, specifically, the cinematography conducts a visceral attack on the viewer, ultimately eliciting adverse physical sensations. I suggest that the film establishes what I define as a certain "in-the-body-ness" between the viewer and the characters—essentially, the degree to which the viewer is placed into the shoes of the film's characters. This in-the-body-ness secures the place of *Irreversible* in Tim Palmer's *cinéma du corps*, "a spate of recent French films that deal frankly and graphi-cally with the body, and corporeal transgressions . . . whose basic agenda is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms" (57).

This visceral assault is first experienced during the Rectum nightclub sequence, filmed (like every other sequence in *Irreversible*) in one take. Here, the camera spins and twirls through the claustrophobic interior, its movement significantly different from that of the party scene, which is lighter in tone and features more structured camerawork, further emphasized by brighter and more diffuse lighting. While a tracking shot is often used in order to help the viewer better understand the camera's surroundings, thus acting as a point of navigation and allowing an unmediated view of the characters' surroundings (e.g. the "Copacabana" shot in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* [1990], or the many tracking shots around the high school in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* [2003]), *Irreversible* celebrates its usage to the complete opposite effect as we follow Pierre (Albert Dupontel) and Marcus (Vincent Cassel) through the dungeon-like corridors of the Rectum nightclub. Here, the tracking shot deliberately disorients, nauseates, and confuses the viewer, aiming to subvert the very function of classical cinematography: it does not simply follow a track, pacing itself through the world, granting the frame a degree of stability that entails complete knowledge and understanding of the world through the screen. Palmer describes the camerawork as a result of Noé's decision to use an extremely small, lightweight Minima camera in order to film a 360-degree area of space around the characters of Pierre and Marcus (76). He discusses the cinematography with descriptors such as "violently" and "jarring," reinforcing the popular idea that Noé tends to punish the viewer.

The result is a complete loss of control—not only for the camera, nor for Pierre and Marcus, but most significantly, for the viewer. The classical ideals of cinematography are dismantled to mirror the alienation and stupefaction Pierre and Marcus experience inside a space that is completely alien to them. As one critic notes, the camerawork

establishes that "nothing makes sense, nothing is in focus, reality is scraps of information that refuse to assemble into a pattern" (Hunter n. pag.). Furthermore, these adverse feelings are transmitted to the viewer in order to establish that in-the-body-ness with the male pair: the viewer, too, gets lost in the world of the nightclub, and subsequently experiences similar feelings of dislocation and isolation. The concept of defamiliarization comes around full circle upon the sequence's final shot. After watching Pierre and Marcus fatally beat the man they believe to be Alex's (Monica Bellucci) rapist, Le Tenia (Jo Prestia), we soon discover their

In Irreversible*, specifically, the cinematography conducts a visceral attack on the viewer, ultimately eliciting adverse physical sensations.*

mistake: the man they killed was not the rapist at all, and Le Tenia merely watches the murder incredulously, with a sadistic sense of satisfaction. Only with the benefit of omnipresence can the viewer understand the tragic error, something Pierre and Marcus may be doomed to never see. The disorientation induced in the viewer by the camera movement is paralleled in the quest of the two men who are similarly lost in an unfamiliar world, only to result in fatal consequences.

While it is important to note the effects that we, as spectators, may feel while viewing the events as they unfold, I wish to continue supporting my initial hypothesis that Noé's film exploits spectator affect through the sensation of touch with evidence from research into the area of human sensation and perception. While there has yet to be a consensus among researchers on the factors leading to motion sickness, the sensory conflict theory has been central to an understanding of VIMS for over two decades. Writing on the topic of motion sickness, J.J. Brand and James Reason argue that "the essential nature of the provocative stimulus is that it always involves a mismatch between presently communicated spatial information and stored traces of previous information" (103). Situations, then, that elicit motion sickness

are *all* characterized by a condition in which the motion signals transmitted by the eyes, the vestibular system [the sensory system that most heavily contributes to the sense of balance and spatial orientation] and the nonvestibular proprioceptors [sensory receptors that detect the motion and orientation of one's own body in space] are at variance with one another, and hence . . . with what is expected on the basis of previ-

ous transactions with the environment. (Brand and Reason 264)

One of the key factors of VIMS, as suggested by Bardy et al., is that of vection, which is defined as the subjective experience of self-motion relative to the inertial environment as produced by optical simulations of self-motion (2). They further explain this concept by employing the idea of *body sway*—defined as "the slight postural movements made by an individual in order to maintain a balanced position" (Abbott et al. 2225)—suggesting that, through laboratory tests, "optical simulations that mimic the amplitude and frequency of body sway give rise to a *subjective* experience of self-motion" (Bardy et al. 2, emphasis added).

It can be established, then, that a spectator who views a film that produces the illusion of subjective movement can experience motion sickness by way of a clash between one's expected degree of movement and the simulation of movement that is forced upon them. This might explain why, in Matt Reeves's science fiction film *Cloverfield* (2008), many spectators reported experiencing bouts of nausea and

vomiting during the film. One doctor explains how motion sickness would be elicited, suggesting that, while watching *Cloverfield*, "viewers were sitting still in their seats, so their inner ear was telling their body they were motionless. But the bumpy camera movements—and their eyes—misled them into thinking they were moving around erratically" (Smith n. pag.). These conflicting messages then bring about symptoms of motion sickness, such as nausea and headache. The degree of subjectivity is central in eliciting this effect: a film that posits the spectator as an objective witness removed from the content onscreen will likely not

result in motion sickness, as it follows the traditional norms of cinematography—such as logical uses of long, medium, and close shots to establish the world and its inhabitants clearly. Contrastingly, a film that attempts to place the spectator within the film must often do so through either a subjective point of view (as evidenced in *Cloverfield*'s filmed-through-a-character's-camera verisimilitude) or, as in the case of *Irreversible*, a form of indirect subjectivity: not witnessing the action through a character's direct point of view, but allowing us to become close enough to the action that we are able to experience the characters' emotions as if we were right there with them (Boggs 132). In our example here, the camera does not literally become the point of view of Pierre or Marcus, or perhaps any Rectum inhabitant, but successfully emulates their states of mind through movements that blatantly violate any traditional cinematographic norm. In so doing, the camera lens transforms into a human eye, emulating the spontaneity and uncertainty with which we view the world, no different from the uncertainty Marcus and Pierre feel in the hostile, claustrophobic, and entirely alien environment of the nightclub.

It can therefore be suggested that Noé treats the haptic through cinematography, which, as exemplified by the VIMS induced by the Rectum sequence, can affect the spectator on a physiological level.[1] Going back to Marks's initial conception of the haptic, we can see how Noé erases the representational power of the image and privileges its material presence instead. The image is not constructed for contemplation and interpretation by the spectator, but instead reveals reality; the notion of "construction" is dismantled for pure feeling on a physiological level, exemplifying

---

1. It should be noted that this remains a hypothesis, and one in need of further empirical research. It is also worth considering viewers who did not experience nausea or uncomfortable feelings of any sort during the viewing.

... the camera lens transforms into a human eye, emulating the spontaneity and uncertainty with which we view the world, no different from the uncertainty Marcus and Pierre feel in the hostile, claustrophobic ... nightclub.

the bodily relationship between image and spectator that Marks delineates (164). If we are to locate the importance of this cinematic technique within Palmer's framework of the *cinéma du corps*, it is evident that Noé focuses on the human body not just on a narrative scale (the vicious beating, the men in the nightclub in general), but integrates the focus on the filmic body into the spectatorial body. For Noé, the body is both subject and object: it is a catalyst for the narrative's propulsion (subject—Alex's rape and beating), yet is also treated most inanimately (object—the body is treated as a vessel for violence, drugs, and sex). In a way, the spectator's body can also be envisaged as such, as we simultaneously are subject by way of direct affect with the film's various bodies, yet remain object as we are held to witness the acts of cruelty.

If it is the objective of the *cinéma du corps* to pose the human body as its thematic centrepiece, then this can only come to fruition, at least for Noé, when the spectator is physiologically affected by the image as well. It is not enough to simply convey the feelings of disorientation and violence as experienced by the characters: there must also be a direct link established between character and spectator for the fullest extent of verisimilitude. While my examination

of the cinematography has revolved around perspective, this direct connection can be further examined with a final look at Marks's suggestion that the affection-image can "bring us to the direct experience of time *through* the body" (163). Marks here invokes Deleuze's notion of the movement-image, examining how the haptic image can "be understood as a particular kind of affection-image," as the affection-image "may also force a visceral and emotional contemplation in those any-spaces-whatever divorced from action. . . . Thus the haptic image connects directly to sense perception . . . ." (Marks 163). Noé makes his concern with the concept of time evident in a number of ways throughout *Irreversible*: the Butcher from *I Stand Alone* (Gaspar Noé 1998) murmurs, in the opening shot, that time destroys all things ("Le temps détruit tout," also seen on a title card at the film's conclusion); the title itself evokes the irreversibility of time, which is mimicked as a framing device for the film (the narrative's sequence of events are shown in reverse chronological order); the sequences are each filmed in one take and subsequently edited together to give the illusion of seamless transitions; and finally, the experience of time is linked to Noé's presentation of the body, with two specific moments demarcating his aesthetic as not only constituting a cinema of tactility, but also of human phenomenology.

In the Rectum sequence just examined, I focused on the movement of the camera, and furthermore, on its inability to cease movement: it twists, turns, and lurches, never slowing down. This is the case, at least, until the sequence's most graphic burst of violence occurs, beginning initially with Marcus having his arm snapped by the man he and Pierre believe to be Le Tenia. Pierre appears behind the man, who is preparing to sodomize a semi-conscious Marcus, and begins to pummel him in the face with a fire extinguisher, long after the man has ceased to consciously respond to the attacks. It is the first time in the film that the camera becomes largely stationary: it only tilts up and down slightly to follow the trajectory of the extinguisher, and spins only once in the middle of the attack. Settling on the ground beside the man, the upward angle allows us to not only witness, but to receive Pierre's attacks as the extinguisher's bludgeons land on the man's face beside the camera. This, again, engages a form of indirect subjectivity with the spectator, but here it makes clear the importance of temporality and its connection with bodily experience. It is a moment when the viewer is not only physically disturbed by the act of violence itself, but also through the fact that he/she is forced to endure it for its entire duration, without ellipses, cutaways, or movement to aestheticize the violence.

Similar to the fire extinguisher scene, the spectator identifies with the victim not through mere representation, but direct affect.

It is this violent method with which Noé establishes the in-the-body-ness between the viewer and the character—in this case, the man being beaten. The concept of duration forces the viewer to acknowledge his/her own cognizance: the duration of the murder correlates to the duration the spectator must necessarily endure. Once the murder is complete, the camera also calls attention to temporality by lingering on the deceased man's caved-in skull: as Stephen Hunter points out, "the camera doesn't look away from the last few seconds of the atrocity, and the biology of death by crushed skull is laid out in detail" (n. pag.).

A further instance of this relation between the body (for both characters and spectators) and temporality is the central event that catalyzes the aforementioned attack in the Rectum nightclub: Alex's rape by Le Tenia. It lasts a total of nine minutes, and takes the stasis of the camera to an even further level in that the camera simply lies on the ground of an underpass, framing Le Tenia and Alex in a medium-long shot, and remains completely motionless for the duration of the vicious rape. In the relationship between spectator

and screen there lies a voyeuristic gaze, the normally private element of sex now dismantled through the spectator's own act of intrusion; this is emphasized when we catch a glimpse of a passerby wandering into the tunnel from the opposite end, only to stop short upon the viewing of the act, and back out without offering any form of support for Alex. In this sense of voyeurism, then, the Rectum sequence shares with the rape sequence an indirect subjectivity that contributes to the film's in-the-body-ness: just as we follow Pierre and Marcus into the depths of a nightclub with equal anxiety and confusion—largely elicited through cinematography— we also follow Alex down into the underpass, the medium shot behind her head emphasizing our own identification with her. This shot is reminiscent of Noé's similar work in *Enter the Void* (2009), which Noé discusses in the context of "his analysis of his own perception . . . [in that] he sees himself in silhouette in his memories and dreams" (B 18). It can similarly be argued, then, that this very subjective notion of the director's perception can be placed within the context of *Irreversible*, for as we are meant to identify with Oscar (Nathaniel Brown) in the first-person narrative of *Void* through this angle, we are also drawn to identify with Alex by following her through the underpass. Similar to the fire extinguisher scene, the spectator identifies with the victim not through mere representation, but direct affect.[2]

2. One might raise the question of identification lying with the attacker rather than the victim, a position that is not my current focus, but that warrants further research. In his review of *Irreversible*, David Edelstein comments that the camera "leers" at Bellucci, with Noé "on the verge of implying that such quivering ripeness can't be left unmolested in a world like this, that by natural law it ought to be defiled" (n. pag.). Roger Ebert suggests that, upon the release of *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi 1981), "the new horror films encouraged audience identification

In the results of a research project conducted on audience responses to watching sexual violence onscreen, Martin Barker lists a number of aspects that he believes constitute the dangers of filmic rape, one of which would appear to support this notion: "There is a belief that to show, for instance, a rape on screen is . . . almost to enact the rape for real. The line between the represented and the real is seen to be particularly fragile in this case" (107). Such an erasure of the boundary between reality and representation occurs in a number of ways: just as Alex is trapped on the ground, so are we; just as she is trapped within the confines of a small tunnel, so too do we feel the claustrophobic confines; and most importantly, just as Alex must endure the violence for nine unbroken minutes, the spectator must also withstand the event for its entire duration.

Describing the camerawork in this sequence as "crucially static" and committing to an "excruciating . . . single-shot," Palmer emphasizes the "punishing" nature that

temporality enacts (77). Other critics have noted the antipathetic nature elicited from the unbroken gaze: the audience must "sit in *anguish* through a *solitary* shot," one describes (Sells n. pag., emphasis added); another argues that it's "difficult to know what to do during those nine minutes in which Bellucci lies prone, moaning and weeping. . . . You can leave—although Noé would probably consider that a victory" (Edelstein n. pag.); the duration of the shot is brought to the fore in another critic's description of the "10-minute-long take" wherein Alex "*endures* a vicious anal rape" (Baumgarten n. pag., emphasis added); and finally, J. Hoberman notes that the "nastiness lasts eight minutes but feels *far longer*. Having found its meat at last, Noé's camera stops turning cartwheels and settles down to *masticate* upon the unsavory spectacle" (n. pag., emphasis added).

There are yet many more reviews and articles referring to the rape sequence in much the same way. Often, descriptors are employed to point to the inescapability of the sequence (relating Alex's rape to that of the spectator, both helpless), and in so doing, inherently discuss the dura-

not with the victim but with the killer" (n. pag.). While this possibility should certainly be recognized with regard to *Irreversible*, such a position does not seem to reflect the experience of most commentators.

tion of the sequence, often noting its significance as a static long take. As a critic for *USA Today* suggests, Noé "[experiments] both with time frame and audience tolerance" (Clark n. pag.), the two inevitably informing one another: the standard Hollywood procedures of editing are broken, the temporality of the image now akin to that of avant-garde cinema, whereby experimenting with duration can be traced back to the structural film tradition of the early 1960s, of which Andy Warhol's early usage of the static

---

… the Rectum sequence shares with the rape sequence an indirect subjectivity that contributes to the film's in-the-body-ness …

---

long take "[triggered] ontological awareness" (Sitney 352). The essence of the long take, however, finds its theoretical underpinnings in the early writings of André Bazin, formulating (and subsequently favouring) realist film theory. Bazin called for the depiction of objective reality through film, citing documentaries and the films of the Italian neo-realists as examples, and argued that techniques such as the long take were preferable to this end over montage editing. Noé exemplifies realist filmmaking through his treatment of the two sequences contemplated herein that focus on the human body, as well as through his goal to affect the viewer on a physiological level. Gregory Currie comments on the long take and realism, suggesting that the former "enhances our ability to detect spatial and temporal properties of the fiction by using the capacity we have to detect those properties of things in the real world" (107). By its

nature, the long take emphasizes "the sense of passionate contemplation . . . [of] reality . . . an unmediated openness to the world" (Le Fanu n. pag.). It could be argued that not only the two sequences mentioned above, but also other, non-violent sequences from the film work to the effect of attacking the viewer, such as the explicit sexual discussion between Pierre, Marcus, and Alex on the subway, whose voyeuristic nature may instinctively cause discomfort within the spectator; while this uneasiness is due to the nature of the discourse rather than the content of the image, the subway sequence shares with the previous examples the long take's property of forcing the viewer to endure the action within the frame.

So it is, then, that the (static) long take, in establishing for the spectator a direct connection between the temporal properties of the image and those experienced in reality, acts as a central factor in constructing the film's in-the-body-ness. We are forced to witness two separate attacks on the human body and, through indirect subjectivity, are transposed into the shoes of each victim. The indirect subjectivity dissipates representation and symbolism for pure physiological and psychological response, achieved through the manipulation of cinematography: the dizzying camerawork mimics the confusion and anxiety that Pierre and Marcus experience in unfamiliar territory, while the static long takes force us to become one with Pierre's victim and Alex, the stasis and unbroken duration eliciting within the viewer a state of ontological contemplation. Noé constructs the image in the face of reality, and in turn pushes ideas of the haptic to the fore: we no longer witness bodily pain, but now experience it for ourselves.

Works Cited

Abbott, Carmen, James M. Keller, Marjorie Skubic, and Fang Wang. "Body Sway Measurement for Fall Risk Assessment Using Inexpensive Webcams." Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. Buenos Aires Sheraton Hotel, Buenos Aires. 31 Aug.-4 Sept. 2010. Conference Presentation.

B, Benjamin. "Contemplating a Colorful Afterlife." *American Cinematographer* 91.10 (2010): 18-22. Print.

Bailey, Matt. "Gaspar Noé." *Senses of Cinema* 28 (2003): n. pag. Web. 27 Mar. 2012.

Bardy, Benoît G., L. James Smart, and Thomas A. Stoffregen. "Visually Induced Motion Sickness Predicted by Postural Instability." *Human Factors* 44.3 (2002): 1-15. Print.

Barker, Martin. "Watching Rape, Enjoying Watching Rape…: How Does a Study of Audience Cha(lle)nge Mainstream Film Studies Approaches?" *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. Ed. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011. 105-116. Print.

Baumgarten, Marjorie. Rev. of *Irreversible*, dir. Gaspar Noé. *The Austin Chronicle* 28 Mar. 2003. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.

Boggs, Joseph M. *The Art of Watching Films*. 3rd ed. Mountain View: Mayfield, 1991. Print.

Brand, J.J., and James Reason. *Motion Sickness*. London: Academic, 1975. Print.

Clark, Mike. Rev. of *Irreversible*, dir. Gaspar Noé. *USA Today* 6 Mar. 2003. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.

Currie, Gregory. *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.

Edelstein, David. Rev. of *Irreversible*, dir. Gaspar Noé. *Slate* 7 Mar. 2003. Web. 27 Aug. 2012.

"Haptics." *Encyclopedia of Multimedia*. 2nd ed. 2008. Print.

Hoberman, J. Rev. of *Irreversible*, dir. Gaspar Noé. *The Village Voice* 4 Mar. 2003. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.

Hunter, Stephen. Rev. of *Irreversible*, dir. Gaspar Noé. *The Washington Post* 11 Apr. 2003. Web. 27 Aug. 2012.

Le Fanu, Mark. "Metaphysics of the "Long Take": Some Post-Bazinian Reflections." *P.O.V.* 4 (1997): n. pag. Web. 18 Oct. 2012.

Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000. Print.

Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2011. Print.

Smith, Michael W. "What's Behind 'Cloverfield' Illness?" *WebMD*. 24 Jan. 2008. Web. 24 Aug. 2012.

Smith, Valerie. "An Introduction to Misogyny in Popular Culture." *The Free Radical*. Sept. 2010. Web. 19 Oct. 2012.

Sells, Mark. Rev. of *Irreversible*, dir. Gaspar Noé. *The Reel Deel* Mar. 2003. Web. 27 Aug. 2012.

Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943-2000*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

Zettl, Herbert. *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics*. 5th ed. Belmont: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2008. Print.