Irréversible
Review by: Mikita Brottman and David Sterritt
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Reviews

Irréversible

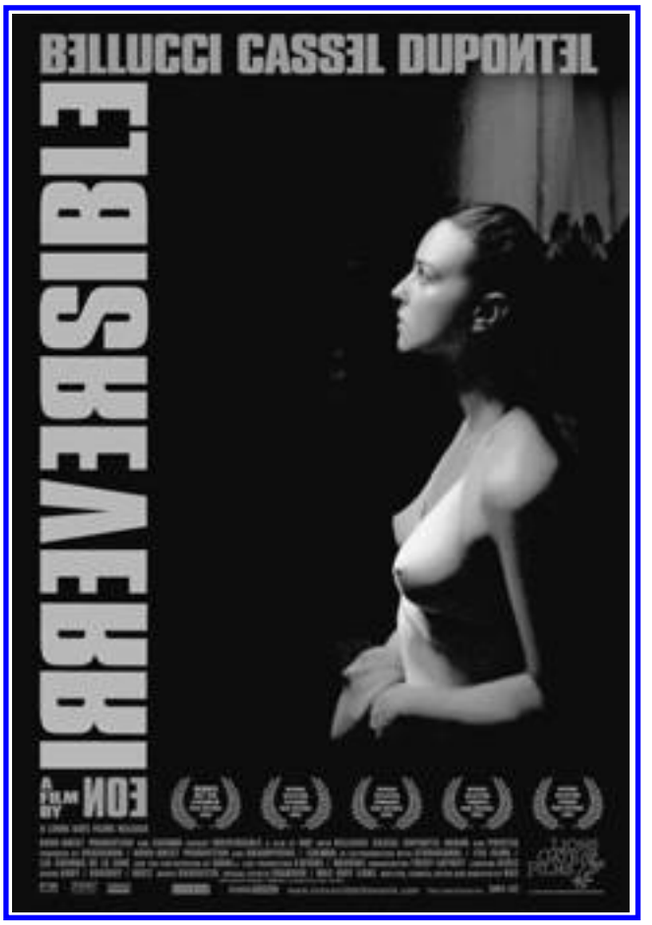
Director: Gaspar Noé. Producer: Christophe Rossignon. Writer: Gaspar Noé. Cinematographers: Benoît Debie, Gaspar Noé. Music: Thomas Bangalter. Studio Canal. US Distribution: Lion's Gate Films.

Watching the shied core
Striking the basket, sliding across the floor
Shows less and less of luck, and more and more
Of failure spreading back up the arm
Earlier and earlier, the unraised hand calm,
The apple unbitten in the palm.

—Philip Larkin, "As Bad as a Mile"

Beginning with a failed gesture—a missed attempt to land an apple core in a trashcan—the poet realizes this was no unlucky shot. He traces his failure back from the gesture, back up the arm itself, earlier and earlier—to when? To the moment the thought was formulated, or earlier? When does a failed action become determined? When do elements of personality become ingrained? When do the choices we make betray a pattern? These are among the philosophical and psychological issues explored by Gaspar Noé in *Irréversible,* which has sparked heated controversy since its 2002 premiere in competition at the Cannes International Film Festival.

Noé was born in Argentina in 1963 but has lived in France since the mid-seventies, when his father fled their native country for political reasons. He studied filmmaking during his late teens, then turned to philosophy, although he recalls being the opposite of a conscientious student. He entered the French film industry as an assistant director of short movies, then made his own directorial debut in 1991 with the forty-minute *Carne,* the brutal story of a misanthropic butcher who takes revenge on the wrong man for molesting his autistic daughter and goes to prison for it. Noé explored these characters further in his 1998 feature *Seul contre tous* (*I Stand Alone*), in which the butcher opens up a new shop in the suburbs with his mistress, then reunites with his daughter and contemplates the prospect of ending their bleak lives in a murder-suicide.



The poster for the American release

Both films caused a critical uproar, but *Irréversible* went a ferocious step farther, reportedly inducing physical illness among film-festival spectators and leading a normally unshockable *Village Voice* reviewer to denounce it for aiming to inflict "nausea, moral indignation, and . . . epilepsy" on its viewers.[1] According to press accounts, the Cannes premiere of *Irréversible* provoked fainting and a walkout by an estimated 250 of the 2400 audience members. People were supposedly nauseated not only by the film's scenes of explicit violence but also by the frenzied, restless camerawork in the long opening shot. Audience members were also apparently upset by the film's frequent use of expletives directed at homosexuals and women, and by a lengthy scene in which the character played by Italian actress Monica Bellucci is anally raped.

Critics in general dismissed the film at Cannes, and many despised it, although it was better received at the Toronto International Film Festival a few months later. A prevailing view was exemplified by

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Johnathan Rosenbaum in the *Chicago Reader,* where he called *Irréversible* "stupid, vicious, and pretentious, though you may find it worth checking out if you want to experiment with your own nervous system."[2] In sum, Noé's work got short shrift from critics too offended by the film to seriously consider its structural complexity.

Irréversible consists of about 13 long, apparently unbroken shots,[3] beginning with a short prologue featuring Philippe Nahon as the violent, dissolute butcher who is the main character in *Carne* and *Seul contre tous*. Half naked and all repugnant, the butcher is rehashing his sordid past with an equally unappealing companion in his squalid Paris apartment. "Time destroys all things," he sighs, as police sirens wail beneath the window. Throughout the scene the camera swirls and dives, providing us with only the most fleeting, temporary moments of clarity.

The camera then plunges into the street below and makes its way into the darkest bowels of an underground homosexual nightclub called The Rectum, where two men seem violently determined to commit murder. These men are Marcus (Vincent Cassel) and Pierre (Albert Dupontel), and they are hunting down a male prostitute known as Le Ténia—The Tapeworm (Jo Prestia)—who, we later learn, has just raped and tortured Alex (Bellucci), the current girlfriend of Marcus and former lover of his pal Pierre. The furious Marcus violently barges into room after room, disrupting scenes of anonymous sex and beating up the participants in a long display of unrelenting violence that momentarily pauses only when one of the aggrieved men breaks his arm. Thinking he's found Le Ténia, the hitherto hesitant Pierre then savagely and methodically smashes in his skull with a heavy fire extinguisher—only, as we discover later, it isn't Le Ténia at all, but a hapless bystander who gets his brains bashed out while Le Ténia himself watches cheerfully from the sidelines. The camera never stops shaking, bobbing, weaving, bouncing off walls, turning upside down, moving in and out of focus—simultaneously showing us nothing and showing us everything. Its movement mirrors the chaos and violence of the situation and the characters' wildly out-of-control states of mind.

Moving back in time—the entire narrative is told in reverse, with each scene depicting events prior to those just shown—we next witness Marcus harassing an Asian taxi-driver and then a transvestite hooker as he searches for The Rectum, while Pierre—a philosophy professor—pleads with him not to be so violent. Moving back in time again, the film shows Alex walking into a dark subway underpass and getting brutally raped and beaten by Le Ténia. In this long scene of violence time seems to stand still, as Alex screams for help and reaches her hand toward the camera in a gesture of desperation and futility. We then see the situation preceding the rape—a party, at which Marcus takes dope and plays around with other girls, causing an irritated Alex to walk home on her own.

Gradually, moving through its reverse chronology, the film explains the reasons and motivations for the scene in The Rectum, as the frenzied camera slowly begins to relax and allow us to make sense of the plot. Eventually a more natural, unobtrusive directorial style comes into play, and we see Marcus and Pierre as calm, pleasant young men. We watch them joking around with Alex as the three of them take the subway to the party, and then we observe a long romantic sequence in which Marcus and Alex lie around in bed together, indulging in love-play and play-fights, laughing and kissing. The film ends with a scene in which Alex, newly pregnant—though she has yet to discover the fact—lies happily reading in a park surrounded by picnicking families and playful children. At this point the camera soars free of its moorings in a different way than earlier, flying into an overhead shot and thence into an exhilarating gyroscopic spin that turns the mise-en-scène into a swirling hallucination of dizzying, delirious intensity. This gives way to a stroboscopic barrage of black-and-white frames assailing the eye with split-second speed, and thence to a printed repetition of the film's grim motto, first articulated by the miserable butcher in the opening sequence: "Time destroys all things." This was the film's original working title, gleaned by Noé from Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* and it recalls a key insight of Schopenhauer as well. "Time is that by virtue of which everything becomes nothingness in our hands," he wrote in 1851, "and loses all real value."[4]

The numerous critics who readily dismissed *Irréversible* as racist, vacant, and homophobic seem to believe that the film's kinetic camera work, transgressive verbal and physical violence, and reverse chronology are merely tricks and gimmicks, rather than fundamental signifiers of its meaning. *Irréversible* is not, in fact, simply a story told backwards, but a complex study of the nature of time. Its director is less interested in cause and effect than in the form of time itself. (This is part of what distinguishes *Irréversible* from other "reverse chronology" narratives, such as Harold Pinter's 1983 *Betrayal* and Christopher Nolan's 2001 *Memento*.) Nor is *Irréversible* the mere nihilistic

anti-romance that some have found it to be. In fact, Noé describes himself (perhaps a tad disingenuously) as "very sentimental," and *Irréversible* as an "intimate" film. "The structure is all funny and the camerawork is full of energy," he says, "but it's really about losing someone you love."[5]

It's also about a lot more, to be sure. Part of the significance of the film's structure is bodily. We begin in the realm of the anal (The Rectum)—a filthy, dark, destructive place—in search of Le Ténia (the tapeworm), whose violence turns out to be infectious. Alex is anally raped in an underground passageway, and the later conversation sequence in a rumbling subway continues the anal motif. As the film continues, however, we find ourselves progressing—as Freud might say—to a more "mature" realm, that of the vaginal. Alex and Marcus make love, and when Alex tests herself with a home pregnancy kit, she learns she is expecting Marcus' child. The final sequence, the rapid-fire explosion of pure black-and-white frames, may be seen as a vision of the symbolic uterus, evoking the moment of conception and perhaps the beginning of life itself. The film's journey has a Dante-esque quality—starting in the pits of Hell, continuing along the tortuous slopes of Purgatory, and ending with an apparition too blazingly delirious for human perception to take in, much less grasp and comprehend.

Another clue to the film's meaning is the book Alex is seen with more than once in the movie, most notably at the end, when she relaxes in a sunny park surrounded by playing children. The book is J.W. Dunne's treatise *An Experiment with Time,* first published in 1927.[6] Its appearance is not, as one critic complained, merely a glib allusion to the film's non-linear structure. Rather, it sheds a great deal of light on the movie's intricate and innovative composition.

Dunne's theories hinge on the notion that there are multiple kinds of "time states," beginning with the most immediate ones that he calls "Time 1" and "Time 2." Time 1 is the kind of time we're accustomed to in daily life—linear time, moving steadily forward, with states of the external world experienced in succession. Time 2—which coexists with Time 1—is not linear but integrated in a kind of fourth dimension, where future, past, and present merge together. Dunne suggests that we experience most of our lives in Time 1—linear time—but we can access Time 2 in various ways, including through our dreams, when our cognitive faculties don't concentrate so intensely on the present moment. Dunne compares Time 2 to the "Everlasting Now" of Eastern philosophy, and asserts that our dreams always take place in Time 2, where future, present, and past are experienced as superimposed rather than separate and linear, as they appear in Time 1.

According to Dunne, states such as trances, dreams, and hypnosis give potential access to Time 2. Our perceptive faculties try to interpret a dream's events as a succession of views similar to those we experience in Time 1—so what we *experience* as our dream (and recount upon waking) is an attempt to make sense of Time 2 via the perceptual faculties we use to operate in Time 1. Dunne's account of the dreamer's experience closely resembles what the audience of *Irréversible* undergoes, as if Noé is recreating the chronological concatenation of Time 2 as experienced from the perspective of Time 1. In our dreams, as Dunne describes them,

> . . . nothing stays to be looked at. Everything is in a state of flux. . . . And, because of the continual breaking down of your attempts at maintaining a concentrated focus, the dream story develops in a series of disconnected scenes. . . . You are always trying to keep attention moving steadily in the direction to which you are accustomed in your waking observation . . . but attention relaxes, and, when you recontract it, you find, as often as not, that it is focused on the wrong place. . . . You start on a journey, and find yourself abruptly at the end.[7]

An Experiment with Time has been in and out of print sporadically since 1934, and Dunne's contributions to space-time metaphysics have not been embraced by the scientific community. Like that of renegade philosopher Charles Fort, his work has been taken up not by the academy but by dilettantes and dabblers, kitchen mystics and bedroom psychics—and an occasional artist like Noé, whose *Irréversible* enacts a similar kind of experiment. "You want to hypnotize with a movie," Noé says. "The hypnosis either takes you somewhere or it doesn't. You're in a trance or you're not. . . . If the hypnosis works well, the audience will get into your dream."

Looked at from another important perspective, the narrative of Noé's film seems characterized by a belief in human helplessness in the face of a future that is as unchangeable as it is unavoidable, since—as Dunne suggests—it is already present. *Irréversible* abounds in signs and omens of what is to come, although these always have an elusive quality. For example, certain moments in the film's first, more violent scenes are later replayed in an affectionate context,

Albert Dupontel as Pierre, Monica Bellucci as Alex, and Vincent Cassel as Marcus

suggesting some of the many complicated connections between what we call "romantic love" and the brutality of rape and violence. Le Ténia's brutal treatment of Alex, including the way he spits disgustedly into her face after raping her, is echoed by the friendly play-fighting between Marcus and Alex, during which Marcus lightly sputters saliva into Alex's face as a joke.[8] When she first wakes up on the morning of the horrible events, moreover, Alex recalls having a strange nightmare about being trapped inside a red tunnel that then broke around her; although she pays little attention to her dream, it is a clear presentiment of what is to happen that night. Marcus, similarly, is unable to feel his arm when he wakes up—a premonition of his arm being violently broken in the Rectum nightclub. "I want to fuck you in the ass," he tells Alex teasingly a little later, a line clearly anticipating Alex's violent anal rape. The banter that Marcus, Pierre, and Alex engage in on the subway is all about Alex's sexuality, and, in the conversation's emphasis on ways of bringing a sexual partner to orgasm, about instrumental, power-oriented approaches to sexuality in general. In the bleak narrative of *Irréversible,* banter, play-fighting, and real violence are all enmeshed with one another; all are continually present. Only human perception interprets one as distinct from another. A sense of imminent catastrophe, as well as the helplessness of humanity, pervades all the "romantic" scenes involving Marcus, Alex, and Pierre, however casually these are presented.

In some respects, these aspects of *Irréversible* reflect Noé's conception of the film as an exercise in the meanings and mechanisms of memory. "You experience things in a linear way," he explains, "but when you reconstruct them with your mind, they're not linear any more. Your remembrance of your own past is not linear. It's just emotions, and moments, and they're in a chronological disorder. If you want to write a diary of what you did—say, three years ago—it will take you a long time to remember in which order the events took place. You just remember faces, moments, doors, rooms."

On other levels—including its nonlinear ordering of single-take sequences that in themselves are linear—the movie is also an elaborate puzzle that spectators are invited to solve as they watch it. "It's linear, and it's not linear," Noé says. "There was an article in France where the writer said it was [like] a Rubik's Cube; you could take it to pieces and put it together [another] way. . . . It's like a game. I think that after the third scene, people understand the rules of the game, and they want to play with you and try to understand it. You could do something [even] more complex, but that would get people lost."

More profoundly, *Irréversible* is influenced by Dunne's sense of the past and future as states that are constantly with us in the present, and to this extent the movie is philosophically inflected as much by fatalism as by nihilism. Noé's characters are powerless to control any aspect of their future; all are predestined from the outset to a fate from which they cannot escape—a fate that is irreversible.

Violent brutality and romantic affection are closely connected in *Irréversible,* but not in the sense that one causes or leads to the other. The connections simply exist: this hellish state is just the way things are. Humans, through their own efforts, cannot save themselves from their fate, which, in the case of Alex, Marcus, Pierre, and a number of other characters, including Alex's unborn child, is destruction and disaster. Any attempt to save oneself from this disaster is futile, and yet people like Alex and Marcus continue to delude themselves that the future is in their hands. This is a key reason for the reverse chronology of the film, which Noé sees not as a drama but as a tragedy in the fullest sense of the term. "In a drama," he says, "dramatic things happen, and in a tragedy, they *unfold.* In a tragedy you cannot change events. In the way [*Irréversible*] is told, the characters cannot change their future, because you've already seen what's going to happen next. So all you can ask is, 'What happened before?' "

According to scholar Daniel Wojcik, fatalism, nihilism, and powerlessness are the trinity of secular apocalyptic thought.[9] The content and structure of *Irréversible* closely resemble those of the traditional apocalyptic narrative, in which perceived threats, so-

cial turmoil, and anomalous occurrences are interpreted as signs that foretell imminent worldly destruction. The effects of Noé's apocalypse may be limited to a small handful of characters, but its larger implications are inescapable—chief among them, that the social and cultural rituals human beings have developed to perpetuate the concept of "civilization" are meaningless acts of denial and repression. Noé describes *Irréversible* as a poignant drama about "losing someone you love," but the narrative clearly has ramifications far beyond what he idiosyncratically owns up to.

The literal meaning of "apocalypse" is "an unveiling," usually in the sense of an unveiling of a state of affairs that has been present all along. Often, in apocalyptic narratives, what is unveiled is the future, which turns out to have its roots in the present moment. As philosopher and theologian Martin Buber notes, in apocalyptic thought "everything is pre-determined, all human decisions are only sham struggles."[10] This is certainly true of *Irréversible,* which is inflected by a strong mood of secular eschatology, using scenes of apocalyptic violence as metaphors for contemporary *Angst*. In *Irréversible,* rituals and institutions like romantic love, marriage, the family, and friendship are revealed to be no more than vacant shams, and we are left with a resulting sense of anomie, disorientation, lawlessness, and chaos.

In this sense, the narrative of *Irréversible* can be regarded as a synecdoche for twentieth-century thought, which has been characterized by the breakdown of previous meaning systems and subsequent feelings of disillusionment, apathy, and anxiety. In the past century as in previous ages, tragedies, disasters, uncertainty, and threat have led people to attribute causality to external factors, whether God's will, the devil, fate, the government, one's parents, an Axis of Evil, or the configuration of the planets at birth. In *Irréversible,* however, Noé instinctively suggests that in the twenty-first century we can no longer attribute violence and disaster to any cause outside the brutal nature of humanity itself. In his apocalyptic scenario, worldly destruction is considered immanent in human nature rather than externally prescribed, fulfilled by the actions and character of human beings rather than determined by outside forces. This is a chief reason for the film's unbridled eruptions of misogynistic and homophobic hate. Noé isn't merely toying with current cultural taboos. He's unmasking strains of inchoate revulsion and anarchic rage that surge through the allegedly civilized discourses of modernity with no less feral viciousness than they possess in the most lawless and barbaric instances of human existence. All that's different in modernity is the degree of repression and dissimulation with which rage and revulsion are disguised. And in Noé's view such camouflage is the worst enemy of all—concealing truths of human instinct and impulse that are as unshakable as they are grim, and encouraging humanity's woeful urge to disavow its own realities by cowering within hard, hypocritical shells of numbness and denial. It is this existential deadness that *Irréversible* assails, using the most radical resources Noé can muster to distress, disorient, and alarm an audience accustomed to movies as a narcotizing pleasure, not a galvanizing journey into its own most desperately hidden truths.

The branch of apocalyptic thought most clearly evoked by *Irréversible* is "unconditional apocalypticism"[11]: the belief that history is predetermined and unalterable (or, as Dunne would describe it, perpetually present); the world is irredeemable by human effort, and its cataclysmic destruction is therefore inevitable. Some writers and scholars attribute the strand of unconditional apocalypticism in twentieth-century thought to the development of nuclear warheads and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the invention of the bomb, there was a sense that humanity could not reverse its inevitable path to destruction, that scientists had created an uncontrollable weapon that would ultimately destroy the world. "The bomb," according to Alfred Kazin, "gave the shape of life, inner and outer, an irreversible change; a sense of fatefulness would now lie on all things."[12]

What the bomb symbolized to earlier writers and scholars is represented in *Irréversible* by human nature in and of itself. Noé's apocalyptic vision presents us with an infernal, chaotic society cursed by violence, fear, paranoia, and a sense of fatalism that time can only make worse. "For the world is Hell," as Schopenhauer articulated this grim insight a century and a half earlier, "and men are on the one hand the tormented souls and on the other the devils in it."[13] The veil has been lifted, and what it reveals is death-in-life, and life-in-death.

Mikita Brottman is professor of language and literature at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Her books include *Offensive Films, Hollywood Hex,* and the edited collection *Car Crash Culture*. She writes frequently for scholarly, mainstream, and underground publications.

David Sterritt is film critic of *The Christian Science Monitor,* professor of theater and film at Long Island University, and co-chair of the Columbia University Seminar on Cinema and Interdisciplinary Interpretation. His books include *Mad to Be Saved: The Beats, the '50s, and Film* and *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*.

Notes

1. J. Hoberman, "All or Nothing at the Cannes Film Festival," *Village Voice,* June 5-12, 2002. <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0223/hoberman2.php>
2. Quoted in *Metacritic.com,* "What the critics are saying:" <http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/irreversible/>
3. In fact there are invisible cuts within some of these shots, and some visual details were digitally added in postproduction.
4. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms,* sel. and trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 51.
5. Interview with Gaspar Noé at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 12, 2002, conducted by David Sterritt and including questions provided by Mikita Brottman. All quotes from Noé are taken from this interview.
6. J.W. Dunne, *An Experiment With Time* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2001).
7. Ibid., 104.
8. Interestingly, Vincent Cassell and Monica Bellucci—who were married to each other during production of *Irréversible*—filed for divorce not long after the film's release, in summer 2002.
9. Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 201.
10. Martin Buber, *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays,* ed. and trans. Maurice Freedman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), 201.
11. See Wojcik, *End of the World as We Know It,* 209.
12. Alfred Kazin, "Awaiting the crack of doom," *New York Times Book Review,* May 1, 1988: 1.
13. Schopenhauer, 48.

Abstract Mikita Brottman and David Sterritt: *Irréversible*. This essay reviews Gaspar Noé's controversial 2002 film *Irréversible*, considering key philosophical and psychological issues it explores. The authors argue that the film's reverse chronology is not a mere gimmick but is essential to its structural complexity and indicative of apocalyptic implications that make it a provocative study of the nature of time.