

THE REAL FRANCE

GASPAR NOÉ'S *IRRÉVERSIBLE*

In her post-Cannes coverage, Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly* called Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* a "vacantly outrageous orgy of graphic rape, revenge, and gay bashing." She led a near-unanimous chorus of critical spanking, the flock insisting that the only question to decide about the film was whether it was silly or just stupid.

Cut the guy some slack. Noé was a discovery of David Overbey, programmer for Toronto and the Cannes Critics' Week. In 1991, Noé showed David his first film, *Carne*, in a grotty apartment in Paris' Strasbourg-St. Denis area with heroin dealers and crack whores steps away. David was captivated by its 40 minutes of static visual beauty and bilious dialogue, spilling from the mouth of an Arab-hating butcher. It crackled with a prescient authenticity belied by Le Pen's growing electoral success. At its Cannes premiere, Noé was hailed as a frightening but brilliant new voice in French cinema.

Soon after Overbey's death, Noé returned to Cannes with 1998's *Seul contre tous* (*I Stand Alone*), a film that used the same character and actor (Philippe Nahon), and amplified the same delusional, loathsome rants with a formidably intense visual style. Noé originally had wanted the English title of the film to be "France." He believed that this awful man represented what France is all about; that underneath its dialectic of bourgeois smugness and sans-coulottes jocularly, the nation seethes in obsessive loathing of the Other. Instead, the critics who praised it saw the film as a kind of companion piece to those TV movies about serial killers, but with more confrontational images.

So we come to *Irréversible*. Noé sets up the film with a short prologue by our old friend Nahon. Naked, fat, and snarling, he is an anti-Buddha who informs us that "Time destroys all things." This clever joke anticipates the soon-to-come literal destruction of the film's characters and their immediate rebirth.

The story is told backwards in time, forwards in narrative intent. A man (Vincent Cassel) rampages through a gay sex/torture club looking for the man who killed his girlfriend. The would-be-killer is colorfully beaten to death by the girl's former lover, a philosophy professor. Next, Cassel beats up a Chinese taxi driver and tranny hooker looking for the club, while the professor asks him to be nicer. Cassel's girlfriend (Monica Bellucci) leaves a party, walks into a dark underpass, gets brutally raped by a gay pimp, and is then beaten to a pulp. At the party, a high Cassel plays around with other girls, ultimately pissing off Bellucci. A subway ride to the party sees



Cassel, Bellucci, and the philosopher discuss orgasms and how best to achieve them. Finally, the happy couple lolls in bed together, waking up, washing, kissing, and being romantic. The film ends with Bellucci discovering she is pregnant.

I give this long synopsis because most critics judge *Irréversible* as though it begins at the story's temporal beginning and ends at the story's temporal end. Noé's decision to go backwards is seen as a cinematic trick, like his constantly swirling camera. (And what a camera it is – the early scenes, in particular, are astonishing in their relentless movement and their fascinating, fleeting parcels of information.)

By throwing our two male leads into the world of fisting faggots, chicks with dicks, and aggressive immigrant Chinamen, without any accompanying context for the viewer except a vague notion that they seek revenge, Noé posits them as French Everymen. What they see around them is what Mr. Frenchman believes is fucked up about his society. When he shows a French superstar getting ass-raped by a gay pimp, while being denounced as a "rich bitch" in the same place dozens of hookers get slammed every year, he is setting up the same dialectic as *Seul contre tous*. The face of bourgeois culture is skin-deep, as is the precious sanctity of working-class dignity. Strip them both off and see real people, the real "France."

(Some of Noé's more outré critics consider the film homophobic because he paints the gay killer as a psycho animal, and the gay club as a site of animalistic behavior. What these – likely heterosexual – critics don't get is that gay B&D sex clubs are site-specific: the whole point is to name and acknowledge a space to cater to animal needs. Noé understands that the over-the-top machismo of the club is the most logical place to have a macho showdown. Same for the club's most desired >>

By Noah Cowan

participant, the woman's killer. This is *Gladiator*, people. As such, *Irréversible* is a much more empowering film for gay people than some "funny" lispng faggot on prime time TV.)

Nevertheless, if the film ended with the rape, *Irréversible* would be a less interesting rethink of how central male violence is to male identity and how much this dynamic informs social politics. Instead, Noé challenges us to reconstitute a standard narrative by providing us with the missing piece. Were the film to actually start where it ends, you would be emotionally invested in this attractive bourgeois couple. Then you would follow their "descent into hell" with all the foreshadowing that such narratives demand. But we refuse to reconstitute this narrative. Why?

By putting the lovey-dovey stuff at the end, Noé identifies it as the actual problem. This ridiculous, idealized notion of heterosexual reproduction is a form of narrative deceit, and should be considered the object of horror; they are perpetuating all the bourgeois myths of safety and protection that Noé hates so much through the privileged act of making babies. He completes his earlier joke: time *should* destroy this.

This is not a very nice position. And I am not certain that Noé's execution is clear enough to support his ideas. But the attempt is definitely not as silly, stupid, racist, homophobic, or vacant as the critics who seem to fear it so much. ■

INTERVIEW

THE FRIENDLY GHOST: GASPAR NOÉ DEFENDS *IRRÉVERSIBLE*

CINEMA SCOPE: What do you think has most shocked people about your movie?

GASPAR NOÉ: It's the critics who have been most harsh. There's a big difference between the reactions of audiences and critics. The audience usually pays to see a movie and they know what they're in for. Film critics are often sent by their office to see a movie they know they might hate. It's different once the people know that the film is very violent, they know what they're paying for. They're not pushed into doing something they don't want to do. In France, there were some journalists I knew weren't going to like it. And still they were invited because it's their job to review it, then they wrote reviews saying it was offensive. There's something to doing a movie without considering whether or not the general public will like it or not. There's something about doing it for yourself or your friends.

SCOPE: You weren't trying to shock with this movie?

NOÉ: No. To shock is too easy. It's more about seducing. You want to hypnotize with a movie. The hypnosis either takes you somewhere or it doesn't. You're in a trance or you're not. There are subjects in this movie that are quite close to the tragedies or dramas of real life, like rape or revenge. If the hypnosis works well, the audience will get into your dream. If people don't want to get into that kind of a trip, they shouldn't go. If people don't want a bad trip, they shouldn't take LSD.

SCOPE: *Irréversible* seems to tie into a strain of French filmmaking, as films like *Romance* (1999) or *Baise-moi* (2000), which seem intent on shocking people, also seem to be about pressing audience buttons.

NOÉ: I think France has become more transgressive than it was 20 years ago. It's not about shocking, it's about having fun with it. Making movies like you would play with toys. Using movies to bring people to some extremity. We communicate in a heavier way than American movies do today. American movies were impolite in the 70s. Now they're

almost all as flat as mineral water. They don't even sparkle. **SCOPE:** So none of the film is real? I read that there was actual penetration in the rape scene.

NOÉ: There is a penis at the end, but it was added as a 3-D special effect in post-production. When we were editing it, the assistant editor said that it was a pity you don't see a penis when he pulls back. So we added it in, just three seconds, a digitally created penis. I showed it to Monica, who was amused. She said it made things all the more real. The actor, Jo Prestia, said it was fine so long as we made it big. The producers didn't know it was going to happen until we got to Cannes. They were a bit taken aback when there was this semi-erect bloody penis up there. Jo was so gentle with Monica in between takes. I think that's why they were able to take the scene so far.

SCOPE: Do you think people were fainting at the beginning because of the camera movement or the content?

NOÉ: Both. We also added a lot of sound, sound that you don't necessarily hear, but that hits you in the gut. So both of them create a kind of nausea. When you come to the rape scene, you're already sick before it starts.

SCOPE: Do you feel rape is becoming a cinematic cliché? There seem to be an awful lot of films featuring bravura rape sequences.

NOÉ: I think murder is more of a cliché. One out of every two movies has a murder in it. It's not nearly that common in reality. There are many other taboos in movies. Moral harassment isn't shown in this part of life. You never see people shitting in a movie. People do that once a day. Filmmakers in America don't show it because they need an R rating. There are many disgusting and humiliating things that people feel that they shouldn't talk about, and they're not shown. Life can be fun, but most of the time life is heavy. People have to fight for their own survival. ■

By Matthew Hays