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## 'Inflected Accounts and Irreversible Journeys'

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### Inflected Accounts and Irreversible Journeys

#### Abstract

In 2006 a team led by Prof. Martin Barker at Aberystwyth University was commissioned by the British Board of Film Classification to study audience responses to five films that the board had recently struggled to classify, due to their depictions of sexual violence. This article (written by the project's Research Assistant) draws on materials generated in relation to two of the films: *Irreversible* and *A Ma Soeur!* It argues that analysis of the patterns of narration that viewers employed in their written and spoken accounts of the films helped to make visible the dominant fields of meaning for those who embraced and refused the films. In particular, it will contrast the different structural role of the director in viewer strategies for negotiating and managing two issues of common concern in relation to screened sexual violence: narrative ambiguity and overwhelming affective power.

**Keywords:** Film audiences, sexual violence, audience research, film authorship, *À Ma Soeur!*, *Irreversible*.

#### Introduction

Whenever concerns are expressed about screened sexual violence, a number of overlapping cultural beliefs about how film and television work come into play. These derive from conflicting sources. A combination of behavioural scientists; psychologists; sociologists; campaigners working from religious, taste and decency, and feminist perspectives; and newspaper editors may not be a recipe for a consistent and coherent theory of media impact (or a successful social gathering), but all have contributed to the climate of concern surrounding the viewing of depictions of sexual violence. This not only provides the context within which the BBFC must make and justify its decisions, it also frames the ways in which viewers who choose to watch cinema containing such controversial scenes can make meaning from them and justify their responses – particularly positive responses. The spectres of 'other' audiences loom large for filmgoers as well as censors, and as the films in question often place their own strident emotional and mental demands upon the viewer, the process of reconciling an extremely personal experience of a difficult film with its perceived status in the public sphere can be very complex. If you ask viewers (and we did) whether and in what ways it is acceptable to depict sexual violence, the overwhelming majority of those who are willing to engage with the possibility will tell you that it all depends on the context.<sup>[1]</sup> Just what might this catch-all mean in practice? We set out to explore.

#### A Little Recent History

Here it is perhaps worth saying something about how the project came about. In early 2006 the BBFC asked Martin Barker to design and conduct a study of audience responses to five films that they had recently struggled to classify: *A Ma Soeur!* (2001), *Baise Moi* (2000), *House on the Edge of the Park* (1980), *Ich the Killer* (2001) and *Irreversible* (2002). Although very different, each contained challenging depictions of sexual violence, and for all but one (*Irreversible*), cuts were required, at least for the DVD/VHS release.<sup>[2]</sup>

The design of the study was tri-partite. We set out to investigate how audiences (male and female) understood sexual violence in relation to characters, story arcs and narrative outcomes, but also to explore how generic placements and moral judgements were arrived at. As we were interested in eliciting the views of the naturally occurring audiences for the films, the first phase was a survey of existing online debates about the titles, encompassing professional and 'citizen' reviews,<sup>[3]</sup> blogs, fan sites and discussion boards. In total, this covered over 400 bodies of English language web discussion of the films. The second phase was a web-based questionnaire. Although this was open to respondents from around the globe, due to our publicity focus, over two thirds of our respondents were UK based.<sup>[4]</sup> Through an opt-in contact form after completion of the questionnaire, this became an extremely effective recruiting tool for our third phase: twenty discussion groups (four per film), held in nine locations around the UK. Where the first two phases had sought to attract a full spectrum of audience experience, the discussion groups were designed to focus on positive responses (the kind of responses often considered most troubling), exploring in depth the nature of sustained engagements with the films, the kinds of pleasures they offered, and the impact of cuts.

The BBFC's decision to commission this study arose, in part, from their interest in a previous article published in *Participations*: Barker's consideration of student responses to the 1971 film, *Straw Dogs*. In this article (2005), Barker picked up on questions that he felt had been implicitly raised but not explicitly addressed by a previous piece of BBFC commissioned research: Guy Cumberbatch's *Where Do You Draw the Line?* (2002).

The aim of the earlier study was to help the BBFC to gauge if their position on sexual violence was in tune with public opinion. To this end, Cumberbatch effectively invited a group of video renters (representing a spectrum of censoriousness) to place themselves in the BBFC's shoes. Participants were asked to view films, which in many cases were well outside their own rental preferences, and discuss the scenes that they thought would present the biggest problems for a classification body. They were also asked to engage in two activities which are central to the BBFC's decision making process on the issue: identifying a film's take-home real world 'message' about sexual violence and gender relations, and judging if the inclusion of a scene was likely to result in real world 'harm'. As the films were frequently considered to be shocking and without value, the latter offered a channel for respondents' puzzlement about who might actually choose or enjoy a film like *Last House on the Left* (1972).

However, although at the more abstract level, respondents seemed able and willing to engage in the debate on the BBFC's terms (after viewing the films, 40% agreed with the statement that 'The problem of rape in society is bound to be made worse by the easy availability of videos that show sexual violence'), many core concepts that mattered to the BBFC, such as 'titillation' and 'copycat behaviour' – and which arguably form the operational bridge between abstract 'harm' and the board's logic for making cuts – did not seem to be part of the spontaneous language used to discuss the individual films (2002: 59).

Cumberbatch noted a number of discrepancies between the ways in which the participants were willing to respond to specific question prompts, and the ways in which they independently chose to express their views, but did not proceed to interrogate the meaning of this gap. For Barker, however, this was a rich

fissure, exposing the difference between the performance of an acceptable position within a well established public debate and the process of arriving at a more personal meaning, which might not tally closely to the more abstract 'messages' about rape and gender which could be identified and recognised as having a clear place within that debate (for instance, although 60% of Cumberbatch's respondents agreed that *Straw Dogs* gave the message that 'when a woman says no she might mean yes', this was not the focus in the accounts of the film, nor did it lead to recommendations to censor). Barker suggested that the assumptions shared by the BBFC and the researchers had precluded a real exploration of the viewers' priorities. In particular, he charged that the focus on identifying 'messages' had led Cumberbatch to privilege the articulation of abstract interpretations and, conversely, to fail to recognise the significance of the more literal descriptions of film narratives that the majority of respondents apparently offered. Barker argued that such literal – but selective – descriptions were examples 'of the ways in which people work in and through a "context"', and in the study he presented in response, he began to explore the ways in which students who 'embraced' and 'refused' *Straw Dogs* used their narration of the film's events and evaluations of specific characters to explore and assert the meaning of an ambiguous text. In the BBFC funded project that followed, exploring the function of these more ordinary and descriptive elements of film talk in securing film meanings, became a major focus of our analysis.

### Frameworks for analysis

This research stood squarely on the shoulders of earlier projects that Martin Barker (and various collaborators) had conducted, a legacy which resulted in a discourse analysis approach, utilising many analytical frameworks and explicit concerns that were already well developed. By the time I joined the project in June 2006, we were beginning from a position where we knew that we would compare the viewing dispositions and interpretative moves involved in producing positive and negative responses to the films ('embracer' and 'refuser' positions) in relation to a framework of public controversy (a strategy developed within the *Crash* study, 2001), and following on from the *Lord of the Rings* study we were ready to account for different levels of respondents investments and articulation. However, we also expected that this project would involve developing new methods for analysis as we went along, grounded in and tested on the diverse data we were gathering. Two new frameworks emerged, and here I hope to explain the way in which the necessity for and nature of each was illuminated by the qualities of different data strands.

The first framework arose from a need to explicitly manage the different *kinds* of context I was encountering in the web survey. What we produced was a system classifying types of context according to their interpretative functions, but these were made visible through the distinct and different 'ways of telling' associated with each of the films. As I will explore shortly through examples from discussion boards, there were often strong narrative patterns in naturally occurring online accounts of the films, but the format of the accounts were incredibly diverse: cult fan sites, blogs which emulated professional review conventions, 'citizen reviews' which could be self-consciously non-professional, DVD product recommendations which explicitly sought to help others manage experiential and financial risk, and discussion forums with widely varying cultures and etiquettes. As we attempted to sort out the features determined by the various format conventions and modes of writerly address, from those which could be reasonably attributed to the films themselves, it was the observation of the clustering/absence of different kinds of context functionality across different online formats that began to suggest a context structure which would prove applicable to the other data strands. In the first instance, this was about identifying if different context clusters mattered in producing positive and negative responses to each film – and to the

evaluation of the meaning of the scenes of sexual violence within them – but it also facilitated pattern comparison between films.

### Context Fields

- 1) *Impact on Self* – This encompasses raw and reflective accounts of the physical, emotional and cognitive impact of the films, and can be expressed purely in personal terms or as an impact on a wider group that the viewer places themselves within.
- 2) *Intratextual* – This refers to the relations between different elements within the film, contributing to judgements about its wholeness or internal integrity. Here the focus is usually on narrative and character, but it can also encompass aesthetic and technical qualities. In practice it involves viewers both identifying textual cues and trying to make connections and extrapolations which work towards completeness. What role do the key scenes play within this?
- 3) *Intertextual* – What connections are made to other films and media forms? This includes comparisons with specific films, generic placements (including senses of national cinemas), and also references to external authors (usually the director) or a star persona.
- 4) *Relationship to 'Reality'* – In what ways is a film/scene measured against perceptions of a real world beyond the film, both at the level of the 'realism' of the depiction and in terms of wider 'truths'?
- 5) *Relations to 'Other' Audiences* – In what ways do viewers invoke the impact of the film or a particular scene on different audiences. In what ways is this presumed, imagined or evidenced. What role does this 'other' audience play in viewers' judgements about the film/scene?

Clearly, in practice, these are rarely discrete, but one or two fields can strongly dominate positive or negative responses to a particular film, structuring and subordinating the use of the other fields. The first working model was developed when I was primarily focused on *A Ma Soeur!* and this readily yielded contexts two (Intra-textual), three (Inter-textual) and a version of four (initially called extra-textual) which contained what would eventually be expanded into the separate context five ('other' audiences). These fields of meaning have some kinship with the levels of interpretation outlined in David Bordwell's classic study of the meaning-making practices of film critics and academics (1989). However, as soon as I turned to the more visceral engagements of *Ichi the Killer* and *Irreversible* the need for an explicit engagement with the role of different kinds of experiential impact became very clear.

Working with real audience accounts – whether found or freshly created – always entails working with the nature of film memory, but most of the studies which have explicitly addressed the issue have focused on more distant recollections. In her consideration of the way that 1930s cinema-going is remembered, Annette Kuhn has argued that what people recount are complex integrations of personal memories and the shared hindsight on the era, which has passed into popular memory.<sup>[5]</sup> She has subsequently suggested that within these, the films themselves often remain only as fleetingly glimpsed and impressionistic images, detached from their narrative contexts (the first sight of Karloff's hand in *The Mummy*), sometimes fused to the physical context of the viewing experience (a fearful burying of a head in lap), or in the case of particularly iconic films (for instance, *King Kong*) even retrospectively inserted or reinforced.<sup>[6]</sup> For our films, the collective narratives were still in different stages of being formed. Personal

recollections of the films themselves were relatively fresh and rich in detail, and the relationship between these elements was particularly well illuminated by both the observed online discussion forums and by our own discussion groups.

Our second framework aimed to provide a means to work with these more recent film memories and had its roots in two of the free text questions we had asked in the online questionnaire: what were the most memorable and most uncomfortable parts of the films? The responses to the first question were very varied, but the responses to the second were highly predictable. Martin Barker proceeded to explore the implications of this through his initial analysis of an early transcript. The result gave us a way of thinking about how films are captured in memory, and the ways in which this process is evidenced in viewer's accounts.

### Remembering Films

- A) *Resonant Moments*: Elements of a film that strike a strong personal chord for the viewer. These tend to be highly individual, and emotionally led. They may remain disconnected from the overall response to the film.
- B) *Punctuation Moments*: Intrusively attention-grabbing moments. As these tend to be unpredictable or intense scenes, they are shared by most viewers. But although acutely remembered, these may not be accurately remembered, and the nature of miss-remembrances are often revealing.
- C) *Challenge Moments*: These challenge a barrier of acceptability – personal or social. They are commonly shared but not universal. Rather, they are strongly patterned according to worldviews, viewing preferences and accompanying expectations. The viewer's conflict may be resolved with relative ease (even if the scene remains tough to actually watch), it may be definitively alienating, or may led to the next category.
- D) *Imperative Moments*: These are moments, which, either on viewing or on reflection, force a re-evaluation of the viewer's understanding of the film. Depending on the outcome, the film can either crystallise to yield more significant meaning, or become too challenging or incoherent, potentially losing the viewer.
- E) *Circumstantial Moments*: These are points where the viewing environment and experience presses itself onto the meaning making process. They are closely related to context one (impact on self) responses, and in relation to these films they are often moments of acute discomfort: the awareness of being in a public or private space, with or without others, can accentuate attention to particular aspects of the film, and to ones own response to it.

### Ways of Telling

To illustrate the ways in which the analysis worked in practice I want to look at the nature of positive accounts for two of the films: *A Ma Soeur!* (Catherine Breillat) and *Irreversible* (Gasper Noë), contrasting straightforward embraces with more ambivalent responses from viewers who had to work harder in order to resolve conflict. Although they received different levels of publicity, the extra-textual offers made by these films were comparable in a number of ways; both were recent French language art-house releases,

made by directors with established and actively promoted auteur reputations, and track records of engaging with shocking and controversial depictions of sexuality.

Another feature that the films had in common was that their key scenes of sexual violence made layered demands of the viewer, incorporating the shocking impact of a punctuation moment, a challenge to the boundaries of acceptable depiction (for *Irreversible* the gruelling duration of the rape and for *A Ma Soeur!* the young age of the victim, Anaïs), leading, for most viewers, to an 'imperative moment' where the overall meaning and value of the film was at stake. As a result, the role of the sexual violence was core to meaning made of these films by almost all viewers. This is something that might sound obvious, but it was not the case for all the films in the study. For instance, although the BBFC was deeply worried by the sexual violence against women in *Ichi the Killer* and demanded extensive cuts, for most of those who embraced the film (and even for many who rejected it) this was not perceived as its defining feature, nor one which needed to be evaluated differently from the many other depictions of violence the film contained. This was partly because of the film's generic context; as an example of J-horror, if viewers felt it 'spoke' about gender relations at all, it did so in a way that was safely distant from western culture. However, films evaluated within a European art-house framework have historically been positioned within UK (and US) culture as sites for explicit and serious engagements about human sexuality, situated in contrast to comparatively frivolous, exploitative or heavy-handed Hollywood treatments of the subject. Not all films, which contain depictions of sexual violence, are perceived to carry 'messages' about that subject, but for these two films, securing and asserting real world meanings was a significant part of positive responses.

Beyond the common external elements, the films were very different in style, tone and narrative construction, and consequently the ways in which viewers made meaning from them – and the sexual violence they contained – could not have been more opposite. Not only were positive reactions to the films constructed through different dominant contexts, these responses were expressed in strikingly different ways.

### **Inflected Accounts**

The story of *A Ma Soeur!* concerned a middle class Parisian family on holiday, focusing on the close but claustrophobic relationship between two sisters with differing attitudes to sex and romance. The older (15), beautiful sister, Elena, embarks on an affair with an Italian student (Fernando), who makes a promise of lasting love with a borrowed ring, and in a long seduction scene, coerces her into having painful anal sex. However, for the audience, most of the character based difficulties and many of the potential rewards of the film lay with the plain, overweight younger (12) sister, Anaïs. She sleeps in the same room and witnesses Elena's experience. She has declared to Elena that she wants to lose her virginity to someone she dislikes, and though a series of scenes of her alone that viewers variously found moving, illuminating, boring, baffling and embarrassing, the film depicts her ennui, her relationship to her pubescent body, and her desire for a sexually liberated life in the future. When Elena's affair is discovered the holiday is cut short, and as the father has to fly back for business, the sisters share an unpleasant and uncomfortable motorway ride through bad traffic, with their mother – a reluctant driver – at the wheel. When they finally pull into a rest stop to sleep, a shocking attack occurs. The windscreen smashes, the older sister is killed with a single hammer blow and the mother is strangled. Anaïs gets out of the back seat of the car, backing away. She is 'raped' in the woods by the killer. In the final scene, the bodies have been discovered the next day, and policemen lead Anaïs from the woods to the car park where the killer has been caught. One

policeman says, 'We found her in the woods. She says he didn't rape her'. Anaïs says 'Don't believe me if you don't want to', turning, so that in the final frame she faces the camera.

In order to embrace *A Ma Soeur!*, viewers needed to find a way to manage the film's many ambiguous narrative elements, character motivations, and particularly the brutal and abrupt change of pace at the film's ending. For this film, the dominant contexts for positive responses were two, three and four. Moreover, in order to be able to fully embrace the film (or to most skilfully dismiss it), viewers needed to be able to move fluidly between the film's internal narrative and character elements, and their sense of an external authorial voice, who's motivations could then be accounted for by reference to larger 'real world' truths about gender relationships. In particular, an ability to move freely between Anaïs, in context two and Breillat, in context three, was key to overcoming the unacceptable hurdle of Anaïs' age, and her peculiar response to the attack.

For this to work, Anaïs rather than Elena, needs to be recognised as the central character, allowing perceptions of Anaïs' reasoning to be closely and sympathetically layered with those of the director. In this way, Anaïs becomes more than a literal adolescent; she is simultaneously a credible young character and the visible construction of an adult intelligence: the author's avatar and critical presence within the diegesis, who reflects back upon adolescence and society. This enables the embracers to refute the common complaint that 'I don't believe that ANY girl, no matter her state of shock, would behave towards the killer and the police as the "heroine" does here'.<sup>[7]</sup> For embracers, the child/adult duality means that Anaïs need not be psychologically and intellectually evaluated as a real child. In contrast, those who do not have such a porous sense of representation find Anaïs' pronouncements and behaviour to be troubling: the inappropriate and unrealistic sexualisation of a young girl. This critique can be magnified by asserting a real world 'harm' that reasserts the boundary between adult and child: that Breillat has obviously exploited her young actress, Anaïs Rebox.

Those who saw the uncut (in the UK, the cinema or imported US Criterion DVD versions) and those who saw the cut version (UK VHS and DVD release) receive rather different amounts of information with which to evaluate the claim that Anaïs has not been raped, but neither is obviously conclusive. In the uncut edition we see the killer force Anaïs to the ground in the woods in a wide shot, and then move to a closer (upper torso and heads) shot of him on top of Anaïs. This stays focused on her facial reaction throughout. As he pins her arms with one hand and wrestles her clothing with the other, Anaïs is subtitled as saying 'You're not going to hurt me?'. He tells her to 'Shut up' and gags her with her underwear. She struggles to free her arms, initially appearing to continue to push him away, but then she places her arm around his neck and appears to pull him closer until he finishes (presumably having climaxed). She lets go of him, slowly extracts the gag from her mouth, and when he pulls back from her, revealing her exposed breasts, she pulls her dress down, covering herself, and turns her head to the side (away from the camera). Throughout the latter part of the scene her facial expressions are subtle and difficult to fathom.

In the UK home release edition this whole shot is missing. The film cuts straight from the wide shot where Anaïs and the killer fall to the ground in the woods to the morning discovery of the bodies. For viewers who had followed the film as a sensitive if uncompromising coming of age study, the abrupt change of pace involved in either version could be too much; the sudden, shocking violence was considered to be a gratuitous betrayal of characters that the audience had invested in. For these viewers the strength of the film lay in the accuracy of its real world observations of the cruelties, rivalries and vulnerabilities of adolescence. To maintain this, the film's internal (context two) cohesion was paramount and resentment of the ending was variously expressed as showy, pretentious and plain incompetent filmmaking. The external author had asserted herself in the viewers' consciousness – and was utterly unwelcome.

Like those already irritated by the character of Anaïs and the film's ponderous pace, viewers who were alienated by the visceral and emotional impact (context one) and narrative disruption (context two) of the ending did not lose much from the viewing the cut version. If the whole of the ending was a nonsensical and offensive lapse of directorial judgement, then its finer grain did not matter. However for those who were readily mobilising an external author as interpretative tool, this was not the case. The ending was a point requiring the viewer to reach back into the narrative for comparison, particularly to the long seduction sequence. For a number of discussion group participants the realisation that there had been a cut provoked anger (e.g. Sean – Edinburgh, Clare – Newcastle and Eleri – Brighton): a sense of having been cheated of the film's real ending, and left with insufficient information to understand Anaïs motivations or to judge what Breillat was ultimately 'saying' about sexual relations (for those who had not realise that a scene was missing, the abrupt cut could also set up the narrative expectation/fear that Anaïs was dead: Ilaria – Edinburgh). However for those who saw the uncut version, things were not necessarily any clearer. The elements of resistance and acceptance in Anaïs response, and the earlier events and attitudes expressed by the sisters were remembered and recounted in variety of ways, anchoring different interpretations of the film.

The following account comes from a lengthy and lively *A Ma Soeur!* IMDB message board thread ('Please – Avoid at all costs (Spoilers inside)<sup>[8]</sup>'), in which polarised positions are expressed, and the logic of fully embracing the ending is explored. This example illustrates a very secure and complete embrace position. Through a tale of a difference of opinion with the friend they saw the film with, this poster takes up a feminist position which respectfully acknowledges other feminist perspectives that reject the film as 'demeaning the destructive nature of sexual damage', and then seeks to persuade. The narrative of the seduction is recounted as social commentary and the viewer's perspective is aligned with Anaïs' knowing point of view: 'Both the audience and Anaïs see through Fernando from the very start, but we aren't very appalled by his behaviour.' The poster has explained that Anaïs "wants her first sexual experience to mean nothing to her, that way no man can hold it over her head as a kind of bragging right" and goes on to assert that Breillat has used the symbol of the ring the student gives Elena to critique the male possession of women through marriage. This leads to the following account of the ending.

These things understood, the conclusion of the movie comes into focus. Anaïs is raped by a complete stranger (in the wake of Elena's murder), and she tells him that he can't hurt her. She walks away seemingly unfazed. When the policeman tells a doctor skeptically that she claims she wasn't raped, she tells him that he doesn't have to believe her.

In this account Anaïs *is* raped, and the action that more ambivalent viewers often refer to as Anaïs 'hugging' or 'embracing' her attacker is not mentioned. Instead Anaïs takes control of the experience through her words, which are remembered and interpreted as an assertion of fact: 'she tells him he can't hurt her', rather than the question or plea potentially offered by the subtitle, 'You're not going to hurt me?' This enables the following reading, which invokes the two sisters as archetypes and claims to reveal larger societal 'truths' than the individual trials of adolescence.

I believe Ms. Breillat is attempting to point out the nature of the role that sexual and cultural/emotional violence play in society. We elevate sexual violence to a level of abhorrence, while accepting the existence of traditional gender roles in society. Elena is owned by every man she will ever sleep with, because that is the nature of her role in society. Anaïs wants nothing to do with this. It isn't an elation of promiscuity, but rather a reanalysis of the nature of these traditional gender roles. Sexual violence is not diminished in any way, it's just placed in its rightful place next to the destructive nature that our cultural values have placed upon women.

Here 'big', abstract meaning is very clearly taken from the rape, but not from the rape alone. It is dependent on the relationship perceived between the rape and other representations of sexual activity in the film. More particularly, though the other information garnered about Anaïs' character, the specific meaning of her actions within the scene are not interpreted as the acceptance of rape, but as the rejection of a subordinate role for women within society.

Some refusers could identify and outline a very similar feminist polemic whilst totally rejecting it. Others were either not willing or able to engage with such an externally authored interpretation, and were also reluctant to accept a partial version of the film as a good coming of age tale which just goes wrong at the end. As these examples from the shorter IMDB thread, "I am confused ...about the ending (spoiler)"<sup>[9]</sup> show, some viewers used message boards collaboratively to produce accounts of the film which were sustainable purely at the level of the intra-filmic – the level of narrative, character and textual cues – eradicating ambiguity, no matter how far fetched and implausible that logic might seem. Following the suggestion that the double murder and rape has all been set up by the depressed Elena on her trip to the toilet at the rest stop, a poster grabs the explanation enthusiastically:

Goodness! I never made that connection, however when the killer breaks the frontsheild, I assume that the noise would have woken Elena up. It looked to me like for a split second, before he struck her, they were looking at each other in silence. I was wondering why she didn't scream, or struggle, or even look surprised. I figured she was in shock. However, If what you are sayin is true, then that would explain why she wasn't surprised when he came, cos she had infact asked him to. IT would also explain why he didn't kill Anaïs. Also, half way through the rape Anaïs stops struggling. Maybe because she thought it was futile and gave up, or maybe she realised that her sister set the whole thing up?

Here it is very important that the interpretation can be anchored in aspects of the visible text, however, the 'punctuation moment' is slightly misremembered; the 'silent look' is between the killer and the mother, not Elena, who although failing to fully wake, does not turn to face her killer and is struck with a single hammer blow that leaves no time for struggle. What this poster remembers is a version that permits the desired logic to work. It allows the perceived deep bond between the sisters to be valued and sustained even in death, and it enables the most troubling aspect of the challenge moment – why does Anaïs stop struggling? – to be reconciled through the sibling relationship: the murder is Elena's elaborate suicide, but one designed to grant Anaïs her wish to live and to lose her virginity.

Different threads employ other textual cues to secure other accounts. Why doesn't the mother wake and scream when Elena is killed? What is the meaning of the look between Anaïs and a passing truck driver? These are often used to define and pin down the last segment as Anaïs' fantasy, possibly dreamed after she has fallen asleep in the car. Thus the ending can be framed as Anaïs' imaginative wish fulfilment, where her family is punished (supporting an interpretation of the sisters' relationship as primarily jealous, not loving), Anaïs is 'chosen' (emphasising the grim lot of the physically unattractive in a beauty obsessed world), and then loses her virginity to someone she can hate (her explicit wish).

Not all viewers who entertained the Anaïs' fantasy interpretation felt compelled to anchor it so securely in visible onscreen events, and in some ways these less precise fantasy interpretations function as a bridge between purely narrative and character based context two accounts and externally anchored auteurist ones. For many art-house embracers there was particular pleasure in retaining and celebrating the film's ambiguity. The ability to move back and forth between different multiple interpretative contexts and strategies, using them to explore difficult questions such as the nature of sex, power and consent was

considered to be a strength in both the film, and the viewer, sometimes leading to disdain for those viewers (refusers or embracers) who needed certainty.

### Irreversible Journeys

A frequent dismissal of audience research seems to arise from the perception that the discipline has privileged the framing context of reception to such a degree that it denies the power of the medium in question. For some of the more traditional film scholars I encounter, this can be problematic; almost everyone can recall a viewing experience when they felt mentally and emotionally steam-rolled by a movie – and pretty much everyone they talked to about it did too. *Irreversible* was one of these films, and talking about it appeared to be an important part of the process of coming to terms with it. People entered web forums primarily not to work out what had happened in the film,<sup>[10]</sup> but to work through what had happened to them. Where for *A Ma Soeur!* the dominant contexts of embrace (two, three and four) and refusal (one and four) were different, for *Irreversible* they were the same: one and five. For the majority of viewers, the film was a visceral and emotional assault; *it made you feel*, and the difference between embracing and refusing the film came down to how you felt *about* being made to feel – and relatedly – how you felt about imagining the impact it would have on others.<sup>[11]</sup>

The film's appeal straddled art-house and horror genres, and, partly through its rising international star Monica Bellucci, attracted a wider audience too (*Matrix Reloaded* was released around the time that the DVD came out). It centres on a night that transforms the lives of three middle class characters, a couple – Marcus and Alex, and their friend Pierre. The evening is depicted in ten single takes, which are shown in reverse order, revealing the story as follows.

Police and ambulances arrive outside a gay S&M club, and a man is arrested for murder. The next take reveals the reason for the arrest: the camera descends into the club, and two men we do not yet have any information about (Marcus & Pierre) hunt and apparently find a man called 'Le Tenia'. In the first of two graphic and shocking depictions of violence, Pierre beats the man's skull to a pulp. The next three scenes then gradually reveal the pursuit, and the reason for the revenge – Marcus' girlfriend is in a coma after being attacked. We then see the assault: A beautiful woman (Alex), walking at night, is trapped in an underpass and, in a scene lasting several minutes, is anally raped and brutally beaten by 'Le Tenia', a gay pimp. In the next scene, the three are at a party: Pierre clearly loves Alex, who leaves on her own after a fight with Marcus. The next sequence shows the complex relationship between the couple and Pierre (who we discover is Alex's ex) as they travel to the party. We then see the intimate relationship of the couple in their flat. When Marcus goes out to buy wine, Alex – alone – discovers she is pregnant. A final shot reveals Alex, happy (and pregnant) lying in the sun on the grass: an 'idyllic life ahead of her.'

Refusers tended to see the reverse structure of the narrative as a derivative gimmick (*Memento* was often referenced as a film which utilised it to better effect), but for embracers it was a rich and meaningful feature, yielding powerful mixtures of tragedy, elation, devastation and gratitude. However before these ultimate responses could be reached there was a gruelling rollercoaster of emotions to be experienced. Embracers attempted to explain how enduring this, particularly the central rape scene, created the eventual emotional rewards of the movie. As a result what they produced were less accounts of the film itself, and more their own personal journeys through viewing it.

The 'Gaspar Noë's *Irreversible*' thread on the JoBlo message boards (a self-consciously masculine online space) was a rich source of such viewing 'journeys'.<sup>[12]</sup> The thread starter did not give their own opinion,

instead suggesting a few topics: 'the camera angles, the extreme nature, the disturbing nature, the rape scene, meaning...anything like that'. From the outset this presented the possibility of making the connection between filmmaking technique, affective power and overall meaning. Over the course of a long (58 post) thread, various people move towards doing this. Initially the way in which the film shows the rape remains quite obscure, or focused at the level of content: 'People criticize this rape scene, saying it's not necessary to have in the movie; however, rape isn't an uncommon thing and I feel showing it such as this way (so violent) gives us a taste of what it's really like.' Another poster responds describing how the film held his 'emotions hostage':

Problem is the gut wrenching part. There is no fucking way I could sit through "that scene" again. I just couldn't. But my hats off to the filmmakers for pushing the edge and doing it well.

Here the whole rape scene is held away through language, referred to only as "that scene". The poster (male – on this site, sex declarations are usually explicit, although, as always, not guaranteed reliable) acknowledges both its emotional impact and what this owes to filmmaking skill, but the mechanics of that relationship remain closed to view; they seem self-explanatory.

Another poster draws out the elements that contributed to his sense of shock: 'it went on forever and was SO brutal and nasty and hard to watch... yeesh...'. The combined focus on duration and brutality leave no space for the rape to be anything other than repulsive, but a more elaborate version appears later in the thread. Here a poster named CheekyShepherd situates the rape within an account of the overall emotional impact of the film.

What can one say? It's a truly dazzling, terrifying spectacle which takes you through all emotions one can truly feel. A fantastic experiment in the medium of cinema. Gaspar Noe is a visual genius! I was dubious of watching Irreversible, but after a years worth of verbal pressure from my friends, hired it last Friday. I was aware of it's content beforehand, but was completely overwhelmed by it's unflinching depiction of violence. Yes, I'll admit it! I was dry-heaving through "those" two scenes, which is unlike me who'll chortle through a gratuitous murder scene in any Hollywood slasher flick, but this was different; so emotional, so vivid, so convincing. It probed my mind that such heinous acts take place, somewhere in the world on a nightly basis. After watching, I called up my Mother, Sisters, all and any woman I have stored in my address book and pleaded them to never walk alone late at night, especially in subways!!

CheekyShepherd begins by giving credit to the director for using film technique to produce such an orchestrated affective response in the viewer. Like many others, the narrative of his viewing journey begins before the decision to watch the film. He positions himself as 'hard' enough for conventional horror, before moving directly to the film's aftermath, asserting its impact in terms of his lingering thoughts and actions and thus demonstrating the ways in which he was not hard enough for *this* film. He then proceeds to move through the sheer spectacle, dizzying nausea, and wince inducing violence of the early club sequence, before arriving at the central rape:

Then "that" scene itself: A beautiful woman raped and beaten unconscious simply for being a beautiful woman, in the wrong place at the wrong time. It made me flinch throughout, feeling hatred for the perverted perpetrator, crying a river of tears for Alex. I felt so violated as I watched, obviously how Alex's character herself would be feeling. A silhouette of a man in the background, walking in the other direction, not wanting to get involved when he sees

what's happening. Is that how we, the viewers, are meant to feel? To see a woman being abducted so brutally and not do anything about it, for fear of being powerless to stop such acts?

Here two viewing positions are invoked: a sense of co-violation with Alex is recounted as the direct experience, but there is also an awareness of the possibility of experiencing the scene as a powerless co-witness, and it is the later which is interpreted as the preferred (masculine) identification point being offered by the film/filmmaker. Perhaps unsurprisingly, although both co-violated and co-witness positions were recurrent features of male embracer responses, for female viewers only the co-witness position seemed to work positively. The co-violated viewing position, which proved both the most intense and potentially transformative for men, was perhaps too close for comfort for women and less likely to yield any major new insight, thus failing to be worth the ordeal. As a result, although it did appear women's responses, it tended to be a feature of refusal.

CheekyShepherd's account of the film's ultimate impact, seems to bear the trace of the primary 'co-violated' viewing position up he took up during the rape. He views the film again when a friend informs him that Pierre killed the wrong man, while 'Le Tenia' stood by and watched, but although this makes 'Le Tenia' even worse, he is still not really interested in the central male characters or their revenge narrative. His sense of 'powerlessness' in the face of 'Le Tenia's attack, does not drive him, as others do, to imagine a successful intervention or revenge. At one level his desperate fear for loved ones condenses into a conventional form of protective strategy: schools should show the film to teenage girls to highlight the dangers of walking alone in closed locations, but although this places the burden of safety on women it does not apportion any blame to them. At another level the film has been so moving that it results in an optimistic idealism where he believes in a 'dream that we will one day live in a world where tragedies depicted in *Irreversible* never occur.' Those refusers who only 'think' *Irreversible*, engaging with it in primarily intellectual ways, conclude that the film is not as deep as it aims to be. However, particularly for male viewers who fully embrace the emotional and visceral journey it offers, the process of emerging the other side of the film, feeling battered but somehow tenderised by the experience, is undeniably profound.

[\[13\]](#)

I've never cried so much in my life after watching it, it's a beautiful love story torn apart by tragedy. Ironically, it's a happy ending. And wouldn't life be two, if we could transgress back to the whom (sic), instead of dying?

Both co-violation and co-witness viewing positions, although unpleasant to experience and sometimes unsettling to gender identity, were relatively uncontroversial, providing morally easy solutions to the challenge of the rape scene. Both were clearly 'responsible' responses, producing 'pure' emotions, and as a result it was not necessary for CheekyShepherd to further explain the mechanism by which he was made to feel them. The same is not true of another JoBlo poster who is driven by his lack of an appropriately affective response to explore the technique of the film in order to find an explanation:

The most disturbing thing about this movie to me was my reaction to the rape scene. It didn't do as much to me as I knew it should. I knew I was supposed to be horrified and hurting, but I wasn't and it took me a while to figure out why that was. During the entire first third the camera is flying around, half the time you don't know what you're looking at, a guy's head is beaten to pulp, everyone is frenetically screaming all the time and it literally makes you sick to your stomach. With the rape scene however the camera is steady for the first time of the film and the entire 9 minute rape scene is shown from a single unmoved perspective. When you want the camera to turn away, it doesn't, and it shows the whole thing without

'blinking', but at the same time, the sickness leaves your stomach and you're almost happy to be watching this.

The poster "loves" the film, but acknowledges problems with using that word, and brands the film "sick": 'horrible images meet viewing pleasure'. Here the 'challenge moment' offered by the rape is not just about endurance, or the appropriateness of representation, it is about evaluating the nature of your own affective response and measuring it against your personal moral boundaries and your sense of social acceptability. The need to be able to understand, and textually justify ones response becomes even stronger in situations where the sense of inappropriateness does not stem from a relative lack of emotion, but comes instead from experiencing sexual arousal.

In the extensive IMDb *Irreversible* message board, one thread starter boldly requested a serious (flame/troll free) engagement with the possibility of arousal in the sequence. This discussion took place against a wider IMDB message board backdrop containing many deliberately confrontational "gross" assertions of arousal, which position the absence of consent either as an irrelevance or a turn-on (e.g. 'the rape scene is HOT', 'up the bum, no harm done', 'surprise sex' etc...), stimulating equally numerous charges from 'responsible' embracers that those who are aroused must be inherently 'sick' to misread the film, and claims by refusers that the assertions of arousal were evidence that the film was inherently dangerous.

The new thread ('Rape Fantasy') followed a personal admission the thread starter had made in another IMDb *Irreversible* thread a few days earlier ('My male friend got shamed by this film..').<sup>[14]</sup>

I must admit that I have a somewhat sadistic streak in me and was initially aroused by the first 30 seconds of the rape. But then it just kept going. And going. By the end I just wanted it to stop. I wasn't turned on, just horrified that I'd felt that way. This is exactly the way rape should be portrayed.

In the new thread he carefully lays out how he feels this transformation occurred:

I think that the genius of *Irreversible*'s rape is that at first it appears as a kind of rape fantasy with the camera swooshing around Bellucci in her very sexy dress before coming to rest totally leaving the rape fantasists with nothing left to find sexy. Just a poor woman, on the floor, in a great deal of pain and discomfort while they are forced to stay and watch for another few minutes.

Here, the same transition from mobile camera to static view, invoked by the insufficiently moved viewer on JoBlo, is interpreted as having a very different impact on personal comfort levels and consequent meaning. This poster credits Noë both with deliberately playing up the eroticism, through casting, costume and fluid camera, and then with destroying it 'by using a totally edit free, movement free shot, from the male perspective; but from a voyeur's point of view just in front.' In this instance, the co-witness position emerges – with much guilt – out of a voyeur's viewpoint, enabling the poster to distance himself from the 'rape fantasist' position. The figure of the director is mobilised to help manage the guilt; the viewer's sexual arousal is both accounted for, and closed down through the agency of Noë. This poster evaluates the filmmaker's motives through the impact of their own personal journey through the rape, and as a result of what they feel to be the corrective qualities of the scene, they find Noë's motives to be pure. However, the initial sexual arousal that the viewer experienced has heightened their intellectual and moral engagement with their own response to the rape. Other posters interject briefly asserting only the arousal, and undermining the thread opener's evaluation of Noë's motives: "It sure turns me on. I think Noë may

have gotten his kicks outta this kind of thing. We're the same." In other threads this tone wins out, but here the analysis continues. A new poster offers a version which includes what they see as the important absences from the scene:

By not moving the camera we endure the event with the character, the camera won't flip to another shot of the pelvic thrusts or a close up of Monica Bellucci's face. These would be seen as breaks from the sickening act. No we are not allowed a break, I think the shooting of this states 'if you are going to watch this then be prepared to watch the evil nature of rape'.

Here, the degree to which viewers were disturbed by their own responses to the rape scene (as opposed to how directly disturbed they were by the rape scene) was related to the degree to which they reflected on precisely how the filmmaking had produced that response, interrogating the text for evidence. However, as the examples explaining the impact of the camera coming to rest show, the mechanism by which the text 'dictated' those responses was not actually uniform.

Most of the argument about whether *Irreversible* is an acceptable and responsible piece of filmmaking hinges on the rape scene. In conjunction with the evaluation of the personal journey, there is a public discourse taking place and this produces the question: is it inherently arousing or inherently aversive? What is the scene designed to *do*? Across all three data sets, responses to this film were more strongly and simply patterned than the others, suggesting that it really *was* a less ambiguous text. Certainly it was experienced as such. Unlike *A Ma Soeur!*, few viewers felt that this film offered them any options. Although they might delve back into the text for symbolism and elaboration, this was secondary: an enriching process for embracers and a trawl for evidence for refusers. In either case it was heavily structured by their gut responses, and those initial reactions were the only ones that *they personally* could have had. Although they might feel ambivalent about having been forced to feel, for those who responded through context one, feeling one's way through *Irreversible* was so unambiguous (confusing, repulsive, overwhelming, but not ambiguous) that it was hard not to project the same process onto other viewers, judging them harshly if they came to different conclusions. The responsibility of the film's real world representations were measured primarily through the filter of its impact on oneself. Moreover, such a powerful effect (or its imagined inverse) must have been intentioned. As a result, implicit assumptions and authoritative claims about the director's motivations were a frequent by-product, structured by – rather than structuring – the viewing process.

## Conclusion

Within responses to both *A Ma Soeur!* and *Irreversible*, the more difficulty viewers have in overcoming 'challenge' moments and the wider demands for sense-making issued by 'imperative' moments, the more closely they attend to textual cues, working far harder than either 'easy' embracers or complete refusers to produce satisfactory accounts of the film. However, what viewers are trying to achieve in their accounts varies according to the dominant contexts through which their evaluation is being made. These contexts become visible by noting what the textual cues are being used to explain. Is the viewer trying to secure a stable and coherent narrative? Are they trying to account for their own emotional, cognitive or physical responses – or those they imagine others to have? Are they looking for evidence of realism or authorial comment? Most responses contain combinations of these, and so it also becomes important to attend to the relative priorities within these contexts.

Here, particularly within the naturally occurring written accounts of the films, observing the patterning of narrative strategies that viewers employ is helpful. For example, in the accounts of easy embrace given here, the relationship between personal experience (in context one) and directorial authority (in context three) is inverted. For the *A Ma Soeur!* 'easy' embracer, the personal narrative of disagreeing about the film with a friend provides the framing context; her perception of Breillat's authorship then structures the way the meaning is 'worked' through the text, supporting 'Breillat's' message with an inflected account of the film's events. Conversely, in CheekyShepherd's account of *Irreversible* the director becomes the framing context (Noë is a 'visual genius') but the substance of the review and the source of the film's meaning lies in the experiential viewing journey. The events of the film are told through their impact on the viewer. In this he veers towards external agency in moments of doubt and confusion: 'is this how we, the viewers, are meant to feel?'

For those who struggle with their own responses to *Irreversible*, an account of the director's intentions can be worked backwards successfully and authoritatively, placing both the credit and the blame for the experience with a version of Noë who is entirely built from the viewer's personal response to the text. Breillat, in contrast, seems to be a less malleable figure. For those who do not already have the necessary auteurist reading strategies, attention to the text cannot be made to 'produce' her in quite the same way. The gradual building of character before the layered 'punctuation /challenge/imperative' moment means that it is possible, if unsatisfactory, to attempt a purely context two account, in a way that *Irreversible* simply does not permit on first viewing. As a result, for some *A Ma Soeur!* viewers, a concept of character agency competes with that of the director rather than reinforcing it, and it is through these most heavily worked attempts to embrace the film, that the role of Breillat as a prerequisite for complete embrace, rather than its by-product, becomes clear.

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## Notes

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[1] 73.3% in our questionnaire. Our study concentrated on people who had chosen to watch the five highly controversial films, so this is unsurprising. However, Guy Cumberbatch's respondents, drawn from a wider sample of video renters invited to watch films purely for the purpose of a study, also asserted the importance of context (2002: 54).

[2] This article draws on and expands analysis from the report to the BBFC. The full report can be downloaded from the BBFC's website.

[3] This draws on Casey McKittrick's use of the term 'citizen critic' to describe the writers of IMDB 'user comments' (2001: 3). McKittrick in turn acknowledges Rosa Eberly's work on citizen and expert position taking in public sphere debates about literature as his source (2000).

[4] With the exception of a couple of the small film images, the web site is now part of the Internet Archive. The following capture allows you to navigate to all five questionnaires and the contextual pages. It is from 9 October 2006. To choose a film questionnaire to view go to:

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20061009105446/www.extremefilmsresearch.org.uk/index.htm>>

To view the questions about film preferences and attitudes to screened sexual violence:

<<http://web.archive.org/web/20061009105457/www.extremefilmsresearch.org.uk/finally.php>>

[5] Kuhn, pp. 219-220.

[6] Keynote presentation, "The Glow in Their Eyes: Global perspectives on film cultures, film exhibition and cinemagoing", Ghent, 14 December 2007. Although Kuhn does not explicitly address the ways in which oral and written accounts may facilitate and foreground different aspects of cinema memory, as with her earlier consideration of Nelson Eddy fans, she does depart from the interview material generated within her own studies, turning to the written accounts (particularly Victor Burgin) in search of more elusively personal cinematic 'memory texts'.

[7] *A Ma Soeur!* IMDB message board thread, "Please – Avoid at all costs (Spoilers inside)" Comment from the thread opener. Project resources.

[8] Project resources.

[9] Project resources.

[10] One narrative exception to this is the discussion of the fact that the wrong man is killed in the revenge attack. However, there was also plenty of collaborative discussion of the techniques by which the film had

achieved its effects, particularly the composition of the nausea inducing sound track and the staving in of the man's face in the S&M club.

[11] Here I should perhaps confess to being in one of the smaller refuser categories, which was not based on a context one response. This is an art-house genre position which evaluates the film through contexts two, three and four, and dismisses it as "style over substance". This rather elitist reading was well represented in professional reviews. There is also a parallel horror genre refusal position (evaluated through contexts one and three) where the film fails to be visceral and shocking enough.

[12] Gender declarations are generally explicit in this forum, although as always, not reliable. Project resources, but in April 2008 version of this thread could still be viewed without site membership at <http://www.joblo.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-59907.html>

[13] On another forum site (Home Theatre) male posters discussed spontaneous urges to hug their wives and children in the days after viewing.

[14] Project resources.

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