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**Split identification: Representations of rape in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible*  
and Catherine Breillat's *A ma sœur!/Fat Girl***

**ABSTRACT**

*This article critically examines rape scenes in two films of the 'new extreme cinema', Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002) and Catherine Breillat's *A ma sœur!/Fat Girl* (2001). On the surface, Noé's disturbing long-take rape scene is clearly designed to foster empathy with the woman's experience and to induce a physical aversion to rape. However, a deeper examination of the scene's ambiguous techniques reveals that they actually work to split the viewer's identification between the rapist and the woman he attacks. One function of this split is to lead the viewer – who is presumed to be male – along an emotional path from lustful aggression towards empathic understanding. Similarly, the film also provides audiences with a transitional figure – a male character who is almost raped – as someone with whom they can identify on the way towards identifying with the female. But this male character ultimately serves as a negative example when he moves to take revenge – an act which is shown to be an extension of the rape, part of the same masculinist ideology or myth of male inviolability perpetuated through the violation of others. Furthermore, the revenge is revealed as being the male character's denial of his own complicity in the rape and of his own participation in 'rape culture'. The rape scene in*

Breillat's <sup>1</sup>*A ma sœur!* also induces in the viewer a split identification with the rapist and with the female subjected to attack – in this case a young girl who disturbingly seems to 'acquiesce' to the assault. This scene is best understood as a rape fantasy that shows how the girl has internalized oppressive notions of femininity and female sexual response. In this fantasy, it is the girl's own subjectivity that is split between the attacker and herself as 'willing' victim, between the man's sadism and her own 'feminine' desire to be punished. The rape fantasy could thus be seen as an acting out of the same old gender story in which the girl (or the viewer) is forced to make a choice between two polarized or untenable positions: identifying masochistically with the victim or identifying against herself with the sadistic rapist. However, this rape fantasy could also be viewed as a working through of gender stereotypes. It is possible to see the split subject of the rape fantasy not as someone who is torn between masculine sadism and feminine masochism, but instead as someone who simultaneously occupies both positions and therefore neither – as someone who occupies an undefined and unconventional space beyond sadomasochism.

As recently noted by Linda Williams in *Screening Sex*, sex 'is not a stable truth that cameras and microphones either "catch" or don't catch'. Rather, when it is depicted in the cinema, sex 'is a constructed, mediated, performed act' (Williams 2008: 2). The same could be said of rape as shown on film: far from being simply present, it is a complex representation involving formal strategies that have ideological effects. This article critically examines rape scenes in two films of the 'new extreme cinema', Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002) and Catherine Breillat's *A ma sœur!/Fat Girl* (2001).

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<sup>1</sup> Estelle bayon takes the term 'physiological cinema' from director Marco Ferreri, who used it in referring to his film *La Grande Bouffe/Blow Out* (1973).

The most-often-noted aspect of the rape scene in *Irréversible* is its long duration. For an excruciatingly extended period of time, a single-take static camera watches from floor level as Alex (Monica Bellucci) is raped, with her suffering face visible in the foreground throughout. Noé has explained this duration in terms of realism: 'I thought the time was realistic. [...] I don't think there are many rapes that are less than 5 minutes' (Lovell 2003). This introduction of 'real time' into cinematic representation creates a 'punctuation moment', a term that audience response researchers have used to describe 'a challenge to the boundaries of acceptable depiction' of an event on film (Selfe 2008). The term has interesting resonance with Roland Barthes' *punctum*, the aspect of a photograph that 'pierces' the viewer (Barthes 1982: 26, 27), as the unbearable Real can be said to pierce the Symbolic. The 'real time'-extended duration of the rape scene disallows a conventional distance from the event and pierces the viewer: 'this is as close [as] one could come to empathizing with a victim without having physically experienced the assault oneself', says Eugenie Brinkema (2004). Estelle Bayon, after describing the rape scene as 'obligating us to undergo the suffering of the victim in all its duration', characterizes Noé's film as 'physiological cinema': 'By implicating [the spectator] physically rather than merely intellectually, verbally, cinema as a physical discourse makes one feel, really' (Bayon 2007: 81, 124, 127).<sup>1</sup> And what we are meant to feel is repulsed by rape. In contrast to the ambiguous/ambivalent depiction of rape in a film like *Straw Dogs* (1971), Noé has said that 'In my case, it's much clearer. You have this innocent woman and this terrible monster' (Gabbey 2005: 41). Noé's mode of representation is designed to induce a physical aversion to rape, making his film an example of what B. Ruby Rich has called "'conversion cinema": films that attempt to horrify or shock the spectator into ethics' (Horeck 2004: 96).

To 'feel violated', the viewer must empathize with the woman's experience. Before the rape, as Alex walks down into the underpass tunnel where the assault will occur, the camera maintains a position behind her, moving with her as she walks and seeing what she sees. Once the rape begins, the camera holds its floor-level position much as Alex is pinned to the floor by her attacker, and Alex's suffering face is constantly in frame as an emotional point of contact for the viewer. As Noé explains, 'The rape is seen from the victim's point of view' (Magill 2002): 'you identify with Monica [playing Alex], because at the beginning of the scene you're behind her back' (Gabbey 2005: 42), and 'because the camera is following her from the back, and is put on the floor, like she's stuck to the floor, you are in her head' (Magill 2002). However, the camera could also be experienced as *stalking* Alex as it follows her down into the tunnel, especially given that the camera remains some distance behind her and is thus not positioned for the kind of over-the-shoulder shot that would more fully suture us into her perspective. This idea that Alex is being eyed by a stalker is reinforced by a feeling of pervasive danger that makes us fear an impending assault: Alex is alone on the streets at night, wearing only a skimpy party dress, and the film's reverse chronology has already revealed her bloodied body on a stretcher so that we know she will soon be subjected to a vicious attack. Of course, even if the camera has in a sense adopted a *stalker's visual* perspective, it could be argued that this only increases *our emotional* identification with Alex. As Sarah Projansky points out, filmic 'texts that provide the spectator with an attacker's point of view do not necessarily *equate* the spectator with the villain. Rather, the representation of the attacker's visual point of view provides the spectator with more knowledge than the vulnerable woman in the text, using suspense to create anxiety for and identification with her' (Projansky 2001: 216).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Projansky here follows Carol J. Clover, who in *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (1992) was among the first to complicate our understanding of modes of viewer identification in modern horror and rape-revenge films.

Noé's 'stalking camera' does make us fear for Alex, but it is too simple to say that it does not also get us to identify with the stalker. In his DVD audio commentary, Noé points out that one effect of the camera's following Alex from behind is that her face is not revealed for some time (in fact, not until just before the rape). Noé says that, knowing how much the fans of Monica Bellucci were desirous of seeing her face, he wanted to keep them in suspense. So the viewer here is also positioned as a fan following a beautiful actress and being tantalized, having to wait and wait to see her face. And this actress who is being followed is wearing an extraordinarily revealing dress – 'the sexiest dress we could find for her', according to Noé (Tang 2003).<sup>3</sup> Thus, as the camera follows Alex, the viewer's identification is split between the stalker and Alex, torn between lusting after her and fearing for her. When the rapist actually confronts Alex in the tunnel, leering at her in her revealing dress and raising his phallic knife, the identificatory tension within the viewer reaches a crisis provoked by the living presence of an actual stalker-figure. Faced with a clear choice, the viewer must emphatically resist the temptation to identify with the stalker/rapist. It is for this reason that Noé brings an end to the camera's ambivalent movement – lustful versus empathetic – and attempts to ground it for good in empathy with Alex:

In the case of Alex, I did [operate] the camera myself. I was [following, circling, and] preceding her, and then suddenly I put the camera on the ground, and I just couldn't move it again. I would have felt ashamed of shaking the camera above her. That would be like sharing the rapist's point of view. (Magill 2002)

Also, I would have felt like getting horny, which I didn't want. I'm part of the male club, I

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that, before making *Irréversible*, Noé had wanted to make a non-violent but sexually explicit film with Monica Bellucci, but they decided against it for fear that it would incite a crazed fan to attack Bellucci on the street (Schaller 2007: 61).

know what we are. Physically, it was something I couldn't do. (Morrow 2003)

Noé locks down the camera, training it resolutely on Alex's suffering face, in a very physical attempt to prevent himself from a shameful identification with the rapist's eye-roving lust. For one viewer at least, as conveyed on an Internet message board, Noé's effort to definitively resolve the tension between identifying with the male rapist and identifying with the female sufferer seems to have had the desired effect:

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. [...] 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. (Selfe 2008)

Other viewers, however, seem less able to make the transition from lust to empathy, perhaps because they are not willing to renounce – or acknowledge – their identification with the rapist or because identifying with a woman's suffering is something they find unbearable. 'I think that, partly, they are jealous [lusting after a woman they can't have]', Noé says about such viewers, adding:

Monica is so famous in France – she's like our national muse. I notice sometimes, in cinemas in Paris, when there's a group of kids in from the suburbs, they get furious during the rape scene. Maybe they have a thing for Monica – and I wonder if it's those who have thought about rape that quit the theatre at that moment. (Morrow 2003)

Noé believes that mostly it is ‘Male dominants [who] have problems identifying with a woman who’s raped’ (Tang 2003), and so Noé provides this audience with a transitional figure (Marcus) – a *male* character who is almost raped – as someone with whom they can identify on the way towards identifying with the female (Alex).<sup>4</sup> For some male viewers, though, this transitional strategy seems to backfire, for the attempted rape of a man so threatens their masculinity that they then find it even harder to identify with a female rape victim. Noé says:

I think that having the male lead almost raped at the beginning, feminises the male audience to a degree that they find challenging. And so, when they are then projected into the mind of a woman being raped, they can’t cope. (Morrow 2003)

Significantly, Noé’s rape scene shows that rape itself is often a male defence against feminization, an attempt ‘to reinforce sexual difference through violability’, as Tanya Horeck (2004: 112) describes it. The rapist repudiates any sense of inferiority or lack and violently projects it onto his victim, whether this be in terms of gender, sexuality, class or looks. Gender: during the anal rape inflicted on Alex, the rapist – his hyperphallic nickname is Le Ténia (The Tapeworm) – pumps himself up by reducing her to a hole (‘I’m gonna blast your ass!’ ‘I’m opening up your ass real good!’ ‘You hole, you cunt!’). Sexuality: the rapist demeans his rival’s manhood (‘a fag’) and praises his own prowess (‘Your old man fuck your ass? [...] I’m gonna fuck your ass like no one has ever fucked it!’). Class and looks: the rapist, a street pimp with a broken nose, tries to empower himself by depriving Alex of her beauty and class privilege (‘Fucking rich bitch! The world’s your due because you’re beautiful, right? Well, *I’m* gonna fix your face!’). One of the most telling moments in the rapist’s verbal onslaught occurs when he repeatedly orders her to ‘Call me “Daddy”!’ – words that were specifically inserted so that ‘maybe the

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<sup>4</sup> The gender ambiguity of the name ‘Alex’ is also part of this transition: when they first hear that someone named Alex has been raped, viewers may assume it is a man before finding out that Alex is a woman.

viewer wonders if he [the rapist]’s been raped himself’, according to Noé (Torneo 2003). It is the man who cannot bear violation who becomes a violator, he who cannot withstand violence in any other way than by projecting it outward onto others.

When Alex’s boyfriend Marcus first sees her violated body on an ambulance stretcher, he is traumatized by the sight. The fact that he is struck dumb, immobilized and nearly moved to tears suggests that his initial response is empathy with her suffering. But, goaded by some other men who claim that only ‘pussies’ don’t take revenge, Marcus has soon repudiated any ‘feminine weakness’ and converted his empathy to macho rage. Galvanized by vengeance, with his face a hardened mask and his mouth spewing vicious epithets, Marcus invades the red tunnel-like spaces of the club called The Rectum to attack the rapist, much as the rapist invaded the red tunnel underpass and anally raped Alex. Marcus’s revenge thus becomes an extension of the rape, not an antidote to it but a spreading of its sickness. The revenge is part of the same masculinist ideology that led to the rape, a myth of male inviolability perpetuated through the violation of others.<sup>5</sup> And, when a man (not the rapist) whom Marcus attacks attempts to rape *him*, Marcus’ friend Pierre bashes the man’s face in, much as the rapist had destroyed Alex’s face.<sup>6</sup> When Noé talks about his film’s critique of revenge, he refers to the fact that the vengeance is inflicted on the wrong man and that the violence gets out of control and leads to murder. But the film’s deeper critique lies in showing how the avenger is the rapist’s double, repeating the violation, caught up in the same pathology.

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<sup>5</sup> In his rage to find the rapist, Marcus also brutalizes a prostitute named La Concha, committing violence against a woman much as the rapist had done against Alex. La Concha is strongly linked to Alex, for the rapist had actually first roughed up La Concha in the underpass before assaulting Alex. Marcus’ brutality thus repeats and extends the rapist’s attack on La Concha. Also, Marcus believes at first that a man named Guillermo Nuñez committed the rape, and Marcus roughs up La Concha in an attempt to find out the whereabouts of Guillermo. But La Concha turns out to be Guillermo, a (transvestite) male. Marcus’ violence towards a woman (La Concha) is thus conflated with his vengeance against a man (Guillermo) – once again showing Marcus’ revenge to be a doubling of the original violation.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that a red fire extinguisher is used to do the battering makes this assault even more connotative of rape.



Marcus' revenge is also a denial of his complicity in the rape – and here I mean much more than the fact that his boorish behaviour at a party drove Alex out into the night alone and unprotected by a paternalistic male. By casting himself in the role of Alex's avenger, Marcus refuses to take responsibility for the extent to which he has participated in 'rape culture', a social formation that 'encourages male sexual aggression', that sees 'violence [...] as sexy and sexuality as violent' (Buchwald et al. 2005: xi), and that condones the sexual objectification of women through uninvited gazing, remarks, touching or groping. Noé draws an extended parallel between Marcus' behaviour and that of the rapist, showing how Marcus' acts are merely steps along a continuum that leads from sexual objectification to rape.<sup>7</sup> At the party, much to Alex's disgust, Marcus leers at, comments on and fondles women indiscriminately as though they were all there for his consumption. He also snorts coke, much as the rapist inhales poppers. When Marcus is alone in the apartment with Alex, he says that he stole her from her former boyfriend, while she protests that she is not an object and that she decides whom to be with. Marcus steals money from her purse (the way the rapist/pimp does from his prostitutes), 'playfully' spits in her face (the rapist too will spit at her) and gropes and grips her from behind, telling her that 'I wanna fuck you in the ass.' This comment 'makes you think that also Marcus is a potential rapist', says Noé (Sterritt 2007: 308). But this is a realization about himself that Marcus refuses to confront. When he and Alex wake up in bed together after falling asleep following sex, Marcus holds his hand over her mouth (the way the rapist will silence her later) just as she is trying to tell him about her dream of a red tunnel that gets broken – a premonition of the anal rape, but also an insight and warning about Marcus' character, about the nightmarish sexual assault that his daytime aggression is headed towards becoming. 'I think they

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<sup>7</sup> There is thus another sense in which Marcus identifies 'the wrong man' as the rapist: Marcus himself is at least complicit in the crime. It is interesting to compare Marcus to the Butcher, a recurring character in Noé's films. In *Carne* (1991), the Butcher's daughter is molested and the Butcher takes revenge on the wrong man. In *Seul contre tous/I Stand Alone* (1998), the Butcher himself molests – or imagines molesting – his own daughter. And at the beginning of *Irreversible*, the Butcher says that he has spent time in prison for that crime.

could have escaped it [their fate, but] people don't even read the signs around them', says Noé (Sterritt 2007: 309, 308). Instead of heeding the warning of the broken tunnel and empathizing with Alex,<sup>8</sup> Marcus becomes a sexual aggressor at the party, which leads to the violence of the rape and of the revenge.

Yet, as Noé admits, the film's reverse chronology, in which the revenge and the rape are seen to 'occur' *before* the appearance of the signs warning about them, would suggest that it is always already too late to heed these warnings: 'the way it's told, it seems that they cannot escape it, because you already know where they're going to' (Sterritt 2007: 309); 'It makes the movie much more tragic because you cannot escape from destiny' (Tang 2003); Alex 'has this dream about the red tunnel, and still she cannot avoid her own fate' (Stringer 2003). Indeed, Alex sums up the moral of the book she has been reading on premonitory dreams as 'the future is already written'.<sup>9</sup> To the extent that Noé's film *Irréversible* represents rape and revenge as inevitable because predestined, it fails to leave open the possibility of positive change in the viewer. Noé succumbs to a biological essentialism where it is the fate of females to be raped, and the destiny of males to take revenge: 'you're not free from your genes,' Noé says. 'You have a genetic code that brings you to things, above anything your brain can tell you [...] yes, you can choose, but your freedom is very limited' (Sterritt 2007: 309). Masculine aggression is less a social construction than it is an immutable biological fact.<sup>10</sup> As Noé sees it, 'man is fundamentally barbaric' and 'you cannot truly represent him if you don't show him as he is when he loses control of his actions' (Gorin and Rigoulet 2002: 30); 'Vengeance is an instinct of man. Man is an animal that retains – more or less – his violent

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus is also given another warning he does not heed: he cannot feel his arm – a foreshadowing of the fact that, if he decides to take revenge (which he does), he will only end up with a broken arm (self-destruction).

<sup>9</sup> The book is J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927) – and in fact it argues against the kind of predestination that Alex finds in it.

<sup>10</sup> Noé's gender essentialism also leads him into a virulent homophobia. Trying to imagine a space that is 'totally male' and thus completely given over to masculine aggression (men among men, or against men, men fighting with men' (Stringer 2003)), Noé comes up with a gay s/m club.

instincts in terms of the degree of the crisis he goes through' (Gaillac and Morgue 2002). It thus becomes impossible for Noé's filmic representation of rape and revenge to have an educative or curative effect on the viewer. The film's images of violence and violation can only further traumatize us as spectators if all we can know is that we are foredoomed to re-enact them.

Another rape scene whose 'shocking impact' has been seen as constituting a 'punctuation moment' because it challenges the boundaries of acceptable filmic representation occurs in Catherine Breillat's *A ma scour!* Here the challenge is not in the duration of the rape but in 'the young age of the victim, Anaïs' – a 12-year-old girl (Selfe 2008). In fact, on the advice of two clinical psychologists, the British Board of Film Classification ordered that the rape scene be cut in its entirety from the UK DVD release of the film, on the grounds that the scene 'may arouse potential child abusers' and that it may be shown to children by 'paedophiles' who would use it to 'groom their victims' (Anon. 2002). The scene is thus censored due to concern that its representation of rape will contribute to the furtherance of the reality of rape, that its impact on a certain kind of viewer will be to invite identification with the rapist and that its impact on another kind of viewer will be to encourage identification with the victim. As a counterargument to this concern, Breillat has claimed that 'censors create the concept of obscenity': Anaïs has 'got a body that is acceptable and normal for a young girl, yet [the censors maintain that] it shouldn't be shown by a film director' (Brooks 2001). Breillat says that the censors turn this child's body into 'a forbidden body because it's supposedly a body that is the object of desire', and the unfortunate result is that 'the weight [of opprobrium] has to be carried by the potential victims instead of being carried by the potential rapists' (Bochenski 2008). Breillat implies that it is the censors who, by *not* showing the rape scene, contribute to the furtherance of the reality of rape by assuming the continued sexual objectification of young girls' bodies and by banning the representation of those bodies rather than censoring the sexual objectifiers. Breillat also implies that

the censors are part of a masculinist social system that stigmatizes the female victims of rape and their bodies rather than attending to the male perpetrators and their violent desires.

Now, it could be argued, *contra* Breillat, that the rape scene in *A ma scour!* is problematic in terms of the subject positions it encourages the viewer to take up. A forward tracking shot positions us behind the rapist as he walks towards Anaïs, and then the camera cranes down and in on them as the rapist lies on top of her, pressing his body onto hers. There is thus a sense in which the viewer is led to adopt a paedophile's perspective and to participate in his movement towards the object of his desire. Alternatively, as in *Irréversible*, the rapist's visual perspective here could be said to further our emotional identification with Anaïs, intensifying our fear for her. But a potential problem for this argument occurs when, in the midst of the rape, Anaïs stops trying to push the rapist off with her arms and instead puts them around his shoulders in an embrace. If our point of identification in the scene is Anaïs, has she just moved from fighting to acceptance of the rape? It could be argued that she 'acquiesces' solely to ensure her survival, but one can see how the BBFC might be concerned about a paedophile viewer showing Anaïs' embrace of her rapist to a potential victim as a model of how to consent to rape. This concern is only heightened right after this scene when we find out that Anaïs herself claims that she 'wasn't raped'.

My aim here is not to defend the grounds for censorship, but I do want to point out that there are certain problematic aspects of this particular representation of rape that should not be ignored or 'interpreted away' in an effort to save Breillat for political correctness. I would suggest that the sadomasochistic elements in this scene – the way it induces a split identification with the rapist and with his 'acquiescent' victim – can be most usefully construed as components of a rape fantasy. As

Elizabeth Wilson has said in calling for a return to a 1970s-feminist openness to exploring challenging material:

We could acknowledge, for example, that some women might have fantasies of being raped, without concluding that this therefore meant that women really want to be raped in real life. Rape or other masochistic fantasies might or might not be common, and they might be problematic, but it was important to confront and explore such responses if anything about sexual behaviour was to change [and] to understand how we internalize oppressive notions of femininity and female sexual response. (Wilson 1993: 17–18)

In considering the question of how ‘women [can] desire rape when it is the most extreme instance of male domination and violence against them’, Elizabeth Cowie suggests that a rape fantasy ‘absolves the subject from the guilt and responsibility of [...] her desire, which appears to come from outside, apparently imposed, but in which the subject will be pleased’ (Cowie 1993: 143).

The assault on Anaïs is figured in ways that could mark it as a fantasy. Before the attack, her sister and her mother fall asleep in the car; does Anaïs nod off too and dream the ensuing events? The hairy rapist who breaks the car’s windscreen and kills her sister and her mother with an axe also breaks the conventions of the *intimiste* film genre and introduces something alien and surreal, as if he were a woodcutter or a wolf in a dark fairytale. In fact, in her desperation to be rid of her virginity, Anaïs earlier had occasion ‘to dream’ of a ‘werewolf’ who would come to take her, and this wild-haired woodsman who attacks her could be her wish-fulfilment fantasy. Perhaps the man who comes to her only looks like a predatory hairy beast because Anaïs is defending against her

own sexual desire for him, a desire that is socially unacceptable in women: ‘the only thing that makes the beast bestial is that beauty isn’t capable of loving him, of seeing him [as he really is],’ Breillat has said (Clouzot 2004: 157).<sup>11</sup> If the rape is actually a reaction formation or disguised wish, this would explain why, when the rapist and Anaïs hold each other’s gaze before the assault, she seems to be hypnotizing him more than he is hypnotizing her; why her words to the rapist – ‘You’re not going to hurt me?’ – sound more like a command than a question; and why she ends up embracing her attacker. As Breillat says, for girls who have been ‘brought up to be decent’, ‘rape is the only way to enact their desire for a man’ (Breillat 1999: 51). This is because, ‘following the mindset of our society, they must as it were “foist” the guilt of desire onto the man whom they did not have the power to resist’ (Breillat 2006: 150).

But does Anaïs have to imagine a man immobilizing her with his body, gagging her mouth and piercing her with pain as the means whereby she can ‘actively’ ‘express’ her own desire for ‘pleasure’? Does not this rape fantasy, for all its wishful transvaluation of terms, leave too much of society’s mindset literally in place (on the screen), keeping the woman fixed within her ‘passive feminine’ position, continuing to define her desire as masochistic? As Cowie reminds us, ‘The fantasy of rape may also constitute a fantasy of punishment in which the sexual aggression of the other is a punishment for sexual desire’, as if the woman “‘asks for rape” by having sexual desires’ (Cowie 1993: 146). If Anaïs imagines the assault as a punishment for her desire, if she views her body as ‘asking for rape’, then is she not identifying with the attacker in her rape fantasy, seeing herself through his eyes? Breillat has spoken of the formative influence upon her of such male authors as the Marquis de Sade and the Count de Lautréamont:

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<sup>11</sup> Breillat’s specific reference here is to ‘Beauty and the Beast’, but this tale, like that of Bluebeard, is a source text for the rape scene between the hairy wild-man and Anaïs.

These are things that I read in my childhood and that I made mine. [...] Authors who [...] wrote about their horror of women! Their murderous desires towards women! [...] as girls, we are nourished on this terrifying discourse by men about women. Fairytales say the same thing: the fear of the monster, the fear of the orge, the desire for Bluebeard, the man who kills women. (Clément 2002: 286–87)

Anaïs too has internalized oppressive notions of femininity and female sexual response. In her rape fantasy, her identification is split between the hirsute attacker (a version of Bluebeard) and herself as willing victim, split between the man's sadism and her own 'feminine' masochistic desire to be punished. As Breillat has said about her relation to a sadistic male character like Bluebeard, 'I love him and I am him, so I treat my victims the way he does. But obviously there's a schizophrenia since my victims are delectably me' (Breillat 2006: 264).

The rape fantasy, then, could be seen as reinforcing society's most pernicious gender stereotypes insofar as it solicits a 'schizophrenic' or split identification with the polarized positions of the male sadist and his masochistic female victim. However, it is also possible to see the 'schizophrenic' viewer of the rape scenario not as someone who is torn between masculine sadism and feminine masochism, but instead as someone who *simultaneously occupies both positions and therefore neither*. According to Cowie, 'Fantasy as a *mise en scène* is more a setting out of lack, of what is absent, than a presentation of a having, a being present' (Cowie 1997: 133). Cowie explains that fantasy often involves a 'de-subjectivisation, 'a varying of subject position so that the subject takes up more than one position and thus is not fixed' (Cowie 1997: 134). The viewer identifies with *both* Anaïs and the rapist and

therefore with *neither* absolutely. The position taken up by the viewer could be described as the *non-position between* the two characters, an undefined and unconventional space *beyond sadomasochism*.

Before the rape, the attacker stalks Anaïs, moving menacingly towards her and fixing her as the object of the male gaze. But Anaïs is also in motion and looking right back at him, as if the two were circling each other and holding each other's gaze. Breillat describes the two as 'fascinated, the one by the other', and she compares the scene to a 'bullfight' in which 'the victim dances with the executioner' (Tylski 2004). Unlike a conventional execution with its stark contrast between attacker and victim, sadist and masochist, a dance implies equality, mutuality, inter-involvement. During the rape *imagined* in this *fantasy* scenario, as the attacker and Anaïs are body to body and face to face, they both are muddied by the forest floor and by their contact with one another, and the hair on each of their heads gets wild and tangled even as they are entangled. Breillat calls it 'the fusion of two beings who hate the world and want to make it explode' (Puaux 2001: 172). What is the nature of this 'fusion'? Yes, one could see Anaïs as identifying with her aggressor as a way of living in denial about the fact that she was raped. After the assault, she emerges from the forest looking as wild-haired as the hairy woodsman who had attacked her, and she claims that she was not raped. In this interpretation, the rape scenario is merely an *acting out* of the same old story: Anaïs (or the viewer) is forced to make a choice between two polarized and untenable positions: identifying masochistically with the victim or identifying *against herself* with the sadistic rapist.



But it is also possible to see the ‘fusion’ in this rape fantasy not as a mere reversal of the binary (the masochist identifies with the sadist) that keeps the polarity in place, but rather as a confusion of these very categories, an identification with a non-position *between* sado- and masochism, a *working through* of these traumatic gender differences. If rape in our patriarchal world is the violent enforcement of gender differences, the rape in Breillat’s fantasy scenario is instead an attempt to explode that hateful world, to deconstruct its differences. The rape fantasy is an attempt to imagine a female character (Anaïs) who *lives through* the sadistic reduction of herself to a sexual object, who *survives beyond* the masochistic feeling that she should be punished for her desires. As Breillat has said,

I used to love the man [...] like Bluebeard, the man who doesn’t love, who kills women. [...] But I’ve realized [...] that one can find pleasure in other ways than through antagonism and the same old dirty feelings of shame. I always had a strong, delicious taste for being humiliated by men. [...] And so I understand very well the couple formed by the victim and the executioner, I see how it’s a powerful couple. But I nevertheless think – even if I adore *Bluebeard* – that it’s a couple whose ties must be broken.[...] (Breillat 2006: 208, 264)

Indeed, in her 2009 film *Barbe Bleue (Bluebeard)*, Breillat extends the working through of gender differences in a way that allows her to move beyond rape fantasy itself. While the hairy Bluebeard does threaten to rape and murder the virginal Marie-Catherine as symbolized by his bloodstained key in her hand and by his knife at her throat, this time Breillat imagines a way to untie the victim–executioner couple *before* the girl is victimized. Instead of being assaulted by Bluebeard as Anaïs was by the hairy wild-man, Marie-Catherine does not allow herself to be punished for her desire – a desire symbolized by her wilfully unlocking the door he had forbidden her to open. Like Anaïs,

Marie-Catherine ‘fuses’ with the rebarbative wild-man, identifying with his alienation from the world: ‘The two characters have the same solitude and loneliness. They are beings who are not loved’, says Breillat (Wheatley 2010: 42). But this identification becomes a source of strength for Marie-Catherine, a rage against oppression that she uses to counteract Bluebeard’s violence, decapitating him before he can commit an (ultimately very patriarchal) assault on her. Rather than be the masochistic object of his sadistic love as inculcated by the fairytale (‘It’s a story that teaches these little girls to love the man who’s going to kill them’, according to Breillat (Anderson 2010)), Marie-Catherine pre-empts this entire scenario of sadomasochistic desire and cuts the very ties that bind her to this victim–executioner dynamic. In so doing, Marie-Catherine (Breillat) clears the way for her to write a new scenario beyond the typically rapacious interaction of inherited ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ roles.

By contrast, the direction taken by Gaspar Noé after *Irréversible* is not so clear, and there is space here to make only a few preliminary remarks about his latest work. With *Enter the Void* (2009) – a film first conceived under the influence of hallucinogenic mushrooms during a viewing of *Lady in the Lake* (which was shot entirely from the protagonist’s point of view) – Noé continues his experimentation with viewer perspective and split identification. At the film’s beginning, we see everything through the eyes of a sex- and drug-obsessed youth named Oscar. But after he is shot in a drug bust and lies dying in a nightclub toilet stall, subjective camera shifts to over-the-shoulder – or, more precisely, behind-the-head – shots showing us Oscar’s flashback memories, including his separation from his sister Linda after their parents were killed in a car accident. Oscar remembers a promise he made never to leave her, and the perspective shifts again to disembodied ‘astral projection’ shots as his spirit leaves his body and goes in search of his sister, hovering above her and watching over her protectively. It is possible to see these changes in perspective –

subjective camera to behind-the-head shots to *disembodied* and *high-angle* subjective camera – as Noé’s way of moving Oscar and the film’s viewer from selfishness to empathy, as each change takes us one step further from egocentric spectatorship towards emotional identification with a woman.

However, just as we viewers could only look on helplessly as Alex was raped, so Oscar as an incorporeal spirit can see – but not act to prevent – his sister from being sexually used by her boss Mario: ‘People who believe in having had post-mortem visions recount that they float above themselves, that they see everything and cannot communicate with the living,’ notes Noé (Etchegaray 2010). If in *Irréversible* the reverse chronology created the sense that it was always already too late to save Alex from assault by Le Ténia, so here the ‘spirit cam’ conveys a similar sense of fatalism, of knowledge without power in the face of Linda’s being abused by Mario. Point of view then becomes even more problematic when the floating camera descends as Oscar’s spirit moves behind and into Mario’s head, adopting the abuser’s perspective as he is thrusting into Linda. Is Oscar’s seeming empathy for his sister really only lustful aggression, his protective vigilance a disguise for voyeuristic and egocentric desire? Is the ‘spirit cam’ really a ‘stalker cam’ like that which tracked Alex before the rape in *Irréversible*? Some of the flashbacks to their past do appear to indicate the potential for an incestuous relationship between Oscar and Linda.

Or does Oscar’s brief sojourn into Mario’s head, this momentary identification with the abuser, form part of Oscar’s growing awareness of his own selfishness and former abuse of women? Perhaps this fleeting re-incorporation marks a further step in the journey of his consciousness to

*distance* itself from the lustful body, to relive sexually aggressive experiences but with a critical awareness of the pain that he has caused. Much later in the film, Oscar's spirit again moves into the head and sees through the eyes of a man having sex with his sister, but this time the man is Oscar's best friend and the sex with Linda could be construed as compassionate love-making. The camera then adopts a perspective from inside her vagina as the penis enters and ejaculates. Has Oscar (Gaspar) finally succeeded in moving beyond masculine aggression to see feelingly from the woman's point of view – or is this still basically a hardcore porn 'money shot' celebrating a man's potency and power? As so often with Noé, it is probably both – again a matter of split identification and ideological complexity.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

My special thanks to Tanya Horeck, Tina Kendall and Sarah Barrow, the organizers of the conference on The New Extremism: Contemporary European Cinema (Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, 24–25 April 2009), and to the participants at the conference, especially Martin Barker, whose probing comments and spirited debate led to marked improvements in this article.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Keesey, D. (2010), 'Split identification: Representations of rape in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* and Catherine Breillat's *A ma scrur!/Fat Girl*', *Studies in European Cinema* 7: 2, pp. 95–107, doi: 10.1386/seci.7.2.95\_1

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**Ideas move fast  
when their time comes.**

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Carolyn Heilbrun

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