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De(con)structive Time: Visual Style and Temporal Simultaneity in the Works of
Gaspar Noé

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By

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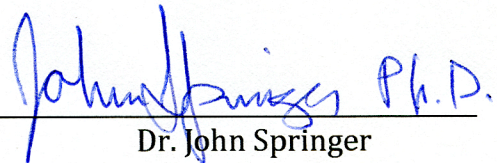
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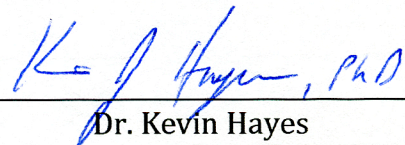
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Gaspar Noé

A THESIS

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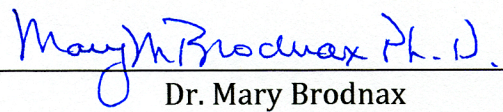
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Abstract

“De(con)structive Time: Visual Style and Temporal Simultaneity in the Works of Gaspar Noé”

Author: Brian W. Collins (University of Central Oklahoma, 2013)

Despite the popularity of director Gaspar Noé’s films, little critical attention has been given to the overall style or common themes within his work as a whole, which also includes short films and music videos. Instead most examinations focus on the controversial issues of explicit representations of sex and violence within his feature films. By examining a cross-section of some of Noé’s lesser known works such as his music videos and short films, one can find within them representations of his dominant visual style including kinetic camera movements and quickly-paced editing existing alongside extremely long static takes. Such a contrasting visual style suggests Noé’s preoccupation with time, and an examination of his two latest feature films, *Irréversible* and *Enter the Void*, reveal Noé’s unique filmic approach to representations of time. Within *Irréversible*, Noé creates the effect of temporal simultaneity—of past, present, and future existing at once—through an intricately structured plot that engages and employs the spectator’s memory more intensely than the typical narrative film. In *Enter the Void* this same concurrence of time is achieved through the subjective point-of-view shots of its protagonist, Oscar. The extended pov sequences position both Oscar and the spectator within the same perspectives in which to view his past, present, in a simultaneous fashion. Noé’s preoccupation with creating the effect of immediacy within his films as well as his heavy use of CGI effects places the director squarely within an ever-growing tendency with mainstream films to create a more virtual experience for the spectator. From 3-D movies, high frame rates, surround sound, IMAX experiences, and digital “realism,” such attempts at manufactured authenticity coupled with explicit representations of violence introduces new concerns within the debate of the correlation between popular media and violence within society.

Introduction

Director, Gaspar Noé is no stranger to controversy, and his films often elicit strong emotional and visceral reactions from critics and spectators. His overt depictions of brutal violence and explicit sexual acts have garnered him the title of French cinema's *enfant terrible*, and his films are often given mature ratings for such representations. However, Noé's work is also lauded by some who see him as creating unique forms of narration and pioneering visual effects within mainstream cinema. Such wide-sweeping opinions of a director's work usually prove fertile ground for critical discussion, and Noé is no exception. Yet, few critical works have examined the director from an auteur perspective, documenting his overall visual style and noting reoccurring themes within his work. More often, critical and popular discussions surrounding films such as *Irreversible* center upon depictions of violence and sex, pornography versus art, or the social responsibility of artists. Less work has been done to examine the structures and forms of Noé's narratives, his aesthetic influences, and his philosophical and personal beliefs. This may be due to the relatively few feature films that Noé has directed. Moreover, even less consideration has been given to his work outside of feature films, namely music videos and short films, which can just as effectively serve any scholar looking to identify aspects of Noé's style.

In documenting Noé's *oeuvre*, one can find a wide variety of projects from AIDS awareness commercials for the French Health Commission to indie-rock band videos and from fake hypnotic infomercials to collaborative projects. In addition, his work suggests an extensive array of visual and technical complexity from the

static long take in his video “Applesauce” to the kinetic camera work of *Irreversible*’s opening sequence. Noé’s work also exhibits a broad range of technical work. His video “We No Who UR” consists merely of a lone shadowy figure walking through a forest at night while his feature opus, *Enter the Void*, utilizes bombastic visual displays, scale models of Tokyo city, “flying cameras”, and large amounts of CGI effects. Whatever the project, Noé’s goal seems to be to visually astound and even shock his viewers with both the form and content of his work.

While his shorter works are usually non-narrative, Noé’s feature films retain a classical Hollywood form telling stories of tragically fated individuals who either lead violent lives or whose lives are abruptly ended in violent acts. The worlds they inhabit are brutal and dark, filled with drug users, sadists, psychotics, strip bars and BDSM clubs. Yet, each seems a victim not of social institutions, but of their own biological and psychological determinants. Noé’s settings represent those less-often-peered-into corners of society that still function within the “heart” of cities and towns as sites of economic, sexual, and political exchange. In a similar manner, Noé delves into the same corners of his character’s psyche exposing and examining those dark regions that often go unacknowledged by the individual. Thus, *I Stand Alone*’s character, The Butcher, struggles against his hatred for society and homicidal thoughts, his love for his autistic daughter and his sexual desire for her while *Enter the Void*’s Oscar struggles in a similar way with the brotherly affection for his sister Linda, and his repressed, sexual longing for her. Each has an unspeakable, repressed part of him or her self that seems to propel them to a tragic and fatalistic end.

However, Noé's work seems to represent more than overt sexuality and incest, brutal violence and revenge killings. His feature films contain intricate narrative structures that function to create a sense of immediacy of events and simultaneity of time that is unique to mainstream films. From *Irreversible's* reverse structured narrative to *Enter the Void's* extended subjective POV sequences and flashbacks, Noé creates an experience of time that attempts to present the past, present and future as existing at once. In *Irreversible*, he uses the long take and static camera to produce vivid and detailed images that reinforce viewer memory—serving as visual mnemonic “supplements” to actually representing images. By providing these memory images to the narrative's real time events, Noé is capable of utilizing viewer recall to create ironic and emotionally resonant scenes in addition to creating the effect of the past occurring simultaneously with the present.

In *Enter the Void*, this same effect is transformed into actual narrative events. By using the subjective POV, Noé accomplishes an immediate sense of the protagonist's (Oscar's) presence; however, his use of the first-person POV, while certainly resembling other films such as *Lady in the Lake*, *Strange Days*, or *Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, is unique in its conception because of its out-of-body conceit. Oscar's death transforms him into a free-floating, invisible, omniscient, and omnipresent consciousness that mediates the images we experience visually. In addition, Oscar's presence alters our emotional responses to images simply by virtue of his continual presence. The representation of his past, while taking the form of a standard flashback sequence, is unique in that we watch Oscar's past *with* him instead of taking the image as existing more “objectively”. Thus, Noé has also

created a simultaneity of subjectivity and a character that can be witness to his own past, present and future.

Although his other feature film *I Stand Alone* (1998) contains many of Noé's visual and thematic features, it works less to exhibit the same sense of immediacy of time that I have describe. Therefore, I will examine the film from those perspectives rather than the lengthy analysis I give to *Irreversible* and *Enter the Void*. *I Stand Alone* is an important film in Noé overall work, and as his first feature, more critical examination has collected since its premier. Thus, my omission should not to be seen as suggesting the film is of lesser importance within Noé's *oeuvre*, but rather as a necessary step in focusing on specific and unique narrative elements that appear in his later works. I also omit lengthy examination of other examples of the director's earlier works such as his first short film, *Tintarella Di Luna (Tan Moon)* and *Carne* for similar reasons. Overall, my selection criteria is based upon those works that contain iconic visual images, themes, authorial attitudes, and issues of time, which I see as constituting Noé's overall style; however, as in any single author or auteur study, my selection and examination of films is based upon my overall thesis, and should not be seen as inclusive of every aspect of Noé's style.

Biography, Music Videos, and Short Films

Gaspar Noé is a Franco-Argentine filmmaker currently working in France and is also visiting professor of film at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland ("Gaspar Noé-Biography"). He was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1963, and his father is the artist Luis Felipe Noé. His family moved to Paris when he was twelve, and later he attended Louis Lumière Film School at age seventeen. After

graduating, he became assistant director for Argentinian filmmaker Fernando Solanas, and soon began directing his own short film, *Tintarella Di Luna (Tan Moon)* in 1985 (*letempdetruittout.net*).

Noé often cites his artistic influences for his work based on other films rather than specific directors, although several of these influential films come from specific directors such as Stanley Kubrick (*2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*) (Marsh). Other influential films Noé often notes are *I Am Cuba* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1964), *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (Kenneth Anger, 1954), *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947), and *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, 1929) (*letempdetruittout.net*).

To date, Noé's complete filmography as director includes nine short videos and films: *Tintarella di luna (Tan Moon, 1985)*, *Pulpe Amère (1987)*, *Carne (1991)*, *Une expérience d'hypnose télévisuelle (An hypnosis television experiment, 1995)*, *Sodomites (1998)*, *Intoxication (documentary, 2002)*, *SIDA (2006)* *42 One Dream Rush (2009)*, He has also directed short segments of larger projects such as *Distriected (2006)*, a compilation film of erotic shorts "intended to illuminate the points where art meets sexuality" ("Gaspar Noé"). He has also participated in a film entitled *8 (2008)*, which contains interviews of eight different filmmakers discussing topics such as world hunger and gender equality. *8* also includes interviews from directors Gus Van Sant and Wim Wenders. Noé's has also written, directed and produced three feature length films: *I Stand Alone (Seul contre tous 1998)*, *Irreversible (2002)*, and *Enter the Void (2012)*. Noé also has film credits for writing and editing in addition to acting experience. He has made cameo

appearances in both *Enter the Void* and *Irreversible* as well as other bit parts in French action and sci-fi films such as *Dante 01* (1997) and *Dobermann* (1997). He is also an experienced cinematographer and credited as camera operator for *Enter the Void*.

Noé's works are noted for their use of computer generated imagery; intense colors and strobe-like lighting effects; pulsating title cards accompanied by reverb beats; the juxtaposition of extremely long kinetic shots mixed with long static takes; and for their intense and graphic depiction of violence and sex. He also frequently casts the same actors for roles in his films such as the French actor Philippe Nahon who appears in *Irreversible*, *I Stand Alone*, and *Carne* as a re-occurring character called "The Butcher," a horsemeat butcher who suffers a psychological breakdown. Nahon also appears in Noé's 1998 short film *Sodomites*, a short pornographic film made in conjunction with the French Ministry of Health to promote AIDS awareness (letempdetruittout.net). *Sodomites* was part of a larger project—a series of works that included four other directors each of which were given a specific sexual theme to artistically pursue.

7 Days in Havana is Noé's latest feature film project. It too is collaborative and also involves the carrying over of previous characters into new narratives. The film is an "omnibus picture" that features multiple directors working on separate short sections of an entire film whose narrative device transplants main characters that appear in one chapter into subsequent story lines (Hopewell). According to the film's official website, the film is "a contemporary portrait of [Havana] through a single feature-length movie made of 7 chapters, directed by 7 internationally

acclaimed directors”. Such examples of Noé’s work suggest not only his affinity for artistic collaboration, but also for truly “international” works. For example, the credit sequence of his last feature film, *Enter the Void* boasts French, Canadian, German, and Japanese production units.

French Extremity

Noé is often associated with the film movement “New French Extremity,” a style of filmmaking depicting violence and perversions that “question the boundary separating the psychotic and the socially acceptable” (“Gaspar Noé-Biography”). Other filmmakers usually included in this style are Francois Ozon, Bruno Dumont, and Catherine Breillat. Reportedly, Noé “gages” his films’ success by the “outrage and heckling” they receive during film festivals (“Gaspar Noé-Biography”). In one response to questions of violence in his films, Noé stated, “Violence is in life; it’s part of human experience. I had problems with the French critics, because they don’t like seeing France portrayed in this way. Interestingly though, most of the people who are offended have not been women, but men” (“Gaspar Noé-Biography”). Noé’s comment suggests a strong disdain for repressing the “truth masked behind a hypocritical façade of normality” that exists within the individual or the nation (i.e. France), while the explicit depictions of sex and violence within his films suggest a need to expose social hypocrisy concerning these issues (“Gaspar Noé-Biography”). This attitude towards social pretensions is evident within much of Noé’s work including all of his feature films. Despite criticism for their content, Noé’s films have won numerous international film festival awards, and both *Enter the Void* and *Irreversible* were nominated for the *Palme d’Or* at Cannes in 2009 and 2002.

Music Videos

Noé has also had forays into directing music videos. In 2012 he directed a video for the American experimental band *Animal Collective* and their song “Applesauce” it exhibits many of Noé’s stylistic marks (Richardson). The five-and-half minute video consists of one long take showing an extreme close up of a woman (model Lindsey Wixon) erotically eating a peach. Both foregrounded figures are darkened significantly, and only Wixon’s sumptuous lips, nose and the enlarged peach are framed. She seductively bites into the fruit, its juices wetting her lips and running down her mouth. The sexual connotations are obvious throughout, and Wixon’s satisfaction with the “fruit” becomes apparent by the video’s end as she slowly wipes her juice-covered lips with the back of her hand.

In addition, the video’s background consists of a pulsating, strobe-like screen that fills the frame. At its introduction, the screen begins slowly switching colors from red, yellow, blue, violent, etc., then increasingly alternating them until individual colors are almost indiscernible. Having no stable or predictable rhythm, the shifting squares of color have the effect of colored flashes of lightning on a curtain window. Overall, the contrasts between Wixon’s slow erotic mastication and the vibrating color scheme mesh well with the song’s syncopated lyric structure.

Also in 2012, Noé directed a video for the band *Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds* and their haunting ballad “We No Who UR.” The song’s tone and rhythm are subdued and slow while Cave’s deep voice and lyrics produce a profound melancholy. Noé’s visual approach to the song’s mood exhibits a similar tone, sharply contrasting “Applesauce’s” overt eroticism, but still retaining its long-take

style. The video is set in a forest at night, and begins with the camera pointed at the leaf-strewn floor. A pair of shadowy lines runs vertically across the frame, slowly moving up to a horizontal position, and finally moving forward. The dark lines are quickly revealed to be the elongated shadows of someone's legs, and the dark figure begins walking slowly, meandering throughout the forest. The entire video consists of this shadowy figure, which is cast against tree trunks and leaves. Presumably, the effect was achieved through intense back lighting and a handheld camera carefully positioned in front of its operator so as to not be included in the darkened silhouette.

While the video is absent of themes of violence or intense colors, it still exhibits other strong characteristics of Noé's cinematographic style: the long-take, handheld camera, and point-of-view stance (i.e. camera-as-character). In addition, his unique and pragmatic approach to the video's representation attests to his technical experience and creativity while its visual simplicity, when compared to his other works, shows a broad range of conception. Thematically, the video's form is suggestive of a brooding nihilism also common to Noé's works: the dark, shadowy figure appears and then vanishes. It appears lost or searching. It is a negation—empty, insubstantial, gaining life only through the reflecting branches, trunks and leaves—with Cave's voice dolefully singing, "The trees will stand like pleading hands/We go down with the dew in the morning light". In this respect, the video reflects a similar cynical mood found in most of the Noé's feature films.

Another example of Noé's use of the long take appears in the music video "Je n'ai pas" ("I Did Not," 1996), which he directed for the French musician Mano Solo.

Again, the entire video is one extended take and features Solo and his band sitting at a table that is in an open field at sunset. The sun sits low in the horizon casting an orange glow across the sky with the entire image darkly lit. The band members are seen lounging in a bored state of mind as if waiting for something such as a tour bus. They express little movement other than shifting their weight from side to side or lighting a cigarette as the song's quick pace and heavy rock beat strike a stark contrast with their relatively disinterested states. The video ends with Solo putting on his leather jacket and the entire band simply standing up and exiting the frame. After they leave, the viewer is left staring at the empty chairs and table, with the sound of chirping crickets and a barking dog in the distance—all of which adds to the feeling of open space, expansiveness, and emptiness that the video already projects.

Such uses of the long take accompanied with representations of boredom and ennui suggests Noé's preoccupation with time. And the director's official website is entitled "Le temps détruit tout" or "Time destroys everything" (letempdetruiittout.net). The phrase itself is an intertextual reference to the opening scene of *Irreversible*, which begins with The Butcher (another intertextual reference) and a man lounging in a small apartment. The camera moves in a slow circular pattern, framing images horizontally, constantly moving. As it passes by the now older, paunchy, and shirtless Butcher, he speaks as if to no one, "You know what? Time Destroys Everything". In a show of concern for the Butcher, the man asks, "What happened to you?" to which the Butcher confesses that he was locked up in prison for sleeping with his daughter. Viewer's previously familiar with The

Butcher character will understand that he is referring to his young autistic daughter, Cynthia who he molests at the end of *I Stand Alone*.

In some sense, Noé's long take style and the existential (philosophy) feelings of alienation, bleakness, and waiting (*for Gadot?*) represent such *avant-garde* art films of the 60's—films often lampooned in American popular culture for their pretensions to "art" (see *Family Guy* "The King is Dead" Season 2: episode 7). However, Noé's videos extend well into independent music circles and cult followings. Also, films like *Irreversible* are often reviewed by popular American critics such as Roger Ebert and David Edelstein (see Ebert and Edelstein). Even though such reviews, at the time of the film's release, centered on the its controversial depictions of violence, the acknowledgement by such critics suggests *Irreversible's* status as a popular art form. The film's domestic box office receipts for ten weeks were a modest \$792,200, however, its release was limited to only thirty-five theaters ("Irreversible").

Another common motif within Noé's work is the representation of rooms full of large groups of people. Such scenes occur in *Enter the Void* and *Irreversible* and are similar to the "We No Who UR" video. Often the camera moves languidly about following a single character who makes their way from room to room of an apartment or house. For example, in a music video for the band *Bone Fiction* entitled "Insanely Cheerful," the camera begins by framing a woman, seated on a chair, putting a record on a turntable. The song begins as she makes her way throughout a house full of people in various poses: relaxing, standing, sitting, etc. There are some suggestions of subdued sexual activity (i.e. a group of people laying

on a bed, lounging nude in the bathroom, embracing, etc.); however, again the mood is one of boredom and ennui, and the song's vocals and lyrics reflect these feelings (ex. "Why ya looking so insanely cheerful?"). It is as if the viewer has just stumbled into an orgy post coital whose participants are too exhausted or depressed to go home. A similar sexual collage of people is evident within *Irreversible* when the camera follows Marcus and Pierre through a house party as large groups of young people sit on beds, snort cocaine, drink and dance. A similar *mise-en-scene* exists in *Enter the Void* when groups of people at the "Love Hotel" or the "Sex-Money-Power" strip club engage in various sexual acts. The camera moves slowly among them, lingering momentarily, and eventually moving on.

Structural Film

The "Applesauce" video's sexual theme reflects a common subject for Noé while the background's multi-colored strobe lighting represents common components of his visual style. Works such as *Irreversible*, *Enter the Void*, *Ava* (part 1), *Une expérience d'hypnose télévisuelle*, and the short erotic film "We Fuck Alone" from *Distrikted* use similar erratic lighting effects in their credit sequences and throughout the films themselves. Noé's lighting effects are strongly derivative of the work of American Structural Film artists of the 1960's particularly experimental filmmakers Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits whose short "flicker" films, according to Jonathan Walley, are traditionally seen as attempting to "foreground the structure of the filmstrip and the mechanism of both camera and projector," (17).

Noé's visual style draws heavily upon Shartis' "Ray Gun Virus" (1966), "N:O:T:H:I:N:G" (1968) and "T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G," (1968) as well as Conrad's canonical

avant-garde work, “The Flicker” (1965). All three short films share a similar form achieved through a strobe-like flickering effect created during projection that produces an almost hypnotic, seizure-inducing experience. In fact, Conrad’s film runs an introductory title card that rather humorously warns the viewer of the film’s potential to “induce epileptic seizures or produce mild symptoms of shock treatment” and that “you are cautioned to remain in the theater only at your own risk.” After the prologue, the film’s content consists of a white screen accompanied by random “flickers” and the sounds of a projector.

The use of such cautionary inter-titles, (suggestive of a William Castle gimmick), are also utilized by Noé in several films including *I Stand Alone*. A disclaimer occurs just before the film’s climactic sequence where The Butcher fantasizes/hallucinates about molesting and killing his autistic daughter, Cynthia. It is just before this scene that the film inserts an intertitle that reads: “You have 30 seconds to leave the screening of this film” and displaying a counter to heighten the tension. As the countdown begins, The Butcher’s voice-over continues to be heard as he describes his plans to kill Cynthia and then himself. At the end of thirty seconds, the film continues.

With respect to color schemes, Noé style is strongly evocative of “N:O:T:H:I:N:G,” which includes a series of fluttering monochromic frames ranging from red, yellow, blue, and green. The film begins with a slowly shifting arrangement of colored frames. Their alternations continue to increase until individual colors seem to coalesce, eventually becoming almost indistinguishable. As already noted, an almost exact reproduction of this effect can be seen in the

“Applesauce” video. And Noé uses a similar approach to color in *Enter the Void*. Instead of a color-filled background, however, this flickering effect is applied to the almost countless variety of font styles and sizes that make up the *Enter the Void*'s credit sequence. The title sequence's bombastic display of Japanese and English script ranges from a thick, blocked font to three dimensional, neon colored letters alternating at such extreme rates that they become incomprehensible. Names of directors, cinematographers, grips, CGI Techs, etc. are flashed on the screen at almost subliminal levels of perception while numerous neon colors seem to vibrate at intense rates.

Such experimental films as “N:O:T:H:I:N:G” and “The Flicker” are known for their highlighting of the material components of film (i.e. film stock, screen, projector, camera) and the avoidance of “illusionist powers of the medium” epitomized through continuity editing, camera movement, and narrative (Walley 17). According to Walley, traditional histories of avant-garde works assume the modernist notion that the advancement of an art form is accomplished through “reflexively scrutinizing” the material properties of its specific medium (15). Thus, the works of such filmmakers like Shartis, Conrad, and Andy Warhol (ex. *Empire* and *Sleep*) were seen as drawing the viewer's attention to the essential material aspects of film (17).

However, there is a contradiction to such essentialist accounts of experimental film, says Walley, because they cannot account for later changes in attitudes by the same “structural” filmmakers whose later works during the 70's would attempt to avoid the materials of film altogether. Shartis' later “installation”

works, for example, would commit a “kind of violence” against the filmic apparatus (i.e. the projector) as the director began screening his films with the “shutter-blade” removed (19). Such an alteration of the projector would no longer produce individual frames, but rather a blurring of colors and shapes that was in contrast to Shartis’ earlier work.

More importantly, argues Walley, such attempts at “disintegrating the physical medium” would become the “first step in a larger process of locating the cinematic outside of film” (19). What would become essentially “cinematic” was no longer limited to the physical properties of film, but would be located by such artists as Shartis within the more “ephemeral qualities” of light, space, and time (20). This notion is epitomized by Anthony McCall’s 1975 installation piece, *Long Film for Ambient Light*, which does away completely with film, camera, projector, and screen. Instead, McCall’s “film” consists of a Manhattan apartment whose windows are covered in a thin material while a single bare bulb lights the entire space. The cinematic qualities of *Long Film for Ambient Light* rest solely in its utilization of time, space, and light. According to Walley, such works signaled the move from essentialist ideas of the cinematic to notions of the historical contingency of the materials of film themselves. Such an “historicized conception” of the filmic medium for artists during the 70’s has its theoretical precedents within the works of Eisenstein and Bazin—“namely, that the film medium . . . is not a timeless absolute but a cluster of historically contingent materials that happens to be, for the time being at least, the best means for creating cinema” (26).

Examination of Noé's overall work shows a move to a more visually complex style particularly that found in later works like "Applesauce," *Irreversible*, and *Enter the Void*. Although these works are derivative of Structural aesthetics, they seem less characterized by the "dismantling" of or violence upon the *filmic apparatus* than on the viewer's *perceptions* of reality. Far from eschewing the materials of film, Noé fully embraces the illusionistic powers of the medium to alter "states of consciousness" (Macnab). In an interview discussing the visual effects within *Enter the Void*, Noé states, "cinema is a way for me to play with the borders of perception, an emotional rollercoaster where we try to create heightened states of awareness" (Péron). And the film's attempt to recreate the psychedelic mental experiences of its main character, Oscar, exemplifies this attitude.

Such attempts to alter the states of consciousness of viewers is epitomized by Noé's short film, *Une expérience d'hypnose télévisuelle* (*An hypnosis television experiment*). The film aired on the French network Canal Plus in 1995 and was featured in the program *L'Oeil du Cyclone* (*letempdetruittout.net*). It stars Alain Ganas and Marie-France who play the role of two hypnotists attempting to put viewers in a state of hypnosis. The film spans over twenty minutes and begins with a "warning" similar to the one in *I Stand Alone*. It states, "The following is a program intended to positively influence your conscious and subconscious through various visual and audio messages". The disclaimer goes on to construct a false legitimacy by claiming that the program will be delivered via the "Hypnocamera" system developed by "Hypnoflex Laboratories Ltd." The viewer is also warned that they have "Thirty seconds to close the curtains, darken the room, and to sit comfortably

in front of the screen” as a “Dr. Pierre Carnac” will attempt to hypnotize those who choose to watch. Dr. Carnac sits in front of a red theater curtain that slowly changes colors from red to violet and yellow to purple through out the program. These color shifts are a subtle version of Noé’s similar use of color within “Applesauce” and *Enter the Void*.

The film begins with a fade into the well-spoken, professionally dressed Dr. Carnac who begins with a series of introductory questions attempting to dispel common doubts in the audience. He states, “Can people be put under hypnosis? Is it possible to guide the thoughts of someone to a better future? Can you revive someone’s earliest memories? Can you change their reputation? The answer is yes.” He continues by convincing the viewer that they suffer from mental problems and that he and hypnosis can help in this regard. “I know what I have to do because I know who you are. Yes, I know you will know what works, and I know what’s wrong. I know what you need. You need love, you see your face does not lie and neither do I.” Carnac’s voice begins in a calm, soothing fashion; however, he soon becomes more aggressive in his commands to the viewer, pointing at the camera while speaking quickly and loudly while making intimidating faces. Several times he extends his open hand at the camera, holding it as if casting a magician’s spell.

Interspersed throughout Carnac’s speech is also a series of startling close ups of an eye accompanied with a strobe-light effect and dramatic, low-tone music. These images give the effect of being transmitted subliminally, although they are clearly perceivable on a conscious level, and Carnac’s overly dramatic arm gestures

seem to elicit comic responses, a tendency he seems to anticipate by stating, “relax, stop laughing, and listen to me”.

Viewing *Une expérience d'hypnose télévisuelle* can create a disorienting experience for the viewer. The flashing images, quick cuts to close ups, and color changes can provoke a startled response while Carnac's intense and continuous talking serve as a difficult visual and aural point of focus from which to disengage one's attention. More broadly, the video suggests the power of images to manipulate viewers' understanding and behavior through film and other popular media such as advertising. The film seems a tongue-in-cheek attempt at Noé's own self-promotion that illustrates his technical virtuosity while simultaneously suggesting his actual ability to manipulate and disorient the viewer. Whether actual individuals were indeed hypnotized or whether Noé anticipated such an effect is uncertain; however, the video's intensity, self-authentication, and length suggest such an authentic attempt. More importantly, the film expresses one of Noé's essential aesthetic characteristics: to not only startle and shock the viewer's moral and ethical convictions, but to disorient the viewer, quite literally, on a physical and perceptual level. As Noé states himself, "Life can be a game and when you make movies, you want to play with the audience . . . It's part of the fun. Like when a magician wants to scare people by sawing a woman in two, he knows it's fake but you want to see people's reactions." (Rose).

Noé's short film, "We Fuck Alone" featured within the larger work *Distrikted* also utilizes flickering effects to disorient the viewer. *Distrikted's* distributor *Revolver Entertainment* evidently wished to avoid any potential problems that might

affect viewers by adding a disclaimer reading: “Warning: This film contains strobing effects that may be harmful to viewers afflicted with epilepsy”. According to the film’s official website, the film is a compellation of eight works by eight different artists who “reveal the diverse attitudes by which we represent ourselves sexually” by exploring “the fine line where art and pornography intersect” (districtedfilms.com). Each segment of the film seems to take a different theme (i.e. oral sex, anal sex, pornography, etc.), as its subject, and Noé’s “We Fuck Alone,” as the title suggests, is an examination of masturbation. The title also alludes to his feature film *I Stand Alone*, which contains a similar sense of solitude, despair, and abandonment through its protagonist, The Butcher.

Visually, “We Fuck Alone” maintains a constant flickering of images throughout its twenty-three minutes. It begins with images of a young heterosexual couple in various forms and position of sexual intercourse. As the camera pulls back, the images are revealed to be a pornographic video projected onto a television screen. The camera pulls back from the television and “looks” up towards the ceiling, moving slowly downwards, and eventually coming to rest upon the image of a young woman in her bedroom, masturbating as she watches. This style of unedited transition is a common technique of Noé’s and is used heavily within *Irreversible* and *Enter the Void*. In addition, the girl’s young age is signaled through various props. The bedroom walls are adorned with music posters and bed sheets exhibit a childish butterfly print. The actress’s hair is pulled up into pigtails, and she is holding a large fluffy teddy bear, which she uses to perform cunalingus upon herself. The scene’s sounds appear wholly non-diegetic and feature overlapping

layers of a low-toned industrial hum, a heartbeat, a crying baby, and a type of rhythmic breathing sound akin to that heard within S.C.U.B.A. equipment.

These sounds as well as the pornographic video are used to transition into the next scene, which shows a young male also masturbating in his bedroom. The man seems an older teenager, and his room is littered with empty pizza boxes, a water pistol, and a sex doll, with which he will eventually have intercourse. Such character interactivity with objects and images within the film seems to echo Noé's own comments about the pornography and the portrayal of sexuality within mainstream cinema. He states,

If I hear that some art movie is pornographic nowadays, I don't trust it. I know what pornography is. I was a huge consumer of porno movies when I was a teenager . . . And then you get excited and you have to masturbate – in a way it's an interactive movie. Some are good and some are bad, but you're not passive watching porno – you become active. But what's actually missing in cinema is clear or proper or joyful presentation of adult love (Rose).

Noé's depiction of masturbation within "We Fuck Alone" can certainly problematize the viewer's interaction with the image merely through the strobing effect alone. Its constant flicker not only creates gaps within the image itself, but disorients the viewer's focus upon traditionally relevant areas of interest in pornography (genitals, chests, lips, etc.) by shifting our awareness to the image's production. Any scopophilic experiences are over-shadowed behind the disruptive effect of the pulsing imagery. Thus, just as each character's interaction focuses on

the pornography and various sex objects, the viewer's "interaction" is not with the images, but with the process of production, especially how that process disrupts our normal visual perception of film (i.e. without strobing lights). As *Destructed's* own website describes, the film provokes a "perceptual and visceral reaction to both what is seen and the way it is shown, we are drawn into a solitary self-referential world of simultaneous seduction and repulsion". Such contradictory effects as "seduction and repulsion" are also hallmarks of Noé's thematic concerns within his work as a whole.

Noé's work seems to represent two extremes of visual perception. Whether it is the long, languid, Kubric-esq takes contained in "Applesauce," "I Did Not," or *Une expérience d'hypnose télévisuelle* or the disorienting flashes of vibrating fonts in *Enter the Void* or "We Fuck Alone," Noé's work seems also preoccupied with time—more importantly, how the viewer is affected when confronted with such extreme temporal shifts within a single film, short or video. Furthermore, the viewer's memory as it relates to time is important theme for Noé, one that he pursues most intently within his feature film *Irreversible*.

Irreversible

Time itself is a major motif within *Irreversible*, which its reverse narrative structure attests. The (linear) story follows couple Alex (Monica Bellucci) and Marcus (Vincent Cassel) through a roughly twenty-four-hour period and is intended to represent one continuous take. The story begins with Alex's discovery that she is pregnant a fact she later playfully hints at to Marcus. Both will spend the next few hours visiting a house party, eventually meet up with Alex's ex-boyfriend and

philosophy professor, Marcus (Albert Dupontel). Later that evening, Alex decides to leave the club alone after a heated argument with Marcus over his unrestrained drug use and flirtatious behavior with other women. On her way home, she is brutally raped by a homosexual sociopath named *le Tenia* (the “Tapeworm”). Pierre and Marcus soon leave the party only to discover the bloody and beaten Alex laying on an emergency gurney. Marcus, along with a reluctant Pierre, sets out on a rage-fueled quest for revenge, enlisting the help of local street thugs to track down *le Tenia*. After accosting a transgender sex workers, the two men track *le Tenia* to a local gay BDSM nightclub called the *Rectum* where Marcus begins attacking some of its patrons in his hasty search. Instead of finding *le Tenia*, Marcus receives a broken arm in a fight and is almost sodomized; however, Pierre intervenes, brutally killing a man he mistakes for *le Tenia*. Both are taken to jail for their crimes. The film “ends” with The Butcher scene previously described.

To simply describe *Irreversible*'s narrative as “reverse” ordered is, technically speaking, inaccurate. A “true” reversal of events would necessitate the rewinding of character actions, movements, and speech, thus, making the film's narrative incomprehensible, at least on a linguistic level. Rather, in order to create the effect in a practical way, Noé divides the story into individual sequences and rearranges them accordingly—the end of one sequence serving as the transition point for the beginning of a chronologically prior sequence. For example, after Pierre murders the man at the *Rectum*, the following sequence begins with Marcus and Pierre's search for the club and ends with their narrow escape from an angry mob of transgender prostitutes. Normally, in a classical narrative represented in

chronological order, the causes and effects of character actions would be implied by their syntagmatic or contiguous structure. Thus, Marcus and Pierre's narrow escape in a cab would logically be followed by their entry into the elusive club, with its marque displaying "Rectum" functioning as cue and establishing shot to spatially and temporally orient the viewer.

Noé's narrative, however, works non-contiguously, problematizing the viewer's construction of the narrative, strongly eliciting the viewer's attention and memory, and drawing attention to the act of narrative construction itself. Rather, than facilitating our understanding of the story, Noé disrupts it, forcing an awareness of our own cognitive processes when creating meaning. However, this is not to say the film does not contain a classical narrative structure and stylistic devices. It does in fact contain an exposition, complication, climax, and conclusion; establishing shots do exist; transitions between sequences are clearly indicated through various devices such as fade to black; and the narrative's cause and effects are logical. It is only the film's *presentation* of events that is rearranged, not the *story* that viewers ultimately construct. Ultimately, the film's narrative contains a logical sequence of events with an "ending" that creates closure.

This form of narrative structure also engages the viewer's memory in unique ways requiring us to attend to and recall events more closely than standard linear narrative. Unlike the "canonical story formats" utilized by classical narratives (i.e. exposition, complication, climax, resolution), *Irreversible* presents us with a shifted linear order (*Narration* 35). In order to construct the story, we must recall each sequence's beginning and ending then, when presented with the next sequence,

mentally re-arrange them in logical order. Using the prior example, we can see how this works. The *Rectum* sequence opens with Marcus and Pierre's journey through the club and ends with a murder. The next sequence begins with both characters in a car as they begin their chaotic search for the club and ends with their hasty retreat from the prostitutes. Thus, the two events that are contiguous are the murder and the car ride. To successfully arrange the events, we must recall, while viewing the current sequence, the previous sequence's beginning and ending. Also we must do this for all of the film's sequences. This process contrasts sharply with a viewer's schema for constructing a classical narrative even though it requires the same cognitive activities (i.e. hypothesis testing, inference making, recall, etc.) (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 31)

A simple analogy that illustrates the difference in mnemonic effort needed on behalf of the viewer can be seen when considering a series of nine numbers ranging from 2 through 10. If we take a set of three digits in reverse order (i.e. 10, 9, 8) as one unit representing one of the film's sequences, then break the ten digits down into three units, we can quickly see how much more our memory is engaged when asked to count backwards by each unit. [We can think of each number within the set as the cause-effect connections existing within each of the film's sequences]. It must be remembered that we have to begin with the smallest digit of each set every time. Thus, [10, 9, 8] then [5, 6, 7] then [2, 3, 4]. Simply counting backwards from 10 would require much less effort if you were to take away the fact that of the sequences' shifted arrangement. This analogy is not without its problems (ex: we are already familiar with the number sequence [10-2] for example, yet it can still

effectively illustrate the shift in the canonical story schema the viewer must adapt in order to successfully construct the story. Moreover, it demonstrates the increase in the viewer's attention to recall of previously represented events.

This is not to imply that classically structured narratives such as Hollywood films do not themselves, at times, require such mnemonic acumen. This is evident within such narrative devices as flashback sequences or in film genres such as mysteries where attention to detail and memory are important factors. *Citizen Kane* is a good example of a film that requires both memory and attention and because it is both a mystery and a collection of flashback sequences. The flashbacks are narrated through the memories of Kane's business partners, friends, and wife with present events (i.e. Kane's death, Thompson's interviews) serving as a framing story. However, this framing story contains few causal events that motivate the story's actions. The "real" story exists in the extended flashback sequences, which are told in chronological order from Kane's childhood to his self-imposed seclusion at *Xanadu*. The flashbacks' causal chain remains linear and character motivated. It is Kane who begins a newspaper business, has an affair, runs for governor of New York state, etc. In this respect, the film retains the hallmarks of the classical Hollywood style through its predominantly linear story presentation and "character-centered causality" (*Classical Hollywood Cinema* 13).

Despite *Citizen Kane's* extended flashback structure, it still retains a narrative "master schema" structure or "narrative structure which embodies typical expectations about how to classify events and relate parts to the whole" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 34). For example, viewers recognize Kane as a character type (i.e.

the megalomaniacal entrepreneur and social activist). We also understand, generically, that his story is a tragic one of “rags-to-riches” ending in downfall. Thus, viewers can use these master schemas as a “framework for understanding, recalling, and summarizing a particular narrative” (34). In addition, the story’s overall chronological order and linear causality aid our hypothesis testing and inference making by limiting the number of narrative events and causalities possible. “Causal connections,” states David Bordwell, “are especially important; in *remembering* stories, people tend to invert the order of events more frequently when the link is only sequential . . . and not also consequential” (emphasis added, *Narration* 35).

Bordwell is referring to a viewer’s recall of *all* narrative events after the story’s closure. In remembering the entire story, our memory is strongly affected by our unambiguous understanding of a character’s actions causing an effect, which causes another effect, and so forth. With the exception of discovering what Rosebud is, (i.e. what motivates Kane, the ultimate “cause”), the film’s clear representation of the characters’ actions and their effects aid the viewer’s recall of events despite their status as flashback.

Irreversible’s structure could be viewed in a similar manner with each represented sequence seen as a flashback to *prior* represented events or a flashforward to *subsequent* represented ones; however, either conception would place the film well outside the classical Hollywood style, which normally motivates such movements and other temporal discontinuities through character memory (*Classical* 43). Noé’s film fails to create such character-motivated cueing for flashback

sequences (such as a close up on a thinking character or a character voice-over accompanied with optical effects like dissolves, fades, music bridges, etc.) that would indicate the narrative's movement back in time. Rather, each seems unmotivated, and the film indicates its temporal shifts through camera work and dissolves that contain no character source. For example, after Pierre murder's the wrong man at the club, the camera moves quickly downward catching a glimpse of the prostrate Marcus. It then begins moving in a circular chaotic manner as the screen goes from completely black to brief glimpses of the club's interior. In a sense we are being "taken out" of the club in the same manner and direction as we entered it. Along the way, an ever-present industrial hum is heard in a rising and falling pattern. Its aural fade along with an accompanying visual one indicates the scene is over, and that a temporal shift has occurred. The next sequence is introduced through a return to the camera's circular movement and vertical direction (i.e. looking up at a night sky) as it eventually comes to rest on the image of Pierre.

Again, the film's transitions are unmotivated by character memory. Rather they seem "artistically" motivated, "justified by [their] power to call attention to the system within which [they] operate" (*Classical* 21). This system can refer to stylistic conventions or, in the case of *Irreversible*, to a film's own narrative conventions. Once we successfully understand the film's rules for transition, we are put on notice that future ones will take a similar form. More importantly, we understand that subsequent sequences will not be the product of character memories, hallucinations, dreams, unless they prove to be so at the film's ending (ex: *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*). Such a reading is not implausible given that Alex and Marcus are just

waking up in their bed at the film's ending. However, the transition to this scene is similar to the others encountered. Thus, the suggestion that it was all "just a dream" seems an unlikely proposition.

As I have suggested, *Irreversible* draws heavily on the viewer's capacity for attention and memory. However, the actual narrative is a relatively simple revenge plot that moves from Alex and Marcus' apartment, to a party, then to a subway tunnel, and finally to *The Rectum*. In addition, the plot's time frame roughly covers a twelve-hour period. Nevertheless, viewers must carefully attend to character actions and events forming hypotheses and making inferences as they go. Despite its refusal to attribute such temporal discontinuities to the subjectivity of its characters, the film retains a classic plot structure.

Memento

In this sense, *Irreversible* resembles similar contemporary Hollywood films such as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), a film that has as its central focus the protagonist's inability to form memories. The film follows Leonard Shelby, a man who develops anterograde amnesia after his wife's murder. Leonard is unable to form memories and must rely on note taking and tattooing his body with important information that may lead to the discovery of his wife's killer. The film's backwards structure is similar to *Irreversible*; however, its plot is complicated even further through the addition of a second plot line told in chronological order. Most of these scenes take place in Leonard's hotel room and alternate with the reverse order scenes.

Memento's unconventional plot line is complex relative to other Hollywood films, and Nolan is careful to make narrative information redundant to counter viewer confusion. The story's redundancy is accomplished through a continual focus on Leonard's amnesia and the repetition of important clues presented in both spoken and written form. According to Bordwell, Nolan also avoids confusion through technical means like separating both plot lines through the use of a traditional color scheme for one line of action and black/white one for the other (*The Way Hollywood Tells It* 78). In addition, the backward plot is held together through "tokens" such as "photos, facial scratches and bruises, a broken car window" and other objects that transform in various ways from one scene to the next. Attending to the change in such objects allows the viewer to orient him or herself within the time line (78). For example, if the car window is no longer broken, then we can assume that the action presented occurred *before* the previous scene. Just like *Irreversible*, Nolan's film follows a classic narrative structure that contains clearly defined cause and effects, and its use of redundant clues along with its ability to distinguish plot lines encourages viewer comprehension.

Compared with *Memento*, however, *Irreversible* contains fewer redundancy cues and "tokens" to help orient the viewer in time, yet is just as comprehensible. This is mainly due to its singular plot line and lack of dramatic twists and turns. There are "turns" in the narrative, but they resemble less the "film-noir twists" of *Memento* where we ultimately find out Leonard may have accidentally killed his wife through a series of insulin injections (*The Way Hollywood Tells It* 79). In addition, Alex does not prove to be *film noir's* "classic treacherous woman" as Natalie does

when she deceives Leonard; and the film's events do not ultimately prove to be Alex's mental projection or dream as in *Memento*. Such intricacies, twists, turns and reveals help suggest *Memento* is a "puzzle film" that calls for multiple viewings and prompts us to ask "what really happened" (79). Noé's film resists this reading through its inclusion of an unambiguous ending and by omitting multiple plot lines. As a reverse narrative, *Irreversible* is more straightforward than *Memento*.

Another reason for *Irreversible*'s relative simplicity with respect to plot may be because Noé seems "less interested in cause and effect than in the form of time itself" (Brottman 38). The relative directness and unimportance of the film's plot when compared to its visual images prompted one blogger to suggest that it could have easily been effective as a silent film and stating, "Although one can hardly imagine *Irréversible* as a silent film, it could very well be one with almost no loss of narrative information or, indeed, propensity to stun, so strong is Noé's command of visual communication" (Bailey).

Several examinations of *Irreversible* have lent considerable insight into the film's themes of time, nihilism, and apocalyptic fate. A review in *Film Quarterly* by Brottman and Sterritt is particularly informative about the film's structural complexity and its connections to Noé's philosophical outlook. Rather than view *Irreversible*'s unique structure, kinetic camera work, and explicit violence as "tricks and gimmicks", the authors believe them to be fundamental to the film's "complex study" of the nature of time itself (38). Brottman and Sterritt see the film's narrative structure as a "bodily" metaphor that begins in the bowels of *The Rectum* works its way through underground passageways (i.e. subway tunnels) towards "the vaginal"

(i.e. Alex and Marcus love-making and her pregnancy) and finally arriving at conception. The film's rapid-fire flickering of black and white frames at its ending may be seen as a "vision of the symbolic uterus, evoking the moment of conception and perhaps the beginning of life itself" (39). To expand upon Brottman and Sterritt's analysis, I would also suggest that the film's narrative structure is not solely derived in a *laterally* fashion. That is, it does not form intricate connections through interweaving plot lines that "branch out" into a complex web of causes and effects. Rather, a good majority of its narrative thrust is *vertically* structured using a redundancy of setting to suggest different interpretations of events.

All three characters are constantly shown ascending and descending stairs, taking elevators down to subway systems, and walking through tunnels throughout their journey into a world of sex, drugs, violence, and murder that culminates at the appropriately named *Rectum*. The character's physical "descent" is mirrored by a moral and intellectual one. Marcus slips more and more into violence and drug abuse when he bypasses the police and accepts the help of some local vigilantes to help track down *Le Tenia*. Pierre constantly worries about Alex and her relationship with Marcus. He consistently refers to Marcus as a "primate," "animal," and "chimp" in an attempt to convince Alex that she is wasting her life with him. At the party, Pierre comments on Alex's new life and her erotic dancing. He asks her, "What're you doing with him? You never danced that way before!" and warns, "you're playing with fire". Noé expresses a similar attitude towards his characters and fellow humans often referring to them in interviews a "mammals" (see Schmerkin and Aftab).

It is clear from many of Pierre's comments that he and Alex's past relationship was much more intellectual than her current one with Marcus. This is further suggested by both men's personalities. Marcus represents uncontrolled animalistic drives. He is bent on vigilante justice, he steals a cab after attacking its driver, he is willing to kill a transgender worker to find *Le Tenia*, and his unrestrained drug use leads to his attempts to sleep with other women. In contrast, Pierre is the composed, rational intellectual who is constantly trying to calm Marcus down or to stop his infidelities. He is referred to as a "philosopher," "historian" and "preacher". Marcus attempts to get Pierre to "loosen up" at the party, and his refusal prompts Marcus to question Pierre's sexuality. The dichotomy of these two characters is ironically reversed at the story's ending when Marcus is almost sodomized and Pierre brutally murders the assailant with a fire extinguisher, smashing his face to a pulp.

This revelation of Pierre's underlying, repressed violence is not unique; however, how we come to understand it is. We are introduced to Pierre through his brutality, and it is later that we learn of his "normal" self. Thus, Noé is attempting to unmask the truth behind a "hypocritical façade of normality," and the film's layered narrative structure serves to metaphorically represent this. All four settings are also strongly connected to sex, which Noé has stated he believes is the "principal drive" for most people (Schmerkin). The act of sex is depicted differently in each of the film's successive settings as is the overall *mise-en-scene*, mood, and camera work. A more in depth analysis of this structure will follow after considering Noé's specific use of time, which is strongly connected to the film's overall structure.

Brottman and Sterritt see Noé's inclusion of J. W. Dunne's book *An Experiment with Time* not merely as an allusion, but a key to the meaning of the film's unorthodox structure. At the film's ending Alex is shown reading Dunne's book as she lounges on the grass of a sprawling park. It is at this point where Noé brings his reversed filmic form to a "close" by ending the film with what would normally be perceived as its opening establishing shot. The "opening" sequence begins with a medium long shot of Alex reading. As the camera moves slowly away from her, it ascends to an extremely long shot of the park, and begins circling her image, ramping with ever-increasing speed to a point of blurring the image.

An Experiment with Time posits that all moments in time are taking place at once, and that human consciousness is limited to experiencing time at a fixed rate only as a consequence of our restrictions of perception and memory. Dunne suggests that time exists in dual states. "Time 1" is that which we experience in everyday life, where past, present, and future as discrete dimensions. "Time 2" contains the past, present, and future at once, each dimension superimposed upon one another (Brottman 39). It is during particular moments of unconsciousness, hypnosis or while dreaming that we are capable of experiencing Time 2. This, for Dunne, accounts for such "temporal aberrations" and experiences such as *déjà vu*. (Dunne 44). Thus it is possible that dreams, which can see into all dimensions of time at once, can actually represent future events to their dreamers. However, our recall of dreams (i.e. Time 2) must be accomplished through our "normal" perception of Time 1. This necessity, according to Dunne, creates an inaccurate perception of dream narratives as being in a "state of flux . . . a series of

disconnected scenes” (Brottman 39). Such a description could easily be applied to *Irreversible*'s overall representation.

Also, Alex directly references Dunne's book during the film when she explains its theme to Marcus and Pierre. She states, “It says the future is already written. It's all there. And the proof lies in premonitory dreams”. The idea of predictive dreaming will unfortunately become true for Alex when she describes to Marcus a dream she had that occurred in a “red tunnel,” which will ultimately prove to be the setting for her rape. Another example of a premonitory sign exists at the end of the film. As Marcus wakes up in bed with Alex, he complains of his arm being numb—the same arm that will eventually be broken at *The Rectum* (Brottman 40). The film also contains more subtle actions, events, and settings that connect up with other moments in the film. Brottman and Sterritt identify several of these including Marcus' playful spitting at Alex's face during their spirited play-fighting. This rather innocuous gesture will be replayed earlier in the film when *Le Tenia* spits into Alex's face after he anally rapes her, a fact that also anticipates Marcus' later joke to Alex: “I want to fuck you in the ass” (40).

Brottman and Sterritt argue that such omens and connections create a narrative experience in *Irreversible* that resembles Dunne's conception of our experience of Time 2 while dreaming. It is as if “Noé is recreating the chronological concatenation of Time 2 as experienced from the perspective of Time 1” (39). The authors' point is not that the film's individual scenes are “disconnected,” but rather that we are experiencing the film's narrative time (past, present, future) simultaneously, with events superimposed upon one another. Thus, we experience

Alex's rape and Marcus' ironic comment in a simultaneous way just as we view his numb *and* broken arm; it is a narrative where "banter, play-fighting, and real violence are all enmeshed with one another; all are continually present" (40).

However, these examples, while certainly indicative of such a reading, are relatively superficial ones when compared to the film's deeper narrative structures. In an attempt to add to and broaden Brottman and Sterrit's analysis, I propose that *Irreversible's* narrative structure further creates a simultaneous experience of events through its four major sequences/settings: 1). *The Rectum*, 2). the subway tunnel (i.e. rape scene), 3) the house party, and 4). Alex and Marcus' apartment. [I have listed these in the reverse order in which they are presented in the film]. Moreover, this quartette of sequences is further divided into complementary binaries with each sequence functioning as a narrative "double" for the other. Therefore, sequence 1 and sequence 3 make up a narrative binary with both sequence 2 and sequence 4 functioning in a similar manner. For example, the BDSM sex party at *The Rectum* functions as the narrative binary for the middle-class, heterosexual sex party that occurs later in the film. Similarly, *Le Tenia's* anal rape of Alex in the subway tunnel is juxtaposed with Marcus and Alex's sexual play at their apartment. While each pair of sequences contain stark contrasts with respect to *mise-en-scene*, mood, and camera work, the actions they contain remain variations on the same theme (sex, drugs, socialization, etc.) Each binary sequence is similar enough to evoke the other's presence within the memory of the viewer through the use of cues such as framing, dialogue, body position, and camera movement or stasis.

Noé introduces the viewer to the interior of *The Rectum* with a dizzying display of kinetic camera work. The frame tilts and spins, turning left and right, moving from low to high angles “simultaneously showing us nothing and showing us everything” (Brottman 38). The camera’s movement seems frantic as it catches brief glimpse of bondage and sadistic acts such as electro-stimulations with cattle prods, the application of hot wax to body parts, sex harnesses and swings. A non-diegetic industrial hum accompanies this scene, further disorienting the viewer. The club’s walls are concrete and steel, illuminated with red lighting. The industrial sound accompanying these images pulsates in a hypnotic fashion, changing from a low to high volume as sounds of screams and moans are heard¹. As Marcus moves further into the club’s interior, he comments that it smells like “shit,” and his anger intensifies as he continues. We follow Marcus and Pierre into what seems like Dante’s *Inferno*, the lower-levels of a deviant, transgressive, and unrestrained underworld of sex and violence.

In contrast, the house party Marcus, Pierre and Alex attend is framed in a much more restrained style. The camera carefully frames individual characters and settings, aiding the viewer’s orientation to time and space with interiors more brightly lit. However, there is a similarity between other important aspects of each sequence. For example, the house party’s dance music contains a low-bass beat, and the camera follows Marcus and Pierre from one room of the house in a similar fashion to *The Rectum* sequence. Additionally, the party house’s rooms are also

¹ Noé himself claimed to have used a low frequency sound (27-hertz tone) throughout much of *Irreversible* in order to produce a nauseating effect upon the viewer (See “Noé”).

filled with groups of people in various sexually suggestive positions such as lying on beds. Also, there are rooms filled with people doing cocaine, kitchens overrun with liquor, and dance floors filled with bodies colliding in erotic movements. The sequence's focus, like its binary, is on Pierre and Marcus. No longer fueled by rage, but cocaine and alcohol, Marcus constantly irritates the philosophy professor with his insistence that he loosen up by having sex and/or doing drugs. In turn, Pierre continually annoys Marcus by lecturing him on drug use and thwarting his sexual advances towards other women. Pierre also serves a similar role in both sequences: as a moral guide and protector who constantly attempts to reason against Marcus' vigilante justice and sexual exploits.

Sequences 2 and 4 also exhibit this same sense of contrast and familiarity. Alex's rape sequence begins with the camera following her from behind down into the subway and eventually coming to rest on the floor looking down the long, empty red tunnel. It is at this point that we recognize Alex's attacker as *Le Tenia* and that Pierre has killed the wrong man. *Le Tenia* anally rapes, kicks and brutally beats Alex unconscious as the camera remains static in the over nine-minute long sequence. The tunnel's concrete floor is strewn with trash and appears dark and grimy, and its walls are unadorned by any art or advertising, all of which gives it a cold, hard, lifeless feeling. Also, Noé uses a relatively long lens allowing the viewer to clearly see action in the distance. At one point we are shown a distant human figure round the tunnel's corner, hesitate, and then walk away. Such depth in framing also helps create a mood of helplessness that underscores Alex's emotional state.

In contrast, sequence 4 shows Marcus and Alex engaging in playful, loving romps inside their apartment. Here we see a couple in a “romantic” relationship as they playfully wrestle naked in their bed. The soft, warm, yellow lighting creates a feeling of comfort and safety, while the bed’s softness is emphasized through Alex and Marcus’ naked bodies lying upon it. They seem sexually satisfied, relaxed and happy. Nevertheless, the scene provides important cues for summoning up images of Alex’s rape. At the sequence’s opening, we see Alex lying on top of Marcus (rather than under *Le Tenia*). The camera remains relatively static keeping both centered in the frame, pulling back slightly to gain a wider view of their naked bodies. Marcus holds Alex down pinning her arms over her head. Her coy displays of half-hearted resistance and exclamations to “Stop, stop, stop” ironically resonate with her cries for help during the rape sequence. Both lovers eventually get up and wander about the apartment, only to have Marcus eventually guide Alex back to the bed, pinning her down once more. However, dramatic irony is only one product of these binary sequences. Ironic or not, what is important for Noé is that each sequence be continually present within the viewer’s experience of the film—that the present, past, and future remain simultaneous and images, both perceived and remembered, are superimposed upon one another within the mind of the viewer. Again, Noé uses framing, dialogue, body position, and camera movements to help cue the viewer’s memory of each sequence’s corresponding “double”.

Another way Noé facilitates the effect of simultaneity is through the static framing of Alex’s lengthy rape scene. The camera’s static framing captures and holds the images of Alex and *Le Tenia*, keeping them continually centered within the

foreground, and both actors remain relatively stationary moving primarily only their arms. The effect is the creation of an extremely static image that is assisted by the solidity of the concrete floor and tunnel walls. It is as if Noé has created a grotesque painting that we must behold for such an inordinate length of time that its image is vividly and permanently printed upon our memories. Audience reactions to the film's 2002 Cannes premier would suggest some viewers chose to avoid Noé's mnemonic manipulation. According to press accounts, the film educed "fainting and a walkout by an estimated 250 of the 2400 audience members" and that viewers were "supposedly nauseated not only by the film's scenes of explicit violence but also by the frenzied, restless camerawork in the long opening shot" (Brottman 37).

Noé's use of long takes as an effective technique for aiding the viewer's vivid recall of previous sequences is supported by current studies in cognitive psychology. Such studies examining the encoding and retrieval of memory provide strong evidence for the argument that visual images are stored in long-term memory (Hunt et al 139). Thus, when recalling an event or scene stored in long-term memory, viewers retrieve the event in its actual visual form as "picture" rather than as words that are then translated into images (141). Also, studies comparing visual versus verbal information have shown a significant level of recall accuracy of images within their test subjects (140). Thus, a film's visual information is much more likely to be accurately and more vividly recalled by a viewer than verbal information, a fact Noé exploits when constructing each binary sequence through both *limiting* the amount of narrative information and *repeating* the amount of visual information.

The elements of the rape sequence previously discussed (i.e. stationary camera, centered framing, restricted character movement, and static imagery) all help limit the amount of narrative information the viewer must process. We are not, as in *The Rectum* sequence, rushing through tunnels and catching glimpses of people and objects in an attempt to try and orient our selves. Such kinetic and varied approaches to *mise-en-scene* would negatively affect the viewer's ability to recall specific events and characters. During Alex's rape, however, Noé significantly limits the amount of narrative information the viewer must process by keeping the image static and visually simple. To also insure viewer recall, Noé repeats this limited information through the nine-minute long take. If we can equate the rape sequence to a static "picture," then it is an image the viewer encounters repeatedly at twenty-four frames per second for nine minutes (12,960 frames). Such profuse amounts of repetition coupled with the sequence's limited information and strong emotional content represents a cinematic mnemonic device *par excellence*.

The viewer's experience of simultaneity within *Irreversible* is a function not only of specific events, but also of the narrative's reverse structure, which engages the viewer's memory in unique ways. Noé states, "You experience things in a linear way, but when you reconstruct them with your mind, they're not linear any more. Your remembrance of your own past is not linear. It's just emotions, and moments, and they're in a chronological disorder" (Brottman 40). We know Pierre, Marcus, and Alex's fate *before* we "meet" them through what would normally be a standard introductory exposition. We come to understand their circumstances *before* understanding them as characters. This reversal is what gives the film's ending a

particularly ironic feeling. In addition, our initial shock at Pierre's brutality and Alex's rape work to ensure our recall of these sequences when confronted with scenes of their "normal" lives by the film's end. The violent content of the film's introduction ensures these emotionally laden sequences and images remain vivid and accessible to the viewer.

The connection between emotion and memory is a well-established principle among cognitive researchers, and specific types of memory, such as "flashbulb memory", are thought to increase the accuracy of visual recall when accompanied by shocking or strongly emotional events (Hunt et al 327). Research into flashbulb memory normally takes the form of interviews concerning tragic historical events such as "Where were you when President Kennedy was assassinated?" Interestingly, because flashbulb memory represents a subject's *personal circumstances* surrounding an event (i.e. where one was, what one was doing, and how one felt), it is possible that more sensitive viewers who walked out of *Irreversible's* premier due to visceral or strongly emotional reactions might be able to easily recall not only the film's particularly violent or disturbing scenes, but where they were and how they felt at the time.

This view of long-term-memory as visual representation supplements similar cognitive approaches such as Bordwell's Constructivist theory that attempts to account for the viewer's construction of film narratives through cognitive processes (see *Narration in the Fiction Film* 29-47). Memory, of course, is an important competency for accurate narrative construction. We must remember important events in order to help form hypotheses and to make plausible inferences. The

viewer's retrieval of visual images has the potential to aid both cognitive strategies by providing a more accurate "picture" of earlier scenes containing crucial information. However, Bordwell's Constructivist approach gives little consideration to the affective features of narrative comprehension, relegating emotional reactions to the "emotional kick" of hypotheses confirmation or to the various emotions "bound up" with expectation and "delayed fulfillment" (*Narration* 39).

Moreover, examination of the function of memory with regard to films such as *Irreversible* can help illuminate aspects of emotional interplay that may exist between what a viewer remembers and what he or she perceives at any given moment in the film. The more romantic sequence between Alex and Marcus is filtered through the memory of her rape. *The Rectum's* socially transgressive scenes exhibit a strong presence within the more socially acceptable party sequences, and Noé's repetition of specific cinematic elements such as dialogue, settings, camera placement, etc. serve to strengthen this overlapping effect. In addition, Noé's reversed structure foregrounds the connections between memory and time while relegating causes and effects to an afterthought. In this sense *Irreversible* is a true "reversal" of narration. Questions as to what caused Alex's rape, what caused Pierre's brutality or Marcus' promiscuity seem circumstantial and fatalistic than a matter of individual choice.

Since, according to Dunne, "real" time (i.e. Time 2) represents the continual presence of past, present, and future, then cause and effect cannot logically exist, leaving the future as unalterable. Moreover, since all events are "enmeshed with one another; all are continually present," then it is only human perception that

“interprets one as distinct from another” (40). Therefore, Noé would say, we interpret Alex’s rape as corrupted, an event of savage brutality that prompts our looking away or walking out of the theater while, in contrast, her playful wrestling with Marcus is seen as “innocent” romance. Their connection stems not from the fact that one necessarily causes the other, but rather that there simply exists a simultaneous connection between them as a variation on a theme (Brottman 40) Within each sequences, sex and violence reign as primary motivators for action. It is only that one is interpreted as “deviant” and the other socially acceptable. Both interpretations are there, says Noé, hidden behind the “hypocritical façade of normality”—a sense of normalcy that is purely a social construct.

Noé’s stark depictions of sex and violence are an attempt to recognize the brutality and lawlessness that exists within the history of humanity and at the core of its mammalian existence. It is the same attitude and philosophy described by Chris Norris as the “chilly bio-determinist existentialism” expressed by such authors and filmmakers as Michel Houellebecq (30). All that is different between *Irreversible’s* representations and those of the “allegedly civilized discourses of modernity,” states Brottman and Sterritt, “is the degree of repression and dissimulation with which rage and revulsion are disguised” (41). Furthermore, that it is society’s concealment of its own hidden truths that becomes a stubborn disavowal of reality resulting in its “cowering within hard, hypocritical shells of numbness and denial” (41). It is this layer of denial that Noé attempts to disrupt by shocking and disorienting the viewer who is accustomed to movies as a “narcotizing

pleasure, not a galvanizing journey into [his or her] own most desperately hidden truths" (41).

Enter the Void

Synopsis: The film's story takes place in current day Tokyo where Oscar, now a twenty something American, is currently living in an apartment. At a young age, Oscar and his younger sister, Linda, were orphaned and eventually separated when their parents were killed in a car accident. Linda now lives in America, but desires to join her brother in Japan. In an effort to raise funds for Linda's plane ticket, Oscar resorts to dealing drugs in nightclubs. Oscar's friend Alex is an artist who introduces him to Bruno, a sketchy drug supplier who eventually supplies Oscar with DMT, a strong psychedelic drug that causes its users to have death-like out-of-body experiences. Bruno eventually becomes Oscar's main supplier. Oscar's friend and client, Victor introduces him to his parents, and his mother, Suzy, who seduces Oscar offering him money for Linda's trip if he sleeps with her. With money from Suzy and his profits from dealing drugs, Oscar is eventually able to afford Linda's trip, and their reunion is an emotional one. They soon reestablish their familial bonds, creating a small home within the numbingly noisy, neon-ridden city.

However, Oscar soon introduces Linda to the darker side of Tokyo bars such as *The Void* and nightclubs like the aptly named *Sex, Money, Power*, a strip club where Linda eventually takes employment as a dancer. In addition, Oscar introduces Linda to LSD, and she soon becomes caught up in a world of sex and drugs. Despite warning Oscar about the dangers of becoming a drug dealer, Alex actively introduces him to even more powerful narcotics while also attempting to start a

relationship with Linda. However, Linda ends up establishing a sexual relationship with her club's floor boss, Mario. Oscar immediately objects to the relationship, Linda's increased drug use, and irresponsible behavior; however, he is powerless to control her given his own reckless behavior. Eventually, Victor discovers his mother and Oscar's betrayal and violently confronts both. As a result, Victor is kicked out of his parent's apartment, and in revenge for Oscar's actions, sets him up in a drug sting operation. Both meet at *The Void* where cops are waiting, but the arrest goes badly, and Oscar is shot and killed. It is at this point that Oscar's "spirit" leaves his body and begins a quest for reincarnation.

It maybe appropriate to start an examining of *Enter the Void* by comparing it to *Irreversible*. Both films contain similar characteristics with respect to plot, character, and visual style. Such a comparison can serve to further described and reinforce elements common to Noé's overall style. For example, both films exhibit similar plot elements such as the existence of a romantic triangle: Alex, Marcus, and Pierre are roughly comparable to Linda, Oscar, Alex. Oscar and Linda never technically have sex; however, he does "enter" the body of Mario while he and Linda are in the act. Also, Oscar and Linda's incestuous relationship is strongly implied in other ways such as their newly formed home after her arrival. Linda quickly takes on the role of housewife, performing the domestic duties. In one scene she is shown standing before the kitchen stove cooking, donning an apron, and sheepishly asking Oscar if he approves of her cooking. Oscar and Linda are also shown as adults laying nude upon separate beds, and the repeated scenes of their affection after Linda's arrival in Tokyo exhibit strong tones of sexuality: her kisses on Oscar's neck and

ears suggest something other than familial love.² Similar to *Irreversible*, Noé also ends *Enter the Void* with scenes of home-like, domestic bliss as well as with Linda (like Alex) taking a pregnancy test, which turns out positive.

Enter the Void also contains strong themes of sex, drug use, violence, and fatalism. During the *Love Hotel* scene, the camera (i.e. Oscar) moves throughout the building's many rooms, watching various couples and groups engaged in sexual acts. Also, there are several scenes involving Linda's erotic dancing and sexual intercourse with Mario at the strip club, *Sex-Money-Power*. Oscar is also shown having sex with a young girl he meets at a club and, in a separate scene, with Victor's mom. During one of the flashback sequences, a young Oscar is also shown experiencing the "primal scene" of his mother and father having sex. Oscar's uncontrolled drug use and addiction resonates strongly with Marcus' erratic and juvenile behavior at the house party scene. The actors (Nathaniel Brown and Vincent Cassel) also bare a striking resemblance to one another.

Enter the Void's violence is less frequent and more subdued, yet just as stark. The automobile accident in which Linda and Oscar's parents die retains just as much realism as Alex's rape or Pierre's attack. The spectator is caught off guard as the camera, placed inside the car, shows a split-second collision with an oncoming semi-truck. The truck's blaring horn is accompanied with the startlingly violent imagery and sound of crunching metal and Linda's screams. This scene occurs twice in the

² In an interview, Noé comments on some viewers' reactions towards Linda and Oscar's relationship: "People have told me the real drama in this movie is that Oscar dies before having sex with his sister. [laughs] So, the first thing he does after dying, he flies to see her and be inside of her" ("Gaspar Noé's Big Trip").

film with little or no warning for the viewer while the images of Oscar's dead parents are as visceral and nauseating as the rendering of Pierre's bloody and disfigured victim. In addition, both scenes include a misunderstanding and/or mistaken identity that leads to the wrongful killing of a character (i.e. Oscar and Pierre's victim).

Just as Alex, Pierre, and Marcus' lives seem doomed to meet the night's tragic ending, so do Enter the Void's characters face a similar sense of fatalism. Oscar, in particular, seems to have little choice in raising money for Linda's trip to Tokyo. He resorts to drug dealing and having sex with his friend Victor's mother in order to raise the funds, and it is drugs and his betrayal of Victor that will eventually lead to his death. Linda's spiral into the world of sex, money, and power is due mainly to Oscar's influence while both characters' lives appear inevitably altered by the traumatic event of their parents' death. The film's flashback sequence brings this sense of fatalism home to the spectator by implying Oscar and Linda's past continues to be a haunting presence within their present lives from their sibling affection to their individual self-destructive actions.

Both films also share strong visual similarities that can be placed within Noé's overall stylistic scheme. As previously mentioned, there are the films' title sequences, both of which are dramatic, colorful and kinetic—expressing Noé's affinity for showmanship and self-promotion. Both also contain fluid, free-floating, and omniscient camera movements in which the spectator can be taken from a wide bird's-eye-view overlooking the action to a closer, more intimate look at specific objects or characters. For example, there are many connections between the *mise-*

en-scene of *Irreversible*'s beginning shot of Marcus and Pierre outside *The Rectum* and the scene outside *The Void* where Oscar's disembodied spirit looks down upon a similar arrangement of ambulances and police cars. Both films also implement the requisite flashing effects often used throughout Noé's *oeuvre*. For example, after Oscar's death, the camera turns to "look" upwards, ascends towards a light bulb residing in the bathroom's ceiling, and "enters" it with the bulb's flashing light filling the frame. The entire screen flickers with an intense white light in an almost exact replication of *Irreversible*'s closing scene described above. Just as Brottman and Sterritt's interpret *Irreversible*'s ending shot as representing a beginning of conception and life, so too can Oscar's death within this scene be read as a transition into his after-life. At other moments, Noé's camera sinks into lamps, sewer drains, stove burners, etc. Thus, the camera's constant rising, falling, and hovering motions are just as evocative of "levels" of time as *Irreversible*'s. This is an important concept given *Enter the Void*'s representation of various levels of Oscar's perception (i.e. visual, mental, emotional, spiritual, etc.) and his simultaneous experience of time (i.e. past, present, and future).

Finally, both films contain and allude to a literary source that supplements their reading. We have already seen how Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* informs our reading of the *Irreversible*'s structure and temporal simultaneity. For *Enter the Void*, this literary supplement is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which is a kind of Buddhist funerary guide for the afterlife that prepares one for the experiences after death up to rebirth or reincarnation. Alex, who loans a copy of the book to Oscar,

explains the book's premise during the film's opening sequence as he and Oscar walk to *The Void*:

After you die, your spirit leaves your body, and your life is reflected in the magic mirror, then you start floating like a ghost. You can see and hear everything around you, but you can't communicate with the living. You see lights of all different colors. These lights are doors that pull you into other planes of existence. Most people actually like this world so much that they don't want to be taken away. That's when the whole thing turns into a bad trip. The only way out is to get reincarnated . . . If you choose reincarnation; you are given a vision of possible future lives. When you choose the life that suits you the best, you enter the womb and become reincarnated.

Alex's explanation is an apt description of Oscar's experience after his death. The camera/Oscar floats freely and transparently passing through walls and above rooftops, among individuals and groups of people, accelerating down alleyways and city streets at rapid speeds, and ascending to heights known only to airliner jets. Oscar's "spirit" can witness the most intimate acts (ex. sexual intercourse, drug use, pregnancy tests, abortions) to the most social (ex. night clubs, busy streets) while maintaining a separation and invisibility to what he sees. In this way, Oscar's POV is a direct reflection of our own experience watching the film. Therefore, the viewer's identification with Oscar's POV moves beyond mere visual perception into a broader, discursive one that elicits such issues as power and voyeurism (i.e. seeing, but unable to be seen).

Cinematic subjectivity and POV are extremely broad topics, and I do not presume that the spectator's identification and experience of *Enter the Void* is merely the result of "formal" devices such as the POV shot or to, as Edward Branigan states, "equating optical (perceptual) POV with the experience of *being that character* (feeling the character's feelings)" (original emphasis, 7). That is I do not wish to equate the viewer's understanding of the film's narrative as manifesting solely through Oscar's "eyes". Such associations are limiting to a critical analysis of a film's overall subjectivity, and has prompted many critics to consider broader forms of POV such as character and authorial attitudes, emotional identification, and linguistic analogies in an "entirely new attempt to define subjectivity" (Branigan 7).

While I intend to argue and assume that everything we witness in the film's narrative is mediated through Oscar's subjectivity, I do not wish to overlook, so to speak, the opportunities the film provides the spectator to empathize with other characters such as Linda and Alex. For example, Linda's vulnerability as a bright-eyed, naïve American woman living in Tokyo certainly solicits our emotional identification with her just as Alex's descent into homelessness and eventual redemption does. Moreover, Noé's own attitudes towards his characters as well as the overt appearance of his cinematic style (i.e. his subjectivity and POV) are also strongly expressed within the film. To a certain extent, the hallmarks of Noé's style, his use of color, long takes, flickering lights, and explicit sex are as identifiable a POV within the film as Oscar's. Multiple subjectivities are evident throughout the film, and the fact that Oscar, after his death, is able to assume the POV of other characters (ex. Mario) creates extremely complex, multi-layered shifts in the spectator's

identification processes. The film presents opportunities for the viewer to simultaneously assume a range of POV's (i.e. viewer, director, narrator, and character), which can extend to visual and/or emotional.

Overall, however, I will focus primarily on the spectator's changing relationship with Oscar's visual and emotional POV throughout, what I will argue, are the film's three distinct "levels" or uses of the subjective POV perspective (i.e. camera-as-character). At times, Oscar's narrating presence is overt, at other times subsumed within the story. To use a Lacanian analogy, Oscar's subjectivity appears as *aphanisis*, as a fading of the subject produced by the signifier (Heath 52). That is, depending on what the spectator sees and how he or she see its, Oscar's presence as mediating consciousness is more or less identifiable. As one might guess, this simultaneity of subjectivities will also correspond and parallel with what I see as Noé's presentation of temporal concurrency similar to that encountered in *Irreversible*. However, whereas *Irreversible* attempts to create the *effect* of temporal synchronization through its reverse narrative structure, *Enter the Void* literally overlaps Oscar's past, present, and future through his out-of-body experience, presenting temporal dimensions to the viewer as ever-present—a fuller filmic manifestation of Dunne's ideas on time.

The film's temporal concurrence is primarily accomplished through the narrative's "out-of-body" conceit and the exclusive use of subjective point-of-view. Narrative shifts in Oscar's interaction with the diegesis (i.e. as human or "spirit") as well as his engagement with his own memory (i.e. flashbacks) are accompanied with corresponding shifts in the viewer's mode of identification with him as well as our

experience of story time. As I have already noted, the viewer's identification with Oscar's subjective POV is strongly indicative of our own experience of watching a film. This alone would ensure some amount of identification with his character however superficial it may seem.

However, the film elicits a much stronger connection with Oscar than merely objective "viewer" or simply as a source for our *visual* perspective. It contains images that, on their own, would express denotative and connotative meanings by virtue of what they represent to the viewer. However, the equating and alignment of Oscar's character with the cinematic apparatus alters how we "see" images *and* how we interpret them. In Lacanian terms, Oscar's implied vision and subjectivity function to limit potential meanings, to "punctuate" the chain of discourse by halting the "slide of the signifiers" (Lapsley and Westlake 76). In another way, Oscar's subjectivity evokes Benveniste's "I," that linguistic placeholder that signals and refers only to the act of discourse (*parole*) itself (Silverman 43-53). By emphasizing the act of narration through Oscar's "I" (eye), even flashback sequences are given an immediacy that functions in unique ways when compared to the past-tense status and "objectivity" of the classical Hollywood's flashback. Before considering these issues further, I want to examine the film's structure with respect to the various ways the viewer engages with Oscar's visual point-of-view.

Subjective POV Sequence

The film's opening sequence takes a subjective POV form similar to that used in Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947) or Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007) in which the character's subjectivity is transmitted through

visual and aural cues (i.e. camera shakiness and movement to indicate character movement, external speech, and internal dialogue to communicate thoughts). In addition, these techniques omit or seriously limit the spectator's ability to identify with Oscar by keeping him "hidden" from our view. However, the technique used in this sequence is heightened with "realistic" touches such as the momentary obscuring of the camera's lens to indicate when Oscar blinks his eyes as well as the imbuing of his internal monologues with echoing effects to distinguish them from his external speech.

Oscar's subjectivity is also enriched through linguistic strategies mainly external and internal dialogue. As he moves about the apartment, we hear him talking with Linda who worries he is becoming a "junkie". After she leaves, we hear Oscar's echoed internal dialogue as he tries to justify his own drug use (while doing drugs) and his denial of becoming a drug dealer. In one of the film's most intense visual displays, we join Oscar as he trips on the hallucinogenic drug DMT. Oscar lies on his bed, the drug pipe extending outwards from the camera as he ignites the DMT. As the drug begins to alter his consciousness, the viewer's identification with Oscar transfers to his *internal* visual POV. The scene confronts the viewer with pulsating multi-colored, kaleidoscopic colors and organic and fractal shapes forming and reforming as Oscar moves forward through the chemically constructed space. At one point during the drug trip, the camera slowly moves away from Oscar's prostrate body, circles above him, and then looks down in an out-of-body perspective, giving the viewer his or her first image of their narrating host. The camera also circles around the round glowing bowl of Oscar's drug pipe introducing

the viewer to a visual motif that will continue throughout the film as table lamps, light bulbs, stove burners, urns, and other similar objects, will serve as portals to other spatial and temporal dimensions. These psychedelic visions are accompanied by a low-toned, pulsating industrial sound whose vibrations rev up and slow down in alternating succession. In addition, these sounds seem “internal” and non-diegetic, existing only in Oscar’s mind; however, they are accompanied by the almost imperceptible voice of Oscar, and seems to emanate from some great distance as if to indicate that his “normal” consciousness faintly exists elsewhere.

This sequence establishes important cues for the viewer’s orientation within the narrative’s diegetic space. We are given a glimpse into how we are to read Oscar’s out-of-body POV and that the camera’s movement “outside” indicates his disembodied consciousness. Therefore, after Oscar is shot and the camera moves upwards, we are already familiar with the conceit and with our positioning within this new POV. This is a critical cue since some viewers might misread the camera’s ascent as simply a long aerial objective shot of Oscar’s dead body, and, more importantly, it is this specific shot that will terminate the initial subjective POV sequence.

Noé has stated his inspiration for the subjective point-of-view technique came from *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947) and *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), films that utilize a similar subjective approach (see “Gaspar Noé-Biography” and “Gaspar Noé’s Big Trip”). Critical consensus is that such extreme attempts at subjectivity (i.e. where the camera is taken as the character) fail to create a truly subjective experience for the viewer. Therefore, Audry Totter’s

uncomfortable kiss into the camera's lens during *Lady in the Lake* or DeGarmot's knock out punch delivered at the camera result in, according to Joy Gould Boyum, "ludicrous" effects or, worse, in a "disorienting" of the viewer (Boyum 88).

Boyum's analysis focuses on the filmic adaptation of novels, especially the attempts to render literary POV's (i.e. first, second, third-person, etc.) into filmic discourse. Boyum believes a third-person limited POV seems more appropriate or "congenial" to a *subjective* cinema because of film's "natural disposition" for objectively presenting objects and events (87-89). Limiting a film's narrative and framing to a single character, to what he or she can know and feel, while maintaining an objective perspective of that character (i.e. actually seeing the character) is, for Gould, the most efficient means of portraying subjectivity. Part of the disorienting effect created by such unorthodox techniques as extensive subjective POV sequences stems from the fact that the "narrator's position in relation to the action is our own" (88). Thus, we are forced to identify with the cinematic apparatus itself. In a film such as *Lady in the Lake*, viewers must align themselves with the narrating character (Philip Marlow), who in this case is represented by the camera—that "mechanical, impersonal observer" (89).³

³ Boyum's point is a valid one; however, even the author eventually concedes that our aversion to such extreme examples of subjective POV may originate simply from their unorthodox nature. The author states, "If we find various cinematic devices strained or more appropriate to literature, it may simply be a matter of habit—of our not being accustomed to their use or of their not yet being part of the accepted stock of cinematic conventions" (91). This is an important point of consideration. There is nothing to suggest that in the future of the cinema such POV's could not become standard techniques nor the viewer's experience of them as commonplace and less problematic ways of understanding the subjectivity of characters.

Astral Shot POV

Noé is able to avoid some of these common issues with subjective POV sequences by limiting the amount of time (i.e. the first twenty-five minutes) the spectator must identify with the camera-as-character in its literal fashion as in *Lady in the Lake*. In addition, the spectator's initial sharing of Oscar's subjective POV changes after his death at *The Void* through a sequence that contains a smooth, over-head crane shot. This second distinct sequence occurs after Oscar is shot and is intended to represent his disembodied spirit floating throughout the city, through walls, and into "portals". Noé refers to these shots as "astral shots, and they signal a shift in our mode of identification with Oscar (Schager). Thus, the hand-held jerkiness of the beginning scenes representing Oscar's movements are replaced with a smooth, arcing motion that attempts to recreate the non-corporality and ethereal nature of Oscar's ghost. Also absent are the external and internal dialogues in addition to the "blinking" effect. The result is something akin to Emerson's "transparent eyeball"—able to see without being seen, omnipotent, and omnipresent.

The removal of such anthropomorphic elements such as internal dialogues within this sequence lessens the spectator's identification with the filmic apparatus, helping to remove some obstacles to identifying with Oscar's subjectivity. However, the viewer is still unable to view any part of his body or face. Nevertheless, the introductory sequence has already helped acclimate the viewer to the new over-head perspective by presenting us with an example of an out-of-body POV.

Ironically, however, the fact that Oscar lacks the ability to speak, to be seen, to be

heard, or to interact with other characters underscores his “cinematic” qualities. That is, his fluid movements, omnipotence, and omnipresence now resemble more the unobtrusive and “invisible” style of mainstream narrative films more familiar to viewers. This familiarity combined with the sequence’s extremely long takes can result, at times, in the spectator overlooking the fact that he or she continues to share Oscar’s POV. These lapses in memory are more likely to occur during Oscar’s long, lingering sweeps above Tokyo near the end of the film when his movements resemble a panning over-head crane shot, a rising establishing shot, or some other more often encountered cinematographic technique. Thus, Oscar’s subjectivity, while ever-present, can grow and fade depending on the viewer’s level of attention and/or upon the specific scene’s content.

However, Noé guards against gaps in our attention by continually reminding us of our embodied POV at crucial moments in the story, making Oscar’s narration as overt as in the prior POV sequence. One of the clearest examples of Oscar’s consistent and overt POV is the scene of Linda dancing at the *Sex-Money-Power* club shortly after her brother’s death. The camera moves through the club’s walls, and we see Linda performing topless onstage as it circles high above her, at times maintaining a significant distance and at others moving closer into a more intimate eye-level shot. The camera rotates around the entire stage, viewing Linda’s body and movements from almost every angle. This style of cinematography is similar to that used in the opening sequences of *Irreversible* as the camera hovers high above Pierre and Marcus outside *The Rectum*. However, *Irreversible*’s bird’s eye view has

not been previously cued as embodied by a human presence, and we interpret the POV as more objectively framed.

In contrast, images of Linda's erotic dancing were previously imbued with the fact that someone is watching her—both Oscar and the spectator. In this respect, such a direct alignment of Oscar's and the spectator's gaze acts to heighten our awareness of our own scopophilia. Linda's body is on full display for the spectator's pleasurable viewing; however, our voyeurism is quickly problematized by our realization of the object's (i.e. Linda's) socially taboo status as Oscar's sister. We may stare *and* cringe in such a context. Furthermore, since much of the story centers on Linda in similar situations, this alternating of viewer reflexivity and scopophilic disruption occurs repeatedly. It should be noted also that the narrative's willingness to look into the more "private" aspects of its character's lives (ex. watching Linda urinate on a pregnancy stick or receiving an abortion), also creates a sense of our viewer intrusion, which would exist even without Oscar's implied presence.

The viewer's knowledge of Oscar's voyeuristic presence, along with the potential awkwardness felt by the spectator given the scene's incestuous mood, serves to alter our interpretation of Linda's dancing. Because the scene creates a socially taboo perspective, some spectator's may choose to identify with Linda due to the dramatic irony created through her ignorance of Oscar's death and her current erotic employment. Although our prior knowledge of Linda's character is limited to the short introductory sequence in Oscar's apartment, it is enough to reveal her love for Oscar, which is illustrated through her concern for his becoming

a “junkie”. Nevertheless, if we choose to identify with Linda’s ironic situation, this choice is based upon the fact that her now deceased brother is watching her.

Likewise, if we choose to note Oscar’s voyeurism and to question its motives (i.e. why does he seem to linger upon his sister’s erotic image?), our identification is also mediated by his presence. The fact of Linda’s ignorance of her brother’s death is as hard to overlook as the fact that we share Oscar’s voyeuristic gaze.

Thus, Noé seems to have constructed a scene where both Oscar and Linda’s POV’s are considered simultaneously. But it is Oscar’s invisible, voyeuristic, and “punctuating” subjectivity that circumscribes the meaning of Linda’s dancing, transforming it from an attractive woman pole dancing to Oscar’s sister erotically dancing while ignorant of his death. Moreover, the viewer is continually reminded of the camera’s “corruption,” bias, and subjectivity—its potential to affect with whom we identify and how we interpret events. It is as if Noé, by continually implying Oscar’s presence, has constructed a previously “loaded” cinematic apparatus capable of “shooting” images with 35-millimeter meanings.

Another way Oscar’s visual and emotional presence is characterized and reiterated is through camera movement and lighting effects that attempt to represent Oscar’s emotional reactions to events. The scene occurring in Linda’s dressing room when she has sex with Mario shortly after Oscar’s death is a good example of this strategy. In addition, it also effectively illustrates how the astral shots lend a great deal of omnipresence and omniscience to Oscar’s narration, simultaneously functioning as a more distant, isolated observer, yet intermittently reminding the spectator of Oscar’s mediating function. Christ Norris notes the astral

shot approach with its “dissociation, isolation, paralysis, and loss” cues the spectator that “this narrative filter will filter very little, letting us feel the unmediated force of Oscar’s experience ourselves” while noting that “none of the actors emote as much as Noé’s camera” (28-30). Norris is responding to a sense of immediacy and directness Noé’s disembodied POV produces through the alignment of character, camera, and spectator.

During Linda and Mario’s foreplay, Linda receives a call on her cellphone, which she immediately silences. The camera/Oscar then abruptly exits the club, moving quickly down an alleyway to find Alex leaving a voice mail for Linda about Oscar’s death. Next, the camera rushes back to the same over-head view of Linda and Mario. As they move towards intercourse, Linda’s cell phone beeps to indicate she has a voicemail. Thus, through the camera’s unrestrained movements, we are given pertinent narrative information. We now know that it is Alex who is calling Linda. These types of narrative moments appear several times throughout the film and act as a form of long-take crosscutting strategy that is able to represent narrative events happening simultaneously.

As the scene continues, the camera again hovers above the action. In response to the phone’s voicemail beep, Mario asks, “So, who was that,” and Linda replies, as she pulls Mario’s penis from his pants, “It doesn’t matter”. In response to this statement, the image begins to slightly vibrate, flicker, and blur. The camera tilts slowly right and left as if to “look away” from the action, retreating to a farther corner of the room, and then forward again as if ambivalent about what it sees. Finally the camera descends “into” Mario’s head, and we are given his (and Oscar’s)

visual POV of Linda's upturned face, which fills the frame. Her eyes are closed and she softly moans. We can also hear a heart beat, presumably Mario's, while the camera moves in and out towards Linda in order to simulate Mario's thrusts. The camera moves "out" of Mario's head as he climaxes and back to an overhead POV. The spectator now shares the visual POV of Linda via Mario via Oscar (and Noé?) simultaneously. Again, the scene's eroticism is complicated by our shift into a virtual incestuous encounter. Some viewers may even see Oscar's actions as so intrusive as to constitute the surreptitious rape of Linda or, in a sense, even Mario. Thus, Oscar's presence has "penetrated" not only our own voyeuristic pleasure, but Mario's visual POV and Linda's body.

As Mario is preparing to leave, the faint sound of Alex's voice is heard combined with the beat of the club's music in a similar way to Oscar's voice during his DMT trip. In the almost subliminal voice-over, Alex is heard repeating a speech he gave Oscar about the dangers of becoming a drug dealer, and it continues as Linda listens to her voicemail. Alex's voice-over serves several functions in this scene. First, it anticipates the voicemail for Linda. Next, it serves as a reminder of Oscar's presence since we assume it to originate from him. Finally, it serves as an voice-over flashback that keeps Oscar's past concurrent with the present.

The scene's uniqueness resides in its ability to suggest Oscar's ambiguity towards Linda's sexuality and her personal safety purely through visual means. We sense both his hesitancy and desire to look through the camera's slow-arching tilts from right to left and its movement from close up to long shot. The image's vibrating blurs can also be interpreted as Oscar's anger, fear, or jealousy towards

Linda's behavior while Oscar's possession of Mario's POV can be seen as a surrendering to curiosity, sexual frustration, love, etc. Oscar's visual emotion culminates in the scene's ending as Linda sobs on her couch. She draws her knees up in a comforting, protective manner, and the images vibration becomes a strong flickering pulse accompanied with the camera's retreat to a far corner of the room. Next, it slowly descends "into" a brightly lit, multi-colored table lamp, reemerging in the past as we see a now toddler-age Linda sitting on a bed, holding a teddy bear, and crying in a similar fashion. This transition acts as a graphic match that connects the two separate Linda's helping to orient the viewer in time.

Flashback Sequence

A similar scene of Linda dancing occurs during the third type of viewer engagement with Oscar's POV—the extended flashback sequence⁴. This sequence corresponds to the "magic mirror" after-life event previously described by Alex during which images of Oscar's past are "reflected" back at him. The flashback, as a whole, is characterized by its montage style and by the constant inclusion of Oscar's body within the diegesis.⁵ The particular scene in question (1:13:21) shows Linda again pole dancing at the club. She is positioned in the background in an over-the-shoulder shot with Oscar's dark silhouette in the foreground dominating the frame.

⁴ To avoid confusion: I define the "sequence" as the entirety of multiple images and time periods representing Oscar's past life while "scenes" are images or events that represent a smaller, more self-contained part of the narrative (ex. The death of Oscar and Linda's parents). I am singling out the flashback "sequence" in order to illustrate how the spectator's engagement with Oscar's POV is distinct from the other two sequences (i.e. the film's initial subjective POV and the astral shots).

⁵ Noé has claimed that the idea for including Oscar's image within these flashback sequences stems from his own experience with memories and dreams. In an interview with Independent Film Channel, he states, "I always see myself like a shadow on the right or left side, but I feel my presence. My dreams aren't constructed like POVs, but that's the way I perceive my own past or my own future or my own dreams" (Schager).

Linda is on the stage, squatting down, her legs widely spread. Her hands are initially positioned near her crotch, but soon slowly spread outward along her legs in a suggestive, invitational manner. The entire scene is shot with a long lens that keeps her body, erotic movements, and Oscar's silhouette in focus. Also, the image is framed in such a way as to suggest Oscar and Linda's *apparent* physical proximity (i.e. she seems to be "sitting" on his shoulder). This is underscored by the *actual* closeness of the actors. Oscar is near enough to the stage for the viewer to assume Linda is aware of his presence.

In addition, the scene elicits stronger emotional reactions to Oscar's voyeurism when compared to the prior astral shot of Linda dancing by allowing the viewer to see Oscar within the frame sitting at the bar. Spectators may initially read the scene as a dream given its similarity to the astral shot (i.e. Oscar simply watches a present event); however, our interpretation is quickly refuted as Marion enters the frame, moves to the middle ground, and obscures our view of Linda. Oscar stops him and expresses his concern for Linda warning, "Look, that's my sister. . . don't touch her, okay". Mario replies, "Don't be a bad brother". Mario's comment parallels the spectator's own ambivalence about identifying with Oscar and creates an irony that resonates with the viewer's attempt to identify with his need to protect Linda by "watching out" for her and his apparent desire to "watch" her.

The spectator's understanding of the scene's out-of-body conceit further complicates our contradictory feelings for identifying with Oscar. Its intricate POV structure creates a type of meta-perspective by positioning us with "Oscar" who is *witnessing himself looking at Linda* [I will use "Oscar" within quotes to indicate the

disembodied narrating consciousness]. Now, the spectator's position with respect to the Oscar-within-the-image is displaced to a greater narrating "distance".

Therefore, Oscar is literally and metaphorically "framed," at the center of this narrating scheme. The spectator now is able to identify with "Oscar" viewing his own past actions.

Thus, to identify with Oscar on an emotional level is to take a provisional POV—one determined in large part by what he is seeing. To fully comprehend the overlapping of POV's that simultaneously exist, the spectator must distinguish between "Oscar's" literal view of himself and any judgments he may or may not make towards his actions. The spectator must share in "Oscar's" own self-examination as voyeur in order to fully identify with him. The previous scene illustrates the vast fluctuations in empathy the spectator feels for Oscar by having his erotic voyeurism (i.e. watching Linda) quickly interrupted by his genuine brotherly concerns (i.e. watching out for Linda). Just as *Irreversible's* theme highlights the simultaneous existence of brutality and civility within humanity, these same aspects of Oscar's character as, "good" and "bad" brother, protector and exploiter seem to simultaneously exist within a single moment. Like Linda's body, Oscar's desires and anxieties are on full display for the spectator's consideration. More importantly, however, Noé has positioned us not as guiltless observers, but as implicated within the same perspective and consciousness that is our source of judgment. The spectator's look into "magic mirror" reveals not only Oscar, but also the spectator.

As previously stated, the film's initial transition into the flashback sequence occurs after Linda hears of Oscar's death, and the graphic match that connects the older sobbing Linda with the younger crying Linda. Such a transition draws the viewer's attention to the two scenes' visual and emotional connections as well as cueing us to the beginning of the temporal shift to the past. Many instances of this same technique occur throughout the film. For example, when Oscar and Suzy's affair begins, we see her sitting topless, astride Oscar whose face is turned away from us. Oscar's mouth moves toward Suzy's breast and lingers there a moment. Next, there is a graphic match cut to an infant Oscar suckling his mother's breast. Another match shot occurs only weeks after Linda's arrival in Tokyo and shows Oscar and Linda sitting in park. Oscar asks her if she remembers their pact to "never leave each other". Linda, childishly putting her thumb in her mouth, states, "Never, ever?" Next, a graphic cut shows both characters as children making their blood pact, cutting their thumbs to show their fidelity.

Again, such graphic matches help cue the viewer to time shifts within the flashback sequences helping to orienting us in space and time. In addition, the matches are strongly suggestive of Oscar's conscious and subconscious mental states. For example, the cut from Suzy's breast to Oscar's breast-feeding has obvious Freudian implications. In fact, the film presents a strong oral theme seen within Alex's admittance that smoking pot reminds him of "sucking on my mother's nipples" to Linda's re-occurring thumb sucking. However, as interesting these issues are, I wish to continue focusing on the viewer's experience of time and how the graphic matches, as well as the entire flashback sequence, help create a sense of

simultaneity and concurrence within the viewer's (and Oscar's) temporal experience.

Noé is also able to avoid the disruptive effect of not seeing the protagonist by including Oscar within most of the flashback sequence with the camera positioned over his shoulder. For example, at one point we see Oscar as a small boy watching a younger Linda sleeping, and in another, his family packing the car or a day at the beach. In both his image takes up a significant part of the foreground. Other scenes include Oscar buying drugs from his dealer, Bruno weeks before his death or talking with Alex in his apartment. Including Oscar's image in the flashback sequence allows the viewer to more fully identify with him by giving us a stable image (albeit viewed from the back) with which to invest our emotional identifications in addition to avoiding such lengthy sequences of other character's addressing and/or interacting with the camera. The entire flashback sequence is approximately forty-minutes long and contains at least ten distinct shifts from Oscar's past to his present life in Tokyo.

To complicate the shifts even further, each time section contains flashbacks and discontinuities *within* themselves. For example, during a scene set in the past, Oscar and Linda are shown at different ages that are not chronologically accurate. The beginning scene begins with images of a young Oscar and infant Linda bathing with their mother. Then it cuts to Oscar swimming with his mother at a much later date. Next, there is a cut to Oscar and a now slightly older Linda bathing again with their mother. Finally, the entire family is shown packing their car for a trip to the beach, and eventually the car crash. Thus, there are flashbacks even within the

flashbacks; however, graphic matches help orient the spectator to temporal shifts by keeping character's in framed in similar ways within each cut. The overall sequence continues with images of Oscar and Linda after their parent's death, jumping back and fourth to their new life in Tokyo.

Although this particular scene contains numerous cutting and intercutting, the narrative information is relatively simple. We understand the circumstances of Oscar and Linda's childhood and the need for their promise to never leave one another. We are shown the effects of life's split-second events and their long-term effects—how our past can reemerge in the present altering our future decisions, how it is continually present. And it is through graphic matches, accelerated cutting, and intercutting that Noé visually represents ever-present, overlapping time. All the while, we are reminded, as we view these starkly contrasting images, wide temporal shifts, disorienting discontinuities, that we are seeing through Oscar's *present* emotional and visual POV as he examines his *past*.

However, such temporal disruptions are also unique in their representations simply because, unlike traditional flashbacks, we are continually reminded that we are viewing the world through Oscar's consciousness. In contrast, *Citizen Kane's* flashbacks are cued and understood in a classically Hollywood fashion. For example, when Thompson finally tracks down Susan Alexander for her story, her flashback is motivated by her own memory and accompanied with a dissolve effect. During the flashback, we encounter her singing at *Xanadu* under the hesitant tutelage of Signor Matiste. Just as in many of Oscar's memories, we also see Susan appear within her own recollection (i.e. in objective third-person). This is in

contrast to a subjective first-person POV, a technique that would have proven to be problematic, if not impossible, to create given that Susan is unconscious at one point after over-dosing on her sedative. While our identification with and empathy for Susan's situation can certainly help elicit her subjectivity within the flashback sequence, it is Kane and his obsession with her "success" that is the focal point, as is the case for the entire film.

Any reactions Susan has towards her memory *during its presentation* are relegated to its introduction and conclusion (i.e. when we see her again in the present tense). In response to Thompson's statement, "You know, all the same, I feel kind of sorry for Mr. Kane," Susan states solemnly, "Don't you think I do?" Consequently, Susan's flashback, while understood as her memory, takes on an objective POV that frames and centers on Kane rather than her self. Although the film cues the viewer through Susan's initial descriptions and the dissolve effect to expect a flashback, the resultant sequence remains objectively presented. While Oscar's POV can certainly be said to also center on other characters, he is always present as witness to the scene, and our responses to images are, in varying degrees, mediated by his subjectivity.

I should pause to clarify what I mean by the "objective" POV of a standard flashback. My intention is not to suggest a true objectivity in the strictest sense nor even argue for the existence of such a viewing position. We do not come to understand Susan Alexander's flashback in a distanced, journalistic or documentary mode, emotionally un-invested in the lives and futures of its characters. It is highly questionable whether such a position is even possible given that all texts, even

documentaries, are “overdetermined and historically situated” (Nichols 186). Rather, the scene’s objectivity comes from the “fading” of Susan’s narrating presence and the return of the omniscient, omnipresent “invisible” narrator of classical Hollywood films. Therefore, objectivity in this sense is a relative, illusionistic “distance” created by the text’s formal devices. I make this distinction in order to contrast Noé’s use of extended POV, which creates interesting and unique subject positions for the viewer by consistently emphasizing Oscar’s narrative presence throughout in the film.

In *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, David Bordwell explains some of the major characteristics of the extended classical Hollywood flashback sequence explaining that they need not “respect the literary conventions of first-person narration” (43). He also acknowledges the contradictory tendency of such temporal devices noting that extended flashbacks:

... usually include material that the remembering character could not have witnessed or known. Character memory is simply a convenient immediate motivation for a shift in chronology; once the shift is accomplished, there are no constant cues to remind us that we are supposedly in someone’s mind. In flashbacks, then, the narrating character executes the same fading movement that the narrator of the entire film does: overt and self-conscious at first, then covert and intermittently apparent” (43).

This is precisely what happens with Susan Alexander's character during the recall of her memories with Kane. After the initial dissolve, the narrative no longer provides cues reminding us that we are in fact witnessing a memory.

In contrast, *Enter the Void's* flashback sequences are heavily imbued with Oscar's subjective presence to the point where the numerous images we see can be attributed to Oscar's own consciousness and unconsciousness. The graphic matches, for example, are suggestive of how his memories are connected. That is, their arrangement is not solely for the narrative purpose of filling in gaps, but, rather, can be seen as manifestations of Oscar's subconscious associations. Thus, sex with an older woman (i.e. Suzy) recalls Oscar's mother and breast-feeding. Images of childhood baths summon up images of swimming, which is associated with the beach, which is connected to the car accident, which is linked to Linda, etc. While some juxtaposed images are causal, many have completely associative qualities such as the memory of burying his parents triggers Oscar's recollection of his experience of the "primal scene". Rather than a word association game normally used to elicit unconscious attitudes, the flashback montage functions as a *visual* game of Oscar's association. Thus, the flashback sequence is not only character motivated, it is character mediated.

Viewed in this way, the majority of *Enter the Void* also closely resembles a classically presented and understood Hollywood narrative—one that relies on character actions and re-actions to haul the causal chain; one that is "potentially omniscient," and by extension omnipresent (*Classical* 29-30). However, the film, like a mystery story, refuses to tell all it knows at once. We are intentionally kept

from knowing all of Oscar, Linda, or Alex's story because the narrative withholds information until crucial moments. Like the classical narrative, it "is unwilling to tell all, but it is willing to go anywhere" (30). In addition, the film's flashbacks are, in one respect, similar to those presented in the classical Hollywood film. That is, they are motivated by character. Oscar's hallucinations and out-of-body death experiences are justified by his drug use, his own death, and his encounters with friends and family.

It is through the film's potentially omniscient and omnipresent narration, the physical manifestation of its protagonist, the character motivated flashbacks, and its predominantly fluid, lucid camera work that allows Noé to avoid many of the subjective pitfalls noted by Boyum and to present the narrative in a more "objective" way. Moreover, Noé's placement of Oscar within the frame of his own recollections creates a slightly altered version of the third-person limited POV Boyum claims to be the most effective filmic narrative stance in eliciting a character's subjectivity—one in which our "privileged glimpses into a character's thoughts, our restriction to his point of view don't also involve the sacrifice of our ability to *see* him" (original emphasis 89).

Authorial POV

Oscar's overt narrative POV also mirrors Noé's strong authorial presence within the film. Stylistic markers such as the bombastic and colorful credit sequence, extremely long takes, fluid and erratic cinematography, flickering effects, and themes of sex, drugs, and violence are all prominent in the film. Such iconic examples of his visual style and liberal attitudes towards representation of taboo

subjects can be witnessed within many of its scenes. For example, both characteristics coalesce within the strip club, *Sex-Money-Power* whose abrupt and candid moniker starkly represents its function and content. In addition, as a place of overt sexuality, economic exchange, and underlying motivations (i.e. power), the club's signage makes no attempts to conceal these functions. That is, there are no attempts to "clean up" its purpose by adopting socially acceptable titles such as "Gentlemen's Club" rendered in darkened letters and set at an "across the tracks" location. Rather, the club's sign sits in the heart of the city; its facade resembling a Las Vegas casino, confidently spelling out in large, multi-colored, and flashing letters its function and content. Noé's signature long take style and fluid, free-roaming over-head camera penetrates its walls revealing its interior scenes, whose explicit sex, exchange of money and power fulfill its unabashed advertisement. The club can be seen as analogous to *Enter the Void* itself whose bombastic and colorful opening credit sequence works in a similar way to advertise promises of visual astonishment and to openly confront the viewer with stark, dazzling, and naked scenes

Inside the club we are confronted further with Noé-esq imagery complete with naked bodies; bright red, green, orange colors; white flashing lights emanate from the hexagon-shaped dance floor; and an pulsing industrial non-diegetic sound overlapping the heavy beat of the club's dance music. The camera's all-encompassing, multi-directional tract orients and describes the larger space while, at times, moving closer to view specific images such as Linda using her mouth to sensually remove a dollar from a male patron's. Noé's authorial POV is strongly evident within many of these visual, aural and thematic elements. Just as

importantly, they align themselves with the camera's position and, by logical extension, with Oscar's POV becoming an imbrication of author, apparatus, and character. This linearity and simultaneity of POV can be extended further if we include the emotional POV of Linda and the viewer at each end of this chain of subjectivities. Branigan identifies these various subjectivities or "levels" of narration within a text:

'Subject' and 'object' are not fixed terms but indicative of a relationship between two elements. A table may be the object of the vision of a character who may be the object of a voice-over narrator who may be the object of attention for a viewer; or stated the other way around, the viewer may be the subject for a voice-over narration which may be the subject of a character who may be the subject who nominally produces (sees) the table. The boundary lines between subject and object, narration and narrative are never absolute . . . The text, then, is a hierarchical series of pairs of (nominal) subjects and objects, in which a subject/object pair may at any time become an object for a higher-level subject (2).

Thus, in my scheme of the club's presentation, the viewer is the subject for Noé's narration, which is exhibited through the director's familiar stylistic elements; Noé is the authorial subject that narrates Oscar's POV, which is the narrating subject of Linda who can either function as object of the gaze or whose emotional POV can be included in the chain. In the case of the latter, Linda would function as subject for any object she engages (ex. taking the dollar from the patron). And, of course, the

camera serves as the consistently implied *visual* POV simply by virtue of its required existence, its “need to be placed *somewhere*” (Chatman 132, original emphasis).

Conclusion

Although Noé’s work as a whole exhibits a great diversity with regards to subjects and themes, it is possible to approximately locate and identify common characteristics that make up his visual style and attitude towards his subjects. The worlds Noé creates are filled with characters whose lives seem fated for the inevitable disasters that await them. From The Butcher’s unspeakable actions to Pierre’s shocking brutality, Noé’s characters seem less a product of society as of their own evolutionary and biological processes, their own dark, psychological turmoil prompting them to act. In a similar way, Oscar and Linda’s lives seem invariably altered by their tragic past that at once brings them together and pushes them apart. It is Oscar’s love for his sister that helps make him a drug dealer, and it is being a drug dealer that will create a rift within their relationship. Oscar’s love for Linda is a complex mixture of sublimated eroticism and protective brotherly affection; however, it is his sexual drives that ultimately win out, helping to push her into drugs and precarious sexual situations.

Moreover, the unrestrained violence within Noé’s stories is a masculine one. Just as *Irreversible*’s Alex becomes a victim to masculine sexual violence, the young, autistic Cynthia in *I Stand Alone* is *The Butcher*’s, sexual victim. In addition, Linda’s “fall” can be attributed directly to Oscar’s irresponsible behavior. Her innocence when arriving in Tokyo is sharply contrasted with her subsequent drug addicted and generally dissipated condition. A focus on masculine aggression and violence

becomes a convenient target for Noé's examination and exposure of humanity's underlying brutality given that males are, worldwide, statistically more prone to resolving disputes through violent actions. However, what is more important for Noé is not the stigmatization of men, but the countering of social institutions that attempt to repress, hide, or overlook humanity's biological and psychological "facts".

Recent issues surrounding the Catholic Church's alleged systematic cover up of pedophile priests and the ensuing controversy about maintaining rules of celibacy would be an example of Noé's institutional targets for critique. Other institutional controversies within American culture such as the Pentagon's nationalistic "support the troops" rhetoric versus the realities of the Abu Ghraib human rights violations or issues of regulation of financial institutions subsequent to the 2008 financial crisis are all examples of what Noé would view as the "truth masked behind a hypocritical façade of normality". However, Noé's films rarely confront these types of institutions directly, holding them up for scrutiny, or including them as part of their narratives. Rather, they are conspicuously omitted. Substituted instead are less socially acceptable institutions such as BDSM bars, strip clubs, house parties, "Love Hotels", and the like as if to serve as cinematic "correctives" to more often represented religious, military, or political institutions. More importantly, Noé's focus remains largely on the psychology of the individual rather than the social institutions from which that individual emerged.

The realization and effect of the simultaneity of time within *Enter the Void* and *Irreversible* are examples of Noé's aesthetic beliefs about the potential for immediacy of art and philosophical notions of our memories and past. In an attempt

to express this, he has reversed the classical narrative to reveal, exploit, and disrupt common ways that viewers construct narratives. If anything constructive can be said of Noé's work, it is that it is primarily visual in nature. By creating such emotionally resonant and visually stimulating images, Noé draws upon the spectator's own visual memory to supplement his stories. Watching *Irreversible* is, in effect, watching an exterior and interior film simultaneously. We are not called upon to remember a piece of narrative information in the form of a linguistic fact (i.e. "this will probably happen"), but in a purely visual one. By overlapping both currently viewed images with remembered ones, Noé engages the spectator in unique ways from classical Hollywood films. The spectator, in a sense, provides the image of Alex's rape at the most appropriately narrative instance (i.e. Alex and Marcus play-fighting). Thus, the viewer is actively constructing not just a story, but also a purely visual one. It is as if the scene were a "double exposure" of images—one constituted by our perception and one provided by our memory—overlapping to create an entirely new image. Therefore, both the past and present appear to exist simultaneously.

With *Enter the Void*, Noé creates a unique combination of POV's that acts in a similar overlapping, ever-present fashion. We share Oscar's visual and emotional POV as well as Noé's own overt visual presence. Through the film's "out-of-body" conceit, Noé has created a subjectivity that is at once "cinematic" in its form (i.e. fluid movements, omniscience, omnipresent, "invisible") and "human" in its "look." Like some form of cinematic cyborg (half character, half filmic apparatus), Oscar's character is both capable of our empathy and understanding while not physically

present. That Noé is able to represent emotional reactions, attitudes, and feelings within such a stripped-down character as “Oscar” further suggests the intense visual nature of his films. Even though we may be correct in assuming that the purely *objective* look of the camera is a myth, Noé’s “Oscar” strongly suggests we may not claim the same status for the purely *subjective* camera. In fact, it is only within the lapses of our own attention and memory, our forgetting Oscar’s mediating look, that we mistake the camera for “objective” in the classical Hollywood sense (i.e. omniscient, omnipresent, and invisible).

Noé’s attempts to affect the viewer’s perception, to disorient our ability to perceive through various multi-colored flickering effects, hypnotic flashes, seizure-inducing strobe lights, or nauseatingly kinetic camera movements represent not only a modernist effort to call attention to the image’s production, but to influence the spectator on a physical level. When these effects are combined with such starkly depicted images of violence and sex, issues of violence within popular culture become more pointed. Controversies surrounding the social effects of violence within the media are again reaching a crescendo due to recent events. And while studies continue to fall short in showing a direct causal connection between playing violent video games, watching violent films or videos and an increase in overall cultural violence, such attempts to physically affect viewers introduces a new variable into the discussion. How do such perceptual “games” as Noé calls them, affect the violent and sexual images that we see? Do they disrupt our identification with characters or our understanding of the image as in “We Fuck Alone?” or do

they serve as impediments to empathy and clear interpretation of violence and its ramifications?

However, Noé's *avant garde* visual effects represent only part of an overall movement within other cinematic institutions such as Hollywood to engage the spectator on such a visceral level. Surround sound systems, increased frame rates of films, improved camera resolution, the heightened "realism" of computer-generated imagery, and recently popularized 3D formats are all appear geared to transforming the theater going experience into a virtual one. However, the popularity of such non-theater consumer options such as at-home film streaming services and the ability to watch films on mobile devices have, so far, limited the impact of such spectacular virtual effects to the theaters themselves. Nevertheless, cinematic technology seems, in the short run, to be moving towards a greater visual realism in cinema, and artists such as Gaspar Noé seem poised to push such technology to its extremes with respect to psychologically and physically impacting the viewer. What the social impact of such an extreme combination of content and form can only be a subject of speculation at this point.

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Additional Works by Gaspar Noé

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(1996) Mano Solo: 'Je n'ai pas' (I Did Not) (music video)

(1998) Bone Fiction: 'Insanely Cheerful' (music video) *Imdb*

(1998) Intoxication (short film)

(1999) Arielle Burgelin: 'Je suis si mince' (I'm so thin) (music video)

(2004) Placebo: 'Protège-Moi' (Protect Me) (music video)

(2004) Contre Le Side (Version hétéro) (commercial)

(2005) Eva 1 (short film)

(2005) Eva 2 (short film)

(2005) Eva 3 (short film)

(2009) Yves Saint Laurent: La Nuit De L'Homme (commercial)

(2012) *SebastiAn: Love in Motion* (music video)