

Clemson University

TigerPrints

All Theses

Theses

5-2023

Pedagogy, Sexual Violence, and Contemporary Extremist Films: Baise-moi (2000), Irréversible (2002), and Promising Young Woman (2020)

Olivia Harris
olharri@g.clemson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harris, Olivia, "Pedagogy, Sexual Violence, and Contemporary Extremist Films: Baise-moi (2000), Irréversible (2002), and Promising Young Woman (2020)" (2023). *All Theses*. 4023.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/4023

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

PEDAGOGY, SEXUAL VIOLENCE, AND
CONTEMPORARY EXTREMIST FILMS: *BAISE-MOI* (2000),
IRRÉVERSIBLE (2002), AND *PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN* (2022)

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Olivia Harris
May 2023

Accepted by:
Dr. Aga Skrodzka, Committee Chair
Dr. Gabriel Hankins
Dr. Kimberly Manganelli

ABSTRACT

Baise-moi (dir. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000), *Irréversible* (dir. Gaspar Noé, 2002), and *Promising Young Woman* (dir. Emerald Fennell, 2020) embody characteristics of the extreme. Working from James Quandt's formative writing in 2004, I define extremism as the purposeful inclusion of transgressive themes and situations. However, each of the selected films portrays the extreme under different production styles, aesthetics, and modes of storytelling. My connections to early exploitation film (a precursor to extremist cinema) demonstrate the genre's important history of teaching and educating. Similar to the original intent of classical exploitation films, which taught spectators about taboo topics or addressed social ills, the films selected for analysis teach viewers about a central concept: sexual violence. Specifically, I argue that the films engage in a form of feminist pedagogy. Each film text produces key feminist lessons about 1) the complexity of traumatic experiences and complex responses to that trauma and 2) our cultural understandings of revenge, retribution, and justice. *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman*'s formal elements never allow spectators to dissolve into moments of pure spectacle. Instead, the formal elements that flesh-out female protagonists (who experience vastly different conflicts, social circumstances, and economic positions) linger over the spectator. Because of what spectators view before and after extremist moments, those extremist images become feminist pedagogical tools. As a result, when spectators finally witness extreme violence it becomes less empty/gratuitous; its purpose changes. Looking at the films in order of release, I investigate how each project responds to its particular moment in history by portraying the spirit of feminist movements during each time of production and distribution. Just as scholarship on extremist cinema has accomplished, my project strives to illuminate the social and political value of extremist cinema. As extremist cinema evolves and the feminist political stance changes, so will cinema's methods for representing and teaching about sexual violence, trauma, and justice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| Title..... | 1 |
| Abstract..... | 2 |
| Table of Contents..... | 3 |
| Defining Extremism..... | 4 |
| Importance of Early Exploitation Films | 6 |
| Varying Degrees of Extreme | 10 |
| The New Exploitation: <i>Baise-moi</i> 's Complex Female Experiences..... | 11 |
| Learning in Reverse: <i>Irréversible</i> and Unraveling Expectations | 19 |
| <i>Promising Young Woman</i> 's Hollywood Rape Revenge | 27 |
| The Future of Extremism and Cinematic Feminist Lessons..... | 32 |

Defining Extremism

Three significant films that foreground women and sexual violence trauma define extremist cinema in the past twenty-two years: *Baise-moi* (dir. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000), *Irréversible* (dir. Gaspar Noé, 2002), and *Promising Young Woman* (dir. Emerald Fennell, 2020). A working definition of “extremism” is essential to my understanding of these three films with varying production styles, budgets, and narrative structures, spanning from 2000 to 2020. Initially, the term extremism in film theory emerged from James Quandt: “Writing in 2004, film programmer and critic James Quandt first coined the term ‘the new French Extremity’ to describe what he saw as a ‘growing vogue for shock tactics’ in the French cinema since the 1990s” (Horeck and Kendall 2). Quandt also associated this movement with the work of specific directors such as François Ozon, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat, Phillipe Grandrieux, Bruno Dumont, and others—all of which he labels as “willfully transgressive” (18). Quandt’s original use of the term suggests a pejorative connotation and even distaste for these directors’ choices:

Images and subjects once provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn—gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore—proliferate in the high-art environs of [French cinema] whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical...” (Quandt 18)

Quandt’s writing signals two anxieties: low-quality, peripheral genres seeping into mainstream French cinema and those genres corrupting the true purpose of cinema. However, critical reception of extremist films changed since Quandt’s original synopsis, which prompted a re-evaluation of spectatorship, imagery and ethics, and the nature of humanity altogether (Horeck and Kendall 4). For Horeck and Kendall, this re-evaluation requires the term “new extremism.” This new extremism “reflects [a] bridging position between newness and indebtedness to the past, to a history of transgression and provocation that is renewed and given a visceral immediacy for the present” (5-6). Kendall and Horeck

reference the tradition of “explicit and graphic physicality” of French cinema in the early 1990s¹ as earlier modes of transgressive film (3). Additionally, I understand Kendall and Horeck’s work on the “newness” of these extreme films through provocative cinema precursors such as *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) and the surrealist *Un Chien Andalou* (dir. Luis Būnel and Salvador Dalí, 1929). Watching and criticizing new extremism continues the tradition of transgressive cinema through formal readings of the films that teach the spectator about sexual violence.² My project follows the path of new critical understanding of extremism presented by Kendall and Horeck by addressing two notorious European films. However, I juxtapose these films with a Hollywood production with surprisingly unorthodox themes.

In several ways, I depart from Quandt’s original notion of extremism. While two of the films I examine are French (*Baise-moi* and *Irréversible*), Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* is a high-budget American film distributed by Focus Features and Universal Pictures. Like others, I contend extremism is not limited to French cinema only. Quandt’s notion that these directors create “willfully transgressive” filmic texts, however, is helpful. *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman* purposefully present transgressive themes and situations (sexual violence, revenge, radical expressions of anger, etc.). Each film presents cinematic elements that are not socially acceptable or politically correct, from unremorseful murder (*Baise-moi*) to orchestrating the rape of a former classmate (*Promising Young Woman*). Transgressive elements add to the appeal of these movies; we watch movies with a need/desire to see that which isn’t mundane or acceptable play out on the screen. Specifically, an evaluation of the three films is needed to demonstrate their feminist lessons about the complexity of traumatic experiences and complex responses to that trauma, and evolving understandings of revenge and justice.

¹ While introducing the term “new extremism,” these authors acknowledge “other scholarly work on this body of films [that] preferred cognate terms, such as a ‘cinema of sensation’ (Beugnet 2007a), a ‘*cinéma du corps*’ (Palmer 2006b), ‘*cinéma brut*’ (Russell 2010) or ‘extreme realism’ (James Williams 2009)” (Kendall and Horeck 3).

² Similarly, Pasolini’s films impart lessons about fascist-occupied Italy, consumerism, and sadism. Būnel and Dalí’s surrealist film, on the other hand, uses an experimental style to depict the complex psyche and uniquely human experiences.

Looking at these films in order of release, I explore how the selected film texts develop from using marked exploitation themes (*Baise-moi*), to subverting of exploitation themes (*Irréversible*), to catering to a widespread audience through a “tasteful” depiction of rape-revenge (*Promising Young Woman*). In other words, the films move from low-quality to high-quality while maintaining a similar goal and educational purpose. All three films embody characteristics of the extreme, which I define as the purposeful inclusion of transgressive themes and situations. However, each of the selected films portrays the extreme under different production styles, aesthetics, and modes of storytelling.³ The inclusion of the extreme links the films, but it also serves as the educational element of each work. Through shocking, disturbing, and unsettling their audience, these films impart a message to spectators—one that we are meant to carry long after the viewing of the film. The use of shock and imagery and their relationship to learning relates to what David R. Cole and Joff P.N. Bradley call a ‘pedagogy of cinema.’ Specifically, I want to evaluate these films as a means of teaching that can be accomplished through filmic image only.

Importance of Early Exploitation Films

I situate my work in the study of extremism, but also in the study of exploitation films as described by Eric Schaefer in *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Film, 1919-1959*. Much like the birth (or first intent) of original exploitation films, which taught spectators about topics such as venereal disease, pregnancy, and anatomy, the three films I’ve selected for analysis teach viewers about a central concept: sexual violence. Schaefer explains that classical exploitation films paralleled the era of classical Hollywood cinema and reflected an era of “significant social change in

³ Similar to Horeck and Kendall’s goal of bringing together extremist films with “a range of aesthetic approaches, themes and concerns, but that does not preclude other ways of categorising these films.” In other words, Horeck and Kendall recognize the complexity in defining or locating extremism/extremist characteristics across a vast array of films.

America" (9). Schaefer continues, "Exploitation films generally followed when discourse on a given issue or problem reached a convulsive state" that fueled the desire for on-screen expression (25).

Likewise, *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman* address the issue of sexual assault during pivotal moments in the development of feminism. In France and the United States, the late 1990s and early 2000s brought the third wave of feminism. Both *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* address the complex identities and experiences of their female victims. In many ways, these two projects also mimic the riot grrrl subculture of third wave feminism through their angry, chaos-fueled plots backed by punk rock/electronic soundtracks. *Promising Young Woman* parallels the fourth wave of feminism (beginning in 2012) that emphasized women's empowerment and used the internet as a tool for activism/research—two concepts the film frequently returns to. Additionally, Schaefer's description of sex hygiene films—one of the earliest genres of classical exploitation films—connects to the films I evaluate:

Education is at the axis of character function in the sex hygiene exploitation film and provides the locus for discourse on social issues under examination. Each character functions to either receive, stifle, or create the need for education about sex and reproductive health." (31)

The characters of *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman* function similarly, except each character educates the viewer on a different aspect of sexual violence. However, sex hygiene films and other early exploitation films circulated taboo information to the public when access to that information was restricted or forbidden. This restriction fueled the need for on-screen education. Today, information on sexual violence can be accessed in various contexts: online articles, social media sites, medical offices, chatrooms, protests, etc. We don't need film to learn about sexual violence; only the medium of film can touch the complex reality of sexual assault cushioned in visual storytelling and that is accessible to all. Similarly, Cole and Bradley acknowledge "cinema as an art form [that is] quite unique, and deals with its subject matter in ways that no other form of art is capable of, particularly as a way of relating to the experience of space and time" (19). Film, in its global distribution and consumption, generates discourse on human experience like no other medium.

Each film not only presents sexual assault, but investigates the consequences and effects of each attack. *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman* do not abandon their central victims and their loved ones after their trauma but follow them as they react strongly, violently—even seemingly irrationally—to the traumatizing events that occurred. The films engage in a form of feminist pedagogy because they provide such realistic reactions to sexual assault. Not ‘realistic’ in the sense that these events could plausibly happen (it’s unlikely that victims will go on a killing spree or revenge streak after being assaulted), but realistic in their heightened emotions. These emotions are not the reactions we see plastered across news pages and media—reactions of victims and their loved ones being grateful that justice was served, their voice was heard, or contained frustration and protesting when they are not believed. Instead, spectators receive the unapologetic and seemingly unreasonable reactions to sexual assault. These reactions, splashed across screens in violent extremist spectacles, make viewers turn away in disgust or intrigue them and invite them to keep looking at the screen. For feminist critics,⁴ these depictions of trauma and revenge reflect our changing cultural reactions to sexual violence. For example, *Baise-moi*’s formal extremism depicts an outrage to sexual violence closely connected to the growing public awareness of sexual misconduct and the lack of options women had for retribution. On the other hand, *Promising Young Woman* presents a different quality/kind of extremism linked to a cultural redefining of revenge. Instead of violent outrage, the film’s female protagonist seeks female solidarity, uses technology in her activism, and gathers evidence to use in a judicial system—similar to our understanding of retribution during the revival of the #MeToo movement.

As mentioned before, we visit the movies to see that which is politically incorrect played out on the screen. Society only presents us with structured, organized responses to sexual assault such as the #MeToo movement. Besides organized responses to sexual assault, victims have few options: joining a movement, seeking counseling, or pursuing legal action. However, the reactions of victims and loved

⁴ Although not explicitly mentioned in my project, my thinking was influenced by scholars such as Linda Williams and Carol Clover.

ones in *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman* are not the same reactions portrayed in the rape-revenge genre—they don't boil down to simply enacting revenge. They expand to encompass seemingly “unhealthy” expressions of anger, disappointment, frustration, and more. For example, *Baise-moi* deals with sexual assault within Nadine and Manu's struggle against poverty, all while they forge a relationship of solace. Likewise, *Irréversible* grapples with intimate friendships and relationships and the issue of listening to women (through candid conversations between the main characters). *Promising Young Woman* intersects sexual violence with Cassie's exasperation with the current legal system, her former college's response to sexual misconduct, and her inability to find other female allies. So, the films present victims of sexual violence as full, fleshed-out, whole beings who experience emotional and social processes. Presenting victims as full beings differs from rape-revenge genre tropes, in which the female victim becomes unhinged and hell-bent towards revenge, depicting her as more of a “psycho” vigilante than a human with complex experiences. *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman*'s ability to flesh-out their characters' experiences only adds to the films' feminist lessons, allowing the viewer to relate to the main characters, rather than be an onlooker of the spectacular revenge committed by a woman who is no longer recognizable. The complexity of female victims' trauma momentarily interrupts extremist cinema's use of the spectacular by changing its purpose. Viewers no longer dissolve into spectacle. Tom Gunning calls this spectacle the “the cinema of attractions.” Gunning describes the “aesthetic of attraction” and its function: “Rather than being an involvement with narrative action or empathy with character psychology, the cinema of attractions solicits a highly conscious awareness of the film image engaging the viewer's curiosity (121).” Gunning continues, “The spectator does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfillment” (121). *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman*'s form never allows us this fulfillment; formal elements that flesh-out female protagonists linger over the spectator. Because of what we view before and after extremist moments, those extremist images become a feminist pedagogical tool. Extremism is cushioned in other formal

choices that teach viewers about the female protagonists of each film, so that when we finally witness extreme violence it becomes less empty or gratuitous; its purpose changes. Spectacle no longer sweeps us away because we view it in a larger context. The surrounding form and structure of the films transform spectacle into sites of feminist education.

Varying Degrees of Extreme

While these films present transgressive themes and situations that can be classified as extremist, they do so under dramatically different aesthetic styles and modes of storytelling. In other words, extremism is enacted differently within different production levels. The quality and type of extremism changes in each subsequent project. This changing presentation of extremism mirrors societal understandings of sexual violence and revenge at the time of production. *Baise-moi* arguably contains the most extreme characteristics of the three films, featuring on-screen unsimulated sex, unapologetic violence and harassment, and harsh language. The film presents these features through a low-quality, grainy filming described by Martine Beugnet as follows: “Though the constantly expanding range of aesthetic potential offered in High-Definition Digital recording has become impressive, it is the ‘dirty’ look of the traditional format that *Baise-moi* exploits” (50). Desportes and Trinh Thi’s intentionally amateurish aesthetic amplifies the grubby events that occur in the film, only adding to its extremist qualities. However, Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* from 2002 takes on a wholly different look and style. Noé’s work can be classified as an arthouse film, competing for the highest award at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. *Irréversible* outweighed *Baise-moi* significantly in budget and production time. The film is sharp and colorful at times. It switches between dizzying circular shots and hand-held recordings of violent beatings and frantic searches for Alex’s rapist. Noé’s style amplifies extremist qualities when needed, and uses a more acceptable “Hollywood” look when presenting the quotidian, such as the main characters’ friendly conversation on a train ride.

Lastly, *Promising Young Woman* from 2020 might not immediately strike anyone as extreme in nature. However, the extremist qualities of this film are wrapped up in a well-produced, glossy Hollywood film. *IMDb*'s website categorizes Fennell's work as drama, crime, and mystery. However, the actual story of the film closely follows the genre of rape-revenge (found in other American films like Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave*, 1978). Fennell's high-budget production is crisp, colorful (even neon), bubbly, and traditionally feminine. Cassie, portrayed by Carey Mulligan, works as a barista in her local coffee shop and we're given bits and pieces of her time in medical school, before she drops out due to the death of her best friend. There are few surprises in the aesthetic style and filming of this movie, appealing to a large demographic. The promotion and exhibition of *Promising Young Woman* received the full Hollywood treatment, with a theatrical release in U.S. theaters and subsequent availability on popular streaming services. Despite the aesthetic and production differences between Fennell's project and *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible*, transgressive formal elements remain. The film depicts men repeatedly attempting to sexually assault Cassie, giving her drugs against her consent, and making crude comments about victims of assault. In the most shocking scenes, Cassie allegedly orchestrates the rape of Madison (Alison Brie) and the daughter of a college dean (played by Connie Britton). While the film's style and choice of A-list actors rarely emphasizes (or draws attention to) the extreme, the extreme is nonetheless present. Extreme themes/images entering the mainstream reflects our collective zeitgeist. First, real horrific images and stories circulate daily and gain visibility on the Internet, lessening our sensitivity to more extreme filmic representations. Our collective sensibilities may also be affected by real-world events; spectators are looking for a new form of escapism—a terrifying one. Viewers need a controlled and familiar setting to ease anxieties cushioned in a medium that surpasses the regular servings of frightening news updates. In short, the extreme caters to a demographic whose daily certainty is newsfeed fear.

The New Exploitation: *Baise-moi*'s Complex Female Experiences

Baise-moi from 2001 embodies some characteristics of classical exploitation film that spanned from the 1920s until the 1960s; the exploitation-like characteristics of the film enhance the extremist themes of the project, but also help portray the leading women as fully-formed beings within a specific social and economic system. The film begins with an exploitation-style format with plot points, dialogues, and movements that are seemingly incoherent on first viewing. Reading *Baise-moi* through the lens of the exploitation film genre allows viewers to identify with the protagonists' experiences and highlights the social relevance of this project in the early 2000s—just as exploitation films reflected ongoing social movements of their time. The first 15 seconds show Nadine (Karen Bach) looking absolutely defeated. She wears smudged eyeliner and a silver-spiked choker necklace and appears to be examining herself in the mirror, “reduced to an almost catatonic state” seen in her facial expression (Franco 6). Only later do we learn that Nadine is a sex worker. The camera remains steady, but the image of Nadine is gritty and unpolished. Nadine’s chest and chin appear splattered with blood. The camera cuts to Nadine in a bar setting, this time without makeup, casually dressed, and relaxed. The same issues found in early exploitation film production—bad lighting, confusing editing, overall lack of skill—are purposefully recreated by Despentès and Trinh Thi (Schaefer 47). These formal choices serve as a foundational starting point for the film’s feminist lessons by providing background information⁵—information that looks unnecessary but allows viewers to understand complex reactions to trauma later in *Baise-moi*. The camera tracks Nadine’s eyes to an unknown couple squabbling over a pool table. The blonde-haired woman asks the man to check-in with a social worker and in return, the man complains about a lack of “benefits” (the film frequently references inadequate government assistance). The squabbling actors remind us of those “exploitation players [who] tended to lack charisma, moved stiffly, and delivered their lines haltingly” (Schaefer 47). More importantly, the opening image of Nadine and

⁵ The film provides background information, but more importantly the film draws spectators’ attention to key background information through exploitation-like formal choices that involve our experience/relationship to the screen.

the arguing couple aren't a major kickoff to the film's plot line: the rage-filled road adventure of Nadine and Manu. Instead, these consciously poorly-filmed sequences and strange dialogue look much like the thrown-together narratives of early exploitation films. These scenes do, however, build context for the film. We learn in the opening image of Nadine that she's overworked and degraded. Connecting this image to the couple arguing over government assistance, we understand Nadine's entrapment in a desolate lower-class system. *Baise-moi* continues in its characteristic low-production value, slow pace to show the intricacies of Nadine's disappointing life, her habits, and her cramped apartment that she shares with another woman. Immediately, *Baise-moi* asks us to sympathize with its main character. Nadine is not a stock character of the rape-revenge genre—the female protagonist who we know very little about before she erupts into spectacular violence⁶—but someone in a grim setting whose circumstances are explored thoroughly. The film's exploitation style appears carelessly put together, but this low-budget method enhances the Parisian street-life atmosphere and ultimately allows us to identify with this female protagonist as a complex human facing socio-economic hardship. Additionally, the exploitation-like setup of *Baise-moi* sets the stage for a sort of working-class feminist revolt because the harsh-looking formal elements enhance the violence/chaos enacted by the women.

The exploitation feel of *Baise-moi* asks us to sympathize with Manu as well, using some of the same confusing images and dialogue. After the title card, Manu stands in the street. From Manu's point of view, we see two men argue about work in a storefront across the street: a young employee in an apron and an older man presumed to be the shop owner. Manu's point of view and relaxed expression suggest a familiarity with the dispute she witnesses. The young man tosses his apron on the ground in frustration. This worker-employer conflict is interrupted when strange men accost Manu and demand to know the whereabouts of a local drug dealer connected to Manu's brother. Just as we become invested

⁶For example, the kind of female protagonist found in Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). This classic rape-revenge film focuses on Jennifer Hills, a young writer who is raped while staying in a cabin alone to work on her first book project. As spectators, we are shown very little about Hills, her personality, family or friends, or her social/economic circumstances. Zarchi's film does little to develop Hills's experiences and instead focuses on the spectacle and catharsis of her revenge.

in this conflict, the camera cuts to full-screen pornography.⁷ The cuts disrupt the film's continuity, constantly confusing the spectator and simultaneously "alerting [us] to the viewing process" as classic exploitation films did (Schaefer 84). Just like the opening scenes of *Nadine*, *Manu* is connected by proximity to seemingly puzzling images and dialogue. The film actually works to connect *Manu*'s street conflict to the disgruntled and underappreciated shop worker, demonstrating everyone's struggle in the grimy Parisian suburbs. In the following scenes, *Manu*'s dialogue emphasizes this struggle when she asks her brother for money and whines, "there's no work in France!" A friend also discusses *Manu*'s involvement in the porn industry as a means to support herself.

In "Gender, Genre and Female Pleasure in the Contemporary Revenge Narrative," Judith Franco claims that the opening scenes of *Baise-moi*, which cross-cut *Nadine* and *Manu*'s lives prior to meeting one another, position women for "heroic status" later on when they begin their road-trip killing spree (8). To Franco, this heroic view of the women "offers the female spectator the narcissistic-sadistic viewing pleasure of identification" with *Manu* and *Nadine* as they rampage across the countryside (7). In this view the women become psychofemmes, defined as "women who counter the violence of men with lunatic rationality" (Franco 1).⁸ Franco's reading of the opening scenes of the film are important for situating *Baise-moi* in a history of rape-revenge films with specific generic conventions. But, the greater impact of these opening scenes is the realistic narrative they build around complex violence and trauma. Again, *Baise-moi* gives us plenty of time to become acquainted with its main women through an exploitation-like format that moves slowly and forces us to piece together images and dialogue.

By developing its main female protagonists more than other films in the rape-revenge genre, *Baise-moi*'s more extremist themes and situations become sites of learning; viewers learn about grief,

⁷Eventually, *Nadine* is revealed as the viewer of this on-screen porn. She enjoys the smut through her living room TV, prompting a comical squabble between *Nadine* and her roommate. This further develops *Nadine*'s sexuality and personal habits, allowing the spectator to know her better.

⁸ Franco borrows the term "psychofemmes" and its full definition from Hilary Radner as follows: "[Radner] diagnoses Hollywood's new generation of 'psychofemmes' –defined in a broad sense as women who counter the violence of men with a lunatic rationality—as symptomatic for a general anxiety about the state of the heterosexual couple in contemporary culture" (1).

victimhood, and sexual violence in a more realistic way. After the viewer learns that Manu and Nadine are trapped in a low position within the French class system, struggling to support themselves and fed-up with their circumstances, *Baise-moi* transitions to its initial horrific scenes: Nadine's best friend is gunned down in the street; Manu and a friend are gang-raped by three men in an abandoned garage; Nadine strangles her roommate after several arguments, and Manu murders her brother. Beugnet describes the backlash to the film's most graphic scenes: "Indeed, by confounding even the patterns of revenge that its rape-revenge premise called for, the explosion of brutality and the presence of graphic sex earned the film accusations of meaningless sensationalism" (49).⁹ I take interest in the assessment that *Baise-moi* "confounds" classic rape-revenge narratives. Typically, rape-revenge films feature a singular woman's sexual assault, the female protagonist planning vengeance while healing from the attack (physical healing takes precedence over mental healing), and enacting revenge in a striking display of violence. *Baise-moi* chooses to center *two* main female characters, Manu and Nadine, and only Manu suffers a brutal sexual assault. However, the film establishes Nadine as a victim of sexual violence in other ways—ways that exploit her body as a commodity.¹⁰ Those scenes disclose a female sex worker's labor conditions and allow for intersectional critique: economic/feminist. Nadine is not a typical Hollywood film hero, but she is a working class hero of sorts.

After the film wades through Nadine's routine sexual discomfort and exploitation, extremist situations arise that become sites of learning about grief and suffering. Prior to meeting Manu, Nadine visits a male friend named Francis (Patrick Eudeline) in a nearby town. Nadine identifies Francis as her best friend. Her roommate mocks, "What do you see in a junkie like him?...He's pathetic, keep him

⁹Quoting from Georges Bataille, Beugnet pushes back against critique of the film as "meaningless" by claiming that "the film's critical edge lies precisely in its celebration of the non-utilitarian value of a chosen course that, in all the unbridled excess of its violence and sexual shamelessness, correspond[ing] to Bataille's description of sovereignty: the enjoyment of 'the present time without having anything else in view but this present time'"(49).

¹⁰For example, Nadine performs sex work in the film's first lengthy sex scene. Despite being a sex scene, the imagery does not evoke desire or eroticism. Nadine looks annoyed, disgusted, and uncomfortable as the bald middle-aged man licks her mouth and caresses her. Medium shots displaying penetration are mixed with close-up shots of the television, which Nadine watches during sex.

away.”¹¹ When Nadine meets Francis, a clear platonic intimacy exists between the two.¹² Moments later Francis walks to a nearby pharmacy and is shot down in the street. In one of *Baise-moi*'s most bizarre montages, Nadine looks out of the hotel window towards the sound of gunshots. A jump-cut brings us to Nadine walking past Francis's lifeless body in slow motion. The camera slows down to capture the entire display: Nadine's horrified, grieving face and Francis laying on the hood of a car in his own blood. Nadine's slow-motion walk is interspersed with slow-motion flashes of Francis's death. Nadine's grieving (and puzzled) gaze paired with these flashes demonstrates Nadine piecing together her own best friend's death. The camera returns to a normal pace and Nadine leaves the scene.

In this brutal cityscape, Nadine is not allowed to grieve. In extremist films, “brutal and visceral images appear designed deliberately to shock or provoke the spectator” (Horeck and Kendall 1) and these scenes are often accused of lacking humanity altogether. While the spectacle of Francis's murder certainly shocks us, this scene is also cushioned by our prior knowledge of Nadine. When the camera slows down and lingers on Nadine's terrified face—a face of someone who is forced to move on from her friend's body without any kind of intimacy or embrace—we feel sympathy because the film fleshed-out Nadine and her struggles. Franco analyzes a similar moment in *Baise-moi* when the camera lingers on Nadine's face (3). When one of the men that Manu and Nadine rob and murder claims he can “read [Nadine] like a book.” Franco writes that Nadine “seemingly lets her guard down. She looks repentant, and promises to let him live” (3). Franco further claims that “within the context of the film, the spectator cannot but feel disappointed at her momentary weakness” (3). Additionally, the viewer is inclined to

¹¹ A distracting and loud jazz soundtrack continues and almost drowns the character's words, as though it were carelessly slapped on top of the film in the editing process. In other words, something seems out of place with *Baise-moi*'s style and generic expectations: “if the film thus seems particularly out of sync with its own set of references—violent but stylized thrillers, rape-revenge films and road movies—it is because it was shot on characteristically low-budget, grainy video” (Beugnet 50).

¹²The camera frames Francis's face up-close and admiringly as Nadine chats and laughs with him. Their conversations and interactions never feel sexual; their bodies remain separated except to pat one another's hands. Further, Nadine's loving gaze of Francis demonstrates her control: “Nadine's female power is signaled by her active, investigating gaze (shown in repeated close-ups of her menacing eyes and point-of-view shots), a cinematic strategy usually reserved for males” (Franco 4). Unlike during her prostitution gigs, Nadine maintains autonomy and control with Francis.

celebrate when Nadine shoots the man in the head anyway (Franco 3). While the man's brutal murder does follow the "inviolable rules of *Baise-moi*'s moral universe," it fails to detach us from sympathizing with Nadine's humanness and her femininity impacted by specific socio-economic and cultural circumstances. Her promise not to kill the man, just like her momentary grief for Francis, breaks her from the psychofemme trope of rape-revenge narratives. In our sympathy for Nadine because of her background, we simultaneously learn about the effects of sexual violence. It seems that a history of sexual violence numbs Nadine and prevents her from showing mercy to the man she kills in the villa. Thus, *Baise-moi* comments on the lasting effects of trauma and its impacts on human emotion. The lesson is this: the women's reckless revenge may not be viable/satisfying in the long-term because it leads to a loss of emotional capacity and self-destruction, as seen at the end of the film when Manu dies and police arrest Nadine. Thus, *Baise-moi* embodies the spirit of third wave punk subculture feminism that prioritized the catharsis in the women's outrageous actions. The feminist social context of 2000 helps us understand the lack of long-term healing or viable systems of retribution to sexual violence within *Baise-moi*.

The same pedagogic effect occurs with the extremist images and situations that surround Manu. A group of three men abduct Manu and a friend, take them to a garage, and rape them. This scene became the most controversial in the film; critics believed that unsimulated sex and a close-up shot of penetration during the rape scene eroticized sexual assault. However, the "absence of depth characteristic of the video image renders the sequence as a whole as untillating as it is bleak and horrifying" (Beugnet 53). Nothing in the rape scene promotes desire, favorableness, or appeal. In an interview, director Virginie Despentes defended *Baise-moi*'s controversial choices: "We did not invent rape. I've been raped and one of my actresses has been raped...it's horrific, so I don't see why I shouldn't treat it that way" (Beugnet 53). Like many critics, I find Manu's reaction to her sexual assault the most jarring and informative. Beugnet summarizes the moments directly after rape:

In comparison with this graphic and repulsive portrayal of absolute violation, the sequence that follows is endowed with an eerie sense of calm. Initially caught in medium shot, the two women

are sitting on the floor of the disused warehouse where they have just been attacked... Yet, Manu explains to her distraught friend, with remarkable self-control, that she does not care: "It's like a car that you park in the projects: it's bound to be broken into, so you don't leave valuable stuff inside. It's the same with my cunt: I cannot keep fuckers from coming in so I don't leave anything precious inside." (53)

Viewers understand Manu's initial stoicism as a complex trauma response that impacts her emotions.

Manu exhibits the same stoicism and strong-willed attitude immediately before the rape, when her brother slaps her across the face for hanging out with a "junkie bitch" from the street. Similar to the rape scene, a bizarre calmness follows the violent event. Manu shrugs it off, leans slowly over the bar counter towards her brother, and smiles. Manu and her brother share familiar chuckles (obviously, this is not the first instance of violence Manu's brother inflicts on her). What's almost missed here is Manu's face immediately following the slap. The camera zooms in on Manu's face as she processes the slap. For a fraction of a second, Manu looks hurt.

Despentes comments that Manu and Nadine are both outlaws and their actions are driven by sensation instead of thought (Beugnet 53). At first, this seems to be true for Manu's cold response to sexual assault; she reacts with pure sensations of unfeeling anger, disgust, and dismissal. Manu maintains a rigid facial expression, gestures aggressively with her hands, and over-enunciates her words as if spitting on the men who just raped her. Often overlooked, however, is the glimpse of Manu's humanity that occurs after the rape. Moments before the camera cuts to the next scene, Manu attempts to comfort her friend in the only way she knows how. She reaches for her friend: "It's just a bit of cock. We're just girls. I'll be okay now." This glimpse of feeling and thoughtfulness mimics Manu's first contemplative reaction to her brother's slap. Manu also kisses her brother's body after she murders him. The camera frames their faces intimately as Manu takes a moment of reflection. Although Franco perceives Manu as "the wildest one" who leads the chaos, the film exposes Manu's vulnerability and humanity in glimpses (4). So, the film interpolates viewers and asks them to relate to Manu through formal choices that highlight facial expressions or moments of hesitation during trauma. Manu may act out spectator fantasies, but she breaks sociopathic tendencies to reveal her victimhood (Franco 4). While

Manu and Nadine never hesitate to pull the trigger, they also show us complexity not afforded to other women in the rape-revenge genre. Even in moments of extremist violence, spectators remain aware of formal elements of the film that present Manu and Nadine as empathetic.

Learning in Reverse: *Irréversible* and Unraveling Expectations

Viewing *Irréversible* means encountering some of the same production styles and techniques that *Baise-moi* employed to enhance the exploitation/low-brow feel of the film, which in turn affects what we learn from this sexual assault narrative. However, the budget of *Irréversible* was significantly higher.¹³ James Quandt recognized the director, Gaspar Noé, for contributing to the French extremist movement. The film's semi-polished aesthetic meshes with unclean camera work. Jerome Schaefer comments on the "mélange" of the film: "the visual sophistication of art cinema meets the brute, profoundly fatalist force of a rape and revenge story...shot with a camera that seems so 'unchained' at times" that dream sequences seem tame in comparison (88). After the title card, the camera flickers on and off in front of a solid brick wall. This movement mimics someone awakening from unconsciousness—forecasting Alex's wounded state after the sexual assault. *Irréversible*'s opening shots depict a dizzying, spiraling descent into the dimly-lit streets outside a grimy apartment building. No sound occurs.¹⁴ The camera, seemingly suspended in air, swirls and spins slowly. Immediately, *Irréversible* helps viewers understand complex reactions to trauma by simulating emotional ups and downs. The opening scenes implicitly argue that dark or difficult circumstances are not met with clean/linear resolutions or straightforward emotional processing after sexual violence occurs. The shots include close-ups of a building with flickering street lights and blue police lights bouncing off its matte

¹³ *Irréversible* had a budget of 4.6 million EUR to *Baise-Moi*'s 1.39 million EUR.

¹⁴ However, the film does use an unsettling undercurrent of sound, described by film theorist Tim Palmer in the following words: "Most strikingly, *Irréversible* uses, for sixty minutes of its running time, a barely perceptible but aggravating bass rumble that was recorded for Noé's purposes at 27 hertz, the frequency used by riot police to quell mobs by inducing unease and, after prolonged exposure, physical nausea" ("Style and Sensation" 29).

surface. The camera sways past a painting of a raised fist on the side of the apartment building. The fist stands out against its red canvas background; it might be the first symbol of revenge in the film and helps set the tone for feminist understandings of justice in the story, which include a group of people advocating and seeking retribution on behalf of an assault survivor.

The camera plunges into a nearby apartment, which overlooks a gay nightclub (The Rectum). In the apartment, two half-dressed men lament their past mistakes, time lost that they can never regain, and discuss the strength it takes to recover from difficult situations. Again, the conversation mimics those taken place after instances of sexual assault. While bizarre in its display, the beginning of the film functions in two ways. Like *Baise-moi*'s seemingly unimportant images and dialogues, Noé's confusing images establish a very specific social and economic setting for the victim of sexual assault. The story takes place on the busy streets of Paris and centers the "middle-class" couple Alex and Marcus (as Pierre teases). The film's form, which inspires confusion and terror, also imparts implicit lessons about human nature, suffering, revenge, and justice. Cole and Bradley's analysis of *Suspria* (Dir. Dario Argento, 1977) becomes insightful for Noé's rape and revenge narrative: "The film effervescently leaps from the flat space screen, and one could say forms an enveloping, abstract, and 'feeling-sensing image-scape'" (20). They go on, "The unconscious is consequently opened up and directed by the film, we are left wondering what exactly we have witnessed, and where we have been taken to (and whether we can get back from there)" (Cole and Bradley 20). According to Cole and Bradley, this style promotes a deep philosophical *affect* with the viewer (18). Instead of learning through linear narratives and straightforward images, both *Suspria* and *Irréversible* impart messages through other methods. Cole and Bradley's work acknowledges the complicated learning process that takes place during moments of horror, which the opening of *Irréversible* can rightly be labeled. The film is disorienting and extremist in style; it also builds a pedagogy of trauma from its onset.

Irréversible breaks with classic rape-revenge in numerous ways; it begins fleshing out Alex as a fully-formed, autonomous being just as *Baise-moi* did with its portrayal of female protagonists. While

Baise-moi accomplishes its goal of creating in-depth experiences before erupting into extremist themes, Despentès and Trinh Thi devote a majority of screen-time to Manu and Nadine's violent antics. Alex, on the other hand, is permitted to disconnect wholly from violence for most of the film's 1 hour 34 minute run time. Alex is a victim of sexual assault, but she also takes on other complex identities: friend, girlfriend, ex-lover, someone who likes to dance, someone who listens to music while she showers, a newly-pregnant woman, etc. Alex first appears emerging from the building of the house party she attends with Marcus and Pierre. Her slick ponytail bobs up and down; she wears a backless satin dress and heels. Alex looks for a taxi cab on the Parisian streets. A woman leaning against a streetlamp advises Alex to take the underpass because "it's safer." Alex looks thankful and the camera trails her to the underpass where she's eventually raped. What's important here is the camaraderie built in the small moment of woman-to-woman contact. Spectators, especially female spectators, are invited to identify with Alex by recognizing a moment of female solidarity that is most likely familiar to any woman who has walked alone at night. From this moment on, *Irréversible*'s form works to highlight Alex's positive relationships with other women. The film's reverse chronological order brings us to the party Alex was just attending. The camera follows Alex upstairs at the party. Electronic music bounces in the background. The setting is splashed with warm pinkish red tones as Alex encounters her pregnant friend upstairs. As they greet one another, iridescent light dances across Alex's face. In these moments, Noé eschews all nauseating camera work. Calmness takes over. This lighthearted scene juxtaposed with Alex's brutal assault creates more empathy for this female protagonist—even invoking grief from spectators for a version of Alex that can no longer exist. *Irréversible*'s main impact, and main departure from the rape-revenge genre, is not in its reversal of who takes revenge (Pierre and Marcus), but in acknowledging that victims of sexual assault do not exist in a vacuum. Phrases like "she was someone's daughter/mother/sister" circulate in the news when victims of assault come forward, but Noé's reverse chronological storytelling encapsulates the empathy evoked by the image of assault and then builds on that image. We don't *need* to flesh out Alex's life in order to feel bad for her (the rape scene already

elicits outrage and sympathy for Alex) but the film's form presents a nuance to victims that isn't usually afforded and allows viewers to relate to them more.

Immediately following Alex's assault Noé presents a fetishistic view of Alex that objectifies her. In actuality, this scene works as a critique on society's view of sexual assault victims. This fetishistic look is the first time we glimpse Alex's face after her assault, which heightens the scene's importance in the film's narrative. In other words, it's our first impression of Alex as a person—our first chance to see her disconnected from the violence she will experience after the party. The idea of fetishistic looking comes from film theorist Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey evaluates classic Hollywood through its imagery, or the "erotic ways of looking and spectacle" it creates (58). Mulvey emphasizes the image of the woman, who is the main subject of visual pleasure experienced by the audience. Simply put, we go to the movies to derive erotic pleasure through looking called scopophilia; no look at the screen can be an innocent one (Mulvey 60). After the sexual assault, the reverse chronology of the film tracks us to the house party where the camera follows Pierre and Marcus. Marcus drinks and uses cocaine while Pierre begs him to stop his antics. Eventually, the camera follows Pierre to the house's patio where Alex dances sensually between two other women. We are sutured into Pierre's point of view; we look over his shoulder as he observes the dancing women. Alex turns and twists between the other women, holding onto her satin dress. She is centered between the women and the camera zooms in on Alex's face. At this moment, Alex embodies the "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" Mulvey describes: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (62). Alex's dress is made of shiny skin-colored satin and molds her breasts perfectly, making her appear naked and emphasizing her as an object to look upon.

The camera circles Alex in a close-up to show every angle of her face and body. Alex's thin dress straps meet at her neck and the long satin strings flow down her back, guiding the spectator's eyes towards her backside and legs. According to Mulvey, close-ups fragment and objectify the woman's

body as she becomes the “direct recipient” of spectators’ looks (65). Alex continues dancing and *Irréversible*’s plot line stops completely. Mulvey explains this as a characteristic of fetishistic looking: “[the woman’s] visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in erotic contemplation” (63). Despite its objectifying view of Alex, this scene becomes a social critique because *Irréversible* unfolds in reverse chronological order. After viewing Alex’s rape, spectators are relieved to see Alex enjoying her night unharmed. She is not a woman who puts herself in danger by dressing scandalously (the question “what was she wearing?” usually circulates after a woman is attacked).¹⁵ Instead, this fetishistic view gives us an opportunity to see Alex adoringly and lovingly, even if she is simultaneously objectified through a masculine spectator position. Roger Ebert summarizes the reason why these scenes work to portray Alex positively:

We know by the time we see Alex at the party, and earlier in bed, that she is not simply a sex object or a romantic partner, but a fierce woman who fights the rapist for every second of the rape. Who uses every tactic at her command to stop him. Who loses but does not surrender. It makes her sweetness and warmth much richer when we realize what darker weathers she harbors. This woman is not simply a sensuous being, as women so often simply are in the movies, but a fighter with a fierce survival instinct.

Mulvey wrote about the male gaze in order to critique the image of woman in classic Hollywood films, but Noé successfully employs the same kind of gaze in his arthouse film to depict a positive portrayal of sexual assault victims.

Irréversible backtracks to an elevator in the Paris subway system where Alex, Marcus, and Pierre travel to the house party. This is the only scene that depicts all three main characters in a relaxed state before Marcus and Pierre begin their revenge-fueled trajectory toward Alex’s assailant. So, these images become important for understanding Marcus and Pierre’s complex response to their loved one’s trauma. The camera moves upward to focus on a hallway light at the house party, before spinning and

¹⁵ Here, I’d like to acknowledge another one of Roger Ebert’s notes from his review that borders on this sentiment/question about women’s clothing: “The party scenes, and the revealing dress, are seen in hindsight as a risk that should not have been taken. Instead of making Alex look sexy and attractive, they make her look vulnerable and in danger. While it is true that a woman should be able to dress as she pleases, it is not always wise.”

‘rewinding’ the spectator into the elevator. The camera work constantly reminds spectators of the act of watching a movie, allowing for a more critical and distanced viewing. In the elevator and the subway, the men always stand on either side of Alex. Visually they form a protective barrier around Alex; they press their bodies against hers and wrap their arms around her as she walks. Alex wears a buttoned cardigan over her satin dress which covers and desexualizes her figure. The white tiled subway walls form a clean, pristine, almost innocent space around Alex and the men—as opposed to the red tunnel where Alex is assaulted. Pierre begins a light-hearted but persistent dialogue about Alex’s sexual preferences. The dialogue continues in the subway train, where Marcus wraps his arm around Alex’s neck and Pierre places his hand on Alex’s thigh. As the men take over the conversation about Alex’s sexual preferences, she seems distracted and contemplative. She looks down at the subway train floor while Marcus and Alex crack jokes about female orgasms. These scenes, in which the men form a protective (perhaps intrusive) barrier around Alex, reflects their active role in Alex’s trauma narrative. Alex falls silent in the subway, just as she remains silent throughout Marcus and Pierre’s revenge rampage¹⁶ Further, this scene informs the extremist images and storytelling used as Marcus verbally and physically abuses sex workers and a cab driver while looking for the rapist; both parts of the story portray an overwrought masculinity. Alex never asks or explicitly consents to the men’s vengeance on her behalf. *Irréversible* does depict male-female solidarity with sexual assault victims and the complexities of the men’s reactions to trauma. However, like *Baise-moi*, these cultural understandings of sexual violence and agency during revenge become outdated from a modern perspective that prioritizes female solidarity and listening to victims.

Lastly, I read *Irréversible*’s ending that incorporates extremist themes with a straightforward pedagogic message written on screen. Both of these elements heighten the educational aspect of the film—enlightening us about the realities of sexual assault and commenting on the nature of trauma

¹⁶ Several times, Pierre interrupts the men’s exasperated journey through the Parisian streets to question whether or not they should be seeking revenge on behalf of Alex. The men continue their violent trek without Alex’s consent.

altogether. At the end of the film Alex and Marcus enjoy time in their apartment. They relax naked in bed, joke with each other, and smoke cigarettes. While the plot's most extreme moments have passed, another is yet to come. When Marcus leaves the apartment Alex takes a pregnancy test. The camera never reveals the results, but Alex smiles at the test and hovers her hand over her stomach. In the moment Alex's pregnancy is revealed, a moment that should be happy, spectators cringe. We now carry the knowledge that Alex is pregnant during her rape. We remember her brutal beating and her body lifted into an ambulance by stretcher, newly pregnant. While the pregnancy test scene does not employ visual shock tactics, Noé's extremist film does use "techniques that heighten the sensory and affective involvement of audiences, foregrounding the question of spectatorial response in a way that 'unites the intellectual and the visceral'" (Horeck and Kendall 3). Just moments before this, Alex lays in bed and tells Marcus about a dream she had: "It was weird. I was in a tunnel. A tunnel. All red. And then, the tunnel broke in two." So, Alex foreshadows her eventual assault in the pedestrian underpass outside of the house party (an all-red tunnel that gives the setting a hellish nightmare feel). Spectators are never allowed to forget about Alex's eventual rape, although its visual representation has already passed. This juxtaposition of warm, tender-hearted scenes with the lingering fear of rape makes *Irréversible* all the more nauseating. It also evokes further sympathy for victims of sexual assault. *Irréversible* establishes Alex as a desiring being by portraying her involved in complex relationships. Then, the film heightens this view by making us lament Alex's vulnerability (enhanced by her pregnancy) while she is assaulted.

After the pregnancy test scene and the end of the film, which spirals back into its initial chaos,¹⁷ a message flashes onto the screen: LE TEMPS DÉTRUIT TOUT. This is the same message spoken by one of the men in the apartment during the film's spiraling opening scene: "Time destroys everything." Taken literally, this message shows how Alex's sexual assault is left behind or forgotten by the film's

¹⁷ *Irréversible* concludes with a spiraling and nauseating aerial shot of a sprinkler on a lawn. Ultra-saturated and vibrant colors fill the screen: green grass, an orange picnic blanket, Alex's floral patterned dress, children in bright swimsuits, etc. The camera slowly surveys the happy scene below before succumbing to the spiral of the sprinkler and mimicking its movement. This movement indicates some sort of time warp, reversal, or even the threat of getting caught in fast-paced chronological time.

reverse chronological order. For victims of trauma, however, this message gleans something about the healing process. It acknowledges the fragility of human life and the closeness of traumatic moments. This message also speaks directly to the spectator: the passage of time might lead to something terrible for viewers as well; our own traumatic event may lurk right around the corner. As stated earlier, Noé's arthouse film is more polished than *Baise-Moi* but still uses techniques that revert back to exploitation themes and messages. The message at the end *Irréversible* and the unfolding of events is reminiscent of the use of the square-up in early exploitation films. Schaefer describes square-ups as a statement addressing a social ill or widespread problem that the film wanted to combat (69). As a common generic function of exploitation films, the square-up also guided viewer expectations and lamented the fact that such an evil—whatever evil the film wished to address—existed at all. Noé's square-up, which comes at the beginning and end of the film, is more metaphorical and open to interpretation. However, it still “points to the [same] tension between education and titillation” that existed within exploitation movies.¹⁸ The message that frames *Irréversible*'s entire plot lingers over spectators after viewing, which impedes extremist images of rape, physical assault, and visceral chaos. “Time destroys everything,” Noé's last formal installment, keeps us invested in the drama of the film and the drama of real life, rather than dissolving into spectacle.

***Promising Young Woman*'s Hollywood Rape Revenge**

Promising Young Woman opens in a busy nightclub. Spectators are overwhelmed by flashing blue, pink, and yellow lights. The camera surveys an all-male group dancing, drinks in hand. The

¹⁸ Schaefer also comments on the prevalence of square-ups in different film industries: “The use of square-ups in mainstream movies was an exception, whereas in exploitation cinema it was the rule” (72). The look and function of square-ups may have changed over time, but remain relevant to Noé's film. The use of an eerie, philosophical message works to separate Noé's film from the mainstream and into the arthouse, experimental, niche category with which we associate him. Schaefer confirms the square-up's impact on form: “[Square-ups] also indicated that the basis in real events would have a stylistic impact as well, resulting in films that lacked the gloss associated with Hollywood picture making, substituting instead a grittier style found in newsreels and documentaries” (72).

camera zooms in closely on their dancing bodies, using slow motion at times. Most of the men wear suits and ties. The camera fragments their bodies one by one in a series of close-ups: a man thrusts his crotch while holding his beer, another playfully slaps his own backside, one man licks his lips above his plastic straw, another shakes his hair wildly, and the next man's stomach hangs out of his button-down shirt. Immediately, a kind of female gaze is employed. This feminized spectator position is emphasized by non-diegetic music. Charlie XCX's pop song "Boys" repeats the same line: "I was busy thinkin' bout boys! Boys! Boys! I was busy thinkin' bout boys!" Suddenly, the camera zooms out and the music fades away. This sudden zoom out reveals a very normal, boring scene of men socializing at the nightclub. *Promising Young Woman* employs form to make a joke about the consumption of male bodies, thus commenting on the typical presentation of female bodies in Hollywood films. Just as *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* do, the proceeding conversation between three male coworkers establishes the important social context of this film: 2020 and the era of #MeToo. The men discuss (or really, they lament) the inappropriate behavior they can no longer perform in the workplace. When they see Cassie pretending to be drunk, their conversation takes a dark turn:

Paul (Sam Richardson): *"You know they put themselves in danger, girls like that. If she's not careful, someone's gonna take advantage. Especially the kind of guys in this club... I mean, that is just asking for it. You know, like, you'd think you'd learn by that age, right? Where even are her friends? Just kind of ran off somewhere?"*

These conversations mirror real situations that were brought to light during the #MeToo movement, as women revealed the various forms of abuse and sexual harassment they faced in the workplace.

Eventually, *Promising Young Woman* invokes the rape-revenge genre when Cassie walks down the street after confronting the man who attempted to rape her. The camera zooms in on thick blood dripping down Cassie's arm and white shirt. The blood suggests a violent struggle. At this moment, Cassie becomes part of the "growing number of films [that] have constructed female characters as agents of violence, as they seek either justice or revenge" (Franco 1). The camera zooms out to show

Cassie eating a hotdog dripping ketchup. *Promising Young Woman* meshes a specific social climate, rape-revenge characteristics, and comedy to build its feminist educational foundations.

Many of *Promising Young Woman*'s most extreme moments serve to disturb viewers while also highlighting Cassie's many disappointments during her journey to seek justice for Nina. For example, Cassie cannot seem to find female allies. At times, she is so isolated that it seems she is the only person concerned with Nina's assault. Cassie asks Madison, a former med school classmate, to meet her for lunch. Before Madison arrives, Cassie orders plenty of alcohol for the table but switches her own drink for a non-alcoholic soda. The camera often excludes Cassie's face from the frame, even when she greets Madison. During the lunch, as Madison gets drunk, the camera lingers on the back of Cassie's head. Therefore, Cassie becomes a faceless threat. The camera zooms in to observe Madison slowly become incapacitated as she swallows glasses of champagne and wine. The all-pink table decor suggests a feminine warmth between the two women, but the coldness of each shot reveals otherwise. All background music ceases, all characters wear sterile-looking white clothes, and the restaurant seems empty despite other patrons. Cassie and Madison's lunch is filmed mostly in medium shot, with the women always on the edge of the screen. The lunch meeting mimics a tense negotiation scene in a drama or thriller, despite being a friendly meetup between two old friends.

Just as spectators perceive the scene's menacing tone, Madison reveals her feelings about Nina's assault: "Maybe if you have a reputation for sleeping around, then maybe people aren't going to believe you when you say that something's happened." Cassie replies sharply, "For your sake, I was hoping you'd feel differently by now." Then, Cassie gets up from the table and seemingly pays a man at the bar to sexually assault Madison. Although the next scenes of supposed rape are not shown, spectators feel dread. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* Julia Kristeva describes human reactions to horror which she calls abjection—a breakdown between subject (self) and object (other). Kristeva describes perversion's relationship to the abject: "The abject is related to perversion. The sense of abjection that I experience is anchored in the superego. The abject is perverse because it neither gives

up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (15). Cassie’s actions signal the abject through multiple perversions. As the best friend of a sexual assault victim, Cassie’s revenge against her classmate becomes a shocking moral perversion or distortion of natural law. Cassie’s negotiated rape of Madison is also a crime, and therefore a perversion of law and justice. Spectators also recognize and value Madison’s ‘innocence,’ in the sense that she has never experienced rape and will soon be a victim. This loss of innocence becomes so important to spectators that it evokes abject horror—even the threat of rape is almost as jarring as the spectacle of rape (a spectacle that *Promising Young Woman* never includes). In the context of a large Hollywood production released in theaters to a wide demographic, Cassie’s planned assault becomes all the more jarring. In addition to its shock, the scene also reveals Cassie’s utter outrage for another woman’s blatant disregard for female suffering. The scene presents extremist situations, but ultimately roots itself in realistic emotions that friends/families of sexual assault victims feel when lacking adequate support.

Promising Young Woman includes many scenes that flesh-out Cassie as a whole autonomous being and not a psychofemme, but few reveal her inner turmoil as a victim due to her empathetic identification with Nina. When Madison reappears in the film, she brings a video of Nina’s assault on an old cell phone. While the video of Nina plays, the camera focuses on Cassie’s face. The audio from the video is disturbing enough; a group of male friends laugh and watch while Nina is assaulted during a party. Kristeva’s idea of abjection is revived again here. In viewing the video of Nina, who has passed away, Cassie comes into contact with the bizarre materiality of her friend’s life. Kristeva claims that a corpse is the utmost form of abjection and “it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance” (4). Although Cassie does not view a corpse, she watches a violent depiction of Nina who no longer exists and who Cassie frequently revisits through happy childhood photos—as seen throughout the first half of the film. The muddled status of Nina, hovering between warm photographic memories and this violent depiction of rape, becomes a site of utmost abjection.

Cassie's horrified reaction worsens when she hears her own boyfriend in the video, revealing that he was a bystander during Nina's rape. The abjection Cassie feels is due to the violent destruction of a fond object in her life (her loving relationship) through a video from years ago. The discrepancy between past and present is uncanny. Kristeva describes the same breakdown between current self and object, causing the complex feeling of abjection: "[the object is] a something that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me" (2). Kristeva's next description also fits Cassie's emotional reaction: "On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (2). Fennel's careful attention and dedication to emotional response in this scene breaks Cassie out of her robotic cycle of revenge and humanizes her for viewers. This scene simultaneously alerts spectators to the viewing process; we watch Cassie watch a video. Spectators cannot be absorbed into spectacle, but are forced to remember the narrative reality of assault, trauma, and revenge.

Promising Young Woman presents Cassie's various methods of revenge through formal extremist moments that operate differently than the extremism within *Baise-moi* or *Irréversible*. As stated earlier, the quality and kind of extremism change depending on current social understandings of revenge and sexual violence. *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* operate through a kind of nauseating, chaos-filled, and spectacularly violent revenge linked to the third wave of feminism while Fennel's project creates nuanced understandings of traumatic experience and retribution. *Promising Young Woman* even seems to pay homage to the classical rape revenge genre when Cassie has an altercation with a man on the road. After exposing her former college dean for negligence in dealing with sexual assault allegations, Cassie stops her car in the road in exhaustion. A man pulls up in a truck and verbally accosts Cassie. The muffled sound of the man ("Look at me, you stupid cunt!") overlaps his blurred image in the background. The camera focuses on Cassie's stoic facial expression. A crescendo of triumphant-sounding classical music builds as Cassie steps out of her vehicle calmly. She retrieves a tire iron and swiftly bashes the man's truck windows and rear-view mirror. Cassie remains silent throughout

her attack. Afterwards, Cassie stands in the road. Her body shakes and she seems to ‘snap out of it’ when she touches her face and stumbles back into her car. This brief moment of violence, cushioned in extremist elements like a bizarre soundtrack and Cassie’s silence, is the only scene where Cassie appears to lose control. Fennel’s incorporation of Cassie becoming physically unhinged signals a return to classical rape revenge that is no longer pedagogic to a modern audience. Cassie’s tire iron destruction is temporarily gratifying, but not viable for seeking long-term justice or modifying the man’s behavior (Cassie’s other revenge tactics seem motivated by modifying unacceptable behavior).

Instead, Cassie’s revenge that uses the Internet/technology as a tool, confronts the corrupt justice system, and redefines ‘vendetta’ through the planting of evidence serves as *PYW*’s feminist pedagogy. When Cassie is killed by Nina’s attacker at the end of the movie, the message is initially regressive in redefining revenge (viewers are disappointed with the protagonist’s death). However, Cassie goes to great lengths to carefully document her location, leave her keys/car for the police to find, and prepare scheduled text messages for Ryan (Bo Burham), all of which get Nina’s attacker sent to prison. Cassie’s pre-planning demonstrates that she is not driven by a singular victimhood; she seeks justice for Nina and other victims of sexual assault. The film’s polished Hollywood ending eschews all extremist form. “Angel of the Morning” plays as the camera focuses on Ryan’s last text message from Cassie in hot pink lettering: “Love, Nina and Cassie.” While the upbeat ending demonstrates a move away from extreme form, the film never moves away from extreme content. As in real-life, we deal with extreme content such as sexual violence, death (like Nina’s suicide), and traumatic experience continually. But as our conceptions of revenge change during the post-MeToo era, so will our extremist depictions of that revenge.

The Future of Extremism and Cinematic Feminist Lessons

Altogether, *Baise-moi* (2000), *Irréversible* (2002), and *Promising Young Woman* (2020) produce key feminist lessons about 1) the complexity of traumatic experiences and complex responses to that trauma and 2) our cultural understandings of revenge, retribution, and justice. Of course, the feminist lessons imparted from these films and spectator reactions to those lessons differ between economic and social classes. For example, upper middle-class Americans receive something different from *Baise-moi* than the response of a working-class figure or sex worker. This variability only emphasizes the complexity and accessibility of the filmic medium. While not the scope of my project, I envision a future study framed within spectatorship theory that could trace cinema's potential for trauma processing or trauma therapy. While the formal and structural presentation of the texts portray feminist lessons, I do not want to suggest that the films are reducible to only feminist takeaways/insights. Crucially, these films interpolate spectators into the experience or processing of trauma and allow viewers to work through or play out solutions to sexual assault through the screen apparatus. Our viewing relationship—whether sadistic, masochistic, adoring, and so on—determines our particular experience with the films. Each film text in this project involves our breaking down as subjects to confront the most difficult parts of sexual trauma. However, I prioritize a consideration of the history of exploitation cinema, extremism's constantly changing genre, and formal readings, along with the evolution of feminist thought or a political feminist stance. Each film responds to its particular moment in history by portraying the spirit of feminist movements during each time of production and distribution. Aspects of the films I prioritize, listed above, work to produce a kind of communion with female protagonists, their frustrations, circumstances, and complex reactions to trauma.

On some level, my thesis is about representation. I became interested in how *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible*, and *Promising Young Woman* build a space that represents society's grappling with sexual violence in a new way. In resorting to extremism and through intriguing formal moments that cushion extremist spectacle, each film showcases cinema's capacity to represent something traumatic that often avoids representation altogether. On a more basic level, through formal elements and through content

and character development, each film represents female sexual assault victims in ways that teach the audience about the difficulty in healing, finding justice, expressing anger, etc. Extremist images become a feminist pedagogical tool when they are mediated by formal choices that teach viewers about fleshed-out female characters who experience vastly different conflicts, social circumstances, and economic positions. As stated earlier, I define extremism by the purposeful inclusion of transgressive themes and situations. Responses to extremist films with sexual violence content include a widespread and scathing public rejection of graphic images that are said to gratuitously re-enact trauma, exploit women's bodies, and even gratify perverse spectatorship. Just as scholarship on extremist cinema has accomplished, I hope that my project can continue to illuminate the social and political value of extremist cinema. Specifically, my connections to early exploitation film (a precursor to extremist cinema) demonstrate the genre's important history of teaching and educating. This educational function remains. Extremist films are always pedagogical; viewers are always asked to get something out of extremist films. Additionally, my contribution to the field includes a unique pairing of two European films and one highly-polished Hollywood production into one category, which shows an important evolution in extremist cinema (in this case, extremist cinema that draws on rape-revenge characteristics). My investigation of *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* led to new understandings of *Promising Young Woman*'s use of extremist themes in a film previously categorized only as thriller/crime. In fact, *Promising Young Woman*'s realistic feminist lessons might reveal a coming shift in the genre through its use of unexpected rom-com sequences with a gut-wrenching twist, while *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* connect to a much older model of the genre. As extremist cinema evolves and the feminist political stance changes, so will our methods for representing and teaching about sexual violence, trauma, and justice.

Works Cited

Baise-moi. Directed by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, performances by Raffaëla Anderson and Karen Bach, Pan-Européenne Distribution, 2000.

Beugnet, Martine. "Pornocracies: *Romance, À ma sœur, Baise-moi*." *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 47-59. *ProQuest EBook Central*,
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/clemson/detail.action?docID=334884>.

David R. Cole, and Joff P.N. Bradley. *A Pedagogy of Cinema*. Brill, 2016. EBSCOhost, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.clemson.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1288360>.

Ebert, Roger. "Baise Moi." *RogerEbert.com*, 13 July 2001, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/baise-moi-2001>.

Ebert, Roger. "Irreversible." *RogerEbert.com*, 14 March 2003, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/irreversible-2003>.

Franco, Judith. "Gender, Genre and Female Pleasure in the Contemporary Revenge Narrative: *Baise-moi* and *What it Feels Like For a Girl*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200490262415>.

Grønstad, Asbjørn. "On the Unwatchable." *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, pp. 130-141.

Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator." *A Cinema of Attractions*, pp. 114-133.

Horeck, Tanya and Tina Kendall. "Introduction: What is the New Extremism?" *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, pp. 1-17.

Irréversible. Directed by Gaspar Noé, performances by Monica Bellucci, Vincent Cassel, and Albert Dupontel, Mars Distribution, 2002.

Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection." *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 1-31.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminist Film Theory*, edited by Sue Thornham, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 58-69. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/clemson/detail.action?docID=6141753>.

Palmer, Tim. "Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body." *Journal of Film & Video*, vol. 58, no. 3, Fall 2006, p. 22-32. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=brb&AN=505187586.

Promising Young Woman. Directed by Emerald Fennell, performances by Carey Mulligan, Bo Burnham, and Alison Brie, Focus Features and Universal Pictures, 2020. "Promising Young Woman." *IMDb.com*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9620292/>.

Quandt, James. "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema." *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, Edinburgh University Press, 2011, pp. 18-25.

Schaefer, Eric. "'A Hodge-Podge of Cuttings and Splicings': The Mode of Production and the Style of Classical Exploitation Films." *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 42-95.

Schaefer, Eric. "An Attempt to 'Commercialize Vice': Origins of the Exploitation Film." *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 17-41.

Schaefer, Eric. Introduction: "As Long as it was in Bad Taste!" *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 1-16.

Schaefer, Eric. ““You Gotta Tell ‘Em to Sell ‘Em’: Distribution, Advertising, and Exhibition of Exploitation Films.” *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 96-135.

Schaefer, Jerome P. “*Irréversible* and the New French Extremity.” *An Edgy Realism: Film Theoretical Encounters with Dogma 95, New French Extremity, and the Shaky-Cam Horror Film*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 87-110. *ProQuest EBook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/clemson/detail.action?docID=4534672>.

Tallerico, Brian. “Promising Young Woman.” *RogerEbert.com*, 15 Jan. 2021, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/promising-young-woman-2020>.