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Tim Palmer, *Irreversible*. New York: Palgrave, 2015. xxiv + 164 pp. Figures, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-2303-3697-1.

Review by Greg Hainge, University of Queensland.

As is perhaps fitting for a review of a book that talks about a film that begins at the end, let me start by saying that Tim Palmer's new volume, which sets out to analyze and provide a very complete contextual *mise-en-scène* of Gaspar Noé's controversial 2002 film *Irreversible*, is a very good book indeed. It is important to say this so that some of what follows is not seen so much as a direct criticism of this book as a commentary on the academic enterprise which can oftentimes lend itself to a type of analysis that seeks to find connections between disparate things. While there is of course nothing inherently wrong with this in and of itself, this kind of critical methodology, produced with the benefit of hindsight, can produce a greater sense of homogeneity across disparate texts than might be possible when one is immersed in the present moment, engaging texts in their own time. And while we shall not dwell on this here, it is nonetheless interesting to reflect on how this very problematic is in fact the very same problematic that arises out of the film analyzed by Palmer itself that demands, due to its mode of organization and content, to be reread after the fact.

Like the film that it analyzes, Palmer's book is rigorously divided into a series of sections, the first of which is a blow-by-blow account of the main segments of the film. He then goes on to talk of the film's relationship to what he terms the French film ecosystem, highlighting the ways in which specificities of film school funding arrangements and French government policies rendered possible the very existence of a film such as *Irreversible*. The following section talks of *Irreversible* in relation to the group of films that Palmer has previously turned his attention to in a book entitled *Brutal Intimacy*,^[1] a collection of films that Palmer and others group together under the umbrella term *cinéma du corps*. Subsequent sections talk about Noé's previous work, give in-depth insights into the genesis and design of *Irreversible*, talk about the film's exquisitely cast trio of main actors, pointing out how important an appreciation of this is for a full understanding of the film, while another section provides an overview of the critical reception of the film in France, the UK, and North America. A final section undertakes an in-depth analysis of what is undoubtedly the elephant in the room of the film, namely its extended long-take rape scene.

Throughout the book, Palmer contends that "controversy is inherent to understanding Noé's work" (and it should be noted that the book is published in a series entitled "Controversies"). What his book is so good at forcefully arguing, however, is that there is much more to Noé's film than mere controversy. Indeed, he shows in a number of different ways how meticulously crafted the film is, how every aspect of it is carefully planned, chosen, and choreographed, how the director is always in full control of his work, and how the film is resolutely not the chaotic ramblings of some kind of brash maverick *enfant terrible*, all show and no substance.

Palmer calls his book an “analytical biography of *Irreversible*” (p. 4), which is a very fitting description because, while there is a significant amount of analysis, the book is primarily concerned with understanding the film through contextualization by understanding all of its various lineages. The family tree presented in the book does not only look back across the ancestral lineage of the film, however, but also, with the benefit of hindsight of course, argues that the film is the progenitor of many things to come after it in the French cultural landscape and beyond. As can be the case in many of the analyses of the film that we are presented with here and that refer us back to the numbered segmentation of the film at the start of the book, a breakdown of sequences that follows a reverse chronology because of the way the film is constructed, this multi-temporal contextualization can be, at times, a little confusing as we try to work out what comes before or after what. Given that *Irreversible* snaps time’s arrow into shards and rearranges them, this might be a deliberate, metatextual nod to the film, but the unfortunate effect of this methodology is in fact to give more of a sense of a continuum across time than is warranted when dealing with such a singular cinematic event.

To my mind a similar problem on a different scale exists in relation to the very category of the *cinéma du corps* that Palmer analyzed comprehensively in his previous work (2011) and that appears here in a condensed, redux version. Indeed, when presented as an abridged overview, the pitfalls of a categorization such as this become all the more evident, namely, that it seems to place a very broad range of films in too tight a lineage, to find the kind of commonality that one would normally associate with a “movement” or specific school of filmmaking across a selection of films that would often, if studied in isolation, be characterized as much by difference as by similarity. In other words, in grouping these films together under the umbrella term “*cinéma du corps*” (of which *Irreversible* is considered to be one of the most accomplished examples), we run the risk of analyzing them according to the precepts of this movement (that is not one) rather than on their own terms.

As I started off by saying, however, rather than a specific complaint levelled against this book alone, what I am pushing back against here is what we might term (in my own intertextual nod) a certain tendency in film criticism—or perhaps academic criticism more broadly—that seeks to elucidate through the uncovering of patterns and recurrent tropes, to construct its own position out of the identification of similarity from perceived difference. Even though Palmer brilliantly and convincingly argues that Noé’s own films constitute different points in one single continuum, that “his films are but one film, an expanding canvas” (p. 60), whether this same claim can really be made in relation to *Irreversible*’s broader context is less certain because what becomes apparent when watching the film again is just how far it stood apart from what came before it and how powerful it remains because of this singularity in spite of the number of pale imitations that followed in its wake.

I say “when watching the film again” very deliberately here, because in spite of these slight reservations about some aspects of the book, the best thing about Palmer’s work is that it makes us want to see the film again, not only in order to put some of his analyses to the test or to experience again some of the film’s extraordinary stylistic pyrotechnics (rendered here in a suitably—and impressively—precise and elaborate prose) but, rather, to be discombobulated by it once more, forced “to regroup and rethink, at some conclusive moment to try to lick [our] wounds,” as Palmer says (p. 139). While this book is then a classic example of the kind of film analysis talked of by Raymond Bellour that is constantly frustrated in its attempts to reach an “unattainable text” that itself remains “perpetually out of reach”—an analysis that employs stills and textual description in a desire “frantically to compete with the objects it is attempting to understand”[2]—what it enables us to see is that, when dealing with a film such as *Irreversible*, the filmic text always remains unattainable, inexhaustible, always frustrates our desire for closure. In an important way, then, Palmer’s book comes much closer to the actual operations of the film than Bellour’s text would lead us to believe is even possible for the work of criticism. To put this another way, this is a book that extends the logic of *Irreversible*, which is itself an irreversible logic, a logic that only ever takes us in one direction, never circling back to close the hermeneutic circle, but only ever deeper into the text and its considerable challenges. This, then, is not a book for anyone who

has not yet seen *Irreversible*, but it is essential reading for anyone who has seen the film, regardless of which of the two opposed camps your reaction to the film placed you in, as long as you are prepared to endure it once more.

NOTES

[1] Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

[2] Raymond Bellour, "The Unattainable Text," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 19-27, p. 26.

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