FROM NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY TO THE SUBVERSION OF SCREEN VIOLENCE: AESTHETICS AND DISCOURSE IN GASPAR NOÉ'S I STAND ALONE

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1903, the Luna Park amusement park on Coney Island in New York City served as the setting for the slaughter of Topsy the elephant, who was electrocuted in front of an audience that included the film crew that immortalised the event. The spectacle of Electrocuting an Elephant (Edison, 1903) is thus not the product of a simulation or trick photography, but a document of a real death resulting from an act of extreme violence. When the animal collapses and falls partially out of the camera's field of vision, the camera operator corrects the angle to capture the full view of her lifeless bulk lying on the makeshift platform. This simple camera movement reveals that although contemporary cinema is often criticised for its fascination with violence, such fascination is in fact a trait that can be traced all the way back to the origins of the medium.

With the consolidation of the dominant model of narrative integration, the referential violence that characterised the cinema of attractions. would be transformed into a staged form, domesticated for its assimilation into the story. Since then, film production has been marked by a constant tension between exhibition and censorship, monetised by commercial studios and distributors seeking to exploit the scopic lust of spectators who have become increasingly accustomed to screen violence. As a result, the question that conditioned classical cinema's relationship with censorship, i.e., the question of how much was allowed to be shown, would be replaced with its correlate: how much the spectator was prepared to watch. This inversion of the question marked the end of the classical style, which had been defined by a "poetics of substitution" (Prince, 2003) where the violent act was kept off-screen or only depicted in muted form. In its place emerged a new, explicit and provocative violence, dignified commercially

by *auteurs* like Peckinpah, Kubrick and Scorsese, which ultimately consolidated the hypervisibility of violence present in the diversity of styles that characterise cinema today.

Much like the depiction of sex, the spectrum of violence in cinema has expanded exponentially since the limits of what could be shown on screen effectively dissolved. This is the context in which we find I Stand Alone (Seul contre tous, 1998), Gaspar Noé's first feature film and a precursor to a production that would have a major international impact, Irreversible (2002), particularly due to the brutal rape scene involving its female protagonist, Monica Bellucci. The latter film would subsequently result in Noé's inclusion in the heterogeneous list of filmmakers of the "New French Extremity" as defined by James Quandt (2004): "New French Extremity [...] a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement."

The hyperrealism involving the body and its fluids, combined with the transgression of all manner of ethical and moral boundaries, effectively links Noé's films to this extremist trend, which includes representatives of the most visceral horror and gore, such as Alexandre Aja, Alexandre Bustillo, Julien Maury, Xavier Gens and Pascal Laugier, along with other filmmakers who, while not included in the group, share a similar interest in exploring the limits of what can be depicted on screen, such as Bruno Dumont (*La vie de Jesus*, 1997), Virginie Despentes (*Baise-moi*, 2000), Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*, 2001), and Noé himself, with *I Stand Alone* and *Irreversible*.

Far from attempting to simplify Noé's oeuvre based on the possibility of his inclusion in this vague movement, this article explores his role in the European contribution to the revitalisation of what could be described as "cinemas of violence", referring to filmmaking that positions violence at

the very heart of its discourse. More specifically, the films of Gaspar Noé are identified here with an established trend in cinema that has historically been concerned with taking a metadiscursive approach to violence, whose depiction is never an end but a means of questioning the act of representation itself and the relationship created with the spectator, who is a necessary accomplice in the process. To this end, it is necessary to return to what could be described as the true foundation of the creative approach that underpins his filmmaking, *I Stand Alone*, a prime example of the filmmaker's subversive deconstruction of the traditional cinematic spectacle enshrined in the binary of sex and violence

GASPAR NOÉ AND THE CINEMAS OF VIOLENCE

The concept of violence is a matter of constant debate, and a precise definition of it is extremely problematic for various reasons that range from linguistic and cultural differences to the diversity of fields in which it is studied (Garrido Lora, 2004: 17-25). This article assumes violence to be an intrinsic element of Noé's filmmaking, and given the complex ramifications of this assumption, a theoretical framework is needed to help contextualise the concept of film violence, as well as how it is used in the director's films.

Although film violence could be simplistically described as the display or depiction on screen of acts involving some type of aggression, whether physical, verbal or psychological, the particular characteristics of its treatment in different eras, genres, and filmmaking styles complicate the definition considerably. From this perspective, and with the aim of furnishing an analytical tool that can ensure a more systematic approach, Stephen Prince proposes the concept of "stylistic amplitude" (2003: 35), defined in each film by the correlation between what, how and how much: what action is shown to the spectator; how it is for-

mally represented; and equally importantly, its duration on screen. With this approach, a spectrum can be established with films that make use of minimal or moderate violence at one end. and those in which death, torture and other aggressions are depicted explicitly over an extended period of time at the other. Thus, based on the terminology originally proposed by Prince and further developed by Lauro Zavala (2012: 3-4), Gaspar Noé's I Stand Alone would be placed at the maximum end of the spectrum, particularly extreme for a film that does not belong to the gore or trash genre, given that it depicts explicit situations that go beyond any strictly narrative function and transgress the limits of the representable, to such an extent that ethical questions will probably overshadow purely cinematic considerations.

In contrast, classical cinema established limits on violence with storylines that justified the situations in which it was depicted. The appropriate context was thus to be found in genres such as the war film, the Western or the crime thriller, whose narratives (Mongin, 1999: 28; Orellana, 2007: 94) offered a pretext for the violence, establishing the opposing forces and the particular battlefield on which they would meet. It was a dialectic of action-reaction, of hero-villain confrontation, the defence against a threat that would ultimately result in the restoration of the natural order. The positive function of violence thus depended on the differentiation between the agents responsible for it in the story, and particularly on their motivations, which were decisive in the spectator's determination of the extent to which the violence would be tolerated: "All too often, the most violent actions seem to be justified by the factors that provoke them. And thus, many good guys, people with altruistic motives acting for the good of humanity, tend to be more violent than the most violent bad guy. Their fight for peace, justice, the common good, etc., seems to justify their heinous acts" (Sanmartín, 2005: 21).

It is important to note that the storyline for I Stand Alone is a direct continuation of the plot to Carne (Noé, 1991), a short film that depicts the events that lead to the desperate situation that its protagonist, the Butcher (Phillipe Nahon), finds himself in: his wife's abandonment of him, his solitary life with his autistic teenage daughter, his belief that his daughter was sexually assaulted and the revenge he takes on the supposed perpetrator, his time in prison as a result, and finally, his time in exile, far from his Parisian banlieue. with no job or sense of purpose. These events are described in the third person during the film's opening sequence in the character's own voice, while we are shown photographs of the degraded urban landscape recognisable in the first part of the story (Image 1). The sound of Thierry Durbet's military march, "Honour", lends an epic quality to this story of a loser's survival. By telling tale of his hard-luck life, the Butcher seeks somehow to justify his acts—those already committed and those yet to come-when he returns to Paris armed with a pistol and three bullets to exact his personal revenge.

Image I



This externalising of the protagonist's thoughts through the ongoing voice-over narration will be used to reveal the character's troubled psychological state, exposing an inner violence that seeps into and contaminates the narrative world: a horrifying monologue of visceral hatred of those moral family values that have traditionally underpinned Western societies. This is the first major crack that appears in the film's narrative surface, as the heroic aura marking the depiction of the protagonist clashes with the repugnance that the spectator is likely to feel in reaction to his thoughts and deeds. We are thus offered a complex sympathetic identification with a psychopath capable of causing his partner's miscarriage by beating her, a man guilty of filicidal tendencies and incestuous abuse. These aberrations completely nullify any positive function that could possibly be attributed to the violence depicted, which is always characterised by its destructive nature.

These are the parameters within which *I Stand* Alone operates. The battlefield here is an ordinary suburban setting, filtered through a consciousness affected by alienation and resentment (Image 2). The enemy comes to be vaguely defined as society in general, a hostile and dehumanising force that mutates over the course of the story from the castrating woman to the exploitative employer, from unsupportive friends to an immigrant who runs a simple tavern, until finally becoming identified as the enemy within (Image 3). This is how the vio-

Image 2



lence dissected in the film is unleashed, with no positive outcome that could justify or ameliorate its repugnance.

Based on the above description, Noé clearly subscribes to the aim for controversy, or even condemnation, that characterises so many filmmakers seeking to test the limits established for depictions of violence, or more precisely, for what the public will tolerate in such depictions. This raises the question of what distinguishes his work from those filmographies that base their transgressive attitude on the mere accumulation of controversial images and narrative motifs. As Olivier Mongin points out: "Between images that capitalise on violence by ratcheting up its intensity and those that attempt to repurpose it, i.e., to halt and restrain it, there is a yawning gap: while the former accumulate, the latter strive to effect a conversion of the energy they produce. This is why a detailed analysis is needed of any images that can help to identify the point at which there is a danger of crossing the boundary into the pornographic when the flow of images can no longer be resisted" (1999: 16).

Rejecting the strategy of pornographic accumulation of violent images, some filmmakers have sought to develop a self-reflexive approach that involves the conversion or repurposing of such images. This is something that Gérard Imbert points to when he describes the emergence, in parallel with its hypervisibility, of "a metadis-

Image 3



ES LA FASCINACIÓN POR LAS IMÁGENES DE UNA VIOLENCIA IRÓNICA, ATRACTIVA Y LÚDICA, ANTE LA QUE EL CINE DE NOÉ SE ERIGE COMO CONTRAPUNTO

course on violence, particularly in European cinema, a critical and partly deconstructive discourse that interrogates what can be done with, in reaction to, and after the violence" (Imbert, 2006: 27).

In simpler terms, this distinction refers to the distance between products like the Saw franchise (James Wan, 2004) and other films that aim to address the phenomenon with a critical perspective—although this does not mean they are any less brutal, as was the foundational Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Salò o le 120 giornate de Sodoma, Pasolini, 1975) in its day—reflected in the more controversial works of contemporary filmmakers like Michael Haneke, Lars von Trier, or Gaspar Noé himself.

The particular object of this analysis is thus not the image as a showcase of morbid spectacle, but the signifying and aesthetic discourse that attempts to open up a dialogue about the experience of violence through its cinematic form. In this regard, Vicente Molina-Foix (1995: 164-165) argues that post-modern cinema, faithful to its poetics of excess and its hotchpotch of registers, has inserted extreme violence into a purely aesthetic category, as an ornamental feature with a tendency towards ironic distancing. Although this assertion requires some nuancing, time has proven Molina-Foix correct if we consider how much of the violence in contemporary cinema is hyperbolically aestheticised, emptying it of meaning and transforming it into a choreography as sterile as it is appealing. It is this fascination with images of an ironic, attractive and playful violence that Noé sets his work up in opposition against.

Based on these considerations, the hypothesis to be tested in this article could be described as fo-

llows: that the formal features of *I Stand Alone* are characterised by the activation of mechanisms of sensory and perceptual aggression that articulate a hostile relationship with the spectator. It is a strategy that could be defined as "metaviolent" in the sense that it makes use of the violence of the cinematic form as a discursive exploration of the experience of screen violence itself.

This study attempts to fine-tune this reasoning by means of a methodology based on a textual analysis of Noé's film. More specifically, the method adopted will draw on the notion of filmic microanalysis proposed by Santos Zunzunegui in his book La mirada cercana (1996), which posits and applies the detailed study of certain meticulously selected structures, "small fragments, microsequences that can be observed under the analyst's microscope, facilitating the study of the basic lines of force that constitute the film they are taken from" (1996: 15). With this in mind, the analysis offered here focuses on the final part of I Stand Alone (1h 09'06"-1h 25'35"), as it is this section that offers the most radical expression of the film's creative approach, bringing together the narrative, aesthetic and discursive features that constitute the very essence of Noé's formal approach to violence.

THIRTY SECONDS TO LEAVE THE SCREENING

From this perspective, the operation that best exemplifies the film's approach to violence is without doubt to be found in the transition into the final sequence, when the Butcher's wanderings in the Parisian suburb have led to defeat and resentment. The three bullets to be used for his revenge have specific targets: himself and his beloved daughter, Cynthia (Blandine Lenoire), who has been living in an asylum since the incident depicted in *Carne*. My microanalysis begins at the point in the film where the Butcher is holed up with his daughter in a squalid room at the Motel L'Avenir, the



VOUS AVEZ 30 SECONDES POUR ABANDONNER LA PROJECTION DE CE FILM



Imágenes 4, 5 y 6

same place where the girl was conceived, to close the circle before the final sacrifice. Then, just when the impending horror seems inevitable, the continuity is broken by three intertitles offering an explicit warning message: "CAUTION. YOU HAVE 30 SECOND TO LEAVE THE SCREENING OF THIS FILM. DANGER" (Images 4, 5 and 6).

With this unmasking, the film is exposed to the spectator as a mere projected representation, a metadiscursive artifice that is thus associated with many other exponents of cinema of violence that have taken a clear distance from the suspension of disbelief that sustains the cinematic illusion. On example is the chilling final scene of one of Noé's favourite films, the aforementioned Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Pasolini, 1975), with the grand puppet show that ends the series of desecrations with a pictorial reference to Hell as depicted by artists like Bosch. Another example, closer in terms of its metacinematic connotations. is Michael Haneke's Funny Games (1997), in the emblematic turning point when Anna manages to snatch a shotgun away from the pair of psychopaths terrorising her family and shoots one of them to death. To prevent the happy ending and the family's salvation, Haneke has the surviving madman pick up the remote control to a video player and literally rewind the supposed reality we have just watched, thereby making its imaginary nature explicit in a uniquely revealing way.

But while *Funny Games* alienates and frustrates the spectator with this unexpected expulsion from the illusion of reality, *I Stand Alone* posits a necessary relationship of complicity: the countdown starts, offering spectators the chance to stop watching, thereby symbolising the implicit pact that required the spectator's consent prior to the depiction of extreme violence.

Far from acting as a deterrent, this revealing operation obviously serves as a scopic provocation for a post-modern audience already proven to be "incapable of resisting the spectacle of the forbidden" (Mongin, 1999: 15). This is the territory of the carnival barker, calling us to "come and see" the attraction that will put our courage to the test, as the discourses of film and television horror so often do. It is no mere coincidence that this strategy is an almost identical repetition of one of the greatest carnival barkers of the cinematic spectacle, the director, screenwriter and producer William Castle, whose film Homicidal (1961) features a timer superimposed over the closed door that will open onto the final scene of this exploitation film made to cash in on the success of Psycho (Hitchcock, 1960),



Imagen 7

while a voice-over goads the spectators during the countdown to the beginning of the scene.

It is the promise of breaking the boundary, watching past the limit even while aware of the danger posed. Thus, when the countdown in I Stand Alone is over, whoever has accepted the challenge can watch the much-anticipated conclusion, the spectacle of the forbidden as Mongin calls it, in this case referring to the Butcher's sexual assault and murder of his daughter, and his own suicide. These acts, beyond the limits that gave meaning to the violence in classical cinema, ultimately identify the supposed hero of the story as a monster-executioner who unleashes the horror. It is a trope now firmly established in post-classical discourses, as Gerard Imbert points out: "Horror is no longer associated solely with blood-curdling themes, with its gallery of monstrous characters [...]. It has been incorporated into the everyday world, losing its extraordinary quality and spreading beyond genre cinema [...]. Fascination gives way to terror, a shocked gaze that revels in the spectacle of what cannot be represented and raises the question of limits" (2010: 184).

Thus, given that horror is familiar territory, its appearance as a consequence of the brutal depiction of the events of a story is unsurprising. But the main objective of this study is to identify how the story told becomes a cinematic form dedicated to exhibiting the very essence of the singular aggression operating in Noé's creative approach.



Imagen 8

NOÉ'S CREATIVE APPROACH TO VIOLENCE

A good starting point for the analysis of the formal composition of the violent act is the camera work in the filming of the scene in question. In diametric opposition to Haneke's cold and distanced gaze and his recurring use of sustained shots to signal the inexorably external nature of the expression of the violence depicted, Noé's camera appears to be deliriously attracted to the horror as it unfolds.

After the Butcher suddenly fires the first of his bullets (Image 7), the camera moves restlessly around the little room, revelling in the physicality of dying bodies just as Edison's camera had done 100 years earlier with the electrocuted elephant. This is the hypervisibility of the horror identified by Imbert, and viewing it makes the camera tremble, like a visual translation of the shadow of death that has taken over the scene (Image 8). In this way, a connection is made between the violence of the content and the formal organisation of the sequence, which, defined by the aggressive treatment of the moving camera and the resulting visual instability, forces the spectator to experience the shock provoked by the narrative violence on a perceptual level.

The soundtrack to this sequence is oriented towards this same objective. First of all, the voice-over that externalises the Butcher's thoughts is definitively disconnected from reality, as his



Imagen 9

monologue is broken up into a disjointed series of statements that overlap, contradict, and turn on one another, with the effect of deconstructing the mental diatribe in which he attempts to justify his deeds. This is the crux of the sequence: the loss of all meaning, the existential collapse that follows the transgression (Image 9). The soundtrack expresses this with an overwhelming cacophony that underscores the instability through an accumulation of thoughts, noises and moans that increase the sonic density to the point of rendering its narrative or mimetic subordination impossible.

The noise on both visual and sonic levels is intended to increase the hostility of a cinematic form that is also extended excessively over time as a hallmark of this filmmaker. This technique is also evident in the sequence in *Irreversible* discussed above. The brutal aggression, the main reason for spectators to reject the film due to its tendency toward the pornographic, is realised with a long take that maintains a strict spatiotemporal continuity for just over 13 minutes (41'00"- 54'00"), without a single merciful cut that might omit something superfluous in purely narrative terms.

This approach is a constant in those scenes in Noé's films where the violence is depicted the most radically, as in the scene discussed here, which in a certain way is the scene that establishes it as a norm in his work. Although the formal solutions differ in each case, the result is always the same: the duration on screen must always exceed commercial standards in order to confront the spectator with the limits of the tolerable. While *Irreversible* is constructed formally on the continuity of the action without external editing, *I Stand Alone* is notable precisely for its excessive use as a means of expression and signification.

The event is scrutinised here in fragmented images, stressing discontinuity through the traditional feti-

shes of cinematic violence: the blood, the wound, the murder weapon, and the writhing faces and bodies. But the factor that distinguishes Noé from other filmmakers whose analytical abuse of editing tends to increase the narrative rhythm of the spectacle lies in the pacing; specifically, in a repetition of these images that is excessive in terms of narrative economy, wearing out their informative function at the expense of the fluidity of the narration.

One of the scene's most shocking images offers a good example of this: the shot of the daughter on the floor after the first gunshot, when the blood begins to gush out of the open wound in her neck (Image 10). This image initially fulfils its function in the development of the causal continuity, but it is then repeated as a kind of leitmotiv, interrupting the natural progress of the action through a deliberately rough treatment of editing cuts and transitions.

The imbalance resulting from this editing strategy, the formal opposite of the transparent continuity demanded by the functional logic of the match cut,¹ exposes the jump between images, once again revealing the filmmaking artifice. The intention here is not, as in the example of *Irreversible*, to capture the event while matching the time of the story to the time of the narration; instead, the priority is discontinuity, breaking the scene

down into expressive units that clash violently in the transitions between shots, abandoning direct spatio-temporal relationships.

This is reflected in the insertion of a series of shots that do not belong to the present of the act being depicted but participate decisively in the sequence through a kind of Eisensteinian cinema-of-attractions editing that juxtaposes the images of violence semantically with certain motifs drawn from other moments in time: the image of dead, filleted meat² (Image 11), the sexual act in which the daughter was conceived, and finally, the moment of her birth. Meat, sex, childbirth, life, violence and death are intertwined to express the same impulsive cycle that would later be verbalised in *Irreversible* and its tagline, "Le temps detruit tout", which has since become an axiom of Noé's filmography.

This expressive dimension of the editing contributes to a narrative flow that progresses unevenly in an ascending rhythm towards the devas-

lmágenes II y 12







Imagen 10

tating climax of the suicide (Image 12), until the analytical deconstruction of the event concludes with the extreme of shots that cut after the minimal unit of a single still frame: a final burst of images indiscernible to the human eye, beginning with the Butcher's bloodied brain to symbolise the character's entry into the void of death,³ thus concludes the violent turmoil that has seized control of the creative approach.

THE SPLIT ENDING: THE SEXUAL AND THE PERVERSE

The apparent conclusion is expressed using a long fade to red that engulfs the hyperintensive accumulation of images, resulting in a void, with no further compensation than dead flesh and the sensation of terror. This returns us to one of this article's initial questions: how Noé distances his film from mere pornographic exploitation to engage in that critical and particularly caustic critique identified by Imbert, where the amplification and/or deconstruction of violence is intended to create productive opportunities for reflection. The key point can be found in the film's change of direction at the moment when the fade out is revealed in fact to be a slow dissolve that does not constitute the definitive ending that it might at first have seemed to be, but a turning point where the ending is split into two complementary substructures. The linear nature of the narration is



Imagen I3 Imagen I4

thus upended as time is turned back to offer the characters a second chance: another ending, the *real one*, where the Butcher finally puts away his gun and hugs his daughter (Image 13).

At this point it is worth reconsidering the question raised by Mongin about the possibility of breaking the cycles of violence, as this detour in the Butcher's story seems to associate that possibility with a simple personal choice, apparently as straightforward as replacing the gunshot with a hopeful embrace. However, even in the absence of death, blood or any physical or verbal aggression, the violent form constructed by Noé will soon be shown to be active still in its intimate relationship with the viewer.

Once again, the turning point is marked by an intertitle with a single word blazoned across the screen: "MORAL", an idea that will be interrogated in what follows. After this interruption, the camera moves right in to capture a very specific detail of the bodies locked in embrace, revealing as clearly as possible the Butcher's hand moving up between his daughter's legs (Image 14). We thus witness an extraordinarily precise shift, whereby the death drive exhibited in the previous images is replaced with the manifestation of a perverse sexual desire that transforms the bloodstained sensory violence into another equally aggressive form of violence, but one that operates on a strictly ethical level, as a pure signifier.

The previous instability is now superseded by serenity and balance thanks to the use of frames sustained on the articulation of this second segment. This is also reflected in the minimal editing, limited here to a deliberate, clean and narratively functional transition, and in the soundtrack, as the disturbing cacophony is replaced with a silent calm that progressively fills with the emotive melody of Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major*, redirecting the spectator's sensibility and vesting the images with a powerful sense of redemption. It is, in short, a radical change of formal parameters to conform to the characteristics normally associated with a happy ending, deliberately sidestepping the conclusions arising from the incestuous act.

As stressed above, my aim here is to address the question strictly from a cinematic perspective, and objectively, despite the obvious connotations of sexual abuse present in the situation, Noé seeks to give the scene a formal structure that suggests a positive ending for the characters. But can the spectator leave such ethical connotations aside and positively accept this ending as something satisfying and restorative?

SUBVERSION OF THE SPECTACLE OF VIOLENCE

This study of the treatment of violence in Gaspar Noé's films began with a contextualisation of his

work as part of the extremist trend that emerged in European cinema at the turn of the millennium. Specifically, in chronological terms *I Stand Alone* (1998) and *Irreversible* (2002) belong to the foundation of what Quandt would later classify as the "New French Extremity", attributed to a group of filmmakers who received a certain degree of media attention in France at this time due to the extremely explicit depiction of violence and/or sex in their films.

The reference to the New French Extremity has been taken here as an initial position that offers more questions than answers, as apart from the supposed aim of transgression that gives the label its meaning, there are obvious thematic, stylistic and discursive differences that distinguish Noé's work from most of the horror-gore films that would give international attention and generic dominance to the transgressive attitude of this movement, oriented towards pushing at the limits of the narrative and visual codes of the slasher, splatter, torture-porn, body horror and other physical horror subgenres. Films like High Tension (Haute tensión, Aja, 2003), Inside (À l'interieur, Bustillo & Maury, 2007), Frontière(s) (Gens, 2007) and Martyrs (Laugier, 2008) were emblematic of the radicalisation of structures previously encoded and exploited by ultra-violent horror in the post-classical era. These films are links in a chain that can be traced back to the defining works of the aforementioned subgenres, which they sought to outdo through the accumulation and exaggeration of the features that make the audiovisual excesses promised to the spectator cinematically and commercially meaningful. This obvious difference from Noé's work raises the question of which trend the violence in his films really belongs to. With the aim of shedding some light on this question, this study has explored the hypothesis that associates his oeuvre with a reflexive. self-conscious movement in European cinemas of violence. Based on the theoretical framework adopted for this exploration, the initial conclusions drawn from the textual analysis suggest that the discursive function of the excessive depiction of violence in Noé's *I Stand Alone* owes less to Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) than it does to Pasolini's *Salò*, which, as Arnau Vilaró (2017: 511-515) points out, is a foundational work for a whole wave of contemporary French cinema that includes Noé, along with Claire Denis, Bertrand Bonello, Catherine Breillat and Jean-Claude Brisseau.

While the codes enacted by Hooper and the filmmakers he influenced among the New French Extremity transform the ferocity of their violence into narrative action articulating a story of survival, the direction taken by Noé pushes beyond generic boundaries to question the cinematic depiction of violence itself, using it as a discursive provocation. Excess, stripped of the pretext of perverse pleasure that underpins the spectacle in the work of Hooper and his disciples, is vested with an attitude of inquiry into the phenomenon that intimately involves the viewer. This simple act of interrogation of personal limits, of what happens during the experience of cinematic violence, is the very metadiscursive mechanism that is ultimately what makes Noé's work subversive.

In this respect, it is especially noteworthy that Noé does not choose to offer a direct depiction of incestuous sexuality in the final scene analysed here, as do other transgressive films, such as Dogtooth (Kynodontas, Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009) and A Serbian Film (Sprski film, Sr an Spasojević, 2010). In this case, the consummation is only signified through a meticulous strategy of ellipsis that also contradicts the hypervisibility of sexual content also characteristic of Noé's work.4 The elision makes the clash between the two structures even more obvious: on the one hand, the excess of physical violence; and on the other, the chaste invisibility of the act that represents that other violence, not shown but merely signified in the final and definitive act of cruelty that the filmmaker perpetrates against the spectator.

NOÉ SOBREPASA LA CONTENCIÓN GENÉRICA PARA CUESTIONAR LA PROPIA REPRESENTACIÓN CINEMATOGRÁFICA, INSTRUMENTALIZÁNDOLA COMO PROVOCACIÓN DISCURSIVA

The above is an apt description because it is effectively an assault on spectators who up to this moment have been protected by the "symbolic prosthesis" of the cinematic device (Bettetini, 1996), where, according to the psychoanalytic notion of identification (Baudry, 1978; Metz, 1979), they could participate on an illusory and emotional level in the fictional conflict with no danger to themselves, from the safety of their seats. While the classical model sought somehow to ensure that this conflict would be experienced virtually, presenting the characters' battles and heroic acts that engage the spectator with the story, the post-modern approach disrupts these mechanisms of affective identification, replacing heroism with brutality. On this basis, adapting an idea posited by André Bazin (1977: 12), it could be argued that this new cinema of cruelty represented by Gaspar Noé, Michael Haneke, and Lars von Trier-to cite some of the more recognisa-

ble names—has been characterised by going further than exploring the problem of fitting a negative character into the identification process, or taking the depiction of violence to the extreme in its narrative development. If it were limited to this, the result would be the same as that of the functional violence of genre films, offering no more than he kind of ghost-train spectacle where the visitor experiences the simulation while knowing that in reality there is no danger. Even when that simulation is taken to the limit, as in the case of

the New French Extremity and other examples of post-modern hyperbole, the symbolic protection, although undermined, is never really threatened because the distance needed for the experience to be transformed into a pleasurable spectacle is still maintained.

Conversely, in Noé's films, as in the most radical variation of the cinemas of violence, this pleasure is absent from the equation. In its place we find the shocking notion of a universe driven on cruel impulses, a kind of heir to the principles laid down by Bazinian theory. It is a universe which, as foreseen by Erich Von Stroheim and Luis Buñuel (two foundational examples from Bazin's perspective), is utterly dominated by the impulse-image (Deleuze, 2003: 179-192), whose relentless force is stressed in a way that interweaves it with the discomfort (of either perception or signification) elicited by the cinematic experience.

However, it is important to stress once again that the radical existentialism of its narratives is not what differentiates Noé's work, even when it achieves its maximum level of formal aggression. The key is the enunciative mark around which the film itself turns, challenging spectator-consumers with an inquisitive metadiscursive questioning of their limits and expectations. In this way, any possibility of spectacle is upended by a critical

Imagen 15



shift towards a space where the screen becomes a mirror reflecting the relationship between our gaze and the artificial experience of the violence we are consuming (Image 15).

CONCLUSION

In keeping with the parameters outlined by theorists and historians of cinematic violence such as Olivier Mongin, Gérard Imbert, Stephen Prince, Lauro Zavala and others cited here, the results of this analysis confirm the strategy of subversion in a cinematic context associated with a post-modern gaze that has become desensitised by the transgression and subsequent commercial consolidation of extreme violence since the 1960s. This shift in public attitudes towards screen violence serves as the foundation for the unique formal and signifying system analysed here, which is especially notable for its reaction against aesthetic and narrative sugar-coating of violence, its rejection of the horror genre's guarantee of safe passage, and its exploration of territory where viewing a violent film is conceived of as a violent experience in itself.

The metaviolent nature of Noé's work needs to be defined on the basis of its use and abuse of the resources of cinematic language, which involves the aggressiveness not only of the narrative but also of the formal features that determine its system of aesthetics and signification. As shown in this article, the thematic or narrative violence is thus superseded by a formal violence expressed in the structural and aesthetic parameters resulting from framing strategies, camera movements, editing and soundtrack, to construct a whole in which existentialist cruelty is interwoven with the hypervisibility consolidated by the ultra-violent tendencies of contemporary cinema.

This can be demonstrated by meticulous comparative analysis of the microstructure studied here, which reflects the levels of violence that structure the film and constructs a poetics which,

although with variations, would come to define Noé's filmography in the following years. It is a poetics associated with a metadiscourse on the signification of violence activated by an educated gaze, as a sign of the times in the age of cinemas of excess and exhibitionism.

NOTES

- "Match cut" is used here generally to refer to effective transitioning between images that eliminates or at least conceals the inherent discontinuity resulting from film editing.
- 2 This is a clear allusion to both his job as a butcher and the visual connection with the slaughter of the horse in the opening scene to *Carne*.
- 3 This foreshadows some of Noé's future thematic interests that would later be consolidated in *Enter the Void* (2009)
- 4 Evidence of this can be found in the treatment of sexuality in *Irreversible*, in *Love* (2014), and even in *I Stand Alone* itself, which features images from a real porn film in the scene where the protagonist enters an X-rated movie theatre.

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FROM NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY TO THE SUBVERSION OF SCREEN VIOLENCE: AESTHETICS AND DISCOURSE IN GASPAR NOÉ'S I STAND ALONE

Abstract

This article explores the discursive and aesthetic aspects of the depiction of violence in the controversial filmography of Gaspar Noé. The main object of study is his first film, *I Stand Alone* (Seul contre tous, 1998), understood here as the true foundation of his creative approach, before *Irreversible* (2002) received international recognition and prompted critics to include him in the so-called "New French Extremity" movement. Drawing on Santos Zunzunegui's concept of "filmic microanalysis", this article examines Noé's aggressive formal approach with the aim of identifying his unique way of subverting the traditional cinematic spectacle enshrined in the binary of sex and violence, as well as the relationship it establishes with the spectator, who is a necessary accomplice in the hypervisibility of extreme violence that has characterised the evolution of contemporary cinema.

Key words

Gaspar Noé; Violence; European cinema, New French Extremity; Metadiscourse; Spectator.

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DEL NUEVO EXTREMISMO FRANCÉS A LA SUBVERSIÓN DEL ESPECTÁCULO DE LA VIOLENCIA: ESTÉTICA Y DISCURSO EN SOLO CONTRA TODOS DE GASPAR NOÉ

Resumen

El presente artículo pone el foco de atención en los aspectos discursivos y estéticos de la representación de la violencia en la controvertida cinematografía de Gaspar Noé, tomando como principal objeto de estudio su primer film, *Solo contra todos* (Seul contre tous, 1998), entendido aquí como el verdadero punto de ignición, antes del reconocimiento internacional por *Irreversible* (2002) y su inclusión por parte de la crítica en el llamado «Nuevo extremismo francés». En línea con la noción de microanálisis fílmico de Santos Zunzunegui, este trabajo abordará la agresiva propuesta formal de Noé con el objetivo de identificar las claves de su particular ejercicio de subversión del tradicional espectáculo cinematográfico dedicado al binomio de sexo y violencia, así como la relación que esta establece con el espectador, cómplice necesario en el proceso hipertrófico que ha caracterizado la evolución de la ultraviolencia en el cine contemporáneo.

Palabras clave

Gaspar Noé; violencia; cine europeo; nuevo extremismo francés; metadiscurso; espectador.

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