

“I suffer. I believe. I am.”: Identity, autonomy and performance in Andrzej Żuławski’s  
*Possession*  
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Żuławski’s visceral and disturbing depiction of marital breakdown, *Possession* is synonymous with Isabelle Adjani’s overwhelming performance as Anna. Even those who haven’t seen the film are likely aware of its infamous subway sequence, iconic for its utterly unhinged physicality. For some, Anna is but another in a long line of cinematic representations of the hysterical female, for others she is a radical figure, defiant in the face of men who seek to control her. While Adjani deservedly won both the Cannes prize for Best Actress and a César for her phenomenal portrayal of psychic distress, in interview, Adjani has suggested this trauma was far from mere fabrication. Żuławski has cited Haitian voodoo rituals, as well as the influence of theatre revolutionary and proponent of trance states, Jerzy Grotowski as influences on his directorial process, raising complex questions about the ownership of Adjani’s portrayal and the ethicality of its procurement. At the same time, Anna’s pointed direct to camera address, already appealing to an entangled web of gazes, gains an additional complexity in light of her then-relationship with cinematographer, Bruno Nuytten. Unpacking aspects of *Possession*’s fraught production, this paper considers the layers of complexity around identity, autonomy, and the boundary between reality and artifice behind one of cinema’s most arresting performances.