

CMS 4320 Women and Film
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ROMANCE (CATHERINE BREILLAT, 1999)
REVIEWS/INTERVIEWS

from Radio National
with Michael Cathcart

[Transcript from broadcast interview on Australian Public Radio]

Catherine Breillat is one of France most interesting female film makers and quite a phenomenon. She's a best selling French novelist as well as a film maker.

Romance is her sixth and latest film and it reveals sexuality from a completely female point of view. A woman's account of her own feelings, it's an unflinching depiction of various sexual experiences. Marie, the heroine whose husband refuses to have sex with her, sets out on her own journey for sexual satisfaction - and transcendence.

The film has been controversial since it was screened last year at European film festivals. Yet it's been released around the world... in Great Britain, Ireland, Turkey and New Zealand. And yes, it will be released soon in Australia although it nearly did not make it.

The Office of Film and Literature Classification had refused to classify the film... Its potential Australian distributor, with the suitable ironic name of Potential Films, appealed the ban, which was overturned on the 28th of January 2000.

Catherine Breillat spoke to Arts Today's Rhiannon Brown when she brought Romance here last year for the Melbourne Film Festival.

Rhiannon Brown: The central character in your film Romance is Marie, a young woman outraged by a society where sex has always been male and romance has always been female. She's in a relationship with Paul, her model boyfriend, who won't make love to her preferring to hide himself amongst his crisp, white sheets watching gymnastics on the television. Is your Marie the picture of a woman who is a prisoner of traditional, romantic love?

Catherine Breillat: She's a prisoner of her feelings, not the "traditional" notion of love. In some way it's not at all an outdated or outmoded way of looking at things. Her feelings are very much that of her reality now and in many ways she's perfectly suited to Paul because it's a sado-masochistic type of relationship. And he is able to hurt her where she enjoys being hurt.

Rhiannon Brown: Paul is also a character that we don't get to know very well. He's very two dimensional and a lot of people after the film thought that they didn't get to know Paul. Is his role purely symbolic not literal?

Catherine Breillat: The film is obviously filmed from Marie's point of view. And it's the men who go through her life in this film who are the symbols. If the film had been filmed from Paul's point of view he would have been made a fully fledged character.

Rhiannon Brown: I read that you that you didn't want to make a film that was realistic. You wanted to make a film that was truthful. Is that what you mean?

Catherine Breillat: Yes, that's what I want to say. This film is governed by symbols but reality is governed by symbols as well. The world is governed by symbols and some of these are in part really ugly, and if given consciousness can come back from our primeval memory. So the film is not about Reality. The film is basically about the impact of these symbols on us, how we understand them, how we understand our life.

It's not realism that that I was interested in, it was Reality as understood through symbols. It's a different type of reality. Two of the models which somewhat inspire the film are "La Princesse de Clèves" (by author Comtesse de La Fayette, 1678) and Racine's tragedies. And of course you will identify with the feeling of the character but not with their elevated status, their almost unreachable status. La Princesse de Clèves was from the high aristocracy, and in the case of Racine we are talking ancient tragedy.

But they are in fact the "carriers" of feelings that you can identify with. You can project Their feelings as your own, but not identify with their characters, their status. Nor were they represented in the story, in the play or in their own world.

I'm interested in myth and transcendence and this cannot be compared with daily Reality. It's not about Realism. It's a different type of knowledge, a different type of perception.

I think that in the world there has been no progression in our sentiments. The world changes, fads come and go, fashions as well. But feelings remain the same. So the film is really an intemporal film. It is not situated in a specific time frame and this is why also the fashion is as neutral, or the clothing is as neutral as possible. Not to be, in any way, identified with a period or fashion.

Rhiannon Brown: Being intemporal means that you're also free from being forced to be politically correct and I think that's very nice. It's quite a privilege and of course your film has got a lot of flak for its sexual explicitness. What's interesting is that it creates a new space for cinema that's between art house and pornography.

Catherine Breillat: No, not at all. I didn't make the film with any such idea or intention in mind. I had no intention of creating a new space for the cinema. I made the film trying to create the most basic impression. I made it for myself. I wanted to push limits beyond anything I had done before. The film was made for me. And in this particular case I wasn't self conscious about creating a space, a new form of cinema, a new form of

expression. Basically the film was to be the highest form of expression for me.

I always think you should try to achieve things which go "beyond" yourself. I'd say I was the "carrier" of the film rather than the author of the film. And I mention also that there was a lot of suffering involved. But I was a carrier of something that I knew nothing about. It was almost as if I was carrying an alien creature in me that had been created by my subconscious. Everybody was very scared on set, everybody suffered. It was very exciting but they were working without a net.

Rhiannon Brown: Because Marie is unable to work within the confines or the bounds of the traditional romance with Paul, she literally throws herself into the street and starts a series of sexual experiences. Is this how Marie will remake herself? Is it through sexual deviation that she has to find herself?

Catherine Breillat: It's a quest for the Holy Grail. It's a quest for the ideal. But it is a journey which is an inverted journey. To be able to reach the heights of purity you have to have suffered deprivation and humiliations. And what could have been a descent into Hell becomes liberation. She does conquer. The whole question was also communicated to the actors. Both the main actors and myself found that very dangerous and we knew we were also on a journey. It was a "rite of passage". It was an initiation journey to a higher ideal - something that Lancelot did, something that the Knights of the Round Table did. The quest for the Holy Grail is in some way repeated.

So in fact, it was very painful and very exciting, but in the quest we had to find a way between realism and pornography. It couldn't be pornography. The sexual acts had to lead to something else and they did. I feel in fact that when there are feelings and sex combined it is not pornography and the image that the film throws back is something other than pornography.

Rhiannon Brown: Yes, I really felt that. One of the scenes that really sticks in my mind is the scene where Marie is with S&M partner and right there up on the big screen she has her legs apart, he fondles her and he pulls his hands away towards you and shows you that they're wet. I mean that is female pleasure right on the screen in front of you in a form of cinema that wasn't pornographic.

Catherine Breillat: I think that sex is metaphysical. Love is not about pleasure. Love is a transcending feeling, it's a quest and sex is the hope, is the initiation, the way by which love can transcend itself. So the sex is not just organic gymnastics, sex is the way by which the quest will be fulfilled. What creates the concept of obscenity and of degradation is the moral code which determines what is obscene and it is very often censorship that brings about the concept of obscenity, whereas in fact the sexual act is an integral part of the quest for love.

And I believe that anything that you hide is considered an obscenity whether it be hair or the lower part of the body.

Rhiannon Brown: I'm interested in the character of Robert because he is the

one in the S&M relationship but he seems to also have a real tenderness for Marie. Yet he's the man that doesn't ever get undressed. We never see him in the nude. Why's that?

Catherine Breillat: He doesn't need to have his clothes off because he's past it. He's in another phase of pleasure. He is also going through very acute pleasure but his pleasure doesn't need to go via an erection via the sexual act. And what I found in this sado-masochistic type of ritual is that the men don't seem to have erections but the women seem to be feeling intense pleasure.

Rhiannon Brown: And for Marie the S&M experience seems to be a very sophisticated intellectual experience where you know, even the scenes where he's tying Marie up, they are very funny. I mean he's fussing about, he can't quite get the knot right and he's trying to find it. It's very complicated and sophisticated and very intellectual and I was interested in your film's several references to the dislocation between sex and the mind. I was wondering if you could tell us about those several scenes.

Catherine Breillat: It is the profound subject of the film. The basic theme of the film is the dichotomy of womanhood. The woman cut in two. The film is not about Paul and Marie. The film is about this duality that you have to live. Every society has created laws to exercise power over women and to exclude certain parts of the woman and they use the excuse that it is to preserve the dignity of women.

By creating a law that preserves the dignity of women it presupposes that the woman has no dignity and therefore when you analyse the taboos you realise that you are living here with an ambiguity. And the French language is particularly refined on that point. "Inommé" (un-named) means "God" - the one whose name cannot be named cannot be pronounced in a Judeo-Christian tradition. "Inommable" (unmentionable) is the "unmentionable". And between the un-named and the unmentionable you have a number of question marks. You have a path which is a dangerous path. You have doubt, you have all the questions that you want to ask, and there you have the very nature of taboo.

When we talk about pornographic films we talk about X films, not Y films. And "X" itself in algebra is an unknown quantity. It's a chromosome, it's a letter, it's the unnamed. Symbols govern the world. And this fact did not come about through chance, it's no coincidence. It is fully determined. It's quite interesting that amongst the horrendous acts which are committed by the Islamist fanatics they will cut the throat of the general population. They kidnap young virgin girls, they rape them and then they disembowel them. The sex organs of the woman are in the realm of the symbolic, in the cosmology of symbols - the "black holes of the universe". And there's a terror on the part of some men towards this part of divinity which is Woman because if one is to look at men and women, women are closer to the concept of the divine.

Rhiannon Brown: That's very interesting. Last night at the screening at the Melbourne International Film Festival of your film Romance the audience screamed when Marie gave birth. They didn't scream at the explicit porno

references, they screamed when she gave birth. That was amazing.

Catherine Breillat: Yes it's an image that we don't ever represent. Because it was a real birth, to be able to get the continuity right we had to film it in close-ups. And it was at this moment that the full impact and meaning of giving birth was revealed to me as a film maker. You see I discovered it at that time when I was doing it and I realised in fact it wasn't the birth of a child, it was the birth of a universe. And because of this very frightening parallelism or link with the universe (that link to the divine which women giving birth represent), to protect ourselves, we employ the very effective mechanism of making it something which is "taboo".

It's a question of power. In fact religions have done that. If we reduce the woman's function to an organic function then we are simply rendered "mammals". If Religion, instead of cloistering women away from the soul, instead of lowering women, instead of separating women from their soul, from society as a whole, from Name, from Eternity, religions have enshrined the physical or the organic part of the woman and at the same time the projected men's claim to immortality.

Rhiannon Brown: I just want to ask if you're going to get a release for ROMANCE in Australia?

Catherine Breillat: Australia and Argentina as well as the Islamic countries still haven't bought the film. Everywhere else it's been bought. But because of the (1999 Melbourne) Festival, because of the reaction of the public to the film at least in the first screening and I'm sure that the publicity is going to continue, well maybe it will be bought by Australia. And then I will come (back to Australia) again!

Rhiannon Brown: Thanks very much.

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Review of *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, 1999)

Sight and Sound, November 1999 Much has been made in the press of the fact that *Romance* is one of the most explicit heterosexual art films to date, prompting both accusations of indecency and laudatory comparisons with Oshima's *Ai No Corrida* (1976). Central to *Romance*'s scabrous image is the presence of Italian porn star Rocco Siffredi as the Italian stud Paolo who "fucks" Marie in a graphic take. Both male (erect and soft) and female genitals are on display here, along with head-on shots of Marie's gynaecological examination and her baby's birth. As Marie's voiceover explains: "I just want to be a hole; the more gaping, the more obscene, the truer it is; it's metaphysical, it's my purity."

Yet as Marie's mixture of obscenities and existential considerations indicates, *Romance* addresses its audience not as a sex film but as an intellectual artefact about sex. Culturally it belongs to a French tradition that goes back to de Sade and encompasses the writings of Apollinaire, Bataille, Klossowski and Pauline Réage (author of *Histoire d'O*), in which eroticism is a cerebral matter. As a film-maker Breillat

radically undermines her movie's potential for titillation and voyeurism in a number of ways, often by using prosaic details. A discussion of used condoms and tampons comically precedes sex with Paolo, for example.

Breillat's aestheticisation of sex is indebted to the stillness of Japanese cinema. Her *mise en scène* is bluntly realistic in some ways, but distanced from naturalism. *Romance*'s social anchorage is minimal: Paul is a model, Marie a teacher, but their social identity is as pared down as their white flat. Breillat's signature use of near-to-real time allows such scenes as Robert and Marie's bondage games to be presented in such hyper-realist detail they become almost abstract. Similarly the gynaecological examination is shocking not in a traditional moral sense, but because of the deadpan approach. " *Romance* would not be classified porn," Breillat has said, "not through self-censorship, but by finding another way of showing."

Inevitably, since Breillat is a woman, *Romance* prompts the question of whether this "other way of showing" is connected to gender and whether *Romance* can be regarded as a feminine or feminist exploration of female desire. Like many French female film-makers, Breillat denies the concept of 'women's cinema', seeking to be identified with a general view of authorship. And yet from her earliest films (such as *36 Fillette*) she has focused single-mindedly on female sexuality. Both her recent *Parfait amour!* and *Romance* contain savage explorations of female desire and identity and critiques of French machismo and misogyny. Marie says at one point of Paul, "He dances because he wants to seduce, he wants to seduce because he wants to conquer, he wants to conquer because he is a man."

In other ways too Breillat foregrounds a female point of view and works in the tradition of the woman's film. For instance, Marie's voiceover dominates the soundtrack. The men are weak or merely instrumental - each of them fulfils a simple function (partner, father, mentor, and so on), after which he is discarded. By contrast, Breillat's women are complex. Contrary to stereotypical representations, they are not victims, mad or mysterious objects of desire. In *Romance* it is Paul who is a mystery.

Thus in many ways Breillat satisfies one of the key feminist demands in relation to women's cinema: that it should challenge patriarchal representations and give expression to the complexity of female desire. Her direct tackling of sexuality, unburdened by conventional morality and political correctness, is original and emotionally powerful. *Romance* is both fascinating and disturbing. Why, then, is it disappointing? One reason is that some of its erotic tropes are rather too close to old-fashioned, oppressive male fantasies: Robert's self-important Don Juan figure; the notion that genital penetration is less intimate than kissing; and, most problematic of all, Marie's longing to "meet Jack the Ripper." Is the price Breillat pays for auteur recognition that of endorsing male-pleasing fantasies of what 'masochistic' women supposedly want? As in the recent films of other French women directors (such as Tonie Marshall and Jeanne Labrune), Marie's sexual autonomy is gained at the expense of any other sense of worth. All this only seems to produce a profoundly pessimistic, even nihilistic, world view. There is a lot of sex in *Romance*, but not a lot of pleasure.

By Ginette Vincendeau

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Tainted love

"Romance" director Catherine Breillat explains why women hold more power than men in the bedroom -- and talks about what happens when you bring a porn star onto the set of a "real" movie.

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By Cynthia Joyce

French director Catherine Breillat's "Romance" -- a movie in which the sex is real and not simulated -- has already sparked debate: Is it trash or is it art? The question seems beside the point. "Romance" may be one of the most sexually explicit movies to make its way into the mainstream, but Breillat's exploration of female sexual fantasy is often deliberately *un-sexy*. In "Romance," a young woman aggressively seeks a variety of sexual encounters after her boyfriend, with whom she's deeply in love, refuses to have sex with her. It's not that the fantasies she fulfills for herself -- which include bondage and anonymous sex -- won't be recognizable, or at least understandable, to many women. But Breillat's movie is more than just a study of female wish fulfillment. It goes deeper than that. "Romance" is about the profound sense of loss that one woman feels when she tries -- and fails -- to possess someone else.

Like the film itself, Breillat is a study in contradictions: ambitious, provocative, occasionally arrogant. Here, she explains why no man could have made her movie.

Given the exact same script, could a man have made this film?

I refuse to make a difference between men and women. But *directors* -- they are not interchangeable. I think that the director is a singular artist. It's as if we said Michelangelo could create Titian's painting -- they are different people, they cannot do the same thing.

That being said, I am profoundly a woman, and a man couldn't do this, ever. Had I been a man, I wouldn't have been able to do it.

The film is not in the end very romantic -- it's really about desire, not love.

For me, romance is the illusion of love. Paul doesn't understand Marie. He has a hard time expressing who he is, and she doesn't listen to him. And he doesn't listen to her either. He is the object of her love, he is her idol, he is beautiful, and she placed her love on him because she needed to. And he placed his love on her because he also needed to reassure himself. And this moment where the spark of their encounter, of the romance which makes us believe in the illusion of love, when this moment is finished -- they are at [that] stage of the illusion. Paul has a real problem of identity, and Marie doesn't take this into account at all. She is in her own closed

world. But with me as director, Marie has the love of the camera, so we excuse her -- while Paul, we accuse him. But one is as egocentric as the other.

So you deliberately created Paul as little more than a sex object?

(laughing) "And God created man." So beautiful.

You say Marie has the love of the camera -- is it because you identify with her character?

Am I identifying myself with Marie? No! She is also my creature.

But it's true, Marie has a deep sincerity. The depth of a person is the depth of their sincerity. She goes deep in her own emotions, and this is an honest approach. But she doesn't know that she is not honest with herself.

She is left to live out her fantasies, and Paul confronts her with the reality of this [by withholding sex from her] -- and it's a test lived by both of them. What she's after is not a sadomasochistic pleasure -- it's what we call curing the ill by the ill, to take the road to hell in a quest for the Grail.

Love is the road of hell. We pass through things which we'll never know what they really are -- they have the appearance of one thing, but they are something else, effectively. For instance, Marie's sadomasochistic attachment with Robert [the school principal] has the appearance of a perversity, but it's something that makes her pass through to the other side.

I was very honest when I wrote this. I had to be. I wanted to make sure that no matter what Marie does, she doesn't get destroyed. I wasn't conscious of this when I wrote it; it was like a drawing that grows under the eye. I didn't want this young actress, who is very pure, I didn't want her accepting this role [if it was going to be] a vision of her own lack of self-consideration; she needed to have grace, and then it would become the contrary.

Apparently Caroline Ducey, the actress who played Marie, was somewhat disillusioned by the way the film turned out, and the two of you have since gone your separate ways. Were you disappointed by this?

We are always a bit disappointed when the actors move on to a new role. It's like that. It's life. Film is an act of possession -- we say *my* actor, *my* actress. Therefore it's normal that afterwards, the separation is difficult. We are all disappointed.

But more specifically, she mentioned how disturbed she was to learn -- the day of the shoot -- she would be doing scenes with a porn star, Rocco Siffredi.

I felt that had I told anyone I was going to cast Rocco for the role, there would have been an uncontrollable reaction in the press, and then I would have lost François Berleand in the role of Robert, which would have been a

shame. Why shouldn't one put them in the same film? If I hadn't cast him, I wouldn't have this film. It was a radical idea, because it went against myself and against my inhibitions. My inhibitions are those of society and they are not profoundly me, but to fight against them is very, very difficult. But this is why we have a radical film. The [head technician] and the camera director -- who was very important to the project -- wouldn't want to be in the same room with him because they had prejudices. So I didn't want to say it immediately.

But it was obvious that they [Ducey and Rocco] were an extraordinary couple. I knew they were extraordinary. They knew only that being a porno star is not extraordinary at all. That's true, but Rocco is a very charismatic being. I had confidence in my choice, but there was terror on the set when he arrived.

It was very, very difficult. And extremely difficult for Rocco, because there are so many biting tongues on the set, a lot of culpability and shame put on him -- it was intolerable for him. For Caroline, how do you want her to be able to bear this? Well, she bore it for hours, for hours, for hours. She bore it from 10 in the evening till 3 o'clock in the morning. At 3 o'clock in the morning she couldn't stand it anymore, it's true. How could she be the only one to find it normal to film with Rocco when everybody else was appalled?

But in fact he did turn out to be an extraordinary performer.

You know, bad actors look easy in front of the camera -- it's more difficult for an actor to move well than to pose well. To move, it's more difficult -- to go through a door, to move through a space. Rocco is like a cat, he has a feline body. He is someone who is in absolute harmony with himself. There are an enormous [number] of porno actors who make believe they don't have a physical inhibition; I think that they [do have an inhibition], because they move badly and they even make love badly -- they make rough, discordant gestures. They make the body very ugly -- we all become ugly because of inhibition. While Rocco is in harmony; he is a very harmonious being.

What I find very beautiful is that those two beings [Marie and Rocco's character, Paolo] find it absolutely impossible to communicate. And that in their total solitude, however, from the bottom of it, each understands the solitude of the other. Rocco, who is probably the most virile man in the world, does have to prove that he is a man. In making love, he goes from being strong to being the weakest, in the absolute. He is asking the woman to love him, in a despairing way. He's afraid of not being loved, and this is what I find beautiful.

Have you found that women have responded more favorably to the film than men?

Generally the women are rather troubled by it. They are forced to recognize the things with which they are not very happy, generally.

I don't know, some tell me it's harder for the women because they get a feeling of humiliation sometimes. There are parts -- the scene at the

gynecologist, for instance [where several male medical interns examine Marie in succession]. Women don't like to admit it's a vision they've had themselves.

It's difficult to tell people's impressions when they're leaving the movie because they are often very, very sad and inside themselves. Finally even those who hate it, when they leave, they simply leave the theater -- but the film doesn't separate from them. When they think about it again the second day, and the following day, the opinion is different.

One of the most shocking moments comes not during the scene in which Robert attaches Marie to a bondage apparatus, but directly afterward, when Marie - - apparently distraught at what has happened -- unravels. And Robert turns on a dime, from being her torturer to being her heartbreakingly tender caretaker.

It's true that this is a moment where pure magic happens. Pure magic, because on the set all of a sudden there was a veil of death, [a sense of] really hallucinating. And that all of a sudden when he takes her like this, the body has no weight -- for me it was something extremely magical. Because I didn't have rehearsals, I had told myself that was [a very long time to] attach her like this. Attaching her was already an ordeal. Then there were the lights, so we had to pass the bodies [in a certain way], which was something that I had never done -- that in itself it was a scene. So I decided to film it and not to have any rehearsals, to at least catch what would happen. And evidently the magic catch happened the first time we did it. We were amazed; it is very beautiful. To say, "We did this, we did that ..." is one thing, but it's only when we see it that we believe it. And it's true, it is by far my favorite scene, this scene where there is a passage of power.

At one point, Marie bluntly tells Rocco that men are weaker than women. It feels partly like bravado, especially coming from this woman who is so clearly desperate, but we see from his reaction that there's a troubling element of truth to it.

It's a fact that men are afraid to stop being strong -- it's their misunderstanding that they believe they are stronger than women. I think that the women are stronger. There is a power shift in a physical relationship. This is the subject of the film in the pure sense -- that in the physical love, the man starts by being the predator and the strong one and ends up being the one who is possessed by the woman. The sexual power of the woman is stronger, and the woman's desires are more powerful than are the man's desires. This is absolutely true. And that the man loves to flee is a very beautiful proof of this. We talk about a loss of power, but it is a very beautiful love exchange.

Was making this point your main intention in making the film?

I think that the film has a lot of meaning. It cannot be reduced to a little résumé like this. I think that when we are inside, we are in a hypnotic voyage -- it's very sensorial. The purity, the chastity and the explicit sex, of which we are afraid, are all mingled. So that's it -- this is why cinema is so necessary. We cannot sum it up in words.

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ROMANCE

*** (Not rated)

BY ROGER EBERT

There is a fantasy scene in "Romance" where a woman's body is divided by a wall. On one side, from the waist down, she is in a brothel. On the other side, from the waist up, in a delivery room. What is the message of the scene? Don't be too sure you know. I know I don't. It isn't some kind of simplistic message linking childbirth with misuse by men. The woman having the fantasy isn't really against the activities on either side of the wall. Maybe the scene is intended as an illustration of her own confusion about sex.

The woman's name is Marie (Caroline Ducey). She could be the woman Freud was thinking about when he confessed he could not answer the question, "What do women want?" Marie asks herself the same question. She wants something, all right. She is unhappy with her boyfriend Paul, who refuses to sleep with her, and unhappy, too, with the sexual adventures she has. It's like there's a disconnect between her body and her identity. She does things that sometimes make her feel good, but she doesn't feel good because she has done them.

"Romance," written and directed by Catherine Breillat, became notorious on the festival circuit this autumn because it is an intelligent, radical film by a woman, and at the same time it contains explicit nudity and, as nearly as we can tell, actual sex. It is not arousing or pornographic, because the sex isn't presented in an erotic way; it's more like a documentary of a dogged woman's forced march toward orgasm, a goal she is not sure she values. Marie narrates the film herself and also seems to be reading pages from her journal; she is baffled by herself, baffled by men, baffled by sex. Even after climax, her hand closes on air.

Of course the film is French. It is said that for the French, wine takes the place of flirting, dining takes the place of seduction, smoking takes the place of foreplay and talking takes the place of sex. "Romance" is so analytical that you sometimes get the feeling Marie is putting herself through her sexual encounters simply to get material for her journal. These poor guys aren't lovers, they're case studies.

And yet the film has an icy fascination. Perhaps it is a test of how men and women relate to eroticism on the screen. I know few men who like it much (sure proof it is not pornographic). Women defend it in feminist terms, but you have the strangest feeling they're not saying what they really think. At a screening at the Toronto Film Festival there was some laughter, almost all female, but I couldn't tell if it was nervous, or knowing.

Perhaps the sex content gets in the way, causing our old tapes to play.

When we see a stud on the screen (like Rocco Siffredi, in real life an Italian porno actor famous for one very good reason), we go into porno mode and expect to see--well, what we usually see. But "Romance" doesn't have that mode. Marie relates to Paolo (Siffredi's character) as if he is a laboratory specimen. So this is the famous white rat she has heard so much about. Can he bring her pleasure? Is it perhaps a matter of physical endowment?

And what about Robert (Francois Berleand), who offers to tie her up? He is an ordinary man, not handsome, not exciting, but he has all the necessary equipment and skills, and when he makes his offer, she agrees, as if he is a guide at Disney World suggesting one more ride she should try before leaving the park. Does she like bondage? She goes back for more. Perhaps it is not the sexual side that pleases her, but the fact that when Robert is arranging his ropes and restraints, at least he is thinking about her.

There is a scene in the movie that looks like rape, but is it? She more or less invites the stranger who mistreats her. She wants--well, she wants to take a chance, and then she finds out she didn't like it. So she's defiant toward the guy, but it's not anger at how he treated her, it's triumph that she feels undefeated. Later, there is a gynecological examination--perhaps the creepiest scene in the movie, as interns line up for their turn.

I did not really enjoy this movie, and yet I recommend it. Why? Because I think it's on to something interesting. Movies buy the whole romantic package, lock, stock and barrel. People look great, fall in love and have wonderful sex. Even intelligent characters in smart movies all seem to think more or less the same way while they're in the sack. Erogenous autopilot takes over. Here is a movie about a woman who never stops thinking. That may not be as good for you as it is for her.

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Excerpts from Senses of Cinema (sensesofcinema.com)

Catherine Breillat

b. July 13, 1948, Bressuire, France

by Brian Price

The central preoccupation of Catherine Breillat's work is the sexuality of women. That is, in and of itself, no major accomplishment. How many male directors, by contrast, are not in some way preoccupied with women? Of course, the preoccupation with female sexuality in most forms of cinematic production is marked by exhibitionism rather than introspection; it reassures where it could tear apart. Even in a film like Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale* (2002), any effort to revise the image of the figure of the *femme fatale* along feminist lines is undercut by extensive displays of the female body. In this case, the *femme fatale* may no longer be the cause of the *noir* hero's downfall, but she is still the source of visual pleasure. Although, Breillat's films also tread a very fine line between exhibitionism and introspection—she admits that they are, after all, always about sex—they do so under the guidance of a fundamental difference in conception. In Breillat's own words: "I take sexuality as a subject, not as

an object."

But, of course, this formulation is only half right. Her films are, as I have said, uniquely concerned with a woman's understanding of her own sexuality. The representation of this sexual reckoning encompasses a wide range of issues including the adolescent obsession with the loss of virginity, in films like *Une vraie jeune fille* (1975) and *36 Fillette* (1988); a woman's (possibly) masochistic relation to sex in *Romance* (1999); and the seemingly unbridgeable sexual and emotional gulf between an older woman and a younger man, in *Parfait amour!* (1996) and *Brève traversée* (2001). However, the films are also sexually explicit; contrary to Breillat's assertion, sex is an object as well as a subject in her films. Moreover, the sexual acts on display in Breillat's films are not only explicit, they are often unsimulated, a characteristic of her films that has contributed to her unflattering (in my view) international reputation as the auteur of porn. For Breillat, the visual display of sex is inseparable from the representation of the consciousness of her female characters. The representation of sex is also central to the development of her visual style—a level of innovation that has been grossly overlooked in contemporary film culture. And herein lies both the challenge and the controversy of her work.

Catherine Breillat's preoccupation with the representation of female sexuality began very early in her artistic career. Breillat began as a writer, publishing her first novel, *L'homme facile*, when she was just 17. Ironically, the book was banned for readers under the age of 18 in France for its explicit and transgressive sexual content, thus initiating Breillat into a lifetime of controversy. Breillat would quickly gain a reputation as the female De Sade, the new Bataille—a purveyor of transgressive sexuality. Breillat went on to publish seven novels and one play, many of which she would herself adapt to the screen.

Breillat transitioned to filmmaking in 1975 with an adaptation of her fourth novel, *Le Soupirlail*, retitled *Une vraie jeune fille*. Standing in between this transition from novelist to director was a brief, but no doubt highly influential, acting stint. In 1972, Breillat appeared in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, playing a character named Mouchette. Bertolucci could not have chosen this name more wisely, drawn, as it is, from the eponymous protagonist of Robert Bresson's *Mouchette* (1966). Bresson's *Mouchette*, a very young, utterly disenfranchised girl who is both sexually precocious, sexually abused, and suicidal, was likely a template for many of Breillat's own tortured adolescents. But Bertolucci's film, which centers on the emotional anguish of an American man in Paris who begins an anonymous and transgressive affair in a empty, dilapidated Paris flat, was no doubt a major influence on Breillat's representation of sexuality. Indeed, in *36 Fillette*, Breillat cast Jean-Pierre Léaud, who also had a brief role in *Last Tango in Paris*. And, of course, the censorship problems that Bertolucci faced with *Last Tango in Paris*, for its representation of sodomy, amongst other things, were ones with which Breillat would become increasingly familiar.

Breillat's first film did not see the light of day until twenty-five years later, when it was released in France in 2000. *Une vraie jeune fille* was shelved by its backers for, once again, its transgressive look at the

sexual awakening of an adolescent girl. And it is not so hard to see why. *Une vraie jeune fille* is an awkward film. It represents Breillat at her most Bataillesque, freely mingling abstract images of female genitalia, mud, and rodents into this otherwise realist account of a young girl's sexual awakening. In her summary of Susan Sontag's defense of a literary strain of pornography, Linda Williams offers what stands as an apt description of Breillat's approach in *Une vraie jeune fille*, where an "elitist, avant-garde, intellectual, and philosophical pornography of imagination [is pitted against] the mundane, crass materialism of a dominant mass culture." (2) There is no way, in other words, to integrate this film into a commodity driven system of distribution. It does not offer visual pleasure, at least not one that comes without intellectual engagement, and, more importantly, rigorous self-examination—hence Breillat's assertion that sex is the subject, not the object, of her work.

The difficulty of Breillat's work—that is, her steadfast refusal to make conventionally erotic images, or films, for that matter, which don't deal with sex at all—has led to a myriad of censorship problems. Her second film, *Tapage Nocturne* (1979), which also details the sexual longing of a young woman, and was adapted from her novel of the same name, also met with censorship. Although the film was released, access to it forbidden to anyone under 18. But it was with the release of *Romance* in 1999 that Breillat would face censorship internationally, when the film was either banned altogether in some countries, or given an X rating. It was a situation Breillat spoke out about when she declared that, "censorship was a male preoccupation, and that the X certificate was linked to the X chromosome." (3) Breillat's statement was echoed in the French poster for the film, which features a naked woman with her hand between her legs. A large red X is printed across the image, thus revealing the source of the trouble: a woman in touch with her own sense of sexual pleasure.

Romance, and the world-wide discourse about pornography that erupted in the wake of its release, best typifies the challenge and the interest of her work. *Romance* is about a woman, Marie, whose boyfriend refuses to have sex with her. Her frustration leads her to a series of affairs in an effort to not only find pleasure, but seemingly to arrive at some better understanding of her own desire. The film is sexually explicit, and features, as do many of Breillat's films, acts of unsimulated sex, hence the many accusations leveled against Breillat that she is a pornographer. Indeed, Breillat willfully courted such accusations by casting Rocco Siffredi, a famous Italian porn star, as one of Marie's lovers. Moreover, Marie's sexual encounters are marked by a sense of sadomasochism. Indeed, after having her baby she winds up with a man who is also the principal of the school where she teaches, having blown up her apartment and her boyfriend (who is also, presumably, the father of her child) on the way to the hospital.

Romance was banned in Australia upon its release in January 2000. In his review of the Office of Film and Literature's (OFLC) report on the film, Adrian Martin describes the reason for the ban. And in so doing, Martin arrives at precisely the thing that makes Breillat's films so difficult, and so interesting. Martin surveys the censors' objection to the scene where Marie is solicited by a man in the hallway of her building. In this scene, a man offers Marie twenty-dollars to perform cunnilingus on her, to

which she assents without saying a word. Of course, more occurs, as Marie is turned over (or turns over) as her perpetrator then enters her from behind. As he continues, Marie seems to sob, and when he leaves, she shouts that she is not ashamed. Martin notes that in describing the scene, the writer of the OFLC report says that "he orders Marie to turn over," and that she tries to "scuffle away." (4) Martin replies, "...I did not see Marie try to 'scuffle away' during the scene, or be forced to turn over." (5) Martin's point is that this writer's language reveals his own moral response to an image, as opposed to what is actually present in the image: "One of the most interesting things about *Romance* is the way in which it inscribes in its own material ambiguous designation of obscenity." (6) In other words, neither Breillat nor Caroline Ducey (Marie) give us any concrete signs of her own response to what is happening. We cannot walk away confident of Marie's outrage, only our own, at best. Indeed, the whole scene begins with a voice-over where Marie proclaims that it is, in fact, her fantasy to be taken this way. Yet, the act itself is inscribed into the realist space of the plot, thus blurring the line between fantasy and reality that is signaled by Marie's voice-over.

As such, when we watch this act on screen, and many others like it, we are left only with what we think of what we see. Moreover, we project our own values back on to the screen, as Martin further notes when he cites a review of the film that describes the scene between Marie and Rocco Siffredi as a "humiliating affair." (7) Of course, there is, to my eyes, no signs of humiliation in that scene. If anything, it is a frank and very physical depiction of a sexual encounter. Siffredi asks Marie if he can have anal sex with her, an act that stands as the possible source of said humiliation. However, this possibility is complicated by the fact that she very calmly consents, on the condition that he first continue to make love to her. Moreover, the scene begins with Marie telling Siffredi, while holding a soiled condom, how men like to keep things hidden—how easily they are disgusted. The only sign of shame in the sequence comes when she admits to Siffredi, in the middle of sex, that she only sleeps with men that she doesn't like. If there is shame here, it is the viewer's.

And that's just the point. Breillat exposes us to sexual encounters, often very volatile ones, but does not tell us what to think about them. She does not, I believe, judge her characters, or their desires. But that does not mean, however, that Breillat's images and characters are necessarily removed from moral consideration. Rather, the opacity of her characters, the material designations of obscenity, to borrow Martin's phrase, only make the films more meaningful.

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This resistance to simple, and therefore limiting, character comprehension, is the key to Breillat's films, all of which stands as efforts to represent the consciousness of her female characters in extremely complex terms. She does not afford us the easy access to the mind of women that one finds in mainstream film where a woman's consciousness is always externalized. Breillat is very clear about this, as she has said:

There is no masculine psychology in my cinema. There is only the resentments and desires of women. A man should not attempt to recognize himself in my male characters. On the other hand, he can find [in the

films] a better understanding of women. And knowledge of the other is the highest goal. (8)

Therein lies one of the chief virtues of Breillat's work, and the very trait that makes it just as important for men as it is for women. In refusing to represent male psychology in any significant way, Breillat not only refuses to reinforce conventional patterns of identification, but asks that men learn something about women; or at the very least, the male spectator is refused easy signs of character psychology. However, Breillat's innovations are by no means limited to questions of identification and character psychology—though these questions do stand at the center.

One of the unfortunate consequences of Breillat's reputation as the auteur of porn is that it has obscured the much more interesting fact of her engagement with the history of modernist filmmaking. Breillat is a central figure in European film culture. In addition to her stint in the Bertolucci film, Breillat has written screenplays for directors such as Maurice Pialat (*Police*, 1985), Federico Fellini (*And the Ship Sails On*, 1983), Liliana Cavani (*The Skin*, 1981) and many others. Likewise, her own films have shown an interest in the expansion of genre, a major characteristic of European modernist filmmaking, as in her renovation of the *policier* in *Sale comme un ange* (1991). Moreover, Breillat is vocal about the filmmakers who have shaped her conception of cinema, consistently praising the work of figures such as Warhol, Pasolini, Oshima, Dreyer, and Bresson—all of whom can be felt in Breillat's films in very interesting ways. (9)

Perhaps the largest influence on Breillat's work is to be found in Italian neorealism, or at least in the idea of neorealism. Breillat's films often move quite slowly. She prefers long takes with few camera set-ups. She is very interested in documenting the quotidian, more fond of watching a young girl walking down the street than she is in setting that same character before an easily resolved conflict in an effort to keep the narrative moving. In this sense, Breillat gets much closer to Zavattini's famous idea about neorealism and what it would replace:

...the most important innovation, of what is called neorealism, it seems to me, is to have realized that the necessity of the 'story' was only an unconscious way of disguising human defeat, and that the kind of imagination it involved was simply a technique of superimposing dead formulas over living social facts. (10)

In the case of Breillat, this realist tendency is always put in the service of living social facts. Indeed, the sexuality on display in her films is well described by the idea of "living social facts."

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Breillat's films are also characterized by a high degree of reflexivity, thus further signaling her indebtedness to European modernism. This reflexive tendency of her work often confronts the realist dimension of her filmmaking in interesting ways.

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...Breillat's tendency to disrupt her own realist narratives is, I would argue, part of a larger concern to analyze not only the conventions of filmmaking that she is interested in negating, but also the ones that she is employing. In other words, she distrusts realism as a strategy even though it is her preferred mode of representation.

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Along the same lines, Breillat is also one of the most important colorists working in film today. That is, she often uses color not only naturalistically, but as an important form of signification.

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Breillat's work is obviously the product of a major auteur. Her dismissal as the auteur of porn, then, speaks volumes. For one, it excludes her from the accolades with which her male counterparts have long been lavished, and to whom she bears a resemblance. But also, to deny the importance of Breillat's work, to relegate her to a realm outside of art, would be to demand that art merely confirm our ways of thinking instead of challenging them. And this is, I would imagine, what Breillat had in mind when she told an interviewer, "I don't really think about my audience very much." The point, in other words, is not to satisfy expectations, but to confound them. And thus new ideas, new ways of seeing, can emerge.

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