

Catherine Breillat's Cine-erotic *Anti-Romance*: Visualizing the Extremities of Desire

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Abstract

Working contiguously with the tradition of feminist explicit body performance art and within the contours of the newly named movement of French cinema dubbed “*Cinema du corps*,” or the “New French Extremity,” Catherine Breillat has been teasing daringly the slippery, porous, and much-contested borders separating art from pornography throughout her entire, almost forty-year, filmmaking career. Her “erofilms” are visually and performatively allied with a politically motivated, contemporaneous tendency in the visual arts: the proliferation of female-authored visual images featuring the (female) body nude and sexual. Breillat’s self-conscious—albeit extremely controversial—engagement with and representation of nudity, unflinching eroticism, and sexual frankness in films such as *Romance X (Romance)* (1999) seeks to strategically break down artistic and bodily protocols, claiming the right to self-representation for women and attempting to expose the omissions and absences perpetrated within and by the dominant, male-authored visual tradition. Strongly inflected by her intellectual, aesthetic, and feminist sensibilities, *Romance X*, Breillat’s challenging filmic tale, manifests the filmmaker’s firm intention to visually explore the, often, unarticulated and unrepresented aspects of female desire, female sexual experience, and female-male relations. In this film, the first of three films in which she addresses female sexuality in unprecedentedly explicit terms, Breillat engages the female erotic/sexual nude and recreates it outside of the patriarchal visual vocabulary in order to present a self-contained, self-defined, pleased female-identified erotic integration, and, eventually, liberation. By adapting *and* subverting both experimental film traditions and mainstream porn tactics, Breillat manages to unsettle authoritative presumptions underpinning the erotic image in these two representational domains. The power of her cine-erotic fable lies in its ability to provide a conduit into the dominant, masculinist-inflected culturescape (or “imagescape”), allowing her cinematic vision—highly distinctive if not radically new—to function correctively on it, without, however, exhibiting the pedantic affectations of other (feminist) avant-garde filmmakers.

Keywords: Catherine Breillat, *Romance*, erotic, visual tradition, feminism

Setting the Stage

Finely attuned to the French feminist agenda by the mid-seventies, when she attempted to make her directorial debut with the film *Une Vraie Jeune Fille (A True Young Girl)* (1976), Catherine Breillat has been, since then, introducing to the French cinematic ecosystem graphic and confrontational texts whose primary goal is to challenge the dominant visual culture and its disempowering representations of the erotic female body. In the work of the French filmmaker this visceral, material, erotic body becomes the stage, the medium, and the artwork. In that respect her oeuvre bears strong affinities with the vision and the practices of other feminist artists of the late 1960s and 1970s who explicitly addressed and sought to recover hitherto repressed elements of the female psychical and bodily topology. Indeed, from the late 1960s onwards, dramatic nudity, mild sexual contact, and obscene language were becoming increasingly integrated into the counter-cultural performance art of a number of western female artists who combined their art with blatant feminist activism. These artists/performers welcomed the erotic as an object of performance and went on to connect pornographic impulses with cutting-edge drama in order to challenge established conventions, values, and tastes. By means of exploring taboo subjects, such as “the male body through a ‘female gaze,’ or [the] active female sexual drive imagined as something other than monstrous and something other than phallobesessive,”¹ the so-called “explicit body performance artists” tried to effect an intervention within patriarchal culture and its structures of male and female sexuality and pleasure.

Insofar as the feminist explicit body performance art of that timeframe worked to “question the basis of existing aesthetic norms and values whilst also extending the possibilities of those codes and offering alternative and progressive representations of female identity,”² it could be positively argued that it was necessarily subversive, even if, at times, ambiguously so. Also, it may, without exaggeration, be asserted that explicit body performance art marked the beginning of an era when female subjectivity, inextricably bound to and not apart or beyond the body, would be reaffirmed as neither impossible nor similarly victimizing as the normative male one.

1. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 38-39.

2. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 62.

Structured upon and around the female body, the alternative politicization of aesthetics and aestheticization of politics that it enunciated functioned as antidotes against the noxious effects of circulating regressive, masculinist consensus myths and iconographies of all sorts, and, especially, against those that included the female body only to contain, harness, and profit from it. Breillat's experimental yet rigorous engagement with various aspects of the explicit erotic image bears testament to her work's contiguity with explicit body performance art and points emphatically to the fact that she brought together in her work both the strand of counter-culture practice and that of feminist praxis, creating new and progressive meanings for them both. Beginning in the mid-1970s and throughout her career the filmmaker would consistently attempt to undermine cultural phobias about woman's bodies and sexuality, to combat sexism, and homophobia, and to break the male gaze by returning control of women's bodies to themselves.

The politics of subversion in Breillat's films became even more intense throughout the eighties and nineties, culminating in the dismissal of her work by several anti-pornography feminists, notably, after the release of her "scandalously" sexually explicit 1999 film *Romance X*. In spite of the director's assertions that the depictions of sexual activity in her work comment on "the essential incompatibility between male-oriented erotica and the distinct vocabulary of female sexual expression"³ and do not operate in ways that could enhance the potential for erotic pleasure for the male viewer, there were feminist critics who deplored the possibilities for reappropriation of the female erotic body into the voyeuristic structures of the patriarchal tradition; possibilities (supposedly) present in Breillat's visual art. Yet, for all the adverse criticisms and concerns she received, the filmmaker continued to take the risk of creating visual art in which images of the female body nude and sexual abound and whose interpretation, obviously, cannot be guaranteed. Acknowledging the fact that her art is open to an array of interpretive possibilities, ranging from the progressive to the reactionary, although all the while insisting that she does not cross over into male-oriented pornography, Breillat has been taking a risk that can be seen as productive, at least of new possible viewing positions for her audience.

3. Xavier Mendix, introduction to *Peep Shows: Cult Film and the Cine-Erotic*, ed. Xavier Mendix (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 7.

From Hardcore to “Artcore”

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, in the heyday of her cinematic career, Breillat’s films reveal the filmmaker’s deep fascination with the obscene body as well as with transgressive and introspective explorations of female sexuality. By cinematically probing into the microdynamics of sexual relations and desire, especially through the imagery of anticipatory sexual excess and abject representations of the female body and its secretions, she becomes synonymous with the fin-de-siècle trend, or tendency, in French cinema: New Extremism. The term, as Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall are quick to clarify, instead of suggesting unprecedented filmic approaches, tropes, and techniques, reflects a “bridging position between newness and indebtedness to the past, to a history of transgression and provocation [in the arts] that is renewed and given a visceral immediacy for the present.”⁴ Within the context of contemporary film culture the term “has been used to describe and often decry the work of a range of French directors,”⁵ including Breillat. By showing real, unsimulated penetration, directors, such as Breillat in *Romance X, À ma soeur! (Fat Girl)* (2001), and *Anatomie de l’Enfer (Anatomy of Hell)* (2004), blur the line of distinction between porn and *cinéma d’auteur*. By doing so, they provoke a discussion about what art is (not) allowed to do, when one form of art ends and the other begins, and who is entitled to conclusively determine these issues; a discussion unable to satisfy any teleological interest insofar as it cannot be driven to a complete conclusion and/or resolution. The basic focus of “New Extremist” films lies on the presentation of human sexuality and the performing body in its intimacy; an intimacy that reveals itself as brutal, not only because it undermines the distance between movie and viewer, but because it conspicuously reveals the thin line between sex and death, desire and violation. This newly named movement of French cinema manifests a collective emphasis on visceral and brutal images intended to shock and provoke the spectator into a more active viewing situation and, hopefully, into questioning their habitual mode of perceiving, interpreting, and experiencing (sexual) reality.

Indeed, as we shall also see further on, the element of transgression (especially as it pertains to the exploration of the obscene body and of aspects of female

4. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, introduction to *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, ed. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 1.

sexuality), which replaced an earlier celebratory notion of the female body in Breillat's filmic texts, is intended to have specific consequences for personal and social consciousness and to, perhaps, progressively bridge ruptures between women with considerably different views of sexuality.⁶ It is pertinent to point out at this juncture two elements that appear to be unmistakably present in all of the filmmaker's works: namely, her critical engagement with "ways of seeing, specifically perspectivalism, which has inscribed women as given to be seen but not as given to see," and her insolence towards precedent terms of avant-garde art transgression, as she raises "questions about modernist 'shock value' and the particular fascination with a 'primitive,' sexual, and excremental body."⁷ "At base," then, the explicit, obscene body in Breillat's work "interrogates socio-cultural understandings of the 'appropriate' and/or the appropriately transgressive—particularly who gets to mark what (in)appropriate where, and, who has the right to appropriate what where—keeping in mind the double meaning of the word 'appropriate'."⁸ Ultimately, her violent and sexual embodied scenarios do not only engage in a playful tug-of-war between sublimation and de-sublimation of the "erotic," and, by extension, of the "human," but also prove the two pulls as immanent to the human condition betraying efforts at settling the game as suspiciously insecure.

In the Realm of the Senses: Symbolic Framings

One of Breillat's most sexually explicit productions, her notorious *Romance X*, constitutes a study on female disaffection and discontent with sexual relationships and of female empowerment through the attainment of sexual maturity. The liberal, non-puritanical French environment of the 1990s gave to the filmmaker the opportunity to explore controversial issues related to the horrors of male sexual politics in ways unimaginable in the past. In featuring sadomasochistic sexual acts, rape, public fellatio, and cross-over porn actors (such as Rocco Siffreddi, a cult star in the porn industry) and in including actual, not simulated intercourse between actors, *Romance*

6. Opposing obscenity and pornography by utilizing, or, rather, by manipulating the very ways people construct the two, Breillat's work accommodates a paradox that can only be comprehended if one considers the fundamentally paradoxical character of both culture and pornography and, specifically, the fact that they both can as easily offend *and* educate, degrade *and* exalt.

7. Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, 3.

8. Ibid.

X disrupts dominant discourses surrounding the screening of sex in both mainstream and high-art productions as well as the emerging trend for “porn studies.” Yet, instead of gratuitously exhibiting the kind of irredentist spirit of incitement and confrontation that accounts for shock tactics, *Romance X* bespeaks an extreme cultural crisis, manifesting as a sexual identity crisis, and responds to it with equally extreme measures.



Figure 1. Marie and Paul in clinical apparel appear as products of their aseptic surroundings.

The film revolves around the figure of a woman, Marie (Caroline Ducey), who plunges into a self-exploratory, and at times self-destructive, sexual odyssey in order to compensate for her sexless relationship with her indifferent boyfriend, Paul (Sagamore Stévenin); a relationship that leaves her sexually starved and existentially unfulfilled. Marie interprets Paul’s lack of sexual interest as a personal rejection and grows increasingly frustrated, even desperate, with her predicament. Her growing frustration leads her to the pursuit of sexual encounters outside her relationship; encounters by which she is at times victimized and at times empowered but through which she eventually gains sexual and emotional maturity. Throughout the film, and particularly in its first part, Breillat uses the stark white and beige of the couple’s clothing and apartment as a visual index to the woman’s impoverished affective/sensual, emotional, as well as sexual reality. The protagonists’ plain cotton, white clothes and undergarments, resembling medical uniforms, and their minimalist, all-white apartment, a hygienic environment resembling a hospital ward, bespeak their

sterilized (erotic) life. The visual impact of the protagonists' clothes is further enhanced in settings such as the club they frequent; a setting whose dense profusion of colors and textures creates a sharp contrast with the couple's clinical apparel. Their white clothes become a metaphor for a sickly, instead of elevated, purity; a visible index or testimony of the lack of intimacy and passion between them. When, in the second part of the film, and following the female protagonist's first sexual experimentations, Marie appears in a feminine red dress and black lingerie we are left with no doubt as to her sexual evolution; her visual transformation accompanying and revealing her new-found passionate sense of self. Clad in red, Marie seems to have been infected by the overwhelming colorfulness which visually engulfs her sadomasochist lover, Robert (François Berléand)⁹. With red symbolizing sexuality, passion, maturity, violence, and strong emotions (from rage to lust) and with black symbolizing death, and as such indicating the end of feminine purity on the part of the female protagonist—but also prefiguring Paul's death in the end of the film, when Marie is, notably, dressed from head to foot in long, black garments—the filmmaker leaves no central aspect of her story chromatically uncorroborated. Marie moves from virginal white to scarlet and then to black, following a sensuous trajectory that takes her away from a male-authored ideal of femininity (from disembodiment, disorientation, and self-alienation) and brings her closer to an uncompromising negation of this ideal through sexual fulfillment (to embodiment, re-orientation and self-realization). The film's color symbolism effectively crystallizes the development of characters and narrative plot. Interweaving an expressionist strand to her visual text by means of her carefully choreographed color palettes, Breillat provides a symbolic framing that renders her cine-erotic tale accessible even to the least visually trained viewer.

Nevertheless, color symbolism is not the only kind of symbolism Breillat applies to the construction of her visual artifact. Hair, a universal marker of feminine and sexual identity, constitutes great part of the film's symbolic import. In fact, the hair of the female protagonist functions as an eloquent symbol of her psychic state(s) throughout the film. Drawing on a lexicon of signs and symbols constitutive of western social semiotics, the filmmaker puts into unconventional use one of the most conventional cultural encodings of female identity: hair style. In manipulating hair

9. Robert is the middle-aged principal of the elementary school where Marie works as a teacher.

symbolism so as to tease out meanings conspicuously related to the awakening, or rather the development, of female sexuality, Breillat not only challenges hair symbolism's affinities with insidious cultural encodings and, by extension, their patriarchal ideological underpinnings—legacy of a medieval and a Victorian past—but also, albeit implicitly, mounts an argument for the idea(l) of femininity as a culturally constructed and performed set of signs and symbols. The control of hair in Marie's case implies a control of her emotions whereas the loosening of hair-control designates the loosening of emotions. Her loosely tied hair in the opening scene of the movie operates as a visual cue to the female protagonist's inability and/or unwillingness to partake of her male companion's sexual uptightness, which borders on sexual aversion disorder (SAD),¹⁰ and points towards her future sexual receptiveness. Marie's hair loosen analogously to her sexual energy and behavior, thus signaling the woman's gradual sexual empowerment: it is almost loose during her first exploratory sexual encounter with Paolo (Rocco Siffreddi), when she still bears a considerable burden of guilt and shame, and completely loose during her later willing and confident sadomasochist experimentations with Robert, when her sexuality is, for all intents and purposes, unrestrained. Finally, Marie's disheveled hair, haloing a gloriously serene face, in the penultimate scene of the film—when the protagonist holds her newborn child in her arms—signifies the woman's accomplishment of a long-longed-for liberation and enlightenment: a psychological, emotional, and sexual maturity that, partly due to Marie's satisfaction and confidence in motherhood, has now reached its highest peak.

Brutal Intimacies

The film's overt symbolism coheres with its thematic exploration of sexual transgression as a means of escaping a sexless existence and social taboos regarding sex and female sexuality. Throughout *Romance X*, Breillat skillfully stages symbolism's interaction with a highly expressive mise-en-scène and framing as well

10. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (4th ed., Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), 541-43. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, sexual aversion disorder, or SAD, is the persistent or recurrent extreme aversion to, and avoidance of, all (or almost all) genital sexual contact with a sexual partner, which may range from moderate anxiety and lack of pleasure to extreme psychological distress.

as with provocative experimentations with the physicality of the film. This interaction serves to illustrate the internal impact that sexual experiences have on Marie and the role they play in her erotic, personal-growth trajectory. From the outset of the film, the enclosed, aseptic nature of Marie's domestic environment—a cold environment that seems to impinge upon the woman, turning her inward and outward life into a sterile, empty space—provides a visual context and stimulus for the woman's desire for escape. Breillat conspicuously delineates a relationship between space and sexual behavior; a relationship established by a number of associations the film makes between sexual inactivity and inside space, on the one hand, and between sexual activity and outside space, on the other. Throughout the first part of the film, we witness Marie desperately seeking to escape from a piercing, suffocating space within which her sense of entrapment is further compounded due to the sexless nature of her relationship with Paul and the passionless, narcissistic order he imposes on their life. She begins to pursue sexual engagements outside the monogamous, restrictive boundaries of her relationship in an attempt to break the confines of an aseptic, apathetic existence, even if that involves traumatizing herself in the process—as a matter of fact, she does not hesitate to subject herself to occasionally painful, even, life-threatening, transgressive sexual experiences.



Figure 2: Marie's image is fractured; we see her in pieces.

The female protagonist cascades into her sexual odyssey, metaphorically and visually, broken up in pieces. Indeed, from the earliest sequences of the film our image of Marie is fractured: we see her via a constellation of close-up and extreme close-up shots or, blended with her surroundings, brushing her teeth in front of a mirror, in a shot that presents her body as the ultimate site of self-alienation (and, later, retrieval). Her image will remain thus fractured until the last third of the film. Moreover, the voiceover soundtrack, with the abstraction of its words grafted onto the direct carnality of the images, not only stunts the film's potential as a source for erotic pleasure, but also enhances this effect of severance which, ultimately, serves to underscore the distance that exists between Marie's thoughts/fantasies and visceral sensations; a distance that resonantly alludes to the split inflicted on the female subject within patriarchy, one that divides her in two, "inhabiting either the object position of feminine sexuality or the laboring position of maternal activity."¹¹ This split or division is most expressively articulated in Marie's brothel fantasy and in the medical examination scene that precedes it.

It is of outmost importance to note that the brothel fantasy is triggered due to Marie's medical examination by a doctor and a series of medical students, after she has become pregnant by Paul, and in the course of which the male medics treat Marie as "a piece of meat," ("une pièce de cuir").¹² While Marie contemplates on the construction of masculine desire in terms of the Madonna/whore binary, at work in Paul's disdain for her sexual desires and in the medics' treatment of her body, we get to watch this duality graphically depicted in a fantasy scene where a number of women are laid on examination tables in a circular room. The women's lower bodies are separated by a wall from their upper bodies and while heads and torsos are located in a hospital-like room, tenderly attended by their male partners, their lower bodies appear laid in a decadent, dark and dirty place, resembling a cavernous brothel, where they are inspected and fucked by a group of men. The verbal/cerebral and the visceral clash and collide in that scene, as the actions taking place in the two different dream

11. Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 30.

12. Catherine Breillat, *Romance X*, directed by Catherine Breillat. (1999; Paris: Rézo Films), Film.

spaces do, emphasizing the division that exists in the life of our protagonist between sex as a set of fantasy structures, a mental construct, and sex as a wholly tactile, sensory experience. It is this very division, resulting from Marie's partial internalization of the aforementioned masculinist Madonna/whore binary, that which lies at the root of her psychical *malaise*.

Interestingly, the sentiments of the examination and brothel-fantasy sequence echo several feminist critiques of patriarchal culture. According to these critiques, heterosexual men enmeshed in patriarchal culture—including men exercising medical authority—view women either as sexual objects (whore) or de-sexualised objects of worship (Madonna/mother), thus generating false dichotomies that plague women's psychic and material lives and interfere with their sense of completeness. Moreover, by means of this sequence, as well as by means of the two bondage scenes as we shall soon see, and by juxtaposing images of the penetration of Marie's vagina as sexual object with images of its invasion as part of medical procedure, Breillat casts a ponderous look at, and tests, or even, goes beyond the limits of the erotic/sexual and the pathological. In fact, she brings these two supposedly inverse discourses to bear on the invaded, penetrated female body—a body constituting an invading, a tactile presence; a poriferous, humid, hairy, impinging space. Perhaps more semiotically dense and eloquent than any other part of the film, this sequence caustically comments on and intervenes in dominant sexual politics.





Figure 3: Stills from the medical examination- brothel fantasy sequence.

Discussing the film's treatment of the intersection of conflicting pressures (such as fantasy, sexual needs and desires, and social reality) in terms of psychological realism, Tanya Krzywinska notes that

[t]he film makes use of graphic sexual imagery which carry a realist cache because the acts depicted are not simulated, but unlike hard-core these are designed to address real-life problems, tensions and conflicts of interest that arise in relation to sex, including gender politics and the complexities of interpersonal relations.¹³

What we could add to preceding argument is that via the surrealist stylistic excess of the sequence and its culturally prohibited and visually illicit images, Breillat offers a vision of female corporeality and abjection that enacts a de-objectification of the body that, in turn, implies a liberating gesture vis-à-vis the reductive regimentation of the corporeal by the male hegemony of the spectacle. In this particular filmic unit, *Romance X* bears testament to Breillat's intention to move away from conventional filmmaking towards a more baroque, tactile aesthetic in an attempt to disturb boundaries and infiltrate surfaces—including that of the film image itself. The tactile

13. Tanya Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 46.

gaze of Breillat's camera—gaze that probes the surface and lingers in the folds of matter animate and one inanimate and one that refuses visual ellipsis—constitutes the means by which the filmmaker engages viewers with the teeming horror(s) of materiality. This tactile aesthetic is precisely what disrupts an economy of vision in which “looking” is gendered masculine and “being looked” is gendered feminine within the context of the film. By putting emphasis on tactility, Breillat disrupts the relations of distance and control that supposedly undergird the viewing experience—as she did with the Madonna/whore binary that contributes to Marie's imaginary/sensory split. As we shall further discuss below, the filmmaker injects into her “fleshy” narrative scenes of extreme ambivalence and then harnesses the emergent contradictions in order to expose and problematize “the traps of conventional heterosexual sexuality and femininity”¹⁴ and to subvert absolute truths and binaries. In all of the scenes of brutal intimacy that occur during the film, Marie is shown to be actively looking as well as guiding, rather than simply receiving, the male gaze—even in moments when she occupies extremely compromised positions. Indeed, the female protagonist is constructed by Breillat as the subject of her own desire: actively rendering herself an object of desire, putting her body on display, and allowing it to be put on display. Marie plays the role of the exhibitionist, and the role of the masochist as we shall see further on, only in *her* own terms.

In scenes of exhibition, specifically during acts of utmost intimacy, Marie's body is rendered porous, malleable, bent; the relation between the inside and the outside of the body is visually rendered problematic; the composure of the body is unsettled. Images of her body confront the spectator with their irrefutable materiality and viscosity. By introducing the spectator into the body's tactile field the filmmaker plays upon the idea of cinematic spectatorship as a “violent communication,”¹⁵ in which the reception of the images is experienced as a “violence perpetrated against the eye” and the “basic tactility and viscosity of cinematic experiences” bears the potential to assault and invade the spectator.¹⁶ By making

14. Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (4th ed., New York: Routledge, 2013), 330.

15. Georges Bataille, *Guilty* (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1988), 154.

16. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, trans. Bruce Boon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 51.

spectators feel, as much as see, the images of Marie's body displayed Breillat renders the woman's exhibition disturbing for the viewer. Equally disturbing is the defiant display of male genitalia in film. Seeking to probe the reality of sex the spectator's look is projected back on itself, thus becoming the object of scrutiny on the part of the filmmaker. The sense of visual discomfort and violation that *Romance X* engenders is less the result of the explicit sexual content than the result of the shameless exposure and confrontation of the viewer with the libidinal impulses of their look. The film's blunt exposure of the moral, witting or unwitting, complicity of the viewer in subjecting the female body to a controlling gaze, in order to draw pleasure from it, is mainly the reason why *Romance X*, despite its explicit sexual imagery, is surprisingly unarousing. Its brutality appears, therefore, to lie less in its manifestation(s) of sexual exhibitionism than in the confrontation of the spectators with their desire to look and to be fascinated by the display and consumption of sexuality as an image.

Empowering Submission

Breillat's concern with cinematically exploring female sexuality in ways that go beyond stark distinctions between the sexual and the pathological and/or beyond an idea of woman as either victim or agent is notable in scenes in which Marie is engaged in sadomasochism. In these sex scenes *Romance X* manifests itself as a veritable anatomy of desire in which Breillat seizes the body as material and metaphor, combing the visual with the tactile, pleasure and power, anxiety and ambivalence. The said scenes constitute—to borrow from Tanya Horeck's commentary on a slightly different context—"key affective moments, which function not as static sexual spectacles but as performative scenarios that actively work to interrogate and rewrite the terms of the heterosexual encounter."¹⁷ Ultimately, the filmmaker succeeds in accentuating the snares of the visual order by turning, as it were, the cinematic apparatus against itself: by subverting the camera's objectivity with an aesthetic sensibility that confers on her these filmic units a quality of visceral surrealism which is at times parodic and at others overtly ritualistic—often simultaneously.

17. Tanya Horeck, "A 'Passion for the Real': Sex, Affect and Performance in the Films of Andrea Arnold," in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, ed. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 178.

The sadomasochistic relationship that develops between Marie and Robert, a relationship that is *not* characterized by an uncontrolled dominant/passive dynamic, throws into sharp contrast Marie's sexual experiences with both Paul, Paolo, and with the stranger on the stairwell of her building (Reza Habouhossein). The latter sexual encounters are narratively and visually framed by Breillat as "sex under patriarchy";¹⁸ sex "joyless and punitive"¹⁹ (the man on the stairs essentially rapes Marie since he physically forces her to accept anal penetration).²⁰ In these scenes the filmmaker uses sex to emblemize the power struggles that arise within patriarchal societies. Conversely, in the scenes involving Marie's and Robert's sexual experimentations the traditional power relation ascribed to sexual intercourse and defined by gender in patriarchy is foundationally unsettled. "The masochist, wishing to be dominated, controlled, punished, and belittled by a sexual partner, is dependent on this treatment for the attainment of sexual pleasure":²¹ Marie is the "victim in search of a torturer . . . who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer."²² The masochistic relationship is thus an alliance, an agreement between two parties, a contract agreed to by both partners. As willing contractor in a mutual agreement, Marie in the two bondage scenes of *Romance X* retains a considerable amount of control during the entire exchange. Despite adopting the role of the submissive sexual

18. Butler, "Catherine Breillat: Anatomy of a Hard-core Agitator," in *Peep Shows*, 63.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Tanya Horeck, "Shame and the Sisters: Catherine Breillat's *À ma Soeur!* (Fat Girl)," in *Rape in Art Cinema*, ed. Dominique Russell (New York: Continuum Film Studies, 2010), 195-96, 199. As Tania Horeck succinctly argues, "[t]he ambiguity of the scene, and the uncertainty over and how it should be interpreted, is largely to the way that it eschews dominant representational paradigms of rape and victimhood," since Marie refuses any straightforward notion of victimhood in the wake of her violation, both in attempting to intervene in the "scripted interaction" that is her rape by demanding to be paid for the violation, and in troubling the script by refusing to be ashamed. Generally, "the notion of rape is fundamental to Breillat's philosophical exploration of heterosexual relations" and it is a visual specificity to her "envisioning of rape that enables her to articulate something about violence and desire that is only attainable cinematically," because cinema allows one to film contradictions; to capture the sexual moment as a scene of extreme ambivalence.

21. Jimmy Hay, "Inside/Outside: Space and Sexual Behavior in *Belle de Jour* and *La Pianiste*," in *A Companion to Luis Bunuel*, ed. Rob Stone and Julian Daniel Gutierrez-Albilla (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 569.

22. Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 20.

partner, Marie maintains control throughout and thus is, paradoxically, the more dominant partner in the exchange. That explains why the sadomasochistic experiences become a means to metamorphosis and liberation for Marie.

A juxtaposition of the two bondage scenes would, perhaps, more effectively illustrate the distance Marie has traversed between an early stage of frustrated sexual tensions and desires and a later stage of developed sexual consciousness and experience. In the first bondage scene Marie's body (with her signature white dress hitched up and her underwear pulled down so that her vagina is on display) is filmed in parts, fractured, severed from the face which marks its identity. Throughout this earlier scene Breillat cuts from the framed body shots to close up images of Marie's face; an expressive face functioning as a screen on which emotions of agony and ecstasy are alternately projected. In this scene Marie becomes a perfect icon of female *jouissance*. At first, when Robert ties her up, she enters a somnambulistic state, completely abandoning control over her body which hangs flaccid and lifeless-like. Gagged and bound by the rope, her image is reconstructed so as to resemble a contorted surrealist doll. Yet, unlike other cultural embodiments of female sexual pleasure and icons of ideal femininity, in which both female pleasure and violation are silent, or better, silenced, Breillat's images of Marie break that silence by making Marie's pleasure, as well as her discontent not only heard but felt. On one (diegetic) level, Marie's distress in her bondage is felt by Robert, who hastens to remove her constraints and then tenderly comforts her, and on another (extra-diegetic) level it is felt by the spectator. The very visibility of the initial perverse release that Marie experiences in her constraints and of her subsequent suffering in them disrupts the aestheticisation of her body and of the entire sadomasochist sexual encounter. The scene's viscerality seems to escape representation; it spills off the order of the image. The apparent lack of mediation in this scene, as in various scenes of intercourse and in Marie's masturbation scene, is shocking to the viewer; in fact, it attests to *Romance*'s tactile presence; a tactile presence that radically and progressively—in aesthetic and political terms—rewrites the body in ways that foregrounds female (bodily) identity.



Figure 4: Stills from the first bondage scene.

The changes we can trace from the first to the second bondage scene correspond to a movement in *Romance X* from “the confusion of pleasure and pain . . . to rebirth in a new whole form, and a new embodied imagery of female presence and identity.”²³ Whereas in the first bondage scene Marie’s body is filmed in pieces, in the

23. Emma Wilson, “Deforming Fertility: Catherine Brellat’s *Romance*,” in *France on Film: Reflections on Popular French Cinema*, ed. Lucy Mazdon (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), 153.

second bondage scene it is filmed as a whole—albeit still knocked off its vertical axis; indeed a complete, or rather, a consummate sensual landscape. Clad in the scarlet dress, which leaves her arms, shoulders, and neck bare, thus highlighting her sensuality, Marie enters Robert’s apartment and casually walks towards a mirror. As the scene unfolds, the two sexual partners are doubled, on the one hand, by way of their clothes, which are strikingly similar in both color and texture, and, on the other hand, by way of the mirror shot, when they both stand in front of the apartment’s full-length mirror, with Marie, significantly, standing in front of Robert and partially covering him. The scene leaves little doubt visually as to the mirroring relationship that has developed between the two and within which the one has come to mirror the other’s desire(s). When Robert asks her whether she wants to play the role of the dominatrix, Marie refuses and chooses bondage instead.





Figure 5: Stills from the second bondage scene.

Indeed, Marie exhibits such an absolute control of the situation that her subsequent suspension of agency and control in Robert's hands is rendered hardly denotative of a psycho-pathological condition of sexual passivity and/or of a psycho-pathological obsession with suffering. Even after the iron constraints have been placed on her, she retains the posture of an all-powerful modern odalisque in sensual repose. It is worth noting that the two lovers are visually, or rather, chromatically rendered complementary while Robert applies constraints on Marie: her black brassiere matches his black pants, and his red shirt matches her red dress, hitched down, now covering only the lower part of her body. In doubling and, then, in rendering Marie and Robert complementary to one another, Breillat further exposes "the construction of femininity and masculinity under patriarchy" and reveals both men and women as being "comprised of fractured parts of an incomplete whole."²⁴ In effect, she succeeds in presenting "gender as masquerade" and thus, by implication, in undermining "the dichotomy between the virginal woman on a pedestal and the promiscuous other 'in a brothel'"²⁵ a dichotomy predicated on essentialist notions of gender. It is obvious by the end of the second bondage scene that Marie and Robert have developed a relationship involving power exchange, instead of power abuse, as

24. Butler, "Catherine Breillat: Anatomy of a Hard-core Agitator," in *Peep Shows*, 63.

25. *Ibid.*

well as sexual discipline, instead of uncontrolled sexual permissiveness. As Liz Constable has pointedly argued, the experience of bondage does not mean that Marie discovers herself through the perversion of a bondage to which she submits, but rather that she discovers a form of transformative rebirth to which she willingly surrenders, not as a permanent condition but as part of an ongoing process of becoming a sexual, a desiring subject.²⁶ From that point onward, and until the end of the film, when Marie's body is quite revealingly restored to its vertical axis, she is visually and thematically constructed as a dominant, independent woman, in charge of her body, desires, and sexual pleasure; the heroine of her female-authored drama.

(Re)birth

The end of the film could be said to be literally explosive. Marie goes in labor the morning following a night out with Paul at a club. Lying in their bed in a “comatose” state due to his heavy drinking the previous night, Paul does not wake up despite Marie's desperate attempts. Eventually, she calls Robert, who takes her to the hospital and stands by her side throughout parturition. The film concludes with “Marie's graphic (re)birth” presented with an extreme close-up of a baby's head and then its body emerging from an extended vagina; a shot which, ironically, alludes to the “split beaver” shot, typical of pornography.²⁷ The parturition scene, no less than the brothel-fantasy scene, constitutes a calculated shot at two male-dominated visual regimes corresponding to extremely profitable industries: pornography and mainstream Hollywood cinema. In both scenes Breillat “exposes the duality of the feminine in film, typified by ‘two extremes of [its] deformation . . . in pornography, on the one hand, and Hollywood, on the other’ [as] each in its way caricatures, fetishizes and exploits women.”²⁸ Resonantly, the birth sequence, which ends with the baby exiting the woman's body, is juxtaposed with the image of the blast in Paul's

26. Liz Constable, “Unbecoming Sexual Desires for Women Becoming Sexual Subjects: Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Catherine Breillat (1999),” *MLN* 119, no. 4 (2004): 672-95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3251954>.

27. Butler, “Catherine Breillat: Anatomy of a Hard-core Agitator,” in *Peep Shows*, 63.

28. *Ibid.*, 64.

apartment.²⁹ The end of the film has been described by Breillat as “the birth of a woman into a whole being . . . [who] no longer needs a man and a romance with a man to be complete . . . [as] she’s the one who gives meaning to her life, by herself.”³⁰ The film’s end seals Marie’s break with patriarchal order, confirming that her sexual odyssey has been a means to future liberation and fulfillment.

Epilegomena

Consistently invested in a post-1968 ethical cinema, a cinema that explores sexuality without compromises and without exhausting itself in safeguards against immorality, and committed to the search for an autonomous female existence, Breillat is an *auteur* hard to be over looked. Her narratives of carnality not only shatter accepted conventions of art and break open the sanctioned boundaries of the feminist praxis, but also take a step further, and contribute to the redrawing of the lines of the category “woman” itself in a move away from the invocation of the generic “Woman” towards the recognition of the diversity of standpoints among women. Her visceral creations are concerned with offering a truthful vision of the erotic body, sexuality, and desire; a vision of the—material, tangible, sensual—world that emerges from the very contradictions that Breillat’s cinematic image embraces. With *Romance X*, Breillat launched into an incendiary philosophical and visual exploration of eroticism, female desire, and female-male relations, an exploration she was to continue with *À ma soeur!* and *Anatomie de l’Enfer*, making sex(uality) the subject and not the object of her visual texts.³¹ Her *Romance X*, one of her most representative explicitly erotic films to date, reflects and refracts a variety of trenchant vignettes of perverse desire, dark eroticism, and sexual politics at the same time that it renders the boundaries between imaginary and real, psychic and social, brutality and love, “scandalously” yet productively unclear. Interspersed with explicit sexual imagery, imagery baptized into the feminist font, and suffused with a certain “black surrealism,” the film represents a heterotopia woven out of overlapping discourses on metamorphosis, eroticism,

29. Marie had turned on the gas before leaving for the hospital.

30. Robert Sklar, “A Woman’s Vision of Shame and Desire: An Interview with Catherine Breillat,” *Cineaste* 25, no. 1 (1999): 24-26, <http://law-journals-books.vlex.com/vid/vision-shame-desire-catherine-breillat-52715826>.

31. Butler, “Catherine Breillat: Anatomy of a Hard-core Agitator,” in *Peep Shows*, 60.

domination. It is a heterotopia that, ultimately, that not only succeeds in rewriting the erotic (female) body as a site of transformation and empowerment in cinema, but also, in interrogating and reconfiguring prevalent models of female socialization and subjectification; therein lies its value as a source of social expiation.

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