

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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FAT GIRL (À Ma Soeur) 2001

Catherine Breillat

OVERVIEW

Director Breillat described *Fat Girl* as a 'psychological sitcom,' which is an apt description of a film that uncovers pain and loss in the otherwise typical story of a family on vacation. Turning the usually happy scenario into a brutally honest depiction of two young girls' sexual experiences and fantasies, Breillat has once again challenged the viewers. What might have been a romantic coming-of-age story becomes a troubling revelation of hatred, rape and murder. Overall, the film is laudable for its open-eyed depiction of young girls in all their complexity—vulnerable, cruel, naïve, controlling, loving and protective. The film was originally banned in Ontario, Canada, for its explicit scenes of teenage sex, but the ban was overturned in 2003. Upon release, *Fat Girl* won prizes at the Berlin and Cannes film festivals.

PEOPLE

Elena Elena is a fifteen-year-old girl.
Anais Anais is her younger sister.
Fernando Fernando is an older Italian student.

SYNOPSIS

Two French sisters, twelve-year-old Anais and fifteen-year-old Elena, are on a seaside holiday with their parents. Both are virgins, but they differ about how they want to lose their virginity: Anais wants the boy to be a stranger, but Elena wants to be in love with him. Elena gets her wish when somewhat older Italian student Fernando convinces her that he loves her, but Anais thinks it's 'fishy.' When their mother finds out about the relationship, but not necessarily the sex, she cancels the remainder of the holiday and drives her daughters back to Paris, to join their father. On the way, when they stop to rest, Elena and their mother are both killed by a madman, who then rapes Anais.

SCENES

On Vacation Anais is twelve and chubby, while Elena is fifteen and gorgeous. The two sisters are on vacation with their parents at the seaside in northern France. As they walk to a café by the beach, they talk about having sex and losing their virginity. At the café, they meet Fernando, an Italian student.

Meeting Elena's first encounter with Fernando is flirtatious. She and Anais go to a café near the beach, where Fernando sizes up Elena as a possible conquest and offers her and Anais a seat at his table. Within a few minutes, after exchanging a few words about themselves, they are kissing, while 'fat girl' Anais tucks into a huge ice cream sundae. The meeting scene ends when Fernando drives Elena to her family villa in his fancy, open-top sports car.

Seduction Before Elena leaves Fernando in the car, she tells him where to find her at night. Never slow to take advantage, he enters the sisters' room and the seduction begins. Fernando is smooth-talking confident, while Elena is willing but confused. As he undresses and fondles her, he speaks of his previous conquests and how special Elena is. Elena is afraid that she'll be just another one, but he persuades her that he really loves her and that he will respect her even after they have sex. He is about to enter her, when she pulls away and explains that she needs time. Taking another tact, he makes her feel guilty for teasing and then refusing him. Now, he is the victim and convinces her that it would be 'proof' of her love to have anal sex. She reluctantly consents, although it is not pleasurable. She feels like crying, but again he convinces her that she gave him a 'gift.' Although he does not use physical force, he does emotionally coerce her, feeding off her need to believe that she is loved. As they part outside, she begins to give him oral sex but now he stops her, saying it's dangerous and he

could be arrested. They separate with a promise to have full sex next time.

Morning after In the morning, Elena apologises to Anaïs for her sharp words to her. Putting an arm around her, she feeds her like a baby. 'Eating will do you good,' she says. 'Take your mind off things.' After buying new dresses, and going to the beach with Fernando, Anaïs sings a sad song while Fernando and Elena make out on the sand. Later, the two sisters bond over childhood memories, laughing and giggling together on a bed.

Ring Elena shows her sister the engagement ring Fernando gave her, but Anaïs is suspicious. When Elena declares that she's 'going to give myself to him tonight,' Anaïs again expresses her desire to lose her virginity to someone she doesn't love.

Loss of Virginity That night, Elena is scared and asks Fernando to be gentle, but he says one hard push is better. A tearful Anaïs tries to block out their cries, as her sister loses her virginity.

Separation Sometime later, Fernando's mother arrives and demands that Elena's mother return the ring her son gave to Elena. Angry and embarrassed, the mother (having returned the ring) cuts short the holiday and drives her daughters back to Paris. Elena is furious but says nothing. The mother becomes tired on the long drive and decides to stop when it grows dark.

Violent end She pulls into a rest spot and begins to sleep in the car. Elena wonders if their father will have her examined to check her virginity, and Anaïs shows solidarity with her predicament. Elena also realises that Fernando has deceived her. Out of nowhere, a madman murders Elena with an axe and strangles the mother. He takes Anaïs into the woods and rapes her. When the police question Anaïs in the morning, Anaïs claims that she was not raped. 'Don't believe me if you don't want to,' she says with a note of defiance.

THEMES

Siblings Three years apart in age, different in body weight and miles apart in temperament, the two sisters bicker all the time. Elena is the more aggressive, but Anaïs also throws in vicious insults when she pleases. Unsurprisingly, they argue over love, boyfriends and clothes. The girls sometimes say hateful things to each other, as adolescents are wont to do, but they also possess a deep mutual affection and rapport.

At one point, Anaïs says that she and her sister have been raised as 'rivals', which is confirmed in more than one scene. The most caustic example occurs when they, and their mother, go shopping for clothes. Trying on a new dress, Elena is looking at herself in the mirror, when Anaïs walks up with a similar dress. 'Not again,' Elena complains. 'You're not having the exact same dress as me! Aren't you sick of copying me? You could take my boyfriend, too...Stop trying to copy me. You'll never be like me!' To this angry outburst, the cool and collected Anaïs retorts, 'You must be joking. I don't want to be like you.' If it weren't for the public setting, we could imagine the two girls fighting and pulling each other's hair.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the nastiness in much of their conversations, the sisters are very close. Their intimate rapport is wonderfully dramatised in a scene when they are alone and look at a mirror. 'No one would think we're sisters,' one of them says. 'We don't look at all alike. But when I gaze into your eyes, it makes me feel like I belong.' The other says, 'I feel the same thing. That's why we're sisters. When I hate you and look at you, I can't. It's like hating part of myself. That's why I loathe you so violently, because you ought to be like me...but at times I have the feeling you're the exact opposite.' The other sister says she feels the same and 'that's why you make me angrier than anyone else.' As we watch them in a close-up, faces side by side, cheeks touching, we realise that they do look very much alike, except that one face is sad and the other happy. Their deep bond, ranging from mutual hatred to mutual understanding, is what allows them to be so honest with each other.

Elena is perhaps less sympathetic, but as the older sibling she also shows a nurturing side to her character. We see this part of her in a scene, the day after her first sexual night with Fernando. At the breakfast table, their father wants to know where Anaïs is. 'Don't shout,' Elena says. 'I'll get her.' She goes outside to the pool area with a large robe, which she wraps around her sister to warm her in

the chilly morning air. She apologises for her rude comments the night before, admitting that it was her fault. Chubby Anaïs cries. Elena soothes her, ties the robe around her, puts on sunglasses to hide her tears and leads her by the hand to the breakfast table. A minute later, she feeds her, too. The big sister is a mother to her little sister.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ELENA On the cusp of womanhood, Elena is both surly and sweet. Although vulnerable and afraid, she is not depicted as innocent or abused. Instead, she is both brave and romantic, a young girl who is determined to lead the kind of life she wants.

Bravado Fifteen-year-old Elena knows what she wants: a boyfriend whom she can love and initiate her into the mysterious world of sex. She is nice-looking, with large expressive eyes, which she uses to good effect the first time she meets a boy on the vacation. Sitting at an outdoor café table, she bats those big eyes in his direction, signalling her interest as surely as a bird's mating dance. When he takes her hand, she keeps staring at him. Soon, as he leans toward her, she more than makes up the distance and kisses him. The kissing and cuddling grow more intense, in front of everyone, including Anaïs who is piling into her banana split. Only the waiter with the bill halts her progress toward snaring a boy for her lover-candidate. It is an overt display of her sexual magnetism, a bravado that hides her fear and naivete.

Rude The sibling rivalry with her sister makes Elena insult Anaïs several times, usually about her weight. This rude aspect of her character is evident in the opening scenes, first when they walk to the café and later when they get there. On their way to the café, Elena challenges Anaïs, saying, 'Let's see who can pick up a boy first. I'll be generous,' she adds. 'Doesn't have to be a decent boy. Any boy. Even a fat slob like you.' Once they reach the café, where Fernando offers them a seat and Anaïs plops herself down, Elena chides her. 'You can't just sit down,' she says sharply. 'You ask if people mind.' When Anaïs stands up, Elena takes her chair and says, 'Don't just stand there like a lump.' Anaïs sits down. Fat Anaïs is an encumbrance to Elena, who has already sized up Fernando as a 'nice boy.'

Romantic We know from the opening scene that Elena is taken with the romantic idea of having her first lover be her boyfriend, if not her fiancé. On the eve of 'giving herself' to him, after her initial sexual experience with him (of anal sex), she shows Anaïs an opal ring. 'He gave it to me,' she says, proudly. 'It's an engagement ring.' Clear-headed Anaïs smells a rat, but naïve Elena dismisses her doubts, saying, 'We're engaged now. It's a pact.' To Elena, the deal is romantic: the ring symbolises love, so I sleep with him. This is the toxic combination of male deception (he took the ring from his mother without permission) and female gullibility (Elena is desperate to believe him) that, in the filmmaker's view, has poisoned sexual relations and marriage in France.

ANAIS At 12 years, Anaïs is precocious, with an emotional intelligence of a much older person. She is lonely, imaginative and candid, especially when talking with her older sister. Embarrassed by her body size, for which her sister insults her, Anaïs is often sad and withdrawn, but she also displays a formidable confidence in her convictions. Her character is one of the most honest and subtle explorations of a child's inner life on screen.

Lonely Anaïs, the fat younger sister, seems to live in a world of her own, partially as a result of being shunned by boys and partly because she finds the outside world 'dumb,' to use her favourite adjective. Her loneliness is shown in one of the film's most poignant scenes. She is swimming alone in the pool, where she enacts a make-believe scene between two people who are competing for her affection. One of the imaginary suitors is the diving board, and the other is the metal ladder at the pool's edge. Paddling back and forth between them, she kisses them, declares her love but makes them jealous by going off to the other. The pretend game of love and sexual desire seems to be a method by which Anaïs displaces her frustrations and delays the complications of the experiences she knows will come.

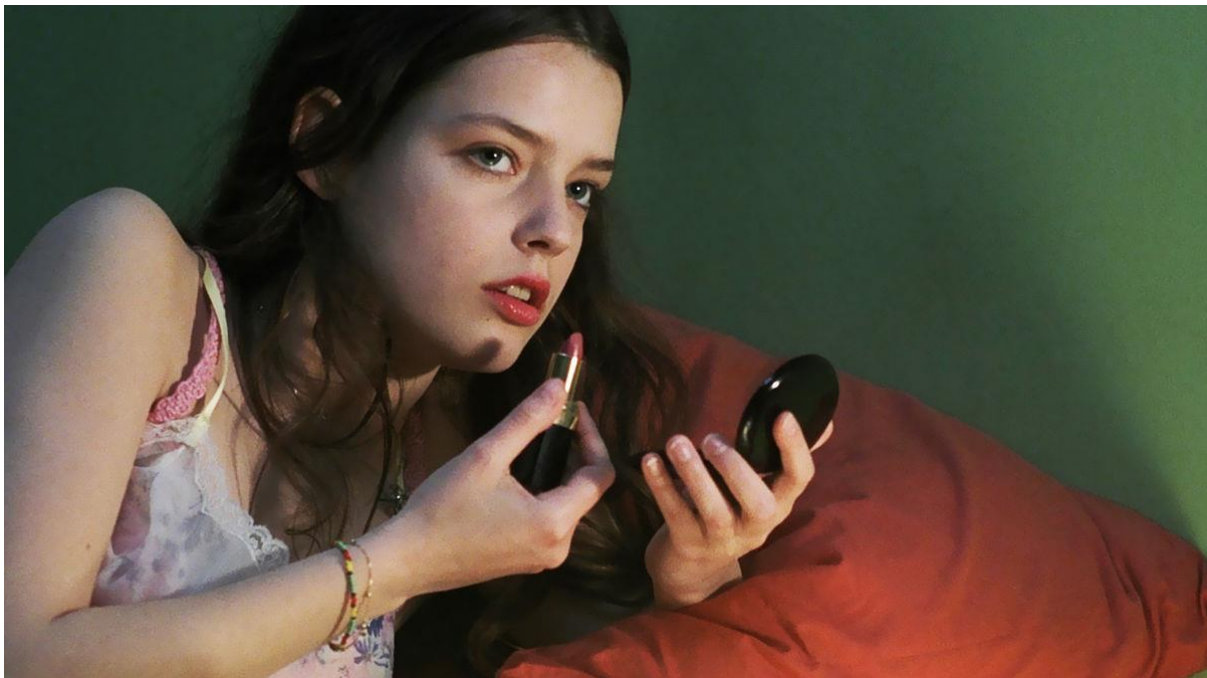
Intelligent From the start of the story, we realise that Anaïs is the more intelligent of the two sisters, the one less swayed by girlish emotions and teenage hormones. That perceptiveness is illustrated during the conversation after Elena has shown her the ring, which is the ticket to intercourse. Elena explains what she's going to do and asks for her sister's reaction. Anaïs then delivers a sobering statement. 'Between what you've already done [anal sex] and that [vaginal sex], there's no moral difference, in my opinion.' When Elena objects, Anaïs says, 'Personally, I want my first time to be with

a boy I don't love...because afterwards you realise he doesn't love you or you don't and you feel dumb.' This insight into the complications of teenage sex is worthy of a much older person. If Anaïs has any fantasies about love and sex, she restricts them to her make-believe game played in the swimming pool, where she is in control.

Defiant The final words of the film are spoken by a defiant Anaïs. After her sister and mother are killed, she is taken into the woods where the murderer pushes her to the ground and lays on her. Later, when she is taken to the inspector, one of policemen says, 'She says he didn't rape her.' As she is led away, Anaïs says, 'Don't believe me if you don't want to.' With those fierce words, Anaïs is claiming ownership of her experience. She may or may not have been 'raped' (the actual act is not shown on screen), but she believes that has achieved the kind of sexual initiation that she wanted.

FERNANDO Italian law student Fernando is older than Elena, probably in his early twenties. He has a winning smile, finds Elena attractive and knows that persistent lies, of the right variety, will break down her resistance. As he says, he's just a normal guy, interested in sex.

Manipulative Fernando is an accomplished chancer. He knows just what to say to the young Elena, how to manipulate her to satisfy his own desires, as illustrated in the central sex scene that lasts for half an hour. He impresses her with his vast experience with girls ('I only sleep with them because I'm a guy') before assuring her that she is 'special' and that he will respect her even after sleeping with her. When she says she doesn't want to, he swears on his mother that he will 'stay on the outside.' When that doesn't work, he shifts to victim mode and complains that she has made him suffer, leading him on and then cruelly rejecting her. It almost works, but at least he is able to relieve himself by ejaculating during anal sex.



(Elena prepares to receive Fernando)



(Anais and Elena)



(Anais)