

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# ANATOMY OF HELL (Anatomie de l'enfer) 2004

Catherine Breillat

## OVERVIEW

*Anatomy of Hell* is as challenging as its title suggests. Neither pornography, nor erotica, it forces viewers (and the male lead) to look at a woman's naked body and examine their attitudes to female flesh. The slow pace, muted colours and frequent voice-overs render the film more an essay on misogyny than a dramatic story. Despite this classroom tone, there are some sensational scenes and moments of exquisite intimacy. The film has a fairy tale atmosphere, with an isolated house/castle, a beast transformed into a prince and a secret blood ritual, all of which recall Breillat's other films (*Bluebeard* and *Sleeping Beauty*). The director wrote the script, adapting it from her own 2001 novel (*Pornocratie, Pornacracy*). The film met with disapproval and incomprehension when first released, but over time it has gained admirers as a bold and provocative piece of cinema. Breillat herself had this to say: 'I'm not in favour of sexual exhibitionism. Rather, I want to create a reflection on sexuality. It's normal that it's difficult for moviegoers to watch this, but those journalists who walked out should be asking themselves why they left. Why were they so shocked?'

## SYNOPSIS

A young woman is stopped from slashing her wrists by a stranger in a disco bar. She then pays him to come to her house and 'watch' her and learn about a woman's body. Over the course of four nights, during which they also have sex, he is forced to look into her vagina, to consider his own reactions and to question his prejudice regarding menstrual blood. Twice, he goes outside and looks at the sea, but otherwise, the camera does not leave the room in which his sexual education takes place. When it's over, he goes to a bar and talks with a stranger about the experience, insulting the woman and boasting of his sexual prowess. But he also knows he shared an intimacy with her and learned a lot. Wanting to learn more, he goes back to the house, but she is gone.

## PEOPLE

Woman  
Man

## SCENES

### Prologue

*Self-harm* The film opens with loud music and strobe lights in a disco bar, where dozens of young people are dancing. Outside, a man sucks another man's penis. The camera tracks the movement of a woman as she threads her way through the gyrating bodies and goes into a bathroom. She sits down and begins to cut her wrist with a razor blade. Blood trickles out. A man enters, stops her and takes her to a local pharmacy, where she is bandaged up.

*Accusation* Later, when they talk, she wants to know why he, a gay man, went into the women's toilets, and he explains that she had touched him when they passed on the stairs of the dance hall. When she accuses him of going into the toilets to get sucked, he slaps her hard. 'You men are all the same,' she says but then performs fellatio on him.

*Proposition* Afterwards, she offers to pay him to do something he won't want to do: study a woman's body. 'Impartially, I mean,' she says. She wants to 'find out what a man sees' when he sees her vagina, without touching, without sex. He is confused but agrees to participate in her experiment if she pays him a lot.

### First night

*Getting started* Dressed in a suit, the man arrives at the woman's house, which is in an isolated spot

overlooking the ocean. She leads him into a room, where he waits while she goes to the toilet. 'You're early,' she says, 'I didn't have time to undress.' He shrugs and says, 'I'm paid to watch. That's all I'm going to do.'

*Expectations* In her voiceover, she says that because he expects something erotic, he will be disappointed. She undresses, lies on the bed and invites him to watch. As they talk, she draws out his disgust for a woman's body, her arm pit hair and her pubic hair. No matter what a woman does, he says, no matter how much she tries to remove the offending hair, traces remain to remind men of a woman's obscenity. She understands his revulsion to a woman's body but tells him that he knows nothing about women.

*Up close* She forces him to come closer and have a better look. He spreads her legs and we see a full close-up of her open vagina. He expresses more misogynistic views, and she complains that he hasn't really looked at her as he is paid to do. He goes outside, walks to the cliff edge and listens to the roar of the sea, which the woman's voice-over tells us is symbolic of female power.

*Flashback* She is reminded of a time when she was still naïve about sex. In a flashback, we see her as a little girl surrounded by a pack of little boys who push her around and then decide to play 'doctor.' She is the patient, who takes off her underpants so they can look. The little boys peer at her and laugh.

*Anal sex* With a stick of her lipstick he paints the lips of her vagina and those of her mouth. Then he has anal sex with her, though she is asleep and doesn't respond. When he cries after his orgasm, she comforts him and says, 'It's just the first night.' In other words, he'll learn to understand himself as the experiment continues.

#### Second night

*Menses* He arrives for the second night, takes off her dress and removes her hair pin. He sits in a chair in a corner, drinking and watching her as she lies motionless on the bed. Before long, he undertakes his task, spreading her legs and looking very close at her vagina. When he masturbates her with his fingers, he finds his hand covered with menstrual blood.

*Urge to kill* He goes outside and this time comes back with a metal gardening tool, the handle of which he slides into her vagina. In the morning, she confronts him with his desire to kill her. 'It's an urge all men have,' she declares but also acknowledges that men aren't aware of that desire.

#### Third night

*Tampon* When he arrives and says that the door was open and that anyone could have walked in, she explains that his protective instinct is also what keeps women locked up. Then, she explains that men are afraid their 'women don't belong to them.' They invent concepts like chastity and morality to assure themselves.

*Blood ritual* Sitting up in bed, she has him pull out her bloody tampon, which she drops into a glass of water. He takes a little sip, while she takes two long draughts. Sharing her blood, they are bound together.

#### Fourth night

*Curse* This time she tells him to look close at her vagina, which holds a dildo. 'You don't like it replacing you, do you?' she says. 'But it gives me pleasure.' After pushing the dildo in and out so that she has an orgasm, he enters her with his erection. This is the literal climax, which gives them both enormous satisfaction. But her menstrual blood has spilled all over the bed and covers his still-erect penis. They agree that he feels her blood has cursed his penis.

#### Epilogue

*Confusion* The man leaves with his money, though in a voice-over he says he didn't want to take it. Feeling like he has been in a fairy tale, he is disturbed and tells a friend about the four nights. The friend says to forget it, that she was a slut, and he says, 'Yes, but the queen of sluts.' The friend advises him to 'fuck and forget,' but he says that she took everything he had. Through soft tears, he tries to convince himself that he degraded her.

*No second chance* Leaving the money behind, he goes back to her house, telling himself that he

wants to start all over again. This time he says he will be fully aware of what he does. But she is gone, and the house is empty, except for the blood-stained sheet.

## THEMES

***Psychology of Sexuality*** The film focuses on the psychological dimension of sexuality and aims to educate a homosexual man about a woman's sexuality and how men and women experience them. The film shows a number of sexual acts. They range from masturbation to anal sex to intercourse, following a rough sort of progression that marks advances in the man's understanding of a woman's sexuality. The film is thus an essay in gender politics, with each sexual act used to teach the man. What it reveals is a typical male revulsion toward the female body, and specifically menstrual blood. Whereas for women, blood is purity and strength, for men it is impure and disgusting. The English slang word for a woman's period ('the curse') says it all. Attitudes toward blood are somewhat ambivalent, though. Whereas menstrual blood is thought by men to be messy, rituals of sharing blood are widespread (blood-brothers, for example, or the Christian ceremony of drinking blood to wash away sins).

***disgust*** What the film shows, and what it wants to teach us, is that the primary element of a man's sexual psychology is his disgust of a woman's body. The most explicit of many explicit statements of this idea comes during the first night. The woman lies naked on a bed, inviting the man's gaze. 'Should I have shaved my armpits?' she asks, and he replies that it wouldn't make any difference because even then, and even if she shaved off her pubic hair, she wouldn't get rid of her 'obscene nature.' When she asks if she can do anything about it, he says there is nothing she can do. 'When you spread your legs, we're revolted,' he explains. He speaks of her skin that sweats and oozes, and says that frogs, who also spread their legs, at least have a 'nice green colour.' This is the crux of the whole film, the instinctive disgust that (most) men feel when they see a woman's naked vagina. They want to enter it with their member, but they don't want to see it.

***Blood*** The other key component of a man's sexual psychology is his negative feelings toward a woman's menstrual blood. It disgusts him, like other parts of a woman's anatomy, but it also frightens and disarms him. This is dramatically illustrated when the woman pulls out her tampon and says, 'Because of this blood, they say we're impure. No intercourse during our periods.' Men are afraid of a woman's blood, she explains, because it 'flows without a wound.' In a version of a blood-sharing ritual, mimicking the Catholic Communion, they drink a glass of water mixed with the menstrual blood. This symbolises their growing intimacy. Toward the end of this scene, the man admits that a woman's blood is fertile. 'A man can't give life,' he says. 'He takes it.'

***Masturbation*** The first sexual lesson occurs on the first night, when the woman masturbates herself with her finger. She has just spoken, in her voice-over of the fact that her vagina and pubic hair resemble a newly hatched baby bird, slimy and gooey. The camera then shows a small boy who takes a chick from its nest and smashes it to bits. The woman is then shown masturbating with her finger, an experience that ends with a pleasurable orgasm. Men, it is suggested, find it necessary to mutilate the weak bird/vagina, while women learn to love it. The woman is also demonstrating that she does not need a man to have sexual pleasure.

***Anal sex*** The next significant sexual lesson, still on the first night, occurs when he takes her from behind. He goes into the bathroom and finds her lipstick, which is red and, of course, shaped like a penis. He uses it to paint first the lips of her vagina and then those of her mouth, while she is sleeping. Next, he mounts her from behind, thrusts hard and brings them both to an orgasm, though she is barely conscious. When he's finished, she lies silent and motionless. Realising that she is still inert, he begins to cry until she wakes up and comforts him. 'It doesn't matter,' she says softly. 'It's just the first night.' The idea seems to be that he is disturbed that he wasn't able to wake this Sleeping Beauty, his male ego is hurt and he needs a woman to soothe his nerves.

***intercourse*** The final lesson is frontal penetrative sex, which takes place on the last night, as a sort of climax to the man's sexual instruction. It is preceded by the woman showing him her stone dildo, which he then pushes in and out to bring her to an orgasm. Stimulated himself, he goes inside her, and, with her legs in the air (Kama Sutra-style), they both achieve orgasm with ferocious energy.

Afterwards, he caresses and kisses her tenderly, which she appreciates. Apparently, he has learned to respect her body and to give her pleasure, as well.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**WOMAN** The woman is attractive rather than pretty, perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties. We know nothing of her life or family, only that she went to a disco bar, nearly killed herself and was 'saved' by the man. During the four nights, and often through her interior monologues, she shows herself to be intensely aware of the attitudes that underlie and direct relations between men and women. Never angry, she is sometimes gentle and always interested in the truth.

*Assertive* The woman's assertiveness is illustrated in the opening sequence. After the man has 'protected' her by stopping her suicide attempt and taking her to a doctor, the two of them, complete strangers, walk down a dark street. Suddenly, she swings around and asks, 'Why did you go into the women's toilet? Men like you [gay men] don't look at women.' When he offers a lame excuse about her having brushed by him in the disco bar, she rounds on him, saying, 'I know why you went in there. To get sucked, like all men.' Her accusatory tone prompts him to slap her hard. She then says, 'That's what you all do. You're all alike.' This initial encounter establishes her character as confident and outspoken.

*Perceptive* Throughout the film, she also displays an understanding of men's sexual desire and fears. One of the most startling examples occurs after the man has masturbated her with his fingers only to find them covered in her menstrual blood. Moments later, he goes outside, finds a nasty-looking iron tool (half rake, half pitchfork) and inserts it into her vagina while she sleeps. When she wakes, she speaks to him with a mischievous smile. 'Last night, you wanted to kill me. You fought that urge a long time.' He asks her how she knows this and she says, 'It's an urge all men have.' He looks uncomfortable at this damning indictment, which he does not dispute. What is remarkable here, and elsewhere, is her lack of rancour. Instead, she speaks to him like a lecturer, interested in education rather than revenge.

*Sensitive* One of the most moving scenes in the film reveals her sensitivity to the man's discomfort. On the first night, he satisfies his sexual urge by having anal sex with her. He thrusts, pants and is sated, but then he realises that she has barely moved. In the next shot, he is weeping. Hearing his sobs, she wakes and goes to comfort him, saying, 'It's all right. It doesn't matter. It's just the first night.' When he continues to shake and cry, she rests her head against his bare chest and says again, 'It's nothing.' Slowly, his shaking and sobbing subside. She has sensed that he feels guilty for taking his pleasure from her inert body (practically a rape) and, rather than attack, wants to soothe his torment. Despite her fierce criticism of misogyny, she is sensitive to the individual.

**MAN** The man is a tall, good-looking gay person, perhaps in his thirties. He has a square jaw, fixed eyes and rarely smiles. His background, and even his present situation, is deliberately left blank. He is the Everyman.

*Lonely* The man does not say much. After all he's paid to watch, and nothing more. But there is one scene that reveals something of his inner self. He is sitting on a chair, drinking whisky, still unsure what is happening. She orders him to come take a closer look at her, but he responds by talking about himself. 'Know why people drink when they're together? Because they have nothing to say. They think a bedroom [sex] will make things better. It's worse. There's no communication.' She asks if he is referring to her, and he says, 'No. I lack the words and thoughts. I need alcohol. I need to forget that bestiality. That loneliness.'

*Open-minded* The man, who at first expresses his disgust about a woman's body, is prepared to learn from the woman. The most sensational example of his open-mindedness comes when she offers him a glass of water reddened by her menstrual blood. It is now the third night, when he pulls out her tampon and dips it into a glass. She swirls it around in the glass, like a tea bag, to colour the water red, and then offers it to him. He hesitates only for a second before drinking some of the bloodied liquid. As she says, it is a kind of bonding ritual, drinking the blood of the enemy. The man, who was the enemy, has found it in himself to drink her blood as part of his learning experience. It is a scene that no one will forget.

*Confused* Over the four nights, the man undergoes a mind-changing experience. He is confused by what he has seen and learned. Even as he leaves the house, he says (in his voice-over) that by

taking her money, he has 'exited from the myth' and lost her. He goes to a bar and drinks with a stranger. Now, he seems to revert to his old self, cursing the woman as a whore and making all sorts of misogynistic insults. In the middle of these ugly comments, he suddenly says, 'I experienced total intimacy with her. Yet I don't even know her name.' He leaves his money on the bar counter and goes back to her house, wanting to reassure himself that his newly-acquired knowledge is permanent. He is in transition, unsure of himself and confused.



(The man watches the woman)



(The man drinks the bloodied water)