

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ROMANCE (Romance X) 1999

Catherine Breillat

OVERVIEW

Romance is anything but a romance. A deeply disturbing film that explores female sexual desire, male notions of a woman's body, rape, sadomasochism and infidelity. The film is meant to provoke. More a film-essay than a drama, it is constructed from the woman's point of view, reversing the hateful 'male gaze' of so much sexually explicit cinema and art. And it is extremely explicit but never pornographic, the motive apparently being not to arouse but to inform. Marie's search for a reconciliation between the conflicting needs for love and sex is grim, almost joyless. It includes a great deal of dialogue and her own inner monologue, as if she is reading from her diary. The ideas expressed and the behaviours shown are often ambiguous, even contradictory, but always thought-provoking. Director and scriptwriter Breillat had this to say about her film: 'I am eternally, devastatingly romantic, and I thought people would see it because "romantic" doesn't mean "sugary." It's dark and tormented – the furore of passion, the despair of an idealism that you can't attain.'

PEOPLE

Maire	A young teacher, engaged to Paul.
Paul	A fashion model, is her fiancé.
Paolo	Her lover.
Robert	Her headmaster, is a skilled sadomasochist.

SYNOPSIS

Marie is upset because her boyfriend Paul no longer wants to have sex. Hurt and confused, Marie seeks sexual pleasure with other men, including a sadomasochist named Robert, who is kind to her. Eventually, piquing Paul's interest, she gets pregnant (by a 'Virgin Mary miracle') and their romance is rekindled. But on the morning that she has to go to the hospital, Paul is too drunk to wake up. Furious, she turns on the gas and is taken to the hospital by Robert, who acts as the father. The gas explodes in the apartment and Paul dies.

SCENES

Argument Paul, an attractive young model, is made up for a photoshoot with as a matador. He is watched by his girlfriend, Marie. Later, a tearful Marie complains to Paul about their flagging sex life. Paul thinks they do it too much, and Marie says he exaggerates. Leaving a café, they walk to a beach, where Marie says she hasn't cheated on him but should have. 'That's how stupid I am,' she says. 'You don't deserve my loyalty.' As the day wears on, she becomes more strident, screaming that he never touches her. Approaching their flat, she almost decides to leave him, but he puts a consoling arm around her and leads her inside.

Seduction fails That night, in bed, the argument continues. She tries to seduce him but he keeps watching television. When she feels under the sheet and finds his erection, he pushes her off. She begins to suck him and he stops her. Now she asks why he doesn't at least allow her to have some pleasure. He says he couldn't do that because then he couldn't love her any more and would despise her. She contradicts him, saying, 'You despise me because I'm a woman. You don't love me at all. You think I'm dirty.'

Fed up Lying awake, with tears in her eyes, Marie regrets her love-hate attachment to Paul. 'They say a man who screws a woman, honours her,' she says in an inner monologue. 'It's true. Paul insults me.' With that thought, she gets up and drives off to an all-night bar, where she meets Paolo.

Paolo In her voice-over, she tells us that she lied to Paolo about being married 'so that he would understand that it's adultery [if they have sex].' He, in turn, says his wife died four months ago and

hasn't made love in all that time. After they engage in heavy petting in the car, Marie refuses oral sex but agrees to go to a hotel the next day.

Teacher As a teacher in a primary school, Marie explains the difference between the verbs 'to be' and 'to have.' A person can "be" without "having." And a person can "have" without "being." The pupils are baffled. Then she tells herself that has she's 'been had.'

Pregnancy Talking with Paul in his apartment, we learn that she has been trying to get pregnant and is angry because he doesn't pay attention to the right dates for conceiving. 'If it's a matter of duty,' he says, 'then no problem.' That gives her hope. 'If we had a child,' she says, 'it would make sense to be together.' Again, Marie says she ought to cheat on him but hasn't.

Jealous In a disco bar, she watches Paul dancing around with sexy women and thinks, 'He dances to seduce. He wants to seduce because he wants to conquer. He wants to conquer because he's a man.' Angry, she leaves, but Paul runs after her. Marie says he was dancing with sluts, and Paul says it doesn't matter who they are.

Sex with Paolo In the next scene, Marie and Paolo have sex in a hotel. During a pause, she talks about his condom and a woman's tampon. Both are disgusting, she says, but that's what she likes. She also complains that too many guys have limp cocks and are inadequate. Although Paolo seems to satisfy her, she says, 'I hate guys who screw me.' Because have sex with Paolo prevents her from remembering Paul, Marie decides to stop seeing Paolo.

Not all the way As Paul and Maire lie in bed in the pure white room, she tries to excite him through oral sex. Again, they have a conversation that exposes their emotional distance. She says that she likes the smell of his cock, which he finds disgusting. She wants to touch him, but he says he won't go 'all the way.'

Robert Marie is back in the classroom writing dictation on the board, but she makes mistakes in spelling. Talking with Robert, the head teacher, she admits her weaknesses and says she might be dyslexic. Soon, she is in his fancy house, complete with sliding Japanese screens and a jacuzzi. Robert says he set it up that way because that's what women like and he's 'had' thousands of women. 'I have them because I talk to them,' he explains to her. 'No one talks to women these days.'

Sadomasochism Robert then reveals his SM/BD predilection, saying, 'The only way to be loved by women is through rape.' When Robert prepares her for S&M, she is afraid but then goes through with it (not shown on screen).

Competition Back home in the deathly white flat, she finds that Paul is not there. She masturbates and finds it 'mildly satisfying, but nauseating proof that she doesn't need a man.' Leaving the flat, she tells herself that if she'd cheated on Paul and still only loved him, it wouldn't matter much if he cheated on her. The problem is that he hasn't cheated on her. Looking through a restaurant window, she sees him by himself, reading and eating. In her mind, she says, 'Love between men and women is a devious conflict. If I get home after him, I've won.'

Rough sex With that thought, she walks back to the flat, but is propositioned by a man on the way and allows him to 'eat' her. He turns aggressive, screws her from behind and calls her a 'slut.' Marie screams at him that she is not ashamed. Then, she deliberately gets home after Paul as 'proof that women are capable of greater love than men.'

More SM/BD Back in Robert's house, where she has had S&M for several weeks, Marie allows herself to be tied up in an elaborate way, with her legs spread apart by a medieval-looking metal apparatus. Later, she says in a voice-over, 'After our sessions I was never depressed. We giggled.' We also see her and Robert eating together in an expensive restaurant.

Conception Returning from the restaurant to the apartment in a good mood, she finds Paul in bed with a book. He senses a difference in her and asks her to touch him. 'Love is a bitch,' she says to herself. 'The guy you love won't fuck you. Cheat on him and he screws you.' That night, they make

love, with her on top and him 'playing the woman,' as she puts it. He is disgusted at that idea and throws her off, but she gets pregnant. Neither came. She says it was 'a Virgin Mary miracle.'

Examination During a gynaecological examination in a hospital, she is prodded and fingered by a series of men just as she has been in the 'sexual' scenes. 'Cunts and faces don't mix,' she says as the camera shows a split image of a woman's body, half in a brothel having sex and half in maternity ward being checked by a doctor.

Baby boy After a doctor says she will have a son, Paul makes love to her 'for the first time in months and for the last time.' Heavily pregnant Marie is a drag on Paul. At a disco bar, Paul flirts while dancing with other women and warns her not 'to make a scene.' Marie is depressed because nothing has changed. On the way home, Paul says that 'a man needs to be challenged...he's always chasing someone.' Marie is not impressed.

Birth and death In the morning, Marie packs a suitcase but is unable to wake a hungover Paul. She turns on the gas and calls Robert, who takes her to the hospital. The delivery is not easy, but she gives birth to a healthy boy. Minutes later, there is an explosion in the flat. The final scene is Paul's funeral.

THEMES

Sexuality The relationship between Marie and her long-term boyfriend Paul is the core of this story. Marie is the central character, whose dissatisfaction, confusion and contradictory attitudes toward love and sex are dramatised throughout the film. At the beginning, she is upset because he has lost his sexual desire for her, but later we learn that he is also self-centred and insensitive. Their conversations and interactions are characterised by a sterility and distance that recalls Antonioni's jaded lovers. In the end, he proves himself worthy of her incandescent rage

Sexuality with Strangers With her sexual desire unsatisfied by her husband, Marie goes out to a bar and picks up Paolo. As the name suggests, he is presented as a substitute for Paul, or Marie's fantasy of Paul as a sexualised man. Outside, in her car, she lets Paolo kiss and fondle her, saying to herself, 'I wanted another taste of the miracle, a stranger making love to you. It's delicious.' When they make love later in a hotel, she says she doesn't like tenderness and that she doesn't like to kiss. 'I don't care who fills my cunt,' she says. 'But I can't kiss someone I don't love. It's too intimate.' While avoiding contact with the lips, she does enjoy an intense session of vaginal and anal sex.

Marie has a brief encounter with another stranger. She is on her way back to the flat, when a man propositions her on a dark stairway. 'A tenner just to "eat" you,' he says. She agrees, saying to herself, 'That's my dream. To know that for some guy I'm just a pussy. No sentimental bullshit. Just raw desire.' After the cunnilingus, he forces her to have anal sex and then calls her a slut, in act that straddles the grey line between consensual sex and rape. After he leaves, she screams, 'I'm not ashamed, asshole.' But, a moment before, she tells herself that to wallow in the shame of being taken by a stranger is pleasurable. For Marie, anonymous sex is ambiguous. She likes it, but it leaves her feeling degraded.

SM/BD experience Marie also forms a relationship with Robert, who is a sadomasochist. Unlike the physical Paolo, though, Robert is an intellectual who has studied and mastered the art of bondage sex. As her headmaster, Robert already has a role of authority and instructor over Marie. Her sexual lessons with him, which are not fully shown, are difficult but not manipulative, as she willingly engages in them. Robert is the only man in the film with whom she seems to have a rapport. After their S&M sessions, she feels happy and they laugh. She grows fond of Robert, and, in a brief scene, we watch them eating together in an expensive restaurant, enjoying caviar and vodka, laughing and chatting like a happily married couple. And, crucially, he comes to her aid in the medical emergency at the end.

Another psychological aspect explored by the film is the thrill of suffering. Although Marie submits to Robert's sadomasochistic techniques without coercion, she doesn't gain much pleasure either. When he asks if she wants him to dominate her, she merely nods, wordlessly. She is also silent and passive as he adroitly ties her hands and legs, gags her and prepares for sex. When he sees tears in her eyes, he unties her and comforts her, asking if she wants to go through with it. She is deeply

disturbed and says, 'I've never done it before. But I've always wanted to.' He says that he only wants to give her pleasure. He suggests that they stop, but she says, 'No. There's no other way...it's a way of dying.' She explains that it has the same thrill as getting close to death, thinking you can't bear it any more but wanting to continue.

The film controversially contravenes expectations by presenting S&M as a liberating experience for Marie. In her inner monologue, she tells us that 'tying me up without tying me down was the secret of his [Robert's] ritual.' As she speaks, she is relaxed and happy, perhaps the only such occasion in the entire film. Robert's no-nonsense sex seems to have freed her from her anxiety above the gap between love and sex. Far from degrading her, the unsentimental dynamic of submission and domination allows her, psychologically, to enjoy sex.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MARIE Marie is a complicated character, who suffers from an alienation from herself. She expresses conflicting desires and ideas about love and sex, often reversing herself. Central to her condition is a disconnect between mind and body. She sometimes does things that make her feel good, but she doesn't feel good when she does them. In the end, though, she shows strength and resolve to live life on her own terms.

Frustrated Marie begins the film unhappy with her boyfriend Paul, who, after three months, has lost interest in their sex life. Her frustration is obvious from the opening scene, in which she argues with Paul. Tears roll down her face as she sits at a café with him, trying to find out what has happened. He simply says he needs a break, but she becomes annoyed by his indifference. Annoyance turns edgy when she says, 'Anyway, I can cheat on you, but you can't on me.' Paul shows some jealousy and asks, 'You've already done it?' 'No,' she says, 'that's how stupid I am. But you deserve to think I have.' This short exchange illustrates the complex psychology of romantic relations. She is angry with both Paul and with herself. She loves him but she wants to hurt him. Her frustration is visceral.

Defiant Although Marie is articulate in her inner monologues, her behaviour with men is largely passive. She might say something with irony, but only once does she give full voice to her turmoil. In that scene, she is going home when a rough-looking man propositions her on a stairway, offering money for him to 'go down' on her. She agrees and enjoys the oral sex, but then he rapes her anally. Afterward, he insults her, calling her a 'whore.' When he leaves, she is distraught. Sobbing she screams at him: 'I'm not ashamed, asshole!' It is a cry of defiance, aimed as much at him as at herself. Only a moment before, during the oral sex, she had said (in her interior monologue) that for a woman the 'shame' of having sex with a nobody is pleasurable. Now, she is not so sure and has to assert that the experience was not shameful.

Decisive The rage building within Marie finally explodes in the dramatic ending of the film. She is heavily pregnant, and appears to have reached a temporary truce with Paul. But when they go to a disco bar, he dances provocatively with other women and drinks too much. In the morning, she needs to go to the hospital for her delivery, but Paul is still asleep with a hangover. As she packs her suitcase, Marie says to herself, 'Bastard. He leaves me alone with my fear [about birth].' She tries once more to wake him, but he is inert. She calls him 'a slob and a stupid tart' before turning on the oven gas, without lighting a burner. Robert drives her to the hospital, where she gives birth and plays the role of the father. Out of the hospital window, we see an explosion and then a happy mother with her son. Marie has made her decisions—to kill Paul and to have her baby.

PAUL Paul is a male model. True to type, he is good-looking but also self-absorbed, insensitive and convinced that he has the right to chase after every woman he sees. To quote Marie's assessment of him, he's a 'bastard.' Not surprisingly, he is also a man with a weak ego, who easily gets jealous and feels threatened by any hint of inadequacy.

Self-centred Paul displays his self-indulgence in every scene in which he appears, through indifference to Marie and his pleasure in the solitary activities of reading and eating. But the first image of him is equally instructive. It is a close-up of him surrounded by make-up artists, who powder and brush his face, while he sits motionless and enjoys the attention. When they are finished, he turns his head from side to side, checking his image in an unseen mirror. Then he walks onto the set, an empty bullfight ring, where he is dressed as a matador, flanked by a female matador. The photographer tells him to stand tall and look 'edgy' because a matador 'understands death.' His female partner is told to 'look down' and 'be a little submissive.' That image captured by the

photographer—handsome, proud Paul, with a passive woman at his side—sums up his character.

Insecure Paul likes to think of himself as strong, masculine and in control. But his self-image is actually brittle, as show in the only sexual scene he has with Marie. One night, when Marie comes back from an enjoyable dinner with Robert, Paul is aroused by her buoyancy and decides it's time to make love to her. Everything goes fine, until she gets on top of him and says, 'Now, you be me. You be the woman. I'll be the guy. I'll screw you.' The idea that he should play the submissive woman angers him and he throws her off the bed. It is an innocent role-play reversal, the kind of thing that many couples engage in, but Paul is too invested in his macho self-image. He cannot even pretend that he is not strong, which means that he is actually weak and insecure.

Philanderer After Marie gets pregnant, 'by a miracle', Paul drags her 'around like a ball and chain' to the disco bars he frequents at night. In one scene, they are accompanied by his sister and brother-in-law because Paul wants his family to get to know Marie, the future mother of his son. Paul enjoys himself dancing with young, sexy women, not caring that Marie is watching from the bar. When Marie objects to his behaviour, he is unapologetic. 'I almost kissed her,' he says coldly. 'She was hot for me. Then I dumped her. You can't complain.' Driving home, with Marie, he explains that a 'man needs a challenge...He needs to fear that he may lose her. Then he chases her. Or chases someone else. A man's always chasing.' Paul justifies his flirtation as a natural instinct. Pregnant Marie realises that actual infidelity is just around the corner.

ROBERT Robert is as complex as Marie and the exact opposite of Paul. An aging head teacher and master of sadomasochism, he is self-effacing, conscious that he lacks good looks, but confident of his S&M skills. When he makes the claim that '[t]he only way to be loved by women is through rape,' we write him off as a violent sadist. But through the long scene of his 'sessions' with Marie, a different picture emerges. Indeed, Robert is the only man with whom Marie forms a friendship.

Confident In sharp contrast to Paul, Robert is unattractive but self-assured. In the extended scene, when he introduces Marie to S&M, his confidence borders on arrogance. First, he plays a recording of a radio interview in which he is called the 'prince of seducers', a man who counts his conquests in the thousands and keeps a list of them. He then explains the psychology of sadomasochism in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, repeatedly saying, 'That's how it is.' He doesn't force Marie to submit. He doesn't have to. His reassuring manner is enough.

Gentle Against all expectations, overturning many stereotypes, Robert is a tender person. Yes, he ties her up and (unseen) has sex with her, but he asks if she wants to 'be dominated', makes sure she is sure and is always gentle. This is evident when, during the first session, she wants to be untied and begins to cry. He strokes her hair and soothes her, saying, 'I want to give you pleasure. It hurts me when you cry. I don't want to do something wrong.' When she says she wants to resume, he says he'll loosen the ropes. But she wants them tight and he obliges. All through this scene, he stays close to her, stroking her head, as if they were real lovers. Robert shows her a kindness that no other man does. That is why, when she needs to go to the hospital, he is the who takes her.



(Marie and Paul)



(Robert and Marie)