

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## **BRIEF CROSSING (Brève Traversée) 2001**

Catherine Breillat

### OVERVIEW

With a nod perhaps to *Brief Encounter*, the 1945 classic English film about stiff upper lip adultery, Breillat has written and directed this story to reflect mores of the new millennium. Continuing with her intense exploration of female desire, she adds here a focus on a teenage boy's clumsy entry into the world of sex and romance. While it is not a masterpiece (it was made for television), it features the film-maker's candid and yet subtle approach to delicate topics.

### SYNOPSIS

A thirty-something English woman, Alice, and sixteen-year-old French boy, Thomas, meet on an overnight boat crossing from France to England. As the evening wears on, they talk openly about themselves, his failed exams and her failed marriage, as well as youth, aging and relations between men and women. The mutual attraction progresses to mutual seduction and then to passionate love-making. But the brief crossing ends with a startling revelation that makes us reassess the characters.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Thomas            A sixteen-year-old French schoolboy  
Alice              An English woman in her thirties.

### SCENES

*Departure* Thomas, a nice-looking French boy, almost misses the ferry that will take him across the English Channel from France to England. He arrives late at the port, lugging a heavy suitcase and his ID is torn, but he is allowed to board at the last moment. Despite being handed a map of the ferry, he looks lost as he wanders through the various rooms and levels on the huge vessel

*Meeting* He makes it to his seating area, leaves his bag and goes to the crowded cafeteria, where he meets Alice, a plain-looking English woman in her thirties. After he helps her in small ways to navigate the impersonal service and set menu, she invites him to sit with her. Speaking in English, they exchange names and continue to eat in silence, though they stare at each other.

*Conversation* When Thomas struggles a little with English, Alice reveals that she speaks French. Now, Thomas opens up and speaks about his close relationship with his mother and his hatred of school. In return, Alice speaks of her boredom and her bitterness that other people decide the course of your life. Emboldened and attracted to Alice, Thomas suggests a drink in the bar, but first she drags him to the duty-free and buys alcohol, where Thomas's true age of 16 is revealed.

*Alice's monologue* In the disco bar, where she drinks brandy and he a coke, Alice reveals that she drinks to forget and apologises for being 'too old'. In a long monologue, she explains the impossibility of love between men and women and reveals that she's separated from her husband, who treated her like 'a piece of furniture.' But her eyes light up when she says, 'I got the bastard. I dumped him yesterday.'

*Magic act* As they watch a silly magician's act, Thomas slides his hand and takes hold of hers. When swords are thrust through a box containing a woman, Alice comments that it is similar to romantic relationships. Men put you in a box, make you disappear and torture you. Meanwhile, Thomas continues to stroke her hand and arms.

*Dancing* With their sexual desire aroused, they move to a disco bar, with low lighting and sensual dancing. Now their mutual attraction moves toward mutual seduction. As Alice drinks more and

more, she becomes voluble and expresses embarrassment at her age. 'You're not old,' he says. Their conversation hovers on the edge of desire, with Alice commenting on Thomas' youth and on relations between men and women. She reveals that she's separated from her husband, lets down her hair and looks at him with distinct longing. Encouraged, Thomas takes her hand and later leads her to the dance floor, where their bodies meld together. These scenes are played subtly and it is difficult to say who is seducing whom, although the experienced Alice always has the upper hand.

*Consummation* Angry that she is mocking him, Thomas leaves her. Back in her cabin, she looks out the window and sees him alone on the deck below. She goes to him and apologises. When she challenges him to be crude, he kisses her and she leads him to her cabin, where they make love.

*Seduction* No romantic relationship is complete without a (brief) separation. This occurs during the dancing scene, when Thomas takes offence at Alice's apparently 'hard' exterior and her suggestion that he is too young. He storms off in a huff, but after less than a quarter hour, she seeks him out and they make up. After Alice soothes Thomas' wounded pride, she leads him to her cabin. She is still full of witty remarks ('This is the dreaded moment when we have to get down to business'), while he is simply consumed with desire for her. Once inside the cabin, she sits on the bed and waits, while a nervous Thomas smokes a cigarette. He nuzzles her like a pet, and she suggests they stop, but he says no. Still, he doesn't move until she begins to undress herself. He does the same, keeping his back to her, and when they are on the bed, he reveals that he's still a virgin. She advises him to go slow and he follows her advice. He is earnest, working hard, and she is enjoying it all. Then they lie motionless, silent, enjoying the closeness of their bodies

*Afterwards* The difference in age is also reflected in their different attitudes to love. That contrast is illustrated in a scene that follows their love-making. They are still naked, but under the sheets, side by side, smoking cigarettes. Differences have been levelled, or ignored, during the passionate sex and now comes the moment of relaxed reflection. When Alice asks if he has lots of girlfriends, Thomas says that 'things are very different these days.' She is doubtful, and he explains. 'We don't have steady girlfriends. No big dramas.' When Alice asks how 'they love each other,' he says, 'You wouldn't understand. It's much more casual. If your girlfriend's not there, you go out with another girl and then you go out with your girlfriend again.' Alice seems to lament the loss of romance in Thomas' generation.

*Morning after* In the morning, they shower, dress and have their photo taken like a romantic couple on vacation. Thomas is ecstatic, but Alice is more circumspect. At breakfast, she looks at him like a mother at her hungry son.

*Deception* As they disembark, Thomas puts down Alice's bags and asks her to wait while he collects his own. 'You'll wait? Swear you will,' he says and she nods in agreement. They kiss, and he races back to get his case, but when he returns, she is gone. On the quayside, in the pouring rain, he misses the shuttle bus, while she passes through immigration and is greeted by her husband and son. When Thomas catches up with her, she is in the car park. She gives him a brief glance, gets in a car and is driven away by her husband.

## THEMES

**Love** This is a story about a relationship that develops between a woman (in her 30s) and a teenage boy (16). After they meet by accident on a boat, their relationship evolves through various stages, (such as attraction, flirtation, seduction, separation) and ends with sexual intercourse. The unfolding of this well-known process has a heightened tension due to the difference in age between woman and boy. Indeed, that age gap is central to their arousal and adds hidden layers to their conversation. The sexual desire that each feels is genuine and powerful, but it comes from different histories and with different motives.

## Society

*Generation difference* One key social factor informing the relationship between Thomas and Alice is age. The fact that Alice is twice his age shapes every stage of their interaction. The dialogue between the two is weighted in favour of the older person, as is natural, but the teenager also expresses ideas about what role age plays in romance. While Thomas is constantly trying to prove himself to the experienced Alice, the film does not shy away from showing Alice and Thomas in something close to a mother-son relationship. In the course of their conversation, the age gap both marks their separation and eases their interaction.

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*Gender difference* A second social factor that determines their relationship is gender. Throughout the story, Alice expresses bitterness toward relationships. She blames men for treating women like objects, but she also finds fault with women for naively believing men. 'The magic moment lasts only while men want to seduce us,' she says to the blameless Thomas. 'You frolic in green meadows, but you end up in the cowshed like a cow chewing old dry hay...It's our fault, as well...We know men are bad...We're too romantic. We can't help believing in love. We won't admit that once they've screwed us, men lose interest.' This searing indictment of gender politics ends with a bleak assessment: 'There's no love. Only words to get what you want.'

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## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**THOMAS** Teenager Thomas is sweet and vulnerable. He lacks confidence, as is natural, but he also possesses a streak of adventure. As a young man, he is full of restless energy, and wishes to impress his older woman friend. He is physically clumsy, emotionally confused and eager to learn—the perfect partner for experienced Alice.

*Restless* Thomas is always in motion, racing to the boat, fidgeting in his seat or tilting his head. He is in transition, moving from his home country to a foreign country, from boyhood to manhood. The best example of his restlessness occurs during the scene in the disco bar. As Alice talks on and on about her life, he shifts his drink on the table or taps it with a swizzle stick. He jumps up to get more drinks, occupies himself with smoking and shifts about on his chair. A moment later, he slides his hand and takes hers, and then leads her to the dance floor, where he stumbles about, unable to sustain a smooth movement. All this energy signals his lack of confidence, his nervousness as he embarks on a voyage of self-discovery.

*Insecure* Attracted to Alice, aroused by her and yet conscious of their age difference, Thomas wants to prove himself to her. That masculine pride born of insecurity is shown in various scenes, but the most dramatic is again in the bar. When she speaks of her unhappy marriage and 'bastard' of a husband, Thomas is both fascinated and anxious to impress. The high point comes when they are dancing. Things have advanced to the point of explicit seduction and Thomas is not going to stop. But Alice keeps bringing up his age. He asks if she has a boyfriend, but she says she falls in love

with men. To which Thomas replies, 'I could take that badly. I'm a man, you know.' He is not, of course, but that is precisely why he claims that he is.

*Vulnerable* The desire to impress leaves one vulnerable, as is the case with Thomas in relation to Alice. Again, that quality is dramatized in the dancing scene, when they are virtually making love on the dance floor. When Alice seems to laugh at his desire for her, saying that she prefers rough men to sweet boys, his feelings are hurt. 'You're a hard woman,' he says. 'You make fun of me because I love you.' He pushes her away and leaves, but not before trying to hurt her. 'One day I'll be older,' he says. 'And you'll be really old, sad and alone.' That cruel retaliation is out of character for sweet Thomas, but he has been hurt because he is vulnerable.

**ALICE** A photographer in her thirties, Alice is a pleasant-looking woman, not especially attractive but possessing warm eyes and a reassuring smile. Unlike her companion, she is self-possessed and relaxed. She says she was married for eight years, without children, and is now separated. She also has an extremely negative view of marriage and heterosexual relations in general. There is a mercurial quality to her, angry one moment and gay the next, sweet and cruel in equal measure. Can we trust her?

*Disillusioned* The dominant aspect of Alice's character is her cynical attitude toward love, marriage and men, although she does not let women off the hook, either. She pours out her bitter disappointment at her own marriage during the scene in the disco bar, while poor Thomas listens. Alice believes that men mistreat and disrespect women, and she uses her own experience to describe the pain suffered by women. 'Imagine the eyes of the one you love lighting up only when they see someone other than you,' she says. 'And when they look at you, their eyes become terrifyingly opaque. Hard and cold, so they can ignore you.' Although women are seen as no more than pieces of furniture, women, too, share the blame in her dystopian view of romance. They stupidly cling to their belief in the possibility of love, thus permitting men to betray them.

*Deceptive* Only at the end of the story do we realise that Alice is devious. She began as a mother and counsellor, progresses to sexual tease and then to lover, but now, as the end, she reveals that she cannot be trusted. She and Thomas get up in the morning after their love-making, take showers and eat breakfast as though they are a normal pair of lovers. Just as they are about to disembark at Portsmouth, Thomas goes back to collect his bag and she agrees to wait for him on the gangway to the shore. But when he returns, she has disappeared. Unseen by him, she passes through immigration and smiles when she is greeted by her son and husband. Everything she has said about herself appears to be false.

*Masochistic* Another surprising element of her character is masochism. This revelation is heaped on poor Thomas during the erotic dancing scene. As Thomas struggles to contain his desire, she plays with him, saying that she doesn't really fancy such a nice boy. 'Usually I prefer tough, virile beasts,' she says. 'I'd never fall in love with someone who couldn't hurt me. It would be exquisite, but I'm masochistic...I prefer men who make me suffer.' Like many of Alice's declarations, though, we are not sure if this is honest or part of her seduction game. Perhaps she is speaking as 'everywoman' or perhaps she just imagines that she likes rough men.



(Thomas and Alice after they first meet)



(Thomas listens to Alice in the disco bar)