

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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CATHERINE BREILLAT (1948-)

LIFE

Catherine Breillat was born in Bressuire and grew up in Nort, both small market towns in western France. She was brought up to be a strict Catholic, facing rigid discipline in both her convent school and home. After a childhood in the provinces, during which she consumed films 'like candy,' she decided, at age 12, that she wanted to be a singer and then an actress. Moving to Paris when only 16, with her slightly younger sister in tow, she began to have casting lessons at a famous institute for actors. When directors ignored her in favour of her 'prettier' sister (Marie-Helene), Breillat turned to writing and published her first novel (*L'Homme facile, Easy Man*) at age 17. Ironically, it was deemed too explicit to be sold to anyone under 18, which meant that she couldn't buy her own book. This was Breillat's first collision with censorship. Other books followed, plus a brief stint of acting, notably a minor role in *Last Tango in Paris*, whose controversial sex scenes taught her something about transgressive cinema. She shifted to filmmaking in 1975, when she adapted her own novel and directed *A Real Young Girl*. Financial and censorship problems, however, prevented the release of this, her debut film, until 2000.

By that date, however, she had already made her name as a bold and experimental director with a number of films, crucially *Romance* (1999), which established her on the international circuit. Once again, though, the film created controversy and was banned in Australia. After completing three more films exploring female sexuality, she suffered a severe stroke that required months of hospitalisation and years of rehabilitation. During that time of weakness, she began a relationship with an infamous swindler (Christopher Rocancourt), who stole most of her savings. In true Breillat fashion, though, she eventually processed that horrendous experiences into a movie (*Abuse of Weakness*, 2013), starring Isabelle Hubbert. Prior to that, she also adapted a novel set in early 19th century France (*The Last Mistress*, 2007) and directed two well-received retellings of classic folk-tales (*Bluebeard*, 2009, and *Sleeping Beauty*, 2010). In recent years, Catherine Breillat has been unable to raise money to mount new production but has been actively writing and working as professor of *auteur* cinema at the European Graduate School in Paris.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Among Catherine Breillat's major prizes, we note that *Fat Girl* won the Manfred Salzgeber award at Berlin, the French Culture award at Cannes and Best Film award at Chicago in 2001. *The Last Mistress* was nominated for the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2007. *Sleeping Beauty* won the C.I.C.A.E award at Venice in 2010

FILMOGRAPHY (feature films)

A Real Young Girl (Une vraie jeune fille), 1975 [released in 2000]

Nocturnal Uproar (Tapage Nocturne), 1979

Virgin (36 Fillette), 1988

Like a Dirty Angel (Sale comme un ange), 1991

Perfect Love (Parfait amour), 1996

Romance, 1999

Fat Girl (À ma sœur), 2001

Brief Crossing (Brève traverse), 2001

Sex is Comedy, 2002

Anatomy of Hell, 2004

The Last Mistress (Une vieille maîtresse), 2007

Bluebeard (Barbe bleue), 2009

Sleeping Beauty (La belle endormie), 2010

Abuse of Weakness (Abus de faiblesse), 2013

THEMES

Female sexuality The primary theme in Breillat's work is female sexuality. However, this preoccupation encompasses a wide range of issues, the most fundamental being point of view. Many, many directors have also focused on female sexuality but largely from a male perspective, which is often exhibitionist and sometimes pornographic. Of course, Breillat's films show sex, very explicit and even violent sex, but they are more concerned with introspection than pleasure. As she herself put it, 'I take sexuality as a subject, not as an object.'

Fat Girl The focus on female sexuality in this film is articulated in the difference between two sisters' ideas of how best to lose their virginity. Walking through a landscape of uprooted and chopped down trees, 12-year-old Anaïs and 15-year-old Elena talk about who they want to be their first sexual lover. 'If I met a man I love,' little Anaïs says, 'I'd want to be broken in first. He won't think my first time counts. The first time should be with nobody. I don't want a guy bragging he had me first.' Elena makes fun of her pudgy sister, suggesting that no one would want her anyway, but Anaïs seems completely content with her idea that her first sexual intercourse should be anonymous. Her clear-eyed dispassionate logic strikes us, the viewers, as precocious, and a little perverse, but later events force a rethink.

Romance Marie, the lead character, in this film has a wide variety of sexual experiences. Frustrated that her boyfriend Robert no longer desires her, she seeks out satisfaction with a stranger in a bar and then Robert, her boss who is also an expert in sadomasochism. Marie's sexual lessons with Robert, 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. Robert's no-nonsense sex seems to have freed her from her anxiety about the gap between love and sex. Far from degrading her, his unsentimental dynamic of submission and domination allows her, psychologically, to enjoy sex.

Brief Crossing Alice, the thirty-something English woman in this film, shares some of Marie's confusion about sexuality in *Romance*. Alice finds herself in the company of a young French boy, Thomas, on a night journey across the English Channel. She is critical of men, who treat their wives 'like furniture,' and thinks that boys (such as Thomas) are 'safe' as sexual partners. She toys with young Thomas and eventually takes him to bed, where she enjoys sex with him. Alice is capable of sexual manipulation, just like the men she condemns.

Anatomy of Hell In this controversial film, a man is hired to watch a woman's body in order to reveal the woman's sexuality and the man's attitudes toward the female body. Although the film includes a number of sexual acts, on their own they tell us little about how men and women experience them. Instead, the film focuses on the psychological dimension of sexuality. What it reveals is a typical male revulsion toward the female body, and specifically menstrual blood. For instance, although blood is purity and strength for women, it is impure and disgusting to men.

Love

Bluebeard The relationship that develops between Catherine and Bluebeard is at the core of the story. Although they do not 'fall in love' and do not kiss (or have any sexual contact), the bond between them is as powerful as it is gentle. Young and romantic Catherine demands her 'space', but she falls under the magnetic spell of the aging man who is kind to her. Their mutual attraction and affection add up to something very close to romantic love.

Brief Crossing 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.

The Last Mistress Love, especially in its self-destructive form is the dominant theme of this film set in early 19th-century Paris. There is considerable discussion of the niceties of keeping mistresses and

how to keep a man's love. The older generation reminisce about the sexual misadventures of their youth and hold differing opinions about the current generation's behaviour. The focus, however, is on the fierce and long-lasting love affair between Marigny and Vellini and its effect on Marigny's marriage. The film neither condemns nor glorifies their sexual adventure, but merely holds it up for scrutiny.

Sisterhood

Fat Girl Three years apart in age, different in body weight and miles apart in temperament, the two sisters in this film 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.

Bluebeard As with *Fat Girl*, this film also features a key relationship between sisters. Again, as in that earlier film, the sisters in *Bluebeard* are aged about 15 and 12, and they are very different children. As in *Fat Girl*, the older sister in this fairy tale, Anne, is more practical, cautious and protective, while the younger one, Catherine, is more expansive, imaginative and bold. Their relationship is tested by two major events in the story: the death of their father and Catherine's marriage. Despite fraying at the edges, the fabric of their bond holds, as it does in *Fat Girl*, too.

Society

Brief Crossing 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.

The Last Mistress This film exposes, but does not condemn, the social mores of early 19th-century Paris, including frivolous costume parties, serial infidelity and the keeping of mistresses. It is a culture of the wealthy and powerful, who tolerate sexual idiosyncrasies within their own ranks but despise outsiders, like the hot-blooded Spanish woman, Vellini. The film-maker maintains a cool and ironical perspective on the behaviour of her characters, engendering sympathy for them, despite their narcissism and hypocrisy. Overall, the film shows us how such a society endures over time, despite its decadence and contradictions.

Quest

Romance A major theme in this film is Marie's quest for a satisfying romantic and sexual relationship. The troubling conflict between love and sex is dramatised in the opening sequence. Marie and her boyfriend Paul have been together for several months, and Paul has lost interest in sex. They have already argued about her desire to have more sex, with Marie (in an inner monologue) saying that 'a man who cannot love me physically is a pit of suffering.' Now, in a restaurant, she speaks aloud to him. 'You know why you drink?' she says. 'So you can pass out whenever we get to bed. You only love me when there is a table between us.' Marie wants to have sex because she loves Paul, and Paul doesn't want to have sex because he loves Marie. It is the time-honoured split between a man's view of his wife as pure (Marie is always dressed in all white) and a wife's need to have sexual satisfaction. Marie takes her quest outside the relationship and experiments with strangers and with SM/BD.

CHARACTERS

1. Open

a) Catherine (*Bluebeard*) is the younger sister, who is wilful, impulsive and dangerously curious. She is the one who befriends Bluebeard and wins the heart of the maligned monster. She loves her sister but also wants to break away from her role as the 'little sister.' Even when she moves into the rich man's castle, she is not afraid to demand that her wishes be granted. She is, however, still a young girl who looks up at the monstrous man with wide eyes and a sly smile.

b) Thomas (*Brief Crossing*) is of a similar age to Catherine, although in a completely different historical context. Like her, he is curious, but also sweet and vulnerable. He lacks confidence, as is natural for a teenager, but he also possesses a streak of adventure. 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 the experienced Alice.

2. Emotional

a) Marie, the main character in *Romance*, 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.

b) Vellini (*The Last Mistress*) is a hot-blooded Spanish woman who lives as a courtesan. He is a mesmeric character, full of fiery lust and few delicate feelings. What can we expect of an illegitimate child of an Italian woman and a famed Spanish matador? She has 'been rescued' from the low-status of a courtesan by her marriage to a wealthy, elderly Englishman. Denigrated by Parisian society, she has a chip on her shoulder and is quick to take offense. Her dark flashing eyes cast a spell on Marigny.

c) Elena, the older sister in *Fat Girl*, presents a sharp contrast with her younger sister. Elena is guided by romantic ideas of a lover and falls for Fernando's skilful seduction of her. She is both surly and sweet. Although vulnerable and afraid, she is not depicted as innocent or abused. Instead, she thinks she gets what she wants, but it is clear that she has been controlled by her romantic ideals rather than rational judgement.

d) The unnamed man in *The Anatomy of Hell* is a tall, good-looking gay person, perhaps in his thirties. He has a square jaw, fixed eyes and rarely smiles, but he does break down and cry during the four nights of his instruction. And, in the end, he is confused about what he thinks of his sex education.

3. Rational

a) The unnamed woman in *The Anatomy of Hell* is perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties. She shows weakness in her attempted suicide, but during the four nights of her instruction she performs like a rational teacher. 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.

b) At 12 years, Anaïs (*Fat Girl*) is precocious, with an emotional intelligence of a much older person, especially in her rational explanation for why she wants her first lover to be a stranger. 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.

c) Anne (*Bluebeard*) is the older sister to curious Catherine. She is protective of Catherine and warns her of dangers ahead. While she is affectionate toward her sister, she also has an unforgiving view of the world, especially the rich and the church. She is said to be the prettier of the two and sings with a beautiful voice, but she is not the one chosen to be Bluebeard's wife. In any case, her instinct for danger might have led her to refuse him.

d) Robert (*Romance*) is an aging head teacher and master of sadomasochism. He knows that he lacks good looks but is confident of his S&M skills, which he describes with forensic precision. 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.

e) Marigny (*The Last Mistress*) is a handsome man aged about thirty. Part of the upper crust of Parisian society, he has sampled all its delights—women, opera, food and drink. But he is trapped in a long and self-destructive liaison with Vellini, who matches and then surpasses his outrageous behaviour. He is jaded by indulgence, but he also possesses remnants of sincerity and attempts to be a faithful husband.

4. Conscientious

a) Bluebeard (in the film by that name) is the classic 'gentle giant', or misunderstood monster, whose bulk and wealth belie his tender feelings. Despite his well-earned reputation, he is presented sympathetically as a man resigned to his ugliness and detested public image. Although standing over Catherine like a mountain, he is always gentle with her, often even apologetic and humbled. He tells her that he will never be angry with her as long as she tells the truth. When she doesn't, well, she finds out that his kindness has limits.

b) The Marquise de Flers (*The Last Mistress*) is a thoroughly likable, if vain old lady, who wants the best for her granddaughter. She has seen it all, survived seductions in her childhood and ended up a sweet, optimistic old woman. She even fancies that young men might find her attractive, at least as a person. Like Marigny, she embodies the spirit of the age, a certain cavalier indifference to the petty morality of others. But her instincts are fundamentally kind.

5. Disagreeable

a) Alice (*Brief Crossing*) is an English woman in her thirties. Unlike her companion (the much younger Thomas), 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 sweet the next. In the end, we find out that she is deceptive and cruel.

b) Fernando (*Fat Girl*) is an Italian law student, considerably older than the teenaged Elena, whom he seduces. 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.' But he manipulates Elena's naivete to get what he wants without much thought for her.



(The director in the early 2000s)



(On the set shooting *The Last Mistress*)