1.0 Introduction

One often hears the words “art house smut”, “obscene”, and “pornographic” in discussions on Catherine Breillat, an unfortunate fact because it reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of her work and the motivations behind it. Since Breillat began her directorial career with *Une vraie jeune fille* (1976), she has and continues to create provocative, philosophical studies on what she sees as the most difficult aspects of being female—sexuality and its social ramifications. Breillat is a thoroughly poststructuralist filmmaker with strong connections to second wave French feminists, especially Hélène Cixous and her concept of *écriture féminine*, but Breillat’s engagement with feminism is not without issues. In her examination of the feminine, she allows her female characters to be vulnerable to an extent rarely achieved since Cassavetes, while using a nearly pornographic language, which could be construed in two different ways: as catering to the pleasures of the gaze, if it weren’t for Breillat’s unique ability to de-eroticize the material; and as reinforcing one of the texts of male dominance, if it weren’t for Breillat’s shift in power to the feminine. These features allow her to create powerful films, but they problematize a strict feminist reading.

Over the course of her career, Breillat has refined a directorial technique that combines a poetic filmic language with frank, neo-realist portrayals of sexuality. Her films tend to remain in the symbolic realm until there is onscreen sexuality, which in her usage treads the border between cinematic realism and pornographic exploitation, though never becoming the latter, and although her films seem to posses enough content to satiate even the most avid scopophile, she manages to de-eroticize her images by replacing libidinal stimulation with intellectual stimulation.
In this paper, I will examine Breillat’s treatment of sexuality and the social and feminist issues that arise from her explicit visual language drawing from *Romance* (1999), *Fat Girl* (2001), *Brief Crossing* (2001), and *Anatomy of Hell* (2004) as well as comparisons to other sexually provocative directors. From here, I will analyze how Breillat uses such a strong visual language artistically including, especially, her use of an *écriture féminine* that allows her to subvert the gaze, to de-eroticize and intellectualize sexuality, and to avoid lapsing into pornographic exploitation while creating powerfully moving works of cinema.

### 2.0 The films

Stylistically, Breillat’s *mise-en-scène* is sparse and her lighting and camera movement are unobtrusive, thus concentrating all attention on characters and dialogue, but she meticulously plans and arranges the elements that do make it into the film. She is, above all, a true auteur as indicated by statements such as, “I want to manipulate the actor…I want my actors to be unable to build their characters. I use my actors like a painter uses his colours. The less they’re aware of what I want to achieve, the more I can actually do it.”¹ She even goes as far as to assert that, “I am the movie,”² and in this sense, Breillat borrows elements from the French new wave. While her camera is more active than Godard’s post-new wave work, it’s no where near as distractingly active as Truffaut’s early work, especially in *Jules et Jim* (1962). Breillat uses neither montage nor Godardian jump cuts. She tends to use very long takes, as is typical of Italian neo-realists using familiar editing techniques such as shot-reverse-shot sparingly and in fact, Breillat’s cinematic language is very similar to Visconti using mainly one-shot sequences so as to “cover

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² Interview with Breillat in *Fat Girl*, DVD, directed by Catherine Breillat (2001; France: Criterion, 2001).
the entire action in interminable deep-focus panning shots.” Overall, Breillat’s style is austere, constantly restrained in all areas save for her radical ideas and (sexual) situations.

At their core, Breillat’s films are philosophical dialogues between pairs of people, almost always a man and a woman. In this way, they are similar to Godard’s philosophic works such as *Weekend* (1968), although *Weekend* features a wide range of memorable characters each speaking about related, but not immediately connected, topics whereas Breillat rarely uses more than two characters and their discussions are acutely focused throughout the film. Where Godard favors group discussions with multiple characters, Breillat favors one-on-one conversations similar to the Marquis de Sade’s literature. Her films align clearly with poetry where the characters and objects are no longer of the Real, but of the Symbolic order, as evidenced in films such as *Anatomy of Hell*, which consists entirely of abstract, philosophical conversation. Consequently, through this technique Breillat comes as close as any previous director to realizing Alexandre Astruc’s idea of the *caméra-stylo*, which describes a mode of filmmaking where ideas supercede narrative and the director can, in a sense, use the screen as a method of philosophic/textual production.

*Romance* is Breillat’s sixth and most popular film, and ranks amongst her greatest work largely due to the fact that its message is universally feminine and not contingent upon age, race, or social position—it speaks about the constitutive relationship of woman vis-à-vis man. The story concerns Marie (Caroline Ducey), a woman, unfulfilled by her genuinely uninterested and distant boyfriend, Paul (Sagamore Stévenin), who embarks on a journey of sexual maturation, empowerment, and eventually, fulfillment thus leading to a number of sexual encounters varying

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from light bondage from a refined Sadean gentleman to a consensual rape with a common low-life.

*Fat Girl* focuses on the relationship between Anaïs (Anaïs Reboux), the sullen, but intelligent titular character; her sister, Elena (Roxane Mesquida), the older, but artless beauty; and Fernando (Libero De Rienzo), the suave, manipulative, predator that seduces Anaïs’s sister. This film is remarkable in that it uses three main characters, a first for Breillat. The film is also unique insofar as it may be semi-autobiographical, as Breillat’s sister, actress and pinup model Marie-Hélène Breillat, was always considered the “pretty” one. Anaïs is a bit jealous at times, but in general, she is the more perceptive and worldly of the two and thus bears the role of Breillat’s philosophic mouthpiece.

One of the most controversial scenes involves the seduction of Elena by the oleaginous Fernando as Anaïs pretends to sleep in their shared room, made all the more troubling by the fact that Elena’s character appears to be between 15 and 16 years old. Although the sex is not nearly as graphic as in *Anatomy of Hell*, the age of the girl and the idea of coercion made it controversial and led to familiar (to Breillat) allegations of real sex (ergo questionable morality).

Breillat’s most purely philosophical, theoretical, and explicit film is easily *Anatomy of Hell*—the tenth film in her self-described series on sexuality. The majority of the film occurs in a sparsely furnished bedroom and consists of dialogue between two innominate characters: a woman (Amira Casar) and a gay man (Rocco Siffredi, an internationally renowned porn star). A few comments on the “gay” man are apropos: the character is not gay in a stereotypically effeminate manner, nor is he necessarily homosexual. Breillat instead uses the character to represent man prior-to and independent-of woman—man as a sexually unsophisticated being who prefers the company of other men in a very fraternal sense. In a way, the film is a
companion piece to *Romance* because where *Romance* shows a woman’s transcendence of socially dictated sexual repression, *Anatomy of Hell* shows a man’s transcendence from a very mundane view of love to a full and total understanding and is changed accordingly.

### 3.0 What is pornographic?

Since most discussions on Breillat eventually discuss pornography, it’s important to understand exactly what this loaded word that inspires such strong feelings across all borders (e.g. cultural, social, religious) means, its common usage, and its relation to art in general. Common feelings about pornography found in each milieu include a varying degree of negative connotation and a strong association with graphic depictions (visual, verbal, or otherwise) of sex. This association with sex has changed over the course of time with the boundary between obscenity and acceptance being pushed further and further until in the twentieth century not even clinical, visual documentation of the sex act guarantees pornography.

Dictionary.com defines pornography as “obscene writings, drawings, photographs, or the like, especially those having little or no artistic merit.” From here, we must further define obscene. Again from dictionary.com, obscene is defined as “offensive to morality or decency; causing uncontrolled sexual desire; abominable, disgusting, repulsive.” Others have interesting and varied definitions such as Nagisa Oshima who states, “A pornographic film [is] a film of sexual organs and sexual intercourse…a film that [breaks] taboos [is], to me, a pornographic film;” David Begelman, the president of Columbia Pictures Industries in the 1970s, who said to *Variety* regarding *Emmanuelle*, “we would have had no interest in the film if its appeal was

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totally to men...then it could be taken as pornographic;” and, most famously, Justice Potter Stewart who, during the obscenity trial over Louis Malle’s *Les Amants* (1958), provided the flimsiest of descriptions offering only “I know it when I see it.” Evidently, a film can be pornographic if it has any of the following: sexual organs (thus eliminating a great deal of 1970s Hollywood cinema), a strictly masculine appeal (thus eliminating action and “buddy” movies), or whatever features any individual subjectively decides to be pornographic (thus potentially putting most everything at risk).

Beyond the issue of obscenity and morality is the issue of power and domination. Feminists assert that pornography is not only a text devoted to upholding the subservience of women, but also an inspiration for physical violence against women. Remarkably, this is an issue that both feminists and conservatives can agree upon, as one can see by the work of aggressive moralist, James Dobson, for the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography where he states, “pornography is degrading to women,” further adding, “a small but dangerous minority will then choose to act aggressively against the nearest available females. Pornography is the theory; rape is the practice.” This appropriation of radical feminist Robin Morgan’s familiar slogan clearly demonstrates the connection between feminists and conservatives and highlights the diffusion of anti-pornography sentiments.

Linda Williams, a scholarly authority on pornography, shows that in the sixties and seventies, writers on pornography began to agree that it was deserving of study for anthropological, sociological, psychological, and sexological reasons and by the late eighties,
Williams herself began writing on the aesthetics of pornography, a position only recently available due to the postmodern revisitation of low art—a position that is gaining momentum in the field of aesthetics. Ann Brooks also faults the standard anti-pornography stance because,

It assumes a unitary, undifferentiated concept of pornography, making no distinction between different forms; it is based on a simple binary model which understands all pornography as a reflection of male sexuality; it assumes a single transparent, undifferentiated meaning regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality or class; it assumes a simple cause/effect model which implies that pornography as representation will lead to violence; finally it makes assumptions about women’s sexuality, seeing women as passive victims, while at the same time denying opportunities for resistance.12

The aesthetic and pluralistic perspective on pornography is what I intend to pursue in this paper, because regardless of one’s personal views on the artistic merit of Breillat’s oeuvre, she is presenting her films as works of art and we must address them accordingly.

This still leaves the issue of defining the relationship between pornography and art (addressed in section 3.2), as well as the issue of pornography and sexuality as necessarily linked (addressed in section 3.3) with a review of so-called obscene content in a broad spectrum of filmmakers, not limited to sexually explicit films.

3.2   Art versus pornography

Addressing the ontology of art is considerably more difficult because an “I know it when I see it” explanation doesn’t suffice under any circumstances. Many philosophers over the course of history have endeavored to provide a definition of art. Plato claimed that art was imitation or representation; Kant attempted to separate artistic quality from a necessary connection to beauty; Hegel spoke of art as cognition, but claimed it had lost the ability to fulfill that function in the middle ages; Goodman describes aesthetic experience as “cognitive experience distinguished by

the dominance of certain symbolic characteristics”\textsuperscript{13}; and in 1996 Jean Baudrillard proclaimed art “null.”\textsuperscript{14}

If art can be, at times, anything to anyone, how can one make a distinction between the artistic and the pornographic? Berys Gaut adopts a usefully anti-essentialist perspective where if something can meet a sufficient amount of artistic criteria (without needing to meet all artistic criteria), we can safely determine its artistic legitimacy.\textsuperscript{15} To defend art against pornography requires no comprehensive system for every contingency: a selection of differing characteristics will suffice and, considering the nature of the comparison, we can expect reasonable cogency. Art may not always achieve the Hegelian ideal of art communicating the fundamental, universal, unspeakable truth helping the world to understand beauty, thought, and God, but it strives for something more than the manipulation of such an easily accessed instinct as the sexual drive.

The ideal of art includes a strong conceptual base, especially in the twentieth century, with a variety of intents ranging from explanatory to philosophical. That aestheticians of various movements cannot agree on a universal definition of art is obvious however, most will agree to an extent that intent is the \textit{sine qua non} of art. Intent is difficult to quantify and the idea of artistic intent says nothing about the interpretation of authorial intention as Barthes shows us,\textsuperscript{16} but if there is a single ‘rigid designator’ satisfactory to most all aestheticians, it is surely intent, for an object without intent cannot be tied to the Artworld, art history, or an artist. To define which intents are worthy of the status of art is beyond the scope of the paper. However, pornography has but one intent and thus we may make a distinction stating pornography is media

\textsuperscript{14} Jean Baudrillard, \textit{The Conspiracy of Art} (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2005).
with this single intent and no others, while art includes other intents (e.g. political, aesthetic, philosophic) and can even include pornographic intent so long as pornographic intent is not the only intent present. That art aspires to appeal to something more sophisticated than a prurient interest is a safe assumption. We can also define pornography as exhibiting instrumental value: it is a means to an end that can be judged simply by its efficacy and consequently, one can easily replace one pornographic text with another because each text ultimately produces the same result. By contrast, art has intrinsic value, as it provides a unique and valuable experience, a value that one cannot replace with another for the same effect. The efficacy of art is much more difficult to measure because the desired result is eternally questionable and subjective.

Pornography is nothing more than an instrument to produce sexual stimulation. The U.S. Supreme Court offers, “the test of obscenity is whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests.”¹⁷ The equivocality of such phrases as “contemporary community standards” notwithstanding, this test is useful in the fact that it confirms the definition pornographic intent. Sometimes the intent will be clouded in a lush tropical atmosphere of surfers and bikini clad women engaging in soft, simulated sex, while other times it may be pushed to the foreground in close-up penetrating shots of real sex. Even though the former may target those with tamer sensibilities and the latter may address those with an appetite for the extreme, they both serve, above all else, to move the spectator to an increased level of sexual excitation, thereby appealing to prurient interest as a dominant theme. If an absolute definition such as this is not as advantageous when the discussion strays from hardcore to softcore and erotic media, I propose that if the overarching intent of a film is sexual stimulation, regardless of

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its level of effrontery, we may not necessarily label it pornographic, but we will also not label it art, i.e. it will be in a state in between.

The factor of intent also allows one to use or borrow from the visual and textual language of pornography directly while attaining artistic status. Former stripper, prostitute, and hardcore actress Annie Sprinkle knows the sex industry well and draws from her experience to create meta-critiques of pornography while using it’s own language. One of her most renowned works, *Anatomy of a Pin-Up Photo* (1991), depicts Sprinkle in typical fetish-lingerie while many captions direct attention to various details: “Corset makes my waist 4½ inches smaller, but I can’t breath; Black stockings make legs look thinner; I can’t walk and can barely hobble; These heels are excruciatingly high,” and so on. Sprinkle is both appearing as a pin-up girl and distancing the spectator from easy pleasure by destroying the phantasm, and in this sense she is making a bold artistic statement. In other works, Sprinkle sometimes goes as far as duplicating pornographic conventions such as the typical, odd camera angles designed to provide the viewer with all the necessary visual information to know the extent of sex act in progress, but the multiple planes of spectatorial engagement offer much more than mere instrumental value.

### 3.3 Pornography and Violence

There is a long-standing debate on the preference of violence over sexuality in the United States and, although this debate is undoubtedly familiar to most, it is worth mentioning again in the context of this paper because were Breillat to use violence instead of sexuality, she might easily avoid much of the criticism that she receives, but she also might lose the effect of shock to many audiences used to seeing machine guns rather than penises.

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It would seem that certain excessively violent films should be just as prone to the label of pornography (i.e., something patently offensive with little or no artistic merit), as sex films. The common exploitation film is, as B-Movie expert Joe Bob Briggs shows, entertaining on two levels: as “an assault on the senses that outrages the middle class and as part of a subculture that only initiates know about;”\(^{19}\) but these films typically have little or no production or artistic value and serve only to exploit a certain feature (e.g. gore, violence, sex) for the sole purpose of packing a theater with spectators looking for a cheap thrill. Movies by Herschell Gordon Lewis, known as the Godfather of Gore, fit the definition of pornography well. His most famous film, *Blood Feast* (1963), contains images of gory death, the extent of which audiences had never previously witnessed such as its most notorious scene where the maniac somehow kills a woman by ripping out her tongue. Scenes such as these are filmed in a simplistic, point-the-camera-at-the-action style with absolutely no flair and no narrative justification—simply put, they are present to create a spectacle. One need only read the poster designed by the directors to understand the intention as exploitative:

Nothing so Appalling in the Annals Of Horror! You’ll Recoil and Shudder as You Witness the Slaughter and Mutilation of Nubile Young Girls—in a Weird and Horrendous Ancient Rite! An admonition: If you are the parent or guardian of an impressionable adolescent, do not bring him or permit him to see this motion picture. Introducing Connie Mason: You read about her in *Playboy*. More grisly than ever, in blood color!\(^{20}\)

Briggs humorously captures the atmosphere of *Blood Feast* perfectly describing the two leads, Connie Mason, “who was so lifeless and unprepared that she drove Lewis insane”, and Mal Arnold, who “when the camera rolled…insisted on using the world’s worst Bela Lugosi accent,


\(^{20}\) Poster from *Blood Feast*, DVD, directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis (1963; USA: Something Weird Video, 2000).
bugging out his Groucho Marx eyebrows, and exaggerating a hokey limp.” While this type of exploitation film is very enjoyable because the lack of technical and artistic skill provide unintentional comedy and though Lewis consciously accepts that he is not making high art, films such as *Blood Feast* are morally offensive and artistically void, offering only instrumental value and yet, because they exploit violence rather than sex, they resist pornographic classification.

For the purposes of this paper, I’ll use the word “pornography” to denote something that is patently offensive with little or no artistic value, typically, but not exclusively, sexual in nature.

### 3.3 Treatments of sex: Breillat and others

Of course, Breillat isn’t the first to use explicit sex in a film. Even if we ignore the realm of hardcore sexual pornography, there are a number of films that use sex with varying degrees of realism, visibility, and intent, the most famous of which is Vilgot Sjöman’s *I Am Curious: Yellow* (1968), a Swedish film that dealt with sexuality in a frank and honest manner. *I Am Curious: Yellow* and its companion film *I Am Curious: Blue* (1968) each feature an increased amount of frontal nudity (both male and female) and unreserved discussions of taboo topics such as the female orgasm and masturbation, but the most “egregious” offense happens in *Yellow* when the female lead kisses the male lead’s flaccid penis.

In 1968 at the time of its American release, *Yellow* was officially deemed pornographic, most likely because it offered visual evidence of what was mislabeled a sexual act, a technique at that time reserved only for stag films, the precursor to modern hardcore porn. The film came at a time when the world began to question sexuality, as one can see in other films such as Dusan

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Makavejev’s *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) on Wilhelm Reich, and its filmic language is one of exploration rather than exploitation.

Vilgot Sjöman’s treatment of sexuality is very similar to Breillat’s in that he doesn’t intentionally eroticize his material with the familiar techniques of lush photography, beautiful actors, or passionate music. Instead, the *I Am Curious* films are shot in a black and white documentary style with a strong connection to French new wave cinema, especially Godard and his use of jump cuts and reflexivity; and there is no attempt to make the sex acts more appealing that they naturally appear. The leads of both films are not particularly attractive (in a reflexive moment, Sjöman teases the lead actress telling her that if she keeps eating candy she’ll look fat when she’s naked), and although Breillat tends to use actors who are more attractive for her roles, her scenes have a similar tone where nothing remains intentionally hidden.

### 3.4.2 Just Jaeckin

After the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Massachusetts’ state anti-obscenity law, the door opened to a new era of sexually charged films including, mostly notably, the work of Just Jaeckin who had back-to-back world-wide hits with *Emmanuelle* (1974) and *The Story of O* (1975). Both are literary adaptations, the latter of which came from an established author, Pauline Réage, and won the French literature prize *Prix des Deux Magots*, although officials quickly declared the book obscene. *Emmanuelle* is remarkable both for its unashamedly erotic nature; its use of a wide variety of sexual situations including lesbianism, rape, and sadomasochism; and for embracing its self-imposed X rating with the tag line, “X was never like this.”

These two films have excellent production values, beautiful soft focus photography, a very solid cast, and most importantly, general public respectability; but they do not attain the title

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of art because the films are “little more than the sum of [their] sex scenes”\textsuperscript{24}—not nearly as crass or explicit as hardcore, but stimulation just the same. The effort that Jaeckin gives to making his films aesthetically pleasing distinguishes them from pornography, but sexual stimulation is the \textit{raison d’être}. Although by today’s standards the films are relatively tame, they still remain very good softcore sex films with no real aspirations of artistic intent. One can tell immediately by the nature and frequency of sexual encounters that they are the main focus of the film. Clues such as lingering shots of naked bodies, the lack of ascertainable irony, and the narrative abeyance during these scenes indicate they exist to entice the gaze and to provide erotic stimulation, thus placing them in contradistinction to Breillat’s and Sjöman’s depictions of sex and also to our previous exclusive definition of art. Where Jaeckin films characters caught in the heat of passion covered in languid, lush music, Breillat films characters constantly speaking through the sex act either in dialogue with each other or in a voiceover. Jaeckin films scenes that look beautiful, though entirely unrealistic (sex while standing in an airplane lavatory is probably not as good as it looks in \textit{Emmanuelle}), while Breillat films scenes that are brutally realistic making no attempt to glorify the sex act or to hide the parts unappealing to an observer, as evidenced in \textit{Anatomy of Hell}’s close-ups of female genitals covered in menstrual blood.

\textbf{3.4.3 Peter Greenaway}

Peter Greenaway is another director whose films include frequent nudity (especially male frontal nudity) and acts of perversion and scatology not typically found in mainstream cinema, but much of this content is not expressly sexual and he presents it in a manner more in common with classic painting than with pornography. Nevertheless, some still maintain that his films, most notably \textit{The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover} (1989) and \textit{The Pillow Book} (1996),

warrant an “obscene” rating such as X or NC-17, which in the general public’s view is tantamount to hardcore pornography.25

Greenaway’s films are a classic example of the public’s preference of violence over sex. While his scatological elements will certainly offend many, it is far more likely that we can attribute his trouble with the ratings board to two issues: the frequent sighting of a penis and the depictions of the sex act shown in long shot, thus hiding none of the familiar bodily motions. It is obvious that Greenaway isn’t trying for titillation as deducible from his visual language alone—his obsession with symmetry, framing, and painterly compositions demonstrate this clearly.

Beyond that, he presents most of his nudity outside the context of sexuality because he finds the sight of the imperfections of the middle-aged male figure aesthetically pleasing and interesting as a subject typically cloaked in the protection of a business suit. One can observe this during the final twenty minutes of The Pillow Book—a virtual parade of naked men of all shapes and sizes. Although some will undoubtedly experience this nudity as erotic, titillation from nudity is not Greenaway’s intent—rather, the intent is discernibly artistic as evidenced by the ritualized choreography and statuesque poses the men adopt as they uncover themselves as objects of art. This is, however, not to suggest that these scenes are not erotic. If the scene is erotic in any manner, it’s likely due to the beautiful calligraphy inscribed on the bodies themselves and, in fact, the camera lingers on the delicately transcribed ideograms much in the way Jaeckin’s camera lingers on breasts.

25 Critics such as Roger Ebert repeatedly call for a functional adult film rating—a rating that serves to keep children from seeing material that they should not see, but that also lets adults see material made specifically for them. Similarly, Breillat feels that “it’s normal to create censorship for children…because they are not adult[s]” and they are thus unable to face the difficulties of the world during their formative years. However, she contends that “an adult cannot accept to have some adults more excellent, more intelligent, superior who are censors who can decide that he is not able to see adult films.”
Greenaway’s use of nudity and sex also differs from Breillat’s in that she is primarily concerned with sexuality while Greenaway is more concerned with visual information, and although spotting a penis in one of his films is a common occurrence, they are never erect as in Breillat’s work. Breillat will often accompany a sex scene with a voice over, thus giving the spectator a window into the female’s psyche just as she is most vulnerable visually, whereas Greenaway presents characters undressed in very innocuous scenes such as taking a bath while discussing the architecture and function of the bathroom itself (26 Bathrooms), a father and son changing into bedclothes for the night, or a man removing his clothes in childish protest of attending a boring funeral service (both from 8 ½ Women), thus further adding to the idea that the bodies are aesthetic objects rather than sexual objects.

3.4.4 Larry Clark

Greenaway, Jaeckin, and Sjöman each film sex in a manner more explicit than typical mainstream movies, but Larry Clark goes far beyond and even rivals Breillat’s most explicit work. Films such as Bully (2001) and Ken Park (2002), the latter of which still (as of 2007) cannot find an American distributor and is available uncut only in Russia, push the boundaries between art and smut almost as far as Breillat while adding the additional problematic element of using actors that appear to be adolescents. The manner in which Clark films sex is strikingly similar to Breillat in that nothing is hidden with convenient framing, nothing is sensational, and, typically, nothing is glamorized.

The major question surrounding Clark’s work is where his artistic vision ends and where his possible fetishistic indulgence begins. Clark began his career as a photographer with the scandalously controversial collection Tulsa (1971) where he photographed his friends in their natural, uninhibited state of casual sex and drug use and, now in his sixties, he continues to
document youth culture still including drug use and casual adolescent sex. Without this background knowledge, it’s very easy to read his films as the work of a pedophile, but these charges are as unfounded as attacks of “art house smut” leveled at Breillat because Clark has artistic rather than predatory intent—his work is intrinsically valuable offering a totally unique and powerful experience. *Kids* (1995) exemplifies this with the protagonist seducing a fourteen-year-old girl in a scene that is, at best, unappealing due to harsh, unflattering lighting and intense, open-mouth kissing with exaggeratedly audible slurping; and, at worst, tragic due to the fact that she is an ingenuous virgin while he is an HIV positive licentious liar. In all probability, the spectator is too preoccupied with the gravity and sorrowful reality of the scene to derive much pleasure from the viewing.

Still, there is the issue of fetishistic indulgence present in certain scenes such as the *ménage-a-trios* that ends *Ken Park*. The scene itself is defensible in the context of the film, but Clark films the scene with sensual lighting, soft music, and slow panning shots of naked teenagers, indicating that perhaps he is giving the scene more attention than it deserves and thus is receiving some sort of gratification by filming in this manner. The idea behind the scene deals with teenagers escaping the callous reality of the world into a type of halcyon utopia where adults are not only absent, but do not exist altogether. The nudity is reminiscent of a Garden of Eden scene and the sex appears easy, natural, joyous, and above all, innocent; but the scene is quite long and is perhaps longer and more explicit than necessary. *Ken Park* does feature extended takes, but they are all filmed in real time without the use of montage and capture the majority of a single act whereas the *ménage-a-trios* scene is a montage of what appear to be “highlights” from many separate acts.
This is the point at which Clark’s work begins to diverge from Breillat’s because in the instances where Clark is self-indulgent, his images show a pleasure devoid from Breillat’s world. Where Breillat wants to examine sexuality in disciplined, clinical detail, Clark is happy to occasionally allow his characters some basic pleasure and happiness, although he still maintains a clear artistic stance as his conceptual intent.

3.5 De-Eroticizing Sex

Finally, we come to Catherine Breillat herself. Although I mention her stylistic traits above in comparison to other filmmakers, Breillat has an interesting way of de-eroticizing sex that no other director duplicates. It’s easy enough to present nudity and sex in an unappealing manner as, say, Ulrich Seidl does in Dog Days (2001), but Breillat doesn’t wish to film ugly sex—she merely wants to remove the pleasure. Where certain directors such as Seidl will film intentionally plain non-actors, Breillat always uses beautiful people in her films showing that she believes in cinematic pleasure, but a pleasure derived from her ideas rather than simple excitation from on-screen bodies. Theoretically, Anatomy of Hell should be a scopophile’s dream: the beautiful and voluptuous former Helmut Newton model, Amira Casar, is naked and displayed reclining on a bed during most of the film, but elements of the mise-en-scène and the text counteract the images. One may argue that, taken in isolation, a still image from this film might provoke sexual stimulation, but Breillat’s painterly compositions are thoroughly preceded in the art world with striking similarities to reclining nudes such as Titian’s Venus of Urbino (1538), Valazquez’s Venus at Her Mirror (1644), Goya’s The Naked Maja (1800), Manet’s Olympia (1863), and Matisse’s Blue Nude (1928). The mise-en-scène is extremely barren: a single bed in the middle of an unfurnished room in an isolated house provides a chilly atmosphere, while a crucifix hanging above the bed induces very non-sexual feelings of morality.
and judgment. The narrative is given entirely to abstract, theoretical discourse on the fundamental and seemingly incommensurable difference between the sexes, thus providing an additional distraction. The fact that the man and woman remain anonymous, as in Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), furthers the abstraction, allowing “sexual expression [to] emerge free of history and the deformed culture.” Hence, even though Breillat chooses aesthetically pleasing actors, locations, and the like, she is not willing to allow sexually pleasing content.

Breillat’s de-eroticization of sexuality is possible in part simply by the manner in which she films. During the scene between Marie and Paolo in *Romance*, the spectator will find no non-diegetic music, no slow-motion shots of flying hair, no soft focus, and, in fact, no sounds other than the actors and the bed. The lack of all of these elements fall under the effect of realism discussed at length in section 5.0. While Breillat doesn’t religiously adhere to these rules as, for example, a Dogma 95 director would, all of her sex scenes typically consist of a single unbroken shot, thus making the atmosphere inescapable for the spectator. Mainstream direction as in Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct* (1992) tends to film a sex scene from multiple angles, giving the spectator’s subconscious a distancing mechanism, while Breillat, by contrast, films scenes that allow for no such distancing—the spectator must remain invested in the scene for the duration. Thus, while she may favor realism for other reasons, she also uses it to make filmic sexuality uncomfortable thus preventing the spectator from lapsing into a disengaged state of visual pleasure.

The most important technique Breillat uses to remove the spectatorial pleasure from her sex scenes is the narrative continuation. Conventional sex scenes usually feature narrative suspension so that the characters and spectators can enjoy themselves in isolation. While it’s true

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27 Dogma 95 is an avant-garde film movement started in 1995 by Danish directors such as Lars Von Trier and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen.
that plot points sometimes occur in the bedroom setting, they almost always occur before, after, or by interruption. Conversely, Breillat usually has her characters speaking throughout the sex act, thereby engaging the spectator intellectually while preventing him or her from lapsing into passive enjoyment. The manner in which a spectator normally enjoys on-screen sex is all-consuming—it grabs their attention and focus by virtue of the visual presence of something typically unseen. Because the nature of sex is a very intense and focused experience, Breillat can, by providing not only dialogue but also philosophical dialogue, steal the focus away from the naked bodies and return it to the text.

If pornography is said to cater to sexual instinct with its purpose to inspire carnal lust, charges of pornography are not justified. An individual that finds sexual gratification in Breillat’s work must either be completely disengaged from the textual component of the film or in possession of a unique fetish. The lugubrious scene in *Fat Girl* where Fernando deflowers Elena is simultaneously infuriating and heart wrenching to watch. As Fernando proceeds to whisper obvious lies to Elena, Anaïs lays awake in her bed first angry at the audacity of this stranger talking his way through her sister’s naiveté, and then devastated for her sister’s lost innocence. Visually, the scene shows the couple in bed, naked from the waist down and is inter-cut with shots of Anaïs in stages of varying emotion. Eventually, once Fernando penetrates Elena, she begins to cry in pain and humiliation, while Anaïs also begins to cry upon hearing the sounds of her sister. Not only is this difficult to watch, but the possibility of sexual excitation is nearly unthinkable.

Presenting Breillat’s work as pornographic reduces it to its most basic elements and leads to misunderstanding, robbing it of the depth that she carefully constructs. Richard Corliss comments that, “since the mid-’90s, French directors have been spicing their minimalist dramas
with quasi-pornographic elements,”28 as if the film used sex exploitatively to sell tickets to otherwise unremarkable films. He goes on to provide an amazingly reductionist interpretation of *Anatomy of Hell*’s central idea (“watch me where I’m unwatchable”): “she is referring to her pubic area.”29 This most superficial reading indicates the subtlety and metaphor are lost on Corliss. The idea of being “unwatchable” is so much more than the elementary taboo concerning genitals: it concerns an examination of what Freud refers to as the “dark continent” (i.e. feminine sexuality); not what “shouldn’t” be watched, but the sub-rosa and the “ununderstood.”

If one reads a work of poetry as if it were prose, it would seem like a strange, poorly worded mess saying nothing special, so in a film so clearly poetic why does Corliss so stubbornly refuse to understand anything beyond the naked people on the screen? Even if one discounts the text entirely and focuses solely on the image, the reading still doesn’t make sense because Breillat’s *mise-en-scène* communicates volumes by itself. Take for instance the persistent messy hair that obscures Marie’s face throughout *Romance*: it is a projection of her psyche signifying a woman divided; a woman in unrest and turmoil; a woman who has not yet learned to accept, love, and enjoy her body; and it is not until she resolves these issues that her hair disappears from her face and sits atop her head as it should. To reduce a film like *Romance* to the sum of its sex scenes or to find it “simple-minded”31 is to miss Breillat’s amazing attention to detail and that is to say, the film itself.

4.0 **Breillat and Feminism**


29 Ibid.


One of the most interesting aspects of Breillat’s work is her relationship with feminist theory: she is at once strongly feminine stating, “I am profoundly a woman, and a man couldn’t do this, ever,” while treading the line of acceptable feminist conduct with her explicit and troubling portrayals of feminine sexuality. Of course, Breillat does not wish to align herself with feminist theory, wanting her mind, not her body, to be the focus. This is nothing unusual inasmuch as Cixous, counted amongst the most prominent second wave feminists, has said herself, “I am not a feminist.” They both share a distrust of what the term seems to represent: woman’s desire for power within the bourgeois patriarchal system of binary oppositions, which Cixous outlines in “Sorties: Out and Out: Attack/Ways Out/Forays,”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/passivity</th>
<th>Sun/Moon</th>
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<tr>
<td>Culture/Nature</td>
<td>Day/Night</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father/Mother</td>
<td>Intelligible/Palpable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logos/Pathos</td>
<td>Woman</td>
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Just as Cixous shows that gaining power in the structuralist patriarchal system is a false victory capable of only the most modest advancement, Breillat similarly sees the necessity of eradicating not only inequalities, but the very hegemony of structuralist thought itself, albeit in a deeply internal manner rather than Cixous’ global vision.

Breillat’s approach is quite compatible with Cixous’ concept of écriture féminine – a specifically feminine mode of textual production under the suppression of the male hegemony.

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that can penetrate the field of male discourse causing subsequent disruptions of logocentricity – and, in fact, one can see in Breillat’s work a strictly feminine perspective subverting both a general language significantly dominated by men (film) and a specific language almost totally dominated by men (pornography). Breillat answers Cixous’ call, “woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.”

The chronology of Cixous and Breillat’s respective work shows an interesting continuation of ideas: In Angst (1977), Cixous’ ‘newly born woman’ cannot penetrate male discourse – “I was falling behind at every sentence. I listened. Suspicious. Startled. I couldn’t grasp the meaning; couldn’t catch up. I was totally bewildered. I didn’t understand anything” – while in Romance (1999), Breillat’s woman, Marie, is beginning to find a voice to challenge the men she encounters; and by the time we reach Anatomy of Hell (2004), the woman is the dominant voice and the speaker of primordial truth—truth before the Symbolic order (i.e. the Real). If Breillat’s women began tentatively in her early films, by the time of Anatomy of Hell, the woman is able to write herself—to “‘realize’ the decensored relation of [her self] to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength...[giving] her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal.”

As closely as Breillat’s method seems to follow the ideas of écriture féminine, some problems remain including aspects of her visual language and the vulnerability she allows of her characters. Perhaps it is less useful to align Breillat completely with one theory than to recognize

a confluence of second wave écriture féminine with some aspects of postfeminism. The manner in which Breillat borrows from postfeminist theory allows the two theories to work together with second wave concepts progressing into postfeminist concepts, thus showing that these approaches are not as incommensurate as is sometimes thought. Where Cixous calls for women to reclaim their bodies and their sexuality, Camille Paglia, in accusing feminists “who see the bare-all, pubic ‘beaver shot’ as a paradigm of women’s historical oppression [as] cursed with the burden of their own pedestrian prejudices,” displays an extension of Cixous’ original idea. Paglia feels that to reclaim one’s body is not sufficient—a woman must allow herself sexual expression in any manner she pleases, pornography, stripping, and prostitution included. She contends that “those embarrassed or offended by [the erotic] are the ones with the problem: their natural responses have been curtailed by ideology, religious or feminist.”

Cixous, Paglia, and Breillat are all proponents of sexual difference, but Paglia and Breillat are slightly more forward in their respective treatments than Cixous, at least at the time of her major theoretical writings. During the seventies and eighties when Cixous was most active, there was an important war to wage on exploitation of women in the sex industry and to employ the language of pornography would be at best controversial and at worst irresponsible and counterproductive to the feminist struggle. However, Paglia feels that much had changed by the nineties and women of the sex industry are now “heroines of outlaw individualism.”

Cixous, Paglia, and Breillat all agree that the morality-chastity/immorality-sexuality binary opposition should be deconstructed even if they differ in the extent to which they wish to present the issue. Similarly, they also see the outspoken, hegemonic faction of puritanical feminists as prime candidates for deconstruction, and in this sense their views are more related to liberal

39 Ibid, 62.
40 Ibid, 59.
humanism than traditional essentialist feminism. Ultimately, it is not necessary or even desirable to force Breillat to conform to any single doctrine so long as one understands how these two theoretical strains work in her oeuvre.

4.1 The problem of vulnerability

The woman of *Anatomy of Hell* is physically powerless against the much larger man and, throughout most of the film, appears vulnerable in every way imaginable—she is naked in front of him, she opens herself up to him literally and figuratively, she reveals all of her secrets, and she allows him to probe and penetrate her body. Furthermore, Breillat enhances the gaze of the spectator by portraying the man—who we can reasonably assume is the bearer of masculine spectatorial identification—as a voyeur, watching the woman who displays herself provocatively before him. In Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, he speaks of the scopophilic instinct evidenced by the pubescent child’s desire to objectify others and subject them to a curious gaze with particular attention to the private and the taboo. Freud avers to the power of the gaze describing the eye as the erotogenic zone which, “in the situation of wooing an object, is liable to be the most frequently stimulated.”

Breillat has described herself as an “entomologist,” thereby confirming the fact that she *encourages* the spectator to look at what cannot be seen. When the woman in *Anatomy of Hell* asks the man to “watch [her] where [she’s] unwatchable,” she is in effect asking the spectator to watch her as well. Insofar as Breillat condones the gaze, it is not the familiar, pleasurable gaze, but rather a troubled gaze further complicated once the man joins the woman under Breillat’s microscope—the male spectator cannot project his fantasy onto the woman without also projecting onto the man.

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42 Interview with Breillat in *Anatomy of Hell*, DVD, directed by Catherine Breillat (2004; Tartan Video, 2004).
Some, such as Laura Mulvey, may perceive the very idea of intentionally subjecting a woman to the gaze as a maneuver dangerously close to being counterproductive. In fact, Breillat does not overturn this power relationship until the end when she reveals that the man, although physically stronger and in the non-threatening position of observer, cannot possess, conquer, or humiliate the woman; and in the end, his physical strength and advantageous position are of little consequence because the catalytic woman is able to move him by virtue of her complete vulnerability, while herself remaining unscathed.

From a strict feminist position, portraying a woman as weak, drawing attention to her frailties, and placing her in competition with an imposing male figure – even if this proves to be false later – is troubling to some, and is doubtlessly unacceptable to others. Some aspects of feminist discourse attest to the image of a strong, powerful woman who can face man with confidence and a sense of general equality (i.e. an empowered woman) and struggle to annihilate the idea of woman as weak or in anyway unequal to man, but it is in this meticulously planned balancing act that Breillat finds an extraordinary power to discomfort and affect the spectator, thereby forcing them to actively confront the issues she is presenting. Even if there is an initial doubt as to whether the female character will maintain her identity and ownership, by the end of the film there can be no question: while the man attempts to maintain his power and dignity in the tearful recounting of details to a stranger in a tavern, he realizes that he cannot quantify the relationship he found with the woman and is thus moved to an unmasculine display of emotion.

4.2 Feminine action and production

Where the above example shows Breillat working for an ostensible feminist cause in a controversial manner, she doesn’t always adopt such a bold stance when dealing with such topics. The scene between Marie and Paolo in Romance provides an interesting contrast. In
Mulvey contends that male characters have all the active roles in cinema while female characters are passive objects, i.e. the men are central and serve to move the plot forward while the women take a secondary, supporting role even if they are so-called leading ladies. Breillat’s films address this problem by concentrating all of the action on the female character, thereby allowing the woman to become, as Mulvey would say, a maker rather than a bearer of meaning. Even in Brief Crossing, where Thomas (Gilles Guillain) is ostensibly the main character, the female lead, Alice (Sarah Pratt), is actually making the plot move forward. The movie may start and end with Thomas, and we may experience the story from his perspective, but the relationship that develops between the two during their abbreviated romance progresses only when Alice is ready, much to the chagrin of Thomas who makes numerous attempts to move their relationship forward on his own time.

Beyond the simple fact of narratives centering on female characters, Breillat manages to keep the female active even in situations where she is typically passive or objectified, namely sex scenes. Marie and Paolo’s tryst in Romance is interesting because even though Paolo is physically larger, fills more of the frame, performs all of the movement, and is on top of Marie who is laying on her stomach, Marie dominates the scene by monopolizing the dialogue and perspective. As the two lay in bed, she speaks philosophically about relationships and her ideas on love, sex, and the differences between the two, while Paolo remains nearly silent, issuing one-word replies to her questions. He only asserts himself twice to enquire, “shall I stick it in your ass?,” to which Marie replies, “not yet” and, “how can you love a guy who doesn’t screw you?,” thus setting Marie up for more philosophizing on love and sex. When they begin intercourse, both fall silent until Paolo is finished, at which time the camera focuses on Marie’s as she begins

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a voice-over maintaining her active position in the narrative while Paolo kisses her body in the background. Marie controls the scene not just though a greater amount of dialogue, but also through more important, plot-related dialogue. In this way, the active role is completely reversed: Marie’s words further the plot while Paolo’s words are perfunctory and only function to allow Marie to speak more words.

5.0 Neo-sexual-realism

For as much trouble as explicit sex creates for Breillat, it may be her use of realism that pushes some audiences and critics out of their comfort zones and into outrage. Some components of Breillat’s work are similar to the Italian neo-realist movement of directors such as Visconti, De Sica, and Rossellini, but as feminist critic B. Ruby Rich points out, the neo-realist movement of the 1940s was a strictly masculine enterprise, which “has never included women in its alleged veracity”—a view that Breillat likely shares. Nevertheless, neo-realist theory is useful in critiquing the style of her sex scenes. Breillat doesn’t adhere strictly to Zavattini’s theories on realism – her films are not exercises in real-time representation of the mundane and are not concerned with the standard neo-realist trope of poverty – but Breillat makes use of real-time, detailed, and thoroughly candid representation during key moments, which as it happens, are typically sex scenes. Bazin describes the psychological benefit to this realist cinematic language as, “[bringing] the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality,” thus enabling, “a more active mental attitude,” because while a more typical style of editing allows the spectator to passively follow the director, a lengthy one-shot scene requires the spectator to, “exercise at least a minimum of personal choice [because] it is from his

attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives.”

If editing functions as Pudovkin describes – “compulsory and deliberate guidance of the thoughts and associations of the spectator” – Breillat chooses to leave key scenes as one-shots to heighten the spectator’s awareness, to force the spectator to actively engage in the diegesis, and is thus able to reach a more meaningful mode of communication. In Cesare Zavattini’s *Some Ideas on the Cinema*, he offers the provocation, “give us whatever ‘fact’ you like, and we will disembowel it, make it something worth watching.” He speaks of this presentation, not of fiction, but of things as they are in reality as, “[creating] their own special significance,” which to understand, “involves a minute, unrelenting, and patient search,” thus overlapping perfectly with Breillat’s desire to be an entomologist, to dissect an issue in near-scientific detail.

While realism in sexuality is troubling to many for a variety of moral reasons, it’s not uniquely so. If we broaden the discussion to include realism in violence, we see that there is already a precedent for problematic realism. Ironically, ultraviolence is permissible – Jason Voorhees of the popular *Friday the 13th* series, now on its eleventh film, can maim, murder, and dismember a dozen teenagers in a single film – while realistic violence typically meets with disapproval, as is the case with *Man Bites Dog* (1992), an unflinchingly real portrayal of unsensationalized and random violence visited upon a range of victims, not limited to teenagers, but also including the elderly and even an infant. Somehow it’s acceptable to show a character being riddled with bullets dying what appears to be an easy, quick death, while it’s unacceptable to show a character writhing in pain from a single gunshot wound to the stomach.

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Sexuality in film is analogous. Glamorous, idealized sex that caters to the scopophilic gaze and maintains the power/submission relationship between the male and female characters routinely passes review boards without incident while realistic sex that is too detailed or that disrupts the power relationship, either by placing the woman in the dominant position or by excluding men altogether in a non-fetishized display of lesbianism, is completely unacceptable. It actually takes a pervasive abundance of glamorized sex to increase a Hollywood movie’s rating from R to NC-17, as was the case with *Showgirls* (1995), while Breillat’s *Brief Crossing* (2001), with its single sex scene, brings charges of pornography.

Breillat is wise to point out that the issue may not be about the presence of real rather than simulated sex in a film at all, but rather an issue of morality: did the actors themselves actually have sex? She scoffs at this notion wondering why, when characters die, audiences never ask if she actually killed the actor! Her reasoning is cogent because in reality, most everybody will have sex during his or her lifetime and the sight of the sex act should not be excessively difficult to watch. However, if the audience witnesses two actors having sex outside of a romantic relationship and, furthermore, the sex is not even for pleasure, but rather part of their job, certain judgmental audience members will want to determine if the actors committed an immoral act, thus raising the issue of problematic realism.

### 5.1 Why show explicit sex?

Why, then, if realism is so troubling to audiences, does Breillat film explicit sex? One could argue that Breillat could just as easily communicate her ideas with a much tamer depiction of sex. Why, for instance, do we need to see an erect penis when we all know that it’s there anyway? The sight of the erection seems more in line with hardcore pornography’s insistence on
providing visual evidence of the reality of the sexual encounter than with what one would expect from a work of art (i.e. something not potentially obscene).

Many avow to the power of the concept of sex: René Guyon speaks of how, “mystic dangerousness invests the organs of generation; they are a seat of occult power;”⁵⁰ Amos Vogel describes sex as, “the most fundamental, most powerfully desired, and hence most dangerous act of human existence;”⁵¹ and Breillat herself contends that sexuality is, “the biggest question of civilization now”⁵²—the power of sex is, quite simply, impossible to ignore and is not contingent upon any demographic. Paglia goes as far as to claim,

Far from poisoning the mind, pornography shows the deepest truth about sexuality, stripped of romantic veneer. No one can claim to be a expert in gender studies who is uncomfortable with pornography, which focuses on our primal identity, our rude and crude animality. Porn dreams of eternal fires of desire, without fatigue, incapacity, aging, or death.⁵³

Breillat depicts explicit sexuality, in part, to tap its incredible power thereby jolting the spectator out of comfortable passivity using the full effect of this atavistic unrest and to dissect this ‘primal animality’ Paglia references. On any occasion where the majority of a film is given to philosophical discourse, the director risks alienating the audience with too much talking and, as meaningless as they may be in a philosophical film, too little action and plot development. Many works by Godard are beautiful, thought-provoking films, but when characters sit in a room and talk to each other and simplistic entertainment is obviously not the goal, minds that are not actively engaged in the onscreen discourse tend to wander. Because sexuality is already central to Breillat’s ideas, she can push it to an extreme to keep her line of communication to the spectator open, thus increasing the impact of her films.

⁵² Interview with Breillat in *Brief Crossing*, DVD, directed by Catherine Breillat (2001; France: Fox Lorber, 2001).
On the other hand, Breillat also risks clouding the mind of the spectator with potentially distracting images. There’s a strong possibility that unusually explicit sex may so distract the spectator that they are unable to follow Breillat’s ideas. This is an important issue, especially when she is communicating with a male spectator who may be uninterested in the topic or who may lack sufficient background knowledge to understand Breillat’s thought and will no doubt tune out everything but the images, leaving the impression of mindless pornographic stimulation. Similarly, an unusually repressed spectator may cover their eyes in fear that the film will, as Vogel describes, “‘spring’ from the screen and invade the audience with its heavenly power.”54 much in the way some feminists and moralist argue that pornographic consumption leads directly to violence against women.

Finally, filming explicit sex is a way to force extra-filmic controversy and is not dependent upon the audience understanding her intent or following her line of thought. When Breillat chooses to film a scene with an international porn star, as is the case with Romance and Anatomy of Hell, she is virtually guaranteeing controversy in the public and in the government. Although this is potentially detrimental to her goal of releasing these films in theaters, the controversies continually open up discussions on censorship and obscenity, thus enabling Breillat to speak out against these charges. Films such as Romance place the female in control of her sexuality (she is not owned or controlled by a man, or anyone for that matter) and Breillat argues that this reversal of power is actually why her films are offensive to bureaucracy,55 that if a man made the film and maintained the status quo active male and passive female, the film would generate little controversy at all. This is not to imply that her films are nothing more than publicity tools to provide a public forum for her opinions—that would take away from the

54 Amos Vogel, Film as a Subversive Art (U.K.: C.T. Editions, 1974), 199.
55 Interview with Breillat in Brief Crossing, DVD, directed by Catherine Breillat (2001; France: Fox Lorber, 2001).
importance of her ideas and furthermore, she could attain the same result by simply filming sex in a standard hardcore style without symbolism, metaphor, or even art for that matter. Nevertheless, her films do achieve this end and she exploits every opportunity to speak on these topics.

5.2 **Rocco Siffredi**

In a film awash with controversy, the most daring move on Breillat’s part is the use of Italian porn star, Rocco Siffredi, in *Romance* and, significantly, he is one of the few actors Breillat uses in multiple films. Even though Breillat chooses to downplay the significance of Siffredi’s presence in a non-pornographic film, there are an assortment of issues and implications that result. The presence of a porn actor isn’t unique in itself (Ginger Lynn Allen, a former hardcore actress appears in more than one hundred films, the most recent being *American Pie Presents: Band Camp* in 2005), but when hardcore porn actors enter mainstream film (for the sake of argument, we’ll rather amusingly group Breillat’s work with the whole of fictional, non-hardcore film), they are customarily retired from the adult industry and they typically don’t assume the roles of their previous career, i.e. that of an objectified sexual being.

What does it mean to insert a porn actor into a legitimate film, and furthermore, what does it mean to insert an internationally renowned porn actor into a legitimate film? There is, of course, the purely practical side: Siffredi is accustomed to being naked in front of a camera, performing intercourse from most any position and in most any style, and attaining a state of arousal on command and maintaining said state for long periods of time.

There is also the issue of asking a standard actor to perform the above tasks. The attainment of realism may require these actions, but besides being physically and emotionally difficult, the actors have reputations and careers to consider—it’s easy for Siffredi to appear
aroused on film while it would be disastrous for any sort of mainstream actor to do the same. Chloë Sevigny is an excellent example: in Vincent Gallo’s *The Brown Bunny* (2003), she fellates Gallo on camera (although not to orgasm) in a very controversial scene that both destroyed the film’s hopes of any mainstream theatrical release and ignited a firestorm of moral and ethical criticism directed at Gallo and, especially, at Sevigny who was promptly dropped from the William Morris Agency that supported her. While one could argue that Amira Casar goes further even than Sevigny and takes an equally physically and emotionally demanding role as Siffredi, women have the advantage of imperceptible states of arousal if intimate contact is unavailable and therefore one can assume that it is, in fact, an act—that she is not actually aroused. There is also the advantage of a body double mentioned before the film in a statement from the director, thus enabling Casar to avoid the criticisms of morality that previously targeted Sevigny. Furthermore, once the director makes a suggestion of surrogate intimacy, both the spectator and the actress avoid questions of morality independent of whether the actress actually did use her own body—it is enough to simply imply a fiction, but only when expressly mentioned via non-diegetic comment.

Beyond mere practicality and the consideration of career, Breillat’s reasons are less obvious. Why choose such a major star with such widespread visibility? At least in Europe, his name is much bigger than Breillat’s and using him in *Romance* is akin to putting Schwarzenegger in a Maya Deren film. Breillat comments in interviews that she likes the graceful manner of his movements, stating that “Rocco performs with his entire body and mind, so he is a sort of perfection.”56 It appears that he is simply the right man for the job, but it goes further than that. Rocco Siffredi stars in very hard, misogynist pornography featuring such

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56 Kevin Murphy, “Hell’s Angels: An Interview with Catherine Breillat on *Anatomy of Hell*,” *Senses of Cinema* 34, no. 5 (2004): http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/34/breillat_interview.html
aberrations as extreme sadomasochism, urination, anilingus, and other acts atypical of American pornography, all the while remaining one of the few male porn stars to film heterosexual intercourse exclusively—simply, he is a unique porn star. It is also important to note that nearly all of his sadomasochistic roles are such that he is dominating a woman rather than the opposite, thus placing him among the most fiercely masculine of all male porn stars and adding to the realism of the scene.

Breillat uses Siffredi again in *Anatomy of Hell*, this time as one of the only two actors in the film. His presence implies the hatred and objectification of women, and even though his work with Breillat suggests that he doesn’t share these feelings in real life, it’s likely that she is using his extra-filmic background to enrich the film’s text of a woman opening herself up to a powerful and menacing male figure and thus making his eventual downfall all the more effective.

Finally, there is also the possibility that Breillat is using an actor of this type to suggest that men, as a whole, would like to envision themselves as intensely virile porn stars whose masculine presence so completely overpowers the feminine presence that the latter disappears in accordance with the will of the former. Even if Breillat is among the most contentious of directors, this may be an overly extreme stance for her and is conjecturable only in a limited extent because while this desire for primitive, physical power over women is certainly valid in some cases, Breillat is no misandrist.

6.0 Conclusion

Catherine Breillat is a genuine auteur making powerful films that break the boundaries of cinema itself, and thus she deserves to be understood and critiqued as an artist rather than a
simplistic provocateur or a bombastic purveyor of quasi-hardcore pornography. When understood in the context of poststructuralist second wave feminism, her films reveal a deep, theoretical assessment of the state of womanhood in the late twentieth century. Her films are unique in their combination of *écriture féminine* and aspects of postfeminism, and it is through this philosophical lens that Breillat crafts her films so that they can communicate her artistic vision and worldview. The sexuality portrayed is often difficult to watch because of Breillat’s methodology of de-eroticizing the scenes, which uses the techniques of narrative continuation to engage the intellect; painterly compositions; unapologetic, sterile *mise-en-scène*; and the absence of familiar filmic conventions used in mainstream and pornographic sex-scenes, such as enticing camera angles, obscured views, soft lighting, and erotic music. However, the films are not solely difficult because of this confrontational sexuality, but also because of the ideas at their foundation. Far from exploiting the shock of forthright sexual representation, her films use these visual and textual elements to ask penetrating questions about the interior of the feminine experience. Most remarkably, her films answer Cixous’ call for women to take up a pen and write themselves, challenging the dominant masculine discourse. Her provocations and radical approach are not simply aesthetic choices, but rather they are essential tools—tools that she uses effectively in a non-exploitative manner to examine the issues of society and feminine sexuality.