



Sex and Power in *Romance* and *Parfait Amour!* by Catherine Breillat

Erika Sofia Blomberg
Film studies
Faculty of humanities, Gothenburg University
C essay FL1801, 15 Credit Points, H25
Supervisor: Karolina Westling

Abstract

SUBJECT: Film studies

INSTITUTION: The institution for cultural sciences, GU

ADDRESS: Box 200, 405 30 Göteborg

SUPERVISOR: Karolina Westling

TITLE: Sex and power in *Romance* and *Parfait amour!* By Catherine Breillat

AUTHOR: Erika Sofia Blomberg

TYPE OF ESSAY: Bachelor's thesis (C) , 15 credit points

DISSERTATION TERM: SP 2026

The two films *Romance* (1999) and *Parfait Amour* (1996) by the controversial director Catherine Breillat explore themes of desire, violence, expectations, power relations and sexual submission. Both works explore what happens to women when they are not able to live up to the expectations of sexual expression that are usually allowed in our society. By looking at the often uncensored sex scenes and the scenes where intense violence occurs, certain patterns of repetition appear. By breaking from traditional cinematic conventions both works problematise and examine the question of shame and structures of power. By looking at the expressions of sexual agency in the films, we can see in what ways these follow and break away from the expectations of the viewer.

Keywords: Female sexuality, power structures, pornography

1. Introduction	4
1.1 Catherine Breillat	4
1.2 An introduction to the films	5
1.3 Previous research	5
1.4 Research question	6
1.5 Theories and method	7
2. Analysis	9
3. Power relations and norms	9
3.1 The cultural politics of desire	9
4. Breaking the expectations of the gaze	13
4.1 The masculinity of the male characters	14
4.2 Sexual fantasies and shame	17
5. Violence, death and the Faustian pact	21
5.1 Violence and punishment	21
5.2 Death and Birth	25
6. Discussion and conclusions	28
7. Summary	30
8. Bibliography	31

1. Introduction

When we look at the works of Catherine Breillat it is often hard to look at them but also hard to look away from them. There is a fascinating conflict of horror and sexual desire present. If we assume that gender is a performance, I believe that it is during sex that this shows itself in the clearest, most obvious way. Everything from the different positions, the different sounds we make and the way we present ourselves to our sexual partner is a clear performance of our gender; which is always present. The way that we have sex within a patriarchal society is driven by many unwritten rules and assumptions of the gaze, which we both use to look at others but also to analyse and control our own behaviours at all times. What is fascinating about the films of Breillat is that her characters both play into the presumed image of femininity but also break away drastically from these conventions, as she shows a raw female sexual desire that has not been explored much in previous cinema. Most of her characters are not driven by love or a desire to be loved but rather their desire for sex itself. As the assumption about women is often that they use sex as a means to an end to receive love, closeness and validation from men, Breillat instead shows characters that have no hidden motives, they just want to have sex for the sake of having sex. Now it is of course unclear what sex would look like in a society that wasn't under the patriarchy and whether true sexual freedom for women is possible in our society, as sex does not exist within a bubble, separated from the unfair treatment of women present everywhere else. This then affects what women desire and how they show it, which I believe Breillat tries to show us through examples of what female sexual desire can look like as a step in the right direction when it comes to showing what women can desire without judging or moralising it.

1.1 Catherine Breillat

The French filmmaker Catherine Breillat is known for creating films that explore female sexuality and the complex relationship between men and women. Although coming from an intensely catholic background, she, against the wishes of her parents, wrote her first published novel at 17 and it was immediately banned from being sold to people under the age of 18 in France due to its erotic contents. Since then, censorship and controversy has followed her throughout her career but her films have also changed the way unsimulated sex in cinema has been seen by mainstream audiences, going from the previous solely pornographic status to one closer to art in post pornography. Most of her films include topics such as shame, desire and violence. When it comes to violence, Breillat herself says in an

interview with Robert Sklar about *Romance* that she believes women to be less physically capable of violence than men but much more versed in psychological violence¹. She continues to state that with female emancipation comes a freedom from alienation but also a greater capability of tremendous violence in their relationships which has previously not been represented much in cinema due to the lack of female directors².

1.2 An introduction to the films

Breillat is mostly famous for making coming of age films about young girls discovering their sexuality such as *A Real Young Girl* (1976) and *Fat Girl* (2001) but this thesis will instead focus on a few of her films about adult women. The two films are *Parfait Amour* (1996) and *Romance* (1999). *Parfait Amour* follows an older bourgeois woman named Frédérique as she starts a relationship with a much younger man named Christophe. The relationship quickly descends into psychological and, later on, physical violence as the two start resenting each other due to jealousy and an inability to understand one another. This takes a fatal turn as it leads to the choking ending of Christophe stabbing Frédérique repeatedly in an uncomfortably long shot.

The film *Romance* follows the school teacher Marie as she becomes disillusioned with her relationship with her model boyfriend Paul as he refuses to have sexual relations with her. This causes her to pursue sex with various men in an attempt to find something that will satiate her desire. Throughout the film we get to hear her inner monologues as she describes complicated feelings of lust and hatred for these men. She later gets involved in a BDSM relationship with the principal at the school she works at. The film explores the dangers that women face when trying to find the truth to their sexual desires as she gets sexually assaulted by a man in a staircase after making him an offer to perform oral sex on her. In the end we see that she decides to kill her boyfriend by leaving the gas stove on, resulting in an explosion. After this we see a controversial real birth scene and her and her child end up attending his funeral.

¹ R. Sklar. A Woman's Vision of Shame and Desire: An Interview with Catherine Breillat. *Cinéaste*. 25: 1 (1999): P.24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41689201> (Accessed 11 Jan. 2026).

² *ibid*

1.3 Previous research

The works of Breillat have been studied from multiple feminist lenses ever since their controversial initial reception. Many of these works have been in French such as the article “De la place du sexe dans les rapports amoureux, ou pouvoir et désir féminin chez Catherine Breillat” by Rene Predal from 2001 but the first English monograph to explore her works was the book *Catherine Breillat* by Douglas Keesey which came out in 2009. There are interviews with Breillat herself available in English from before the 2000s but there is not much content by others analysing her work available on the internet from this time. Adrienne Angelo writes that her films were picked up by mainstream audiences and scholars first in the mid 90s and before that most texts focus on her film festival entries. Most of the reviews written in English from this time focus on the inclusion of her film *36 Fillette*(1988) in the 26th New York film festival, mostly focusing on the reactions of the audiences and the scandalization of her films rather than the content itself. Later on, texts such as “Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)” by Eugenie Brinkema from 2006 and “Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and The Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy” By Ruth A. Hottell and Lynsey Russell-Watts from 2002 are relevant for this thesis. The text “The Feminist Beachscape: Catherine Breillat, Diane Kurys and Agnès Varda” by Fiona Handyside is also one that stands out for its use of the Foucauldian perspective. If we look at slightly more contemporary texts there seems to still be a large focus on audience reception and scandal, especially in a post-me too world. After the release of *La Prédation* by Caroline Ducey, an autobiographical book describing her negative experiences as playing Marie, the main character of *Romance*(1999), we could see this. In the book she describes accounts of rape and pressuring to participate in sex-scenes that she had not been informed on prior to the moment of shooting. This, of course, problematises the question of how we view realism in the name of art and these real life consequences are important to have in mind.

1.4 Research question

I want to explore the different ways that she portrays sexual agency and power relations in the films *Romance* and *Parfait Amour!* and how the portrayals differ. The way this will be done is by trying to answer the following questions.

How does Breillat portray sex and power relations in the two films?

How does Breillat play with the expectations of the gaze?

How is death and violence portrayed in these works and what does it symbolise in relation to sex?

1.5 Theories and method

The way that I will be conducting this research is by analysing the sex scenes and both of the murder scenes in the films and seeing in which ways power relations play out in them; also comparing the ways that power relations play out between the male and female characters in their relationships. This will be done through a feminist framework, with a Foucauldian influence, and a focus on the gaze. To answer the research question we need to first define which definition of sexual agency it is that will be used in this text and which approach will be used when it comes to power. Sexual agency can be described as the ability to make decisions freely in a sexual context. This includes both having the choice to say no and not participate in sexual acts but also to be able to say yes and participate in acts that you want to engage in. There is a long history of women being discouraged from practising sexual agency while men are encouraged to use their sexual agency to pursue women in a conquest-like manner³. Now free choice can always be problematised as there are always underlying societal structures that motivate women's sexual wants but Breillat does show many of the complexities of this. It is worth mentioning though that her films do in some ways also adhere to certain preconceived notions of gender, sex and power as well while also challenging others. There is also the question of norms that we have been conditioned to adhere to our entire lives which are deeply embedded in our culture and lives. Since this happens unconsciously we do not need other people to reinforce them as they already exist within us and affect our actions. Sex is part of a bigger pattern of power which constrains it.

If we then look at what power is, it can be defined in many ways. The definition of power used by Foucault in this body of work can be described, as seen in *The History of Sexuality*,

³M. Cense & I. Vanwesenbeeck, *Understanding Sexual Agency. Implications for Sexual Health Programming*, *Sexes*. 2021; 2(4) P.378 <https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes2040030> (Accessed 20, Jan, 2026)

as not a unified thing used by one group over another, nor the combination of different institutions that have been elected to represent the people of a state but instead the moving substrate of force relations which engender states of power. Power is an omnipresence that is produced from one moment to the next. The main idea being that power is everywhere because it comes from everywhere. It is not a structure but a complex strategical situation in a particular society⁴. This then means that power can therefore not be held on to but is instead exercised from mobile relations. Small societies of power like those within one family all link together to create larger structures that run through the societal body⁵. All power has aims and objectives but this is usually not from an individual's conscious decisions, but rather, the rationality of power is seen through tactics that are quite explicit at the limited level in which they are inscribed. Tactics that then connect to one another, but are based elsewhere, and then form larger systems. All while not having a specific inventor to be found⁶. I think that when it comes to women we can through this lens see how it is difficult for one individual to wield power, but rather, it is a complicated system of relations and norms that shape power. Meaning that what is sometimes seen as “sexual empowerment” can just be a furthering of these expectations if it does not manage to be a true resistance against these norms that have been ingrained in history for so long.

This analysis will also partly use the concept of *the male gaze*, which in this case means the way that dominant classic narrative cinema has a tradition of viewing the world and female characters through the lens of heterosexual male desire. This way of looking at cinema comes from the ideas of Laura Mulvey and her definition of the gaze as consisting of the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the male characters within a film and the gaze of the viewer of the film, all finding pleasure in looking⁷. We are automatically predicted to identify with the male characters and see the female ones as the other, or the one to be looked at. Women who do not play into the gaze or that are perceived to be lacking then invoke a feeling of castration in the male viewer and often get punished by the narrative in traditional cinema. I believe that analysing the camerawork and the male characters of the film can be an effective strategy for looking at how Breillat plays into the gaze but also breaks away from it, sometimes in almost humorous or ironic ways.

⁴ M. Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. (Penguin books, 2020), P.93.

⁵ Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, P.94.

⁶ Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, P.95.

⁷ L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen 16, no. 3 (September 1975): P.10, doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6. (Accessed 11, Jan, 2026)

Many of Breillat's works explore the budding sexuality of young girls but the works picked for this essay have more of a focus on adult women and their relationships to men. This is because a lot of the previous research has already explored her coming of age themes. It is also for the sake of limitation due to the size of the project and the fact that she has less films about adult women.

2. Analysis

3. Power relations and norms

As Foucault says on the topic of sexuality, it should not be described as a by nature alien and stubborn drive that is completely disobedient to a power which tries to subdue it and oftentimes fails at doing so completely. Moreso, it seems to be a transferpoint for power relations, both between men and women, young and old people, teachers and students, an administration and a population etc. Sexuality is not the most resistant or immovable aspect of power relations; rather, it is one of the most functional and adaptable. It can be mobilised in numerous ways and serves as a key point of leverage through which a wide range of strategies can be enacted⁸.

3.1 The cultural politics of desire

If we look at the film *Romance*, a scene that sticks out is the scene of her and the principal at the school she works at. The first time she comes to his apartment to engage in BDSM and get tied up, it is almost shocking to the viewer, as it is the most sexually deviant behavior that we see her display in the film. The fact that he is in a position of power over her, both in their casual lives as her boss, but also in the sexual aspect of their relationship as he is the one that ties her up and gags her, feels controversial, especially in a post-me-too society. The discourse of consent in these sorts of relationships feels complex and it is hard to say if someone is getting taken advantage of or not sometimes; in a way only the potential victim can decide, but sometimes it is also hard to see it yourself. But at the same time, what is agency, if not the ability to also say yes to the things that you do want, even if they are controversial.

⁸ Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, p.103.

When we look at the first frame of the scene at her boss Robert's house, it is visually a striking contrast to the white room in the scene right before where her boss scolds her in his office at the school. In that scene the only colour we see is the faded red of his shirt, which stands out against the whiteness. This is then contrasted with how the white colours of Marie's outfit stand out against the dark wooden and red interior of his apartment. The apartment itself is decadent and adorned with traditional Japanese accents, a stark difference to her boyfriend's modern and minimalist, all white apartment. This also shows how Robert is a metaphor for the past and the traditional man who dominates women and does not care for modern ideas of equality. Robert describes his apartment as a theatre where he can act out different scenes, which makes it clear to us that this is a space dedicated to sex and seduction, much unlike Paul's apartment that feels too sterile and clean for sex to be allowed in it. When she gets tied up and gagged, the camera is zoomed in on the face of Robert, although Marie's face is in the forefront, and he tells her that he is aware of the fact that women can often feel that things have gone too far in situations like these, or that their boundaries have been disrespected. Mysterious music starts playing and it is hard to tell from Marie's facial expression what she is thinking, as it is partially covered up. There is a clear absence of the monologue of her inner thoughts that we get to hear in all of her sexscenes with other men in this scene, as if she can not make sense of it herself. Brinkema describes Breillat's juxtapositional close up shot of Robert's fingers after fingering her in the scene in "Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)". Traditionally this would be a scene focusing on male sperm in heterosexual pornography but Breillat plays with the expectation of the viewer by instead focusing on female body fluids⁹.

On the topic of female sexuality Breillat comments in an interview with *Cineaste* from 1999 that she believes that what female directors can contribute to the topic of sex in film, which men cannot, is the aspect of shame¹⁰. When we look at the film *Romance* Hottell and Russell note how the sexual fantasies of Marie often put her in a very submissive position. When she is tied up we see her cry afterwards but she still chooses to go back and do it again. They note

⁹ E. Brinkema. Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat). *Women: A Cultural Review* 17:2 (2006) P. 151.

<https://doi-org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/10.1080/09574040600795739> (Accessed 11 Jan, 2026).

¹⁰A. Sklar. *Woman's Vision of Shame and Desire: An Interview with Catherine Breillat*, P.25.

how perhaps her crying is not out of lack of consent but rather a result of the shame she may feel for breaking away from what is expected of the other and the pleasure that it gives her¹¹. But one can't help but think that had it been another person than Marie, perhaps this scene would be depicting a completely different, not so consensual, situation. As much as we would like for consent to be completely crystal clear in all situations, in real life, grey areas are unfortunately common. Sometimes we did not know that we wanted something to happen to us until it did, or one can have complicated feelings about a sexual act after it has happened. When we see Marie's body being sexualised in the bondage scene it feels confrontational of us as the viewer. Is this an extension of her masochistic exhibitional desire to be looked at or is it meant to unsettle us? The film does not provide clear answers for this and we are then left ungratified, but this seems to be on purpose.

In an interview with *Believer* Mary Gaitskill describes on the topic of her book *Bad Behavior*, which inspired the 2002 film *The Secretary*, that the main character after getting somewhat degraded by her boss, as he spansks her, has a mixed reaction to it as she both exited but also humiliated and chocked. But after quitting the job, when a reporter calls her and wants her help with an exposé on the boss, she hangs up, because she knows that, despite how it looked to the outside world, she is absolutely sure that she consented to the relationship. The author then argues that this understanding, that it was as much her choice as his, is dignity¹². I believe that this is similar to Breillat's intention too, it is Marie's continuous consent that makes the scene, which can otherwise be quite uncomfortable to look at, a unique exploration of desire. In earlier works Breillat explores how when young girls go through puberty there is a sort of suspicion from the outside world that you notice as your body visibly starts to develop. As if in a way society deems you to have lost your freedom and dignity. She states in an interview with *Cineaste* from 1999 that she believes that since women are trained to find pleasure in shame this is how we come to start seeing ourselves from the perspective of the man while having sex¹³. But she also states that while the taboo around sexuality creates desire we need to transgress in order to move forward from this tendency which is harmful to women¹⁴. She describes this as being what motivates her choice

¹¹R. A, Hottell & L. Rusell Watts. Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy. *L'Esprit Créateur* 42: 3 (2002): p.77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26288388> (Accessed 11 Jan. 2026).

¹² S, Heti. An Interview with Mary Gaitskill. *Believer*. 60 (2009). <https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-mary-gaitskill/> (Accessed 11 Jan. 2026).

¹³ Sklar. *A Woman's Vision of Shame and Desire: An Interview with Catherine Breillat*, P.25.

¹⁴ Ibid

of showing everything uncensored in her films, the need to question what is taboo and ugly about sex in order to restore female dignity¹⁵.

In *Parfait Amour*, on the other hand, we can see how even in situations where it is the woman that is the much older one and therefore perceived to have more power, this can sometimes be an illusion, as women are still oftentimes the ones with less power in heterosexual relationships regardless. She goes outside of the norm, but gets punished in the end for it, showing how hard it is for women to win. If we look at the second sex scene of the film, we see that Frédérique is covering her eyes with her arm and making a lot of sounds as he is on top of her.



“Second sex scene”, Catherine Breillat, *Parfait Amour*, 1996.

The camera is close to their faces and feels imposing. While her bare breast is visible in the corner of the screen, it melts into the general fleshiness of the shot and the colour of the bedsheet which is the same hue. We can at first not tell if she is enjoying the act or if the sounds are of her crying, therefore making the covering of her eyes understandable. The sounds she makes can be from pleasure but their almost exaggerated nature could also be a form of performance or perhaps an imitation of women in porn. When Cristophe hears a noise he covers up her mouth and tells her to shut up, this is quite aggressive for what looks like an intimate moment. He is worried that her daughter will hear them and tells her that she was being loud, while she denies it. It is as if he is the one taking control in this scene and

¹⁵ ibid

telling her how loud she is allowed to be. This scene is like a small representation of the film as a whole, throughout the films she gets punished for her refusal to moderate her desire and emotions in a way that follows what is deemed as acceptable femininity.

We can see how the film ironically removes the typical ideological cover of heterosexual romance and instead focuses on the power structures that rule it and make it so unfair. The film shares a title with a famous French liqueur that is often described as a potent sweet drink with a strong taste of roses, vanilla and almonds. The sticky almost perfumed flavour that is often described as overpowering could be Breillat's way of playfully making an ironic comparison to the western ideals of love. The film is free of any non-diegetic romantic music and the female lead even says that she does not listen to music at all. The only time we hear any is when Christophe plays a song for her in his car. It is as if this is a way that the film tries to free us of manipulation and to instead see the relationship for what it is. Frédérique is the one that bears most of the social consequences of the relationship, even though they have both made the active choice to be in it. We can see how society deems her desire to be irrational, self destructive, desperate and humiliating. This is a stark contrast to how romance films have a long tradition of pairing older men with much younger female costars while never even pointing out the age gap or making it a part of the story, it is just seen as the norm. It is when this is not even questioned that it creates a power structure, or as Foucault puts it, power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself¹⁶. Women are conditioned to find subordination sexually appealing while men are conditioned to find domination sexually appealing. The old standard then being that the man teaches a woman while she is the innocent one that gets taught. But when young men seek out older women it seems to often be in a fetishising way. It is a sexual fantasy but it does still oftentimes not involve actually losing any control, but rather playing into a roleplay of not being the one in control, as they oftentimes are still the ones with more power in the real world.

The way that men and women are conditioned differently also shows itself in other aspects of the film. Although she is older than him she is still the one that desires love, while he follows his conditioning as a man to see his desire as more autonomous and non-committal. Norms are what decide what we desire, even before we have made the active decision to seek it.

¹⁶Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, P.86.

Breillat shows us a form of desire that is not private but rather a complex combination of different structures of gender relations, power and vulnerability.

4. Breaking the expectations of the gaze

In a world where the male gaze seems to be the standard, the works of Catherine Breillat instead center female pleasure on screen. The text “Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy” by Hottell and Russell-Watts explores this. Using the works of Sigmund Freud, Hottell and Russell recognise a pattern of self-identification in the images seen on screen when it comes to the male spectator¹⁷. He can both identify with a passive position, an active one or an objective observer watching a scene. The female spectator, on the other hand, is then only left with the option of either identifying with the passive woman on screen or watching her through the eyes of the male spectator in an objectifying manner¹⁸. What Catherine Breillat does is attempt to create a new perspective, that of the female spectator and what she desires.

4.1 The masculinity of the male characters

In *Romance* the main character Marie's model boyfriend Paul can be seen as a caricature of masculinity. Breillat describes one of the first scenes as deliberately poking fun at him by having him being dressed up as a matador and needing to be on his tiptoes in order to be the male lead in a photoshoot¹⁹. We also see this discussed in Hottell and Russell-Watts's text where they mention how the camera zooms out from the beginning of this scene and reveals a woman watching him as he is getting his makeup done and discussing his look, therefore making him the subject of the gaze²⁰. When he is not able to meet Marie at her sexual desires she uses Paolo as a stand in. He is portrayed as a more masculine version of Paul and he is also in a way the subject of the gaze.

¹⁷R.A., Hottell & L. Russell Watts. *Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy*, P.71.

¹⁸Ibid

¹⁹Sklar. *A Woman's Vision of Shame and Desire: An Interview with Catherine Breillat*, P.25.

²⁰R.A., Hottell & L. Russell Watts. *Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy*, p.72.



“Sex scene with Paolo”, Catherine Breillat, *Romance*, 1999.

In the sex scene we can see the camera slowly pander and zoom in on his muscular build rather than going over her naked body. But at the same time Marie’s inner monologue reveals that it is not his body that is at the forefront of her mind but rather her distaste with the men she has sex with and when she talks to him it is not the typical porn-speak about the size of his penis but rather her critique of men’s adverse reactions to condoms and periods. Early on in the scene we see Paulo's erection for a long time while they are talking and she is putting on the condom. Brinkema explores the use of the image to focus on what she calls the sticky production of female desire²¹. She states that Breillat removes the mysticism of the phallus by simply showing penises on screen, often flaccid and unremarkable while blending into the rest of the flesh seen on the screen²². Hottell and Russell-Watt describe how Marie from *Romance* becomes a quiet spectator looking at men, while her erotic dream sequences pose as a look into her very raw internal desires. She is not meant to become the object of the gaze but that is rather the men she has sex with, and whose naked bodies the camera lingers on. The internal monologues of hers describe her distaste with the men she has sex with and once again shows us whose eyes we are meant to watch the events unfolding from.

Instead of the man’s ejaculation being the marker of the end of the act, the film instead takes a radically different approach, we instead see an extreme close up of a live birth which becomes the really provocative moment of the film which shows the possible material consequences of sex. Throughout the film we are challenged and unsettled by the push and

²¹ E, Brinkema. Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat), P. 152.

²² ibid

pull-dynamic of it. While denying the viewer the visualisation of the climax of many of the sex scenes that would be central to traditional pornography, the film instead challenges the viewer to seek pleasure in the act of fantasising.

In the first sex scene of *Parfait Amour* we first see a close up shot of Frédérique's smiling face as she looks satisfied and afterwards we see a shot from further away where he is laying on top of her. We do not see her body at all in any of the shots and the camera is clearly focusing on his completely naked body, while we can not see his face. By focusing solely on her facial expressions and his body we see how Breillat goes against the typical gaze that makes the woman something to be looked at but rather makes her emotions and reactions the one we are supposed to relate to while the male character becomes the subject of the gaze. In the rest of the film we see how Christophe is a victim of toxic masculinity and internalised homophobia and takes that hatred for himself and directs it outwards. Frédérique constantly feminises him and calls him, among other things, a homosexual and not a real man, partially because of the fact that it makes him so angry. The camera just furthers this feminisation by putting him in the role that a woman would usually take up. Frédérique explains in another scene that her ex used to cheat on her with other men and it seems that that is one of the reasons why she constantly puts Christophe down by calling him gay. While it is still clearly problematic that Frédérique uses gay as an insult, one must also question why being compared to a woman seems to be the worst thing Christophe can imagine.

Throughout the film he shows contempt for Frédérique while also desiring her. In the film he says "I love her, but she repels me". As Katherine Angel puts it in *Tomorrow sex will be good again*, sexually desiring a woman is a form of vulnerability that can in a way feel emasculating, this is why many men instead direct this hatred for their own perceived femininity towards the woman that they desire instead²³. Men only hate women in order to not hate themselves. It seems being compared to a woman makes him feel bad for the very human emotions and vulnerabilities that can come with sex, and in a way he might envy Frédérique for having the option to express her emotions more freely as a woman, but also loathes her for not using it and instead acting cold, similarly to how men have been conditioned to act after sex. Frédérique, on the other hand, admits that she hates herself. In her words she describes this as "I love sex, but I hate myself". Men are raised to hate women,

²³ K. Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will be Good Again* (Verso, 2021) P.105.

but women are also raised to internalise the male perspective and hate ourselves. The fact that she also openly says that she loves sex could also be one of the reasons why he feels such disgust for her. Simply “owning” your sexuality as a woman and being openly sexual as a solution to the oppression women face is not viable if we do not acknowledge the fact that most women who do this get punished for doing so. Whether this is through public ostracisation or in her private sexual or romantic relationships, it is still a constant threat that stops women from being truly liberated. She is also revealed with herself which seems to stem from an internalised male gaze, judging her for her own sexual desire.

It is a quite short sex scene, especially for Breillat, but afterwards Cristophe says that he loves Frédérique and that she could take care of him. To this she counters that their relationship could only be a fantasy, this shows their opposing views, even from the beginning. It is also interesting how he takes on the stereotypically feminine role of wanting a relationship and love, while she takes on the stereotypically masculine, more cynical and avoidant one. In the film his desire to be taken care of is meant to stem from the way his mother has hurt him throughout his life and that now he seeks out someone with similar characteristics to his mother because that is the love that to him feels familiar, despite it being damaging for both of them. And the two are truly damaged, even before their relationship starts; him from his mother and her from her previous relationships. They then take this out on each other by her first being jealous and cynical and later on by him acting aloof and cheating. Cristophe seems to constantly be running away from both himself and his mother while still going into a relationship that mirrors his previous experiences, in a way he almost hates himself more than she does, although he can not admit it. At least that is the way that Frédérique justifies his behaviour when speaking to him, or perhaps to herself in a way. But this psychoanalytic approach also feels like a way for her to explain and rationalise the damage and sexual desire the two have in store for each other. Perhaps this is a way for her to try to keep some sort of self-coherence in a situation so run by the illogicality of lust and desire.

4.2 Sexual fantasies and shame

In many of Breillat's films we can see how her perspective seems to be that shame is capable of connecting people through shared values but also alienating them. She explores this in *Romance* by, for example, through the fantasy sequence where Marie dreams of lying down

while the upper half of her body is in one room, and the lower one is in another. The latter being a room filled with naked men who are having sex with her. She then wants there to be a sort of assembly line of women's lower halves. She wants to be just another anonymous vagina, not knowing who it is who is having sex with her. This concept of sort of being cut in half feels reminiscent of the unique scene in Breillat's earlier film *A Real Young Girl*(1976) where the main character, surrounded by her family at the dinner table, inserts a spoon into her vagina under the table, without anyone knowing. This sort of double experience of having one half of you in one socially acceptable world and the other in a more socially frowned upon secret sexual fantasy shows the sort of dissonance of female sexuality. Women are encouraged to be sexual but are at the same time shamed and ostracised for being so, especially if it is in a way that goes against the norm or is seen as abject. But this is also her fantasy, begging the question, can shame then feel sexy? Can the forbiddenness be what draws her into both this fantasy but also cheating with multiple men, even though it is wildly frowned upon? At the same time a fantasy is just that, a fantasy, it is never guaranteed that one would enjoy it if it happened in real life. As Hottell and Russell-Watts put it in "Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy", "gratification is not achieved through acting out the fantasies or through the enactment on the screen of fantasies, but through the activity of fantasizing itself"²⁴. There is power in knowing yourself well enough to have such a specific fantasy and embracing it, even though it will always be influenced, to some extent, by the culture around you.

Throughout the sex scenes her body is often fragmented as the camera mostly focuses on close ups of her body, Hottell and Russell-Watts write that this allows the viewer to insert themselves in her position and fill in the gaps ourselves, using our fantasy. As the main theme of the whole film is fantasies, often ones blending in and out of the diegesis of the narrative, we see that this is Marie's story, told entirely from her emotional and subjective perspective²⁵. The use of her voice-over only furthers this as we can only hear her accounting of things. As we throughout the film see how the sexual fantasies shown are often accompanied with pain and distress we are not encouraged to entirely relate to Marie and her desires but to question our own reaction to the unconventional desires of the other and why we have them. As the camera is never truly on our side, we are then forced to change our relationship with it. It is

²⁴R.A., Hottell & L. Rusell Watts. *Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy*, p.78.

²⁵ ibid

not telling us what we are supposed to desire or relate to but rather to explore our own individual desire freely, therefore opening up a space for female desire in all of its rawness.



“Mirror scene” Catherine Breillat, *Romance*, 1999.

We can see how *Romance* is constantly aware of the conflict between Marie, the camera and the audience. Throughout the film, Marie's reflection in mirrors serve as a way to make the spectator feel as if they are Marie as the camera angle makes it appear as if it should be in the place where Marie stands. She also in a way breaks the fourth wall as she looks us straight in the eye, almost giving off the impression that we have been caught looking at her. While Marie explores her voyeuristic and exhibitionistic sexual desires she simultaneously reminds the viewer of their own desire to seek visual pleasure, perhaps even confronting our own shame or fantasies.

Repetition is used as a tool in *Parfait Amour* to show the decline of their relationship. What started off, as Frédérique calls it, as a fantasy has by the third sex scene become a disillusioned reality, showing the truth of a relationship based on competitiveness and inequalities. Aesthetically this scene is similar to the previous ones, it takes place in the same bed, with the same lighting and same angle, but each time we see them have sex in this bed it is slightly more aggressive and harsh. The scene comes right after a fight over their entire relationship and after he has threatened to go up on the roof through the scaffolding despite the risk of dying, to which Frédérique reacts with cold indifference. The still imposing close

camera now makes the scene feel less intimate but rather more uncomfortable and enclosed. The tight framing and the loud noises of his body pushing hard against her repetitively with no background music or distraction makes the scene feel realistic in a discomfoting way. Since the scene cuts straight from the fight to the sex it makes it uncertain how it went from one to the other as well, leaving us uncertain of how consensual the whole thing is. In this scene Frédérique does not look pleased or calm like in the other ones but rather the camera focuses on the grimaces on her face that could be a result of losing herself in pleasure or from being in pain, as an audience it is hard to tell.

At this point in the film they are slowly realising that their relationship was a fantasy but also a complete illusion. Many heterosexual relationships risk turning out not living up to the expectations one had at the beginning, especially for women. In the western world one is promised true understanding and warmth by romantic media and culture but is then met with the cold reality of uneven labour, both in the home and emotionally. This film shows this even more by portraying a toxic relationship where disillusionment quickly shows that even in a relationship with less expectations than a serious one where you live together women are still oftentimes the ones that suffer more. Judging by Frédérique's apartment and age she probably has more economic power than Chrisophe but even this does not help her gain any real power in the relationship, as she is still emotionally more dependent on him than he is on her. When it comes to the sexual side of the relationship it seems like she is also the one that has less to gain from it than him. She clearly wants exclusivity but he sees himself as too free for that, meaning that she is always slightly unsatisfied. He then slowly starts displaying more sexually aggressive behaviour and she then loses the only real benefit that she was gaining from the situation.

When it comes to shame, the male character is the one that displays the most of it in the film. He is often seen over compensating for the fact that their relationship is unconventional by acting out and using anger as a means of distracting himself from his shame over it. While Frédérique is told by society that she should feel shame over dating a man so much younger than her and she does refer to this jokingly a few times throughout the film and while this probably comes from a real place of shame that she is avoiding, it still feels like she in some way accepts herself and her sexuality for what it is. At least much more than Christophe and society as a whole does. This does mean that she gets punished for it in the end though, a

reality for many women who try to break from the norm and refuse to feel the shame over their sexuality that society has imposed on them.

Now she also feels shame as well but internalises it in self hatred instead of acting outwards like Christophe; something quite usual for women. A lot of power that society has over women is seen in the way that women self regulate. She constantly anticipates judgment from both Christophe and others if they were to find out about the relationship and tries to guess what negative things they are going to say to her before they say it, in an attempt to control the situation and at least say that she is aware of them. The amount of power a norm has depends on how well it can hide its own mechanisms since this is the only way it is tolerable and we will embrace it. As Foucault puts it, power imposes secrecy on those which it dominates, but we would not accept the power norms have over us if we saw them for the attempt to limit our desires that they are²⁶. Now Frédérique does not display overt sexual fantasies like Marie from *Romance* but we can see her intense sexual desire for Christophe in the way she longs, waits and is even willing to humiliate herself for him. The internalisation of self surveillance has not managed to protect her from pain, revealing the way Breillat shows the limits of disciplinary powers over desire and fantasy in her works.

5. Violence, death and the Faustian pact

Violence in Breillat's works is less of a spectacle and more of a natural consequence of the domination that men have over women in our culture. Dissecting how deeply embedded it is in heterosexual relations and desire. She shows the punishment women get when they do not adhere to the very conditional type of female sexuality and desire that is allowed in society. Exploring the complex entanglements between the everyday violence seen in the ignoring of female autonomy and the more confrontative one that is performed directly to the female body.

5.1 Violence and punishment

Marie's body is the centerpiece of the film *Romance*. In "Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics" by Brinkema she describes how one can build on the theories of Michel De Certeau ideas of space as a frequented place by where moving bodies intersect²⁷.

²⁶ Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, P.86.

²⁷ E, Brinkema. *Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)*, p.153.

Here Marie's vagina then becomes the intersection of moving bodies as she exchanges partners and becomes not just the physical female interiority but expands into the realms of the boundlessness of space itself. Returning to Freud's ideas of self identification where the phallus becomes the centerpoint of sexual pleasure and visual point of reference, therefore turning woman into the representation of absence or lack, female interiority can then not be seen, as the male gaze can only see his own reflection when trying to gaze at his other. As the vagina has been seen as an unknowable, hidden space, Brinkema argues that this also makes it into a space not seen by the outside gaze, therefore making it threatening to the patriarchy.²⁸

As Breillat confronts this anxiety by putting the vagina at the forefront of *Romance* this results in a break against the traditional punishment that we have seen in cinema when women have been seen as sexually lacking and therefore evoking the threat of castration in the male viewer. This freedom then stands in stark contrast against the violations to Marie's body by sexual partners and doctors that we later see in the film. This results in the filmic and physical space in the films being brought together by their similar violations. The space of the film itself, is according to Brinkema, Marie's body itself²⁹. When we look at the scene where Marie gets assaulted in the staircase, it is this that makes it so impactful.

In the beginning of the scene he asks her if he can lick her for money, to which her inner monologue replies that it is her dream to be seen as just a vagina to be fucked, without any emotions attached. At first we are lured into a false sense of security as he does what he says he is going to and she seems in control, but then, abruptly, he tells her to turn around and starts raping her. He calls her a whore and then the camera, which is still in the same position as before, behind the two, stays in the same position for the remainder of the scene. It does not play a part in manipulating the audience through different angles or close ups, but rather, through its distance, stays non-moralising in a merciless way. The rape itself is quite short but still feels hard to watch with the loud noises of him pushing into her repeatedly contrasts the quiet surrounding. The naturalistic cinematic style is surprisingly present with its cold gaze. As a viewer we realise that the camera is us, we are all guilty onlookers.

²⁸E, Brinkema. *Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)*, P.154.

²⁹Ibid



“Staircase scene”, Catherine Breillat, *Romance* (1999).

Afterwards Marie cries and screams that she refuses to feel shame. This could be both at what has just happened to her but also, in the broader sense, at her sexuality as a whole and her denial of the social norms and history that came before her, telling women how they should live out their sexuality. This confrontative scene shows how a sexual fantasy such as hers is unrealistic as long as men do not want a society without female shame. While women get encouraged by men to be open sexually this is in stark contrast to how those same men often react to knowing that a woman has been sexually open with men other than themselves. The after effect of this being slut shaming and sometimes even rape. The man in the staircase does both and we see that this is her punishment by society for attempting to find the truth to her desire, a very real one for many women.

In *Parfait Amour*, the end scene starts off with Frédérique and Christophe fighting over how little they have sex and she says that he is not a real man and that he must be queer since he does not like women. He tries to tell her that love is more important than sex but she says that she does not care about love, she wants sex. After a while he starts choking her but stops after a little while and she spurs more homophobic insults at him. After she catches her breath he grabs a broom handle, swiftly holds her down and inserts it into her aggressively. This recurring theme in the works of Breillat, such as *Anatomy of Hell* (2004) where a homosexual man inserts various objects into a woman, could be a way of showing how society rapes women yet distances itself from the act itself. By removing the actual penis

from the act it is truly showing how rape doesn't come from men's extreme desire for sexual pleasure, but from them wanting to control and silence women. The camera, similarly to in other scenes from the film, is closed in on Frédérique's face, which is mostly covered by her hair, and we only partially see her reaction to the act, not the act itself. It is not often that Breillat hides acts from the viewer so the effect is quite intentional and powerful.

Rape is a large issue in our society. Yet various porn sites and films will have detailed filmings of oftentimes real rapes, despite critiques and requests from victims to take videos down. Individual's requests oftentimes go unanswered and it oftentimes takes widespread public outlash to force change, such as in 2020 when Pornhub took down a majority of their content as it was found to depict child abuse and non-consensual acts, as CNN reports³⁰. Our culture does not want to hear about court cases about rape, listen to accusations made against powerful men, especially if they have created big scientific discoveries, or listen to women speak about their trauma. The systematic rapes against women and minors becomes something that many just want to close their eyes at and hope that it goes away. Yet many films depict rape as a way to further their stories. Many of the films that attempt to confront the issue that is rape, try to use it to shock the audience or use it to build some sort of character arc for its female characters oftentimes film the scenes from the perspective of the rapist. Close ups of women's faces as they scream in pain, cameras that roll slowly over their naked bodies or torn up clothing, oftentimes just contribute to the fetishisation of rape.

What Breillat does is turn away from traditional camera angles and editing methods. Her rape scenes show a clear difference from her sex scenes. It is not the close up and fleshy intimate scenes that we normally see from her, but rather, there is a cold distance, only diegetic sound and oftentimes both subjects are almost fully clothed like in this scene. This is surprisingly rare as many other directors film rape scenes very similarly to how they would a sex scene and with the male gaze in mind. What then surprises the viewer is that, after a while, Frédérique stops sounding hurt and instead starts moaning and later laughing almost hysterically. We do not know if this is a defence mechanism and a refusal to become a victim or her actually enjoying the act performed on her. Since many of Breillat's subjects seem to be enjoying acts that most women would probably find disturbing, we are uncertain if this is

³⁰ J. Valinsky. Pornhub removes a majority of its videos after investigation reveals child abuse. *CNN*. (2020). <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/15/business/pornhub-videos-removed> (Accessed 11 Jan 2026).

her exploring the sometimes surprising reactions to trauma or if this is us being met with the complexities and uncertainties of fleeting sexual desire. Breillat, as usual, decides to keep us in the dark.

5.2 Death and Birth

Foucault describes the Faustian pact in *The History of Sexuality* as the mythical belief that sex will reveal some sort of truth about our being and release us from alienation and constraint, making it seem worth dying for³¹. We can see how Marie from *Romance* subscribes to this myth as well through her sometimes dangerous quest to find the truth to her desire. Sacrificing yourself for sexual fulfilment plays into this belief that suffering is not a result of domination but rather the price one must pay to find autonomy and a release from existential dread. Throughout the film she accepts pain and risks physical danger in order to live out her masochistic fantasies. But by the end of the film Breillat does not show these experiences as a reason for sexual transcendence or some sort of revelation, that is rather the birth and the murder of her boyfriend instead. Showing how Marie's suffering did not actually end up being meaningful, but is rather a result of the way that women are demanded by our culture to prove their autonomy through endurance.

Brinkema remarks in “Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics” on how death is at the heart of the film *Romance*, not just in how the main characters Marie's boyfriend dies but how the entire film is foreshadowing it by him being painted a ghostly white in the beginning of the film and almost all of the *mise en scene* being the colour white³². The only thing disrupting this theme being Marie's black hair, red vagina which we see in an extreme close up and later a bright red dress which she wears while searching for her own sexual pleasure. This makes the film seem to appear in a sort of liminal non-place which does not necessarily represent any one time period or place but rather poses as a blank canvas, waiting to be filled. But it is not just a film about death, it is also a film about birth. The live birth scene that we see a close up of does not just represent a new chapter of Marie's life after killing her boyfriend but it is also her birth, as she has been reborn. The birth juxtaposes the white room of the hospital in an incredibly dramatic way and we see how it fills in the gap of mysticism of what we have traditionally thought could be shown on screen.

³¹Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*, P.156.

³²E, Brinkema. *Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)*, P.156.

Brinkema continues to describe how in Breillat's films sex and death are always connected. Death of the female characters often represent the loss of virginity and the male characters who die often do so in unremarkable ways³³. In *Romance* we do not see Paul's death, just the explosion. She continues to state that there are two main types of violence in Breillat's works, the shocking image of horror that is death and the violence of sensation that is sex. These work together to create the unique metaphysics of her films. The text then compares the visual aspects of Breillat's style with the works of Francis Bacon who has also been described as using these two types of violence³⁴. Bacon is interested in a violence that is concerned with only colour and line, a violence of a sensation, a potential of violence, a violence of reaction and expression. This is not a relationship of form and matter but rather of materials and forces. When it comes to the way violence takes form on top of flesh Breillat and Bacon are closely related, as they both use a deformation of the body to achieve a violence of sensation. Similarly to how Bacon dismantles a face, Breillat uses close-ups to create a face and dismantle it. This face often being a labia but then being distorted by her erasure of any difference between the spaces represented in and the spaces of her films themselves. The horror of film and its relation to movement and sensation then creates a material rip in the film itself that in Breillat's films constitutes the sensations felt. This visual shock shows us our own naivety or as Brinkema puts it, we are duped, then fucked³⁵. This way the material and ontological workings of the film materialise into our flesh, then turning it to celluloid and then turning that to flesh, leaving us feeling sticky.

The murder in *Romance* is, in a way, distant, Marie does not see it happen and is far away at the hospital. Crisophe, on the other hand, kills his partner while being incredibly up close to her in a crime of passion. We can see how this is also a way of showing the way women are punished for their desire. Foucault's Faustian pact is a metaphor, he speaks of sex being seen as worth a symbolic death, but Breillat draws this further in *Parfait Amour*. By letting the main character actually die, we see how she critiques the idea that consent is the only thing that can protect women from the sufferings they have to endure when it comes to sexual and romantic relationships with men. Frédérique chooses the relationship and to stay in it

³³Ibid

³⁴E, Brinkema. *Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)*, P. 167.

³⁵E, Brinkema. *Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)*, P. 169.

throughout the whole film, consenting to the things he puts her through, but this is not enough to protect her from the emotional exploitation and the violent end that she meets due to him. Desire is political, because the society that we live in is based on uneven power relations, and this is not something that we can escape. Even if you “choose” something, the desire you have to do so comes from deeply rooted structures of domination that came long before you.



“End scene”, Catherine Breillat, *Parfait Amour*, 1996.

When we look at the scene where Chrisophe stabs her, the camera stays in the same place for the whole painfully long sequence. As a viewer one is confronted by the horrible sounds of the knife striking flesh over and over again without any other sounds or music as a distraction. It feels scarily realistic and the close up of his concentrated, emotionless face as his hand moves back and forth methodically is incredibly hard to watch, even though we see almost no gore or blood. The scene is a repetition and shares many visual and auditorial similarities to the much earlier scene where he might have sexually assaulted her. The white background as to not distract from facial expressions and movement acts as a blank space in both scenes. He stabs her repeatedly and the sounds of the strikes is in the same rhythm and rate as the sound of his body smashing against hers in the possible sexual assault scene. It is as if the murder is just a natural extension of the rape right before as well, he does not even pause when he switches from the broom handle to the knife, the rhythm is never broken.

After this, the film ends. We are left with the lasting impression of the pure hatred he feels for her, this is ironic considering how he just a few minutes before tells her that what they have between them is love, and considering the name of the film. But this is a smaller story representing the larger structures of malevolence against women, structures hidden by the promises of love and romantic relationships. The seeds were sown earlier in the film as he constantly degrades her, for example by presumably sleeping with Frédérique's daughter openly and not even denying it when she confronts him. Refusing to acknowledge his conditioning, he instead blames it on “human nature”. We can see this in many myths about sex and biology that get spread today as well. Completely removing all blame from the culture that has raised us to act this way in the first place. He threatens to kill himself throughout the film, yet ends up taking her life instead. But by showing this so openly, Breillat shows how it is not the women of her stories who are weak for ending up in undignified situations, but rather the men that are weak for needing to use others to prove their power to themselves.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The works of Breillat have a unique combination of aesthetics and themes which make her works stand out. But one must also ask what the intention is behind using pornography as a medium. In *Making Sex Public* by Damon R. Young, he builds on the ideas of Andre Bazin and states that the realism of the photographic medium in combination with the pleasure in looking into a private world that makes all cinema inherently pornographic³⁶. He continues to mention how the stereotypical gender roles of cinema have worked as a classical narrative tool³⁷. He then mentions how the way that cinema later on made sex public opened up doors to imagining sex as something that could exist outside of the institutions and spaces of traditional heterosexual domesticity. In feminist cinema the female body went from just being something to be gazed at to a tool of autonomy and sexual difference that made audiences uncomfortable at times. What Breillat does so uniquely is turning the expectations of both pornography and cinema right on its head, making room for a new kind of cinema where female sexuality is allowed to be problematised and examined in full detail³⁸.

³⁶ D.R. Young. *Making Sex Public and Other Sexual Fantasies*. (Duke University Press, 2018), P.7.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ D.R. Young. *Making Sex Public and Other Sexual Fantasies*. P.8.

A lot of her works, just like many by other female directors, get described as being examples of the female gaze, but does the female gaze truly exist? Foucault is famous for his model of power, the panopticon, representing the way people self-regulate without having to be told to do so but rather by an internalisation of power structures. In my opinion this can also be linked to the gaze, like the prisoners of his hypothetical structure, women do not need to be watched by an actual man to have internalised it and act as if being watched by one subconsciously. Or as Margaret Atwood famously puts it, you are a woman with a man inside of you, watching a woman. You are your own voyeur³⁹. So while it is positive for cinema that there is more of an attempt to create a female gaze, it is not as easy as just having female directors. At the same time, it is also not necessarily a female director's job to represent all women or some sort of female perspective, we would never demand that a male director should represent all men or always speak for the male perspective. What Breillat does well is describing a form of sexuality that many would find offputting, regardless of gender, making it feel like a critique of the male gaze. At the same time many of the female characters still look conventionally attractive and follow the wants of the male gaze, so it is much easier to accept their sexual transgressions than if it had been women that most men would find unattractive.

The two films both have differences and similarities but both show a female sexuality that is complicated, filled with adversities and uncensored. Instead of relying on classic cinematic conventions the films reject the patriarchal and capitalistic ideals of love and relationships acting as an end goal for female characters. Instead both main characters are driven by lust and desire which is what furthers the narrative forward in both stories. Marie, for example, takes on the traditionally masculine role of the initiator while her boyfriend Paul takes on the traditionally female role of the passive receiver. He is also often seen being the one withholding sex, something we often expect women to do. It is this denial of pleasure that the film shows as the source of Marie's distaste for him as she starts to pursue other men. By having this being what drives the narrative forward, it makes her take on the role that has traditionally been reserved for men in classic cinema, and it follows throughout the whole film.

³⁹ M. Atwood. *The Robber Bride* (Anchor, 1998) P.442.

The film's language and expression also breaks away from cinematic conventions and editing, special effects and background music is used sparingly. By not moralising the characters choices she opens up a door for a more nuanced view of women. No one in a Breillat movie is truly innocent or all good which makes the representation of women much more human and realistic. There is female suffering in her films but it does feel intentional, it does not feel like a spectacle but rather a realistic view of what happens to women across the world every day for attempting to search for sexual freedom. She makes the audience aware of ourselves and makes us question our own expectations, discomforts and reactions. Therefore including us in the system that she critiques, to watch a Breillat film is to be confronted directly.

7. Summary

Breillat's works are capable of exploring women as full human beings without the constraints of stereotypical feminine values of passivity and the female characters in both works drive the story forward with their sexual desire at the forefront. By showing all sides of womanhood, even the ones oftentimes seen as off putting or abhorrent, she manages to make the audience question why these norms and expectations were created in the first place and why it can inherently feel so wrong to see female sexuality on screen. The idea of owning your sexuality instead of looking at it as a vulgarity has a striking effect in these works.

By looking at a few of the sex scenes in the two movies we can see how she uses patterns and repetition to show the loss of control for a woman in a relationship in *Parfait Amour* and the contrast between fantasy and reality in *Romance* to show the complications of sexual agency. In both films the strong themes of guilt and shame show how female sexuality is constantly under examination by both outside sources and by women themselves, showing the constant societal policing over the female body and its wants. This shows how power comes from conventions and for women to gain power over their sexuality a whole change in the system is needed rather than a singular individual's decisions. Sexual freedom is not easily gained and the films are not perfect in their representations of women but the works of Breillat show a look into what cinema has the potential to be if one refuses to feel shame.

8. Bibliography

Angel, K. *Tomorrow sex will be good again : women and desire in the age of consent*. (Verso, 2021).

Atwood, M. *The Robber Bride*. (Anchor, 1998).

Brinkema, E. Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat). *Women: A Cultural Review* 17:2 (2006) P. 147- 170.

<https://doi-org.ezproxy.ub.gu.se/10.1080/09574040600795739> (Accessed 11 Jan, 2026).

Cense, M. & Vanwesenbeek, I. Understanding Sexual Agency. Implications for Sexual Health Programming, *Sexes*. 2021; 2(4) P.378 <https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes2040030> (Accessed 20, Jan, 2026)

Foucault, M. *The History of sexuality Vol.1*. (Penguin books, 2020).

Heti, S. An Interview with Mary Gaitskill. *Believer*. 60 (2009).

<https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-mary-gaitskill/> (Accessed 11 Jan. 2026).

Hottell, R. A. & Rusell Watts, L. Catherine Breillat's "Romance" and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy. *L'Esprit Créateur* 42: 3 (2002): p.77.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26288388> (Accessed 11 Jan. 2026).

Mulvey, L. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Screen*. 16, no. 3 (September 1975) doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6. (Accessed 11, Jan, 2026).

Sklar, R. A Woman's Vision of Shame and Desire: An Interview with Catherine Breillat.

Cinéaste. 25: 1 (1999) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41689201> (Accessed 11 Jan. 2026).

Valinsky, J. Pornhub removes a majority of its videos after investigation reveals child abuse. CNN. (2020). <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/15/business/pornhub-videos-removed> (Accessed 11 Jan 2026).

Young, D.R. *Making Sex Public and Other Sexual Fantasies*. (Duke University Press, 2018).

Films

Breillat, C. *Romance*. (1999). ARTE France Cinéma.

<https://drakenfilm.se/film/romance>

Breillat, C. *Parfait Amour* (1996).

Images

Fig. 1. Breillat, Catherine. *Parfait Amour*. 1996. DVD.

Fig. 2. Breillat, Catherine. *Romance*. 1999. ARTE France Cinéma,

<https://drakenfilm.se/film/romance>.

Fig. 3. Breillat, Catherine. *Romance*. 1999. ARTE France Cinéma,

<https://drakenfilm.se/film/romance>.

Fig. 4. Breillat, Catherine. *Romance*. 1999. ARTE France Cinéma,

<https://drakenfilm.se/film/romance>.

Fig. 5. Breillat, Catherine. *Parfait Amour*. 1996. DVD.