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Catherine Breillat as Auteur

In “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” Andrew Sarris, U.S. film critic and a leading proponent of the auteur theory, writes of the three principles of auteur theory, describing them as such: “three concentric circles: the outer circle as technique; the middle circle, personal style; and the inner circle, interior meaning” (Sarris 563).

By this definition, French filmmaker Catherine Breillat is most certainly an auteur. Breillat has directed thirteen films, all of which deal with the erotic and emotional lives of women from a female perspective. She wrote the screenplays for all but one of her films (*À Propos de Nice, la Suite*, which she only directed a segment of). Through her films, Breillat aims to reexamine both pornography and Hollywood myths, both of which she says caricaturize, fetishize and exploit women (Williams 276). Beyond the themes of her films (Sarris’ inner circle of meaning), Breillat’s camera style is also unique; she frequently features the female gaze in her film, particularly the female desiring gaze. Additionally, the way in which Breillat films sex scenes is characteristic, as she uses no music, montages or close-ups, but instead uses long takes of the actors’ entire bodies. And lastly, Breillat’s films indeed reflect personal style, as Breillat bases many of her lead characters on herself and casts actresses who physically resemble her. Their looks, interests and mannerisms are also hers (Gillain 205).

In this paper I will be looking at three of Breillat’s films to argue that she is indeed an auteur in the way she destabilizes standard images of female sexuality through both characters and film technique. The first film I will be looking at, *36 Fillette* (1988), is about Lili (Delphine Zentout), a bored fourteen-year-old who has an adult body but a young girl’s emotions, as she tries to lose her virginity to a much older man. The second, *Romance* (1999), is about a 20-

something woman Marie (Caroline Ducey), whose boyfriend has lost sexual interest in her, compelling her to go on a sort of sexual journey to seek revenge and find herself. The last, *A Ma Sœur* (2001), follows 15-year-old Elena (Roxane Mesquida) as she experiences her sexual awakening under the watch of younger sister, Anaïs (Anaïs Reboux).

Characters: atypical sexuality

In each of the three films, the female characters have an atypical view of sexuality. In *36 Fillette*, 14-year-old Lili considers her virginity something she needs to get rid of. She attempts to have sex with a much older man, Maurice (Etienne Chicot), but has reservations. Williams writes of this theme in Breillat's films, in which "to be a virgin is to carry around an enormous burden. To lose virginity can be a negotiation of enormous bad faith" (William 276). In the scene in which Lili and Maurice are alone together at night, this is apparent. Lili is about to leave and Maurice asks her why she came to his apartment in the first place. "Maybe I thought I'd feel like it," she says. He begins to caress her as she continues, "that something might make it possible." Lili tells him he's too old; he makes her sick. They lie down on the couch and as Lili covers her face, says "I can't...being a virgin is horrible. If I'd slept with 50 guys I'm sure I'd like you." "You have beautiful breasts," Maurice tells Lili as he kisses her. "A bunch of lies," Lili says. "Feelings have nothing to do with chest measurements." Maurice gets up, the mood gone for him. This scene illustrates Lili's atypical views on sex. Virginity is very much a burden for her, however she wants her first time to be completely removed from romance. Lili appears in contrast to the typical young woman in film, who romanticizes her loss of virginity and wants it to be with someone special. At the same time, Lili is also a very realistic portrayal of a young woman, as she has a strong desire to lose her virginity, but also many hesitations. The complexity of her sexuality is unique, as the character could have easily been portrayed as

simply a slut or simply a virgin. Breillat's creation of a character who is both inexperienced and sexual is certainly atypical.

A Ma Sœur! continues the idea of virginity as a burden. In the first scene of the film, sisters Elena and Anaïs discuss losing their virginity. Elena, the older sister, says that she doesn't sleep around with boys. "If I meet a man I love, I'd want to be broken in," says Anaïs. "He won't think my first time counts. The first time should be with nobody. I don't want a guy bragging he had me first." Anaïs' views on sex are almost identical to Lili's from *36 Fillette*. For her, losing her virginity is a hurdle she has to jump before beginning the rest of her life. Like Lili, she wants her first time to be with "nobody," so that no one she cares about will feel like they were her initiation into sex. Again, this position on virginity is rare in film. The presence of Elena, who *does* want to lose her virginity to someone special, further highlights the atypical quality of Anaïs' sexuality.

In a second scene from *A Ma Sœur!*, Anaïs' atypical views on sex are further seen. Anaïs swims around a pool, singing a song about finding someone to love and plays a game where she talks to the legs of the deck and the pool ladder. "My lips are soft, huh? I'm a good kisser," she tells the deck. "Yes, you're my love. But I don't want to marry you yet." She swims over to the ladder and says, "Now that I know men like me, I want other experiences. Don't I kiss well? I've only been kissed once before." She swims back to the deck. "Are you jealous? I didn't really cheat on you. Women aren't like bars of soap, you know. They don't wear away. On the contrary, each lover brings them more, and you get all the benefit." She swims back to the ladders and say, "You make me sick. How can you disgust me and attract me so much? You're the one I'll give it all to." Again, Anaïs views appear unconventional for a 12-year-old girl. She has a completely unromantic view of sex and firmly believes in gaining as many experiences as

possible before settling on one person. Her comment about the ladder both disgusting her and attracting her echoes Lili's comment to Maurice and enforces the idea that Breillat chooses to depict sex in a realistic and unpretty way. Lastly, Anaïs' statement that "each lover brings [women] more," shows that she sees sex as not merely about pleasure, but about growth as a person; a very unusual point of view for anyone in film, let alone a young girl.

Marie, the main character in *Romance* has a similar opinion of sex. In the film, Marie's boyfriend refuses to be intimate with her, causing Marie to doubt her own worth. Instead of trying to get him interested in her, Marie goes on a sexual journey, completely free from romance (hence, the tongue-in-cheek title). Early in the film, Marie looks through a window of a coffee shop and sees her boyfriend sitting by himself, looking happy. Marie sees this as an insult to her and decides to be just as aloof toward him. "I win if I'm last to get home," she says in voiceover. "I know it, I'll have an edge on him." She walks down the dark streets and is approached by a man who says, "\$20 just to eat you." Marie looks at him for a long time considering. Her voiceover says, "That's my dream. To know that, for some guy, I'm just a pussy he wants to stuff without sentimental bullshit. Just raw desire." Marie is, perhaps, the most extreme example of unromantic sexuality. Disgusted with where her romantic love life got her, she views sex as nothing but carnal. Marie goes off with the man and he ends up raping her. Crying and smoking a cigarette afterward, Marie's voiceover says, "Is nymphomania destroying yourself because you choose a man who doesn't love you? I don't want to sleep with men. I want to be opened up all the way: when you can see that the mystique is a load of innards, the woman is dead! Maybe I really want to meet 'Jack the Ripper.' He'd certainly dissect a woman like me!" Here, Marie continues this idea that, for her, sex is not about the other person, but about her own personal experience. She sleeps with men to learn about herself. Her mention of

the mystique again reiterates this idea that sex is merely carnal, there is nothing innately mysterious or romantic about women's sexuality. She reiterates these sentiments in a second scene, while she is being given a gynecological exam, through voiceover:

I don't want to see who's fucking me. I want to be a hole, a chasm. The more gaping, the more obscene it becomes, the more it must be me, the intimacy of me, the more I become absent. It's metaphysical: The more a prick thinks it possesses me, the more I disappear. I am emptied.

By calling the experience metaphysical and refusing to see her partner, Marie again insists that sex is a completely personal and singular act.

The main characters in *36 Fillette*, *A Ma Sœur!* and *Romance* clearly exhibit atypical views on sex. Lili from *36 Fillette* is atypical in that she views her virginity as a burden and wants her first time to be with someone she doesn't care about. However, she is also atypical because of the complexity of her sexuality: she wants to lose her virginity, yet she is also very afraid to. Anaïs from *A Ma Sœur!* also views virginity as a burden and wants to lose it to no one special. She also sees sex as not just about pleasure, but about understanding herself. Marie from *Romance* views sex as completely unromanticized. For her, it is completely about self-discovery and her own experience. By comparing these three characters, it is clear that Breillat returns to common themes of female sexuality in her films, even creating similar characters, such as Lili and Anaïs.

Film technique

Female gaze

In addition to the female characters' attitudes toward sex, Breillat employs film technique to destabilize standard images of female sexuality. One of the ways she does this is with the use

of a female gaze. Unlike in traditional cinema, the male gaze is rarely used in her films. When the female characters look and when they don't, as well as who they look at, is important in Breillat's films.

In *36 Fillette*, Lili can be seen in several instances looking brazenly and desiringly at men. However, the night she almost has sex with Maurice, she lies down on the couch with him, but she covers her eyes and turns away from him so she doesn't have to see him. He turns her around to face him and she covers her eyes. When she looked at the men before, she was cocky and trying to act mature. In this scene, when she covers her eyes, she has decided she does not want to have sex with Maurice. That night he violates her, against her will, and the next day she wears sunglasses, literally hiding her gaze. Breillat clearly depicts the act of looking as empowering and an assertion of sexuality. Lili's covering her eyes and turning away represents a hesitation toward becoming a sexual being. Lili's wearing sunglasses after Maurice violates her can be seen as a rejection of sexuality. She does not want to be seen as desiring. In the last scene of the film, Lili looks directly at the camera and smiles for the first time. Having achieved her goal of losing her virginity, it's as if she has gained the confidence to address the audience.

Like in *36 Fillette*, Marie from *Romance* also uses her gaze to express desire. In the first scene of the film she is watching her boyfriend, Paul (Sagamore Stévenin), as he is made up for a photo shoot (he is a model, which adds even further meaning to the idea of Marie as the holder of the gaze). In the first few scenes of the film, as the audience learns of how Paul neglects Marie, she can be seen staring at him longingly at a nightclub and at a café. After Marie decides to ignore Paul and go on her sexual journey, she begins to direct her gaze at other men. She can be seen at a bar, looking at Paolo (Rocco Siffredi), whom she will later go home with and staring at several other men, desiringly. In these scenes, Marie is clearly portrayed as the active viewer

and the men are objects of her gaze, a departure from traditional cinema that presents the female character as both sexual and powerful.

In *A Ma Sœur!* all of the looking is done by Anaïs and is mostly in a watchful manner. The opening credits end on an image of Anaïs' face, staring solemnly at the audience, setting up her gaze as authoritative and most important. As her sister, Elena, meets and flirts with Fernando (Libero De Rienzo), Anaïs stares at the couple in the same solemn way. Her look is almost expressionless. It isn't until the sex scene that Anaïs begins to show emotion with her gaze. She stares at Elena and Fernando across the bedroom with a look of interest, covering her eyes, then peeking through her fingers. But it isn't until Fernando convinces Elena to have sex that Anaïs really changes her expression. At the sound of her sister's painful screams, Elena winces. She turns to face the couple head on, then as Elena's screams grow louder, turns away abruptly, tears streaming down her face. Unlike in *36 Fillette* and *Romance*, Anaïs' gaze is an observational one, not a desiring one. The audience observes Elena's sexual awakening through Anaïs' eyes, which look much more harshly on the experience than Elena's eyes, clouded with her illusions or romantic love, would have looked. By using her sister to frame Elena's first experience of sex, Breillat again offers an atypical view of female sexuality, especially the often romanticized experience of loss of virginity.

Portrayal of sex

In addition to the use of the female gaze, Breillat's portrayal of sex destabilizes standard images of female sexuality through film technique. Breillat is known for her depiction of sex that is without music, montages or close-ups, filmed in real-time, uninterrupted and unromanticized. Gillain writes:

Not only do Breillat's films characteristically present bodies in their entirety, but they also present sex scenes in sequential shots and in real time...there is nothing false or equivocal in the portrayal of sexuality in Breillat's films. The body speaks its language, and the image faithfully reproduces it. Nor does Breillat hesitate (in *Romance* and *A Ma Sœur!*) to show male sexual organs. The erect penis is glaringly absent in the films of male filmmakers, as we know." Gillain 208-209

In *36 Fillette*, this can be seen in the film's only sex scene. It occurs at the very end of the film, after Lili has left Maurice for the last time. She approaches Bertrand (Olivier Parnière), the son of her parents' friends and gets him to come to her house. The scene opens with them lying together naked. The camera frames them in a full body shot, but a curtain hides the lower half of their bodies from view. Lili says, "That's enough, stop dribbling on me. What are you waiting for? Go ahead!" "I want you," he says and she doesn't respond. Bertrand comes quickly and Lili pushes him off of her. The camera zooms in to him alone on the bed. He asks, "Was it good for you?" "It never is the first time," Lili says. "This was the first time?" Bertrand asks. "Why do you think I did it?" she says. "Then...you love me?" he asks. The camera cuts to a close up of Lili as she looks over her shoulder and says, "Asshole!" She turns from the camera and the next shot is of her walking outside, fully dressed. She turns to the camera, scowling for several seconds, then breaks into a huge smile as the camera freezes the frame and goes to the credits. This scene clearly demonstrates Lili's attitude toward sex. Not only does she have sex for the first time with a completely random person, but she is in control and detached, as she wants to be. The filming of the actual sex, which lasts less than forty seconds and appears

to bring no pleasure to Lili, *is* completely unromanticized. The objective camera angle – observing the two from a distance and at eye level – makes it even more so.

The sex scene in *A Ma Sœur!* also depicts a first sexual experience in a stark and realistic way, but without any of the humor from *36 Fillette*. The scene occurs for almost half of the film, most of it documenting Elena's doubts about having sex and her boyfriend, Fernando, trying to persuade her to have sex. Like in *36 Fillette*, their entire bodies are shot at a distance and at eye level. The entire time, the camera intermittently cuts to close up shots of Anaïs watching the two. Elena finally tells Fernando that he can penetrate her anally. The camera then cuts to Anaïs, nervously looking at the two and away from the two as Elena's sounds of discomfort are heard. Anaïs winces as Elena screams and continues to look away then at them. At one point she covers her eyes with her hands, but then peeks through her fingers. As Fernando comes close to climaxing, Anaïs moves her body and looks directly at them. She then abruptly turns around and cries and Elena's screams grow louder. As noted previously, this scene, while also realistic and unromanticized, holds none of the humor of the scene in *36 Fillette*. What was a victorious event for Lili, is a painful one for both Elena and Anaïs. The pain that Elena endures could certainly be seen as a condemnation on Breillat's part of the "romantic" sex that Elena believes she is having. Anaïs' literal judging cements the idea that the Hollywood myth of losing virginity to "the one" can be brutal.

As in *A Ma Sœur!*, the sex scenes in *Romance* also take up a large portion of the film. The effect of them, however, is different. The scenes are meant to show Marie's sexual journey. It begins with the longest scene in the film, in which Marie has sex with Paolo. The two meet at a bar and go home together. Before actually having sex, Marie talks for a long time about how she enjoys looking at "disgusting things," like used condoms. The conversation already places

the sex act in a very unglamorous light. The camera then shows Marie then putting a condom on Paolo and the entire act of intercourse, uncut and unsimulated. The camera stays at a distance and shows the bodies of the two in their entirety, at eye level. This helps to further distance the sex from any kind of romance.

The second sex scene works to further Marie's experience of sex even further from romance. The principal at her school, Robert (François Berléand), invites her to his home where she learns that he is into sadomasochism. With him, Marie has her first experience of bondage. The scene lasts for twenty minutes and painstakingly records Robert tying her up. Like in all the other sex scenes, both characters full bodies are shown at eye level. Marie appears to take no pleasure from the experience and even cries. However, afterwards she appears pleased with herself, as if it were a rite of passage.

The third "sex" scene is Marie's rape. What begins as a casual encounter with a stranger turns into a nightmare for Marie as she is brutally raped. The scene is shot in real time, with no cuts. They are filmed in their entirety and at eye level. This experience is quite obviously devoid of any emotion or pleasure, however Marie's voiceover at the end of the scene (which was described in the character section above), reveals that she views the violence against her as another step toward understanding herself and of demystifying female sexuality.

While making different points, the sex scenes from all three films are shot similarly – realistically with as objective a view as possible – and each portray female sexuality in an unusual way, removing the idea of romance from sexuality.

Conclusion

Through her creation of characters who display atypical views on sexuality (the theme of her films) and her use of the camera through both a female gaze within the film and realistic and

unromanticized portrayal of sex (the technical aspect of her films), Breillat destabilizes images of female sexuality and proves herself to be an auteur.

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