The Romance of Catherine Breillat

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores how four films by Catherine Breillat, a controversial French filmmaker, express notions of Romanticism. It begins by outlining specific aspects of Romantic thinking that she engages with through film. Through the use of textual analysis, this thesis makes connections between Romantic thinking, her artistic vision (as it is expressed through interviews), and *Une vraie jeune fille* (1976), *Romance* (1999), *Anatomie de l'enfer* (2004), and *Une vieille maîtresse* (2007).

Dedicated to all of my male family members, friends and colleagues who aren't jerks.

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Introduction

> Moi, je suis incurablement romantique.
> **-Catherine Breillat, *Corps amoureux***

The word Romantic has not been one which usually comes to mind when deciding how to describe the films of Catherine Breillat. In the leading book on her work, *Un cinéma du rite et de la transgression*, by David Vasse, the term "antiromantique" is applied half-consciously to characterize the nature of her art. Worse yet are the critics who label her as simply pornographic. Vasse's book and countless interviews with Breillat have come to fruition in order to refute these arguments which neglect to consider the rationale behind her stylistic choices. I disagree with Vasse's determination of Breillat's work as "antiromantique," although I believe his interpretation and misapplication of the word romantic is the root of this problem. This thesis will argue that Breillat's films are, indeed, very Romantic.

Introducing Catherine Breillat

Over the course of a career in film that spans just over thirty years in length, Breillat has earned the moniker, for better or for worse, of being the auteur of porn. Before becoming a filmmaker, she was a critically acclaimed novelist by the age of seventeen. She has been an actress in films directed by others (e.g., she plays the character of Mouchette in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* [1972]), a songwriter, and a lecturer at a number of post-secondary institutions in Europe (she has taught at la Fémis, le Centre national de la cinématographie, and the European Graduate School). She is a prolific screenwriter. Her films are often adaptations of her own novels, and she has been the screenwriter for films by other well-known directors (e.g., David Hamilton's *Bilitis* [1977] and Maurice Pialat's *Police* [1985]). She is very vocal on the subject of her films,

which are interwoven with her views on the relationship between society and art. She is a regular guest on French radio shows. A major source of information for my thesis is a collection of five interviews with Breillat entitled *Corps amoureux*.

Her style of filmmaking is controversial because she includes material that pushes the limits of censorship laws around the globe. Her films invert cinematic conventions such as the notion of the male gaze. These choices are inevitably linked to the political. Her films have been allowed exhibition by censorship boards because of her ability to intellectualize her inclusion of provocative material. Essentially, her argument is that it is the role of the artist to push the boundaries imposed by societal values. She is a vehement believer in the freedom of speech especially for the artist whose role it is to question the boundaries imposed by forces in power. Her popularity has significantly increased since the release of *Romance* in 1999. This popularity has also migrated into the scholarly world as academics have increasingly entered into the discussion of her work. Last year, there was a conference exclusively on the subject of Catherine Breillat in England at the University of Lancaster.

What Is Romanticism?

Unfortunately, Romantic (with a capital "R") is a difficult term to explain. One of the most established scholars on this subject, Isaiah Berlin, who wrote *The Roots of Romanticism,* spent an entire academic career trying to establish a definitive explanation of the term. In his introduction, he explains how this is an impossible task. Romanticism is inherently ambiguous and self-contradictory. That being said, one cannot help but say that something is Romantic: "On sent le romantique, on ne le définit pas" (Mercier qtd. in Gengembre 9). We can recognize its influence, its essence, in a work of art, in a doctrine,

or in a revolution of thought concerning how to live one's life or how to perceive the world.

It is in this respect that I hope to use notions of Romanticism, essentially an intellectual-historical methodology, to discuss selected works from Breillat's filmic body. I will leave the debate of what exactly is Romantic to more established academics. Despite the inherent contradictions found within Romanticism, it is rare that any of these ways of understanding Romanticism have been or can be disqualified. Even contradictory interpretations are equally valid partially due to its ambiguous nature. Hegel, coming out of the Romantic tradition, wrote that even seemingly contradictory interpretations of reality are really bits of a larger, all-encompassing holistic conception of Truth. Breillat, along with other contemporary French filmmakers such as Bruno Dumont and Gaspar Noé, uses Romantic Irony, a belief that Truth can be better understood through the exposure of conflict between seemingly opposing ideas, in her aesthetic choices. Using this Romantic concept as a methodology to discuss her work is not too problematic because these films are not arguing what is Romantic. Instead Breillat's films express symptoms of agreed upon notions of Romanticism.

Methodology

I have decided to focus on Catherine Breillat because there is a contradiction between how she views her own films and the methodologies used by writers to synthesis the meaning and the authorial intent behind her work. This thesis is an exercise in the application of a discourse that resembles the sometimes confusing way Breillat describes her own views. There is no literature that explores the credibility of identifying herself as a Romantic, a claim that initially sparks inquiry and disbelief. She is a part of a larger

phenomenon that is occurring primarily in contemporary French cinema that is often identified as the Cinema of the Body or as the Cinema of Sensation. However, her preoccupation with love between the sexes alongside her breaking down of boundaries between man and animal, her anti-theoretical resistance, and the importance she ascribes to the role of the individual, coincides with many concepts found within Romantic thought. Primarily through textual analysis, I will discuss how Breillat incorporates a Romantic approach to her filmmaking. Each chapter begins with a summary of information related to the production and reception of the films. This contextualizes how societal values influence her artistic vision, and it provides some perspective as to how these films are linked to one another under the heading of "Romantic."

Romantic virtues that Breillat's work, and her words, exemplify include her anti-theoretical stance (a rebellious form of anti-Classicism), her displacement of responsibility onto the level of the individual, her heightened reverence for the role of art, and her depiction of "the quest" through characterization. Her choice to break narrative conventions and to create depictions of the sexes that go against the usual ones found in Hollywoodized mainstream cinema pushes the interaction between the image and the viewer to new levels of engagement. Her decision to break the rules and to provide more elements associated with "the personal" in her films is performed with the intention to establish a more intimate encounter with the viewer. This heightened immersion puts forth the social role of art. Her films serve an educative function by breaking down the viewer's sense of objective distance with explicit onscreen imagery. This attack on the visceral motivates change at the level of the individual. Ultimately, these transgressions are meant

to improve the relationships between the sexes in reality as a way of helping people reach the Romantic love ideal in their own lives.

A distinction needs to be made between *small-r romance* and *big-R Romance*. Small-r romance can be described as the narrative trajectory found in conventional Hollywood films in which the "right romantic couple" often lives happily ever after by the end of the movie (Kyrzywinska 31). On the other hand, there are many examples of filmic romance that depict "unrequited love, forbidden love, [and] forlorn love" (Lopez 259). These characters often embody certain characteristics: heroes who are handsome, brave, moralistic, strong, dynamic; heroines who are fair, youthful, virtuous, pure, passive (Lopez 178; Brill 6). These narratives present worlds where good and evil are clearly defined and oppose one another (Lopez 178). Small-r romances present universes which are relatively uncomplicated and where conflicts are inevitably overcome (178). This is what many people, including Vasse based on the statement that was cited earlier on in the Introduction, would think the word romantic means if one were to be asked.

Another way of understanding this difference is by differentiating between the genre of filmic romance and Romantic films. The genre of filmic romance, in general, attracts audiences based on its promise for escapism and for a predictable storyline "at the expense of characterization" (178). In this vein, Breillat is very much against small-r romance. It is this formulaic contraption Breillat fights against explicitly in her films—this product of unquestioning mentality. It is by fighting against convention that Breillat, in one way, becomes Romantic.

Furthermore, the category of filmic romance is contentious. Is it a genre, a sub-genre, or a mode? Many films identified as romance do not share all of the same conventions.

Many films relegated to other genres occasionally include elements of romance as well (e.g., romantic comedies). Some romance films decidedly subvert these same conventions that would normally be used to identify them. In any event, I am not arguing the genre of filmic romance. I am arguing that Breillat makes Romantic films which, in the words of Lopez, "render into cinematic terms Romantic ideals and credos" such as a promotion of individualism, an encouragement of revolutionary ideas, an exaltation of feeling (spontaneity and passion), and a high valuation of the workings of the imagination (261).

In "The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge," Robert B. Ray, quoting Heinrich Wölfflin, establishes essentially two groups that qualify major cultural movements throughout history: the Classical and the Baroque (32). Under the Classical, he includes the Renaissance, Neo-Classicism, Positivism/Realism/Naturalism, and Modernism. Under the Baroque, he lists Mannerism/Rococo, *Romanticism*, Symbolism/Decadence and Postmodernism. Movements listed under one heading share commonalities:

Classic	*Baroque*
linear	painterly
plane	recession
closed	open
clearless	clear (32)

Basically, as time goes on and new movements emerge, these new movements work as antitheses to their predecessors. For example, Positivism, which is scientific in nature, is a

response to the emotionalism of Romanticism which preceded it, and the Decadent Period re-adopted the extravagance and the sense of multiplicity shared by the Romantics.

On a basic level, Wölfflin and Ray are correct. However, even though these categorized groups do share some commonalities, they do not share all of the same qualities. Out of the different terms we could use to define these films and Breillat's intention in making films in this manner, Romantic is the best one. The assertion of the self alongside notions of primitivism (her repetitive obsession with origins), and taking into consideration how she expresses her artistic vision through interviews, are fundamentally what pull her films out of any of the other tropes.

One way many academics and critics get around defining Romanticism is by choosing to limit it to a specific time period in history. Even this method has been disputed for a number of reasons. One often comes across references to pre-Romantic influences. William Blake, who is often heralded as the father of British Romantic poetry, was not alive during the alleged Romantic Period. One could argue that Romanticism could be found within the Baroque Period partly due to some of the ideas explored by Wölfflin and Ray. Historians still argue about the exact dates of this supposedly specific Romantic Era, as well. Since the 19th century, academics often use the notion of the Romantic as a way of understanding historical movements and artworks which occurred or that were created after this period. For example, Michel Butor labels existentialism as a Romantic concept because of the importance it places on the individual's power to make choices and also simply because it recognizes how multiple choices are possible when one is faced with

making a decision (Peyre 7-8). P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde, 1943-2000* uses notions of Romanticism as a method of describing the films of a variety of filmmakers. The artists of the Beat Movement, many of whose writers relished poets such as Blake, are often described as Romantic in their quests for beatitude. This was done by adopting a more personal form of aesthetics as opposed to a Classical style in producing works of art. Regressing to a childlike state in both life and in the production of art connoted a sense of innocence and purity with their approach. This has been represented through texts such as *Pull My Daisy* (dir. Robert Frank, 1952) where childishness is reverentially depicted by the formlessness, or the intuited stream-of-consciousness, of its dialogue, and through the behaviour of its main actors (many of whom were leading figures of the Beat Movement). The roots of Romanticism can be seen in a variety of hybrid forms since that epoch. It is not inappropriate to use some of its ideas to help interpret what is going on within certain works of art that have been produced during more contemporary times.

As a matter of fact, the inspiration for my argument came from a class on Alfred Hitchcock. For this graduate course, we were asked to write a book review for one of the assignments. I chose Lesley Brill's *The Hitchcock Romance* as I had studied Romantic Literature during my undergraduate degree, and out of the hundreds of books written on Hitchcock it seemed like the most unique publication. Essentially, he interprets all of Hitchcock's films using Northrop Frye's symbolic references to conceptions of worlds of innocence and experience found within literature. After finishing *The Hitchcock Romance*,

and finding it to be a rather weak argument, coincidentally, Professor Richard Allen from New York University came to our class where he gave an enthusiastic talk. Agreeing that most work on Hitchcock was of two camps, psychoanalytic analyses or the subject of suspense, he felt that the existence of these two groups could somehow be best accounted for by using some of the ideas Brill discussed in his book (Allen, *Film Studies 660F/4*). Since then, Allen has written a book called *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*. In it he uses Friedrich Schlegel's conception of Romantic Irony as the basis of his overall argument. Although Schlegel, who wrote *Lucinde*, "a pornographic novel of the fourth order" (Berlin 114), never gives a direct definition of this term in his writings, Allen sums up his theories as this:

> For Schlegel, the concern of philosophy is the relationship between the relative and the finite, which are chaotic, and the absolute or infinite, which are unified and complete. ... Irony is not merely a local rhetorical ploy in which you mean the reverse of what you say: it is nothing less than a cognitive instrument through which the relationship of the finite to the infinite may be grasped. ... This self-definition consists in a ceaseless dialectical opposition or self-division between the empirical, finite self, and the self that, aspiring to the absolute, constantly confronts, overcomes, and confronts against its own finitude. ... Aristotelian logic of non-contradiction (something cannot be both a and not-a) is replaced by the both/ and principle of a 'romantic logic' or 'a = a and a ≠ a'. (4-5)

This notion of conflict between seemingly opposing elements in Breillat's body of work, the overlapping of aesthetic choices that appear contradictory, is something she does to push herself and to push the viewer:

> Le cinéma, c'est de l'idéogramme. C'est mettre de l'inverse dans les scènes. ... Le convenu vous montre les choses d'un seul bloc mais ce sont les choses contraires qui donnent l'émotion et la vérité. ... Une chose et son contraire sont possibles au même instant et au même point. (Breillat, *Corps* 171-172)

Despite its inherent ambiguity, Berlin has been able to identify one specific preoccupation of Romanticism: the assertion of the will of the individual. It is one universal quality and value shared by all of the main figures during this time, and it is an idea that comes out of all of the somewhat contradictory statements made by these men. Responding to the Enlightenment, this was a very novel concept during the 18th and 19th centuries. It has monumentally changed the face of human existence as it can be credited with producing the beginnings of modernity. Alongside this positing of the importance of the individual came many other values. It implied that more importance should be placed on the person than onto social systems or a higher power (e.g., a paternalistic god). This meant that more importance was placed on self-responsibility and self-management. Systems and authorities only became excuses for unpleasant behaviours. Morality was within the person and dictated by the choices (actions) one made. Introspection became a means of navigating what essentially was seen as a world of both predictable (infinite) and chaotic (finite) forces. Meaning in life was to be found in the devoted pursuit of an ideal which included, but was not limited to, the pursuit of the Romantic love ideal. Truth was to be found through personal experience which is essentially the notion of empirical knowledge and reciprocal determinism. In other words, Romantic Irony is the belief that one's understanding of the world is created through how we uniquely experience interactions with all that is external from us. (This is another way of describing Schlegel's ceaseless dialectical opposition). Frustration and confusion, spiral-like obsessing over an issue, the elevated stress placed on an individual to make their own sense of things, were understandable by-products of such a way to live in the world. Self-proclaimed Romantics,

from around the age academics generally agree to be the Romantic Era, exhibited what would later be coined during the 20th century existential angst.

In this thesis on Breillat as a Romantic, I will show how she creates depictions of women who lose too much of their individuality and who are abused for this reason because the idealized men they desire value the importance of the self too much: these leading men are narcissists. They each represent two sides of the same coin. Additionally, these men are portrayed as sincerely believing that they are in love with these women. Not all men are demonized by Breillat, nor are all battered women glorified. There are instances of the opposite that will be discussed at further length within the following chapters. Breillat is interested in the dynamics that bring about these circumstances. Her films are an excursion into the studies of relativity. Breillat is very vocal in the many interviews she has given, an important source of information used for this paper, in saying that this type of confrontation is imperative to rising above these behaviours: male and female alike. It is a social problem. What she explores are the relationships between the abstract and the real: between words spoken (through labelling, censorship, seduction) and their collision with actions physically performed (the desiring sexual body). She is interested in the dialogue between, in the words of Schlegel, the finite and the infinite. It is best to keep in mind that her leading characters, like Breillat herself, are going through transformations. They are in process, they are on quests for knowledge, as they make blanket statements about both genders. It is how they make sense of their life situations. Also, certain characters function as metaphors within another relevant and connected discussion on aesthetics. More specifically, certain character types and their functions in the narratives of some of the films discussed in this paper elaborate on the relationship

between ugliness and beauty which are terms traditionally associated with the mundane and the ideal.

The imbalance between these dynamics can partially be traced back to aesthetics. The division of mind and body has been a major theme within Western religion, philosophy, civilization, and art. Even though this topic is subtly explored in each of her films, it most clearly comes out in *Romance* (*Romance,* 1999) when Robert, during his first liaison with Marie, explains how seduction and attraction are really about the unity/disunity between beauty and ugliness. Interestingly, each of the male leads who are "in love" in her films are very good looking in a beautiful (even feminine) kind of way: "Beauty is always feminine" (Breillat, *Cannes 2007 Press Release*). They are also narcissists. They are the men in love and they are the men who are loved, so they represent the ideal. The dynamics between characters that are considered ugly or beautiful as discussed in this paper differ slightly in each film, but the investigation of this subject is consistent. These conceptions also usually go hand in hand with characters who exhibit sexual agency or its opposite.

Everyone wants to believe in the transcendentality of love. Even her characters, who to many of us do not seem very sympathetic, or who seem like masochists or sadists, also believe they are in pursuit of this ideal based on the words they speak. In constructing these images, in exposing the collision, the irony, between what we or what they think with what is really happening onscreen, Breillat is making a social statement. Her films make us question how we live up to these ideals. One reason for this delusion, she believes, is that men and women experience love within different temporalities:

> La femme est vraiment dans l'éternité de l'amour. … Je ne dis pas que l'homme ment quand il les fait. Mais ce sont des serments instantanés, faits dans une sincérité instantanée. Le temps de la conquête masculine est magnifique. … Ils sont dans le présent de leur sexe. … Les hommes

> s'éteignent très vite. Ils n'ont pas de force. Ils n'ont pas l'esprit de continuité. Ils sont dans l'idée de la conquête. … Il y a un sentiment, une exaltation amoureuse, de la fiction. … La fiction demande tout de même un effort. (Breillat, *Corps* 52, 44)

In other words, women experience love as an absolute whereas men, "les chevaliers blancs," experience it as a finite force (in the temporality of "la conquête"). Marie of *Romance* and Vellini of *Une vieille maîtresse* (*An Old Mistress* or *The Last Mistress*, 2007), on a few occasions, speak words that point to this difference—they are only interested in "absolutes" and "longevity." In confronting these "truths" onscreen, Breillat wishes to alter our moral order. To achieve something closer to the ideal of transcendental love, we all need to pursue a more androgynistic way of being:

> Il faudrait qu'il y ait beaucoup plus d'androgynie. … J'ai rencontré des hommes comme ça dans les nouvelles générations. Ce qui n'empêche qu'il y a encore beaucoup de garçons machos, voire même des caricatures de machos. (54)

This break from dichotomous thinking, which negates the reality of blurred boundaries, comfortably situates her vision within a holistic way of seeing and being that is inspired by Romanticism.

Themes in Breillat's Corpus

In this section, I will introduce several of Breillat's major thematic preoccupations—processes of socialization, search for origins, role of myth, meaning in life—before proceeding to use these issues to analyze four of her films.

I) Socialization, Looking, and Mirrors

Through socialization, we reflect off of others to gain better insight of ourselves, of others, of the world around us. Our knowledge base is acquired through this process. It is an inevitable part of being human. The sexual act is a form of language due to its required

involvement with other people: "C'est un langage pour moi, c'est-à-dire comment on devient humain. Parce que être humain, c'est un rapport au langage, le pouvoir de penser l'abstraction de l'idéal, donc la notion du temps" (Breillat, *Corps* 39). This interchange between the abstraction and the concreteness of the physical act of sex has the potential to transport humans into the ideal rather than only relegating them to existence within the mundane world:

> Si on ne se projette pas mentalement, on meurt, on s'asphyxie, on n'existe pas. On devient un grain de sable de l'espèce humaine, c'est-à-dire un animal. On n'est plus que le représentant d'une espèce, et non plus une personne. ... C'est pour cette raison que je pense que la sexualité humaine n'est pas faite pour se reproduire mais pour se produire, c'est-à-dire être une conscience unique. (45-46)

The sacred is in the profane; the sacred is within the individual. It plays a significant role in the creation of our sense of self. Sex, for Breillat, is an initiatory rite of passage, a means to learning more about ourselves: "They keep trying to keep us from discovering the transcendence of the sexual act which is a truth. It's a truth we can never quite attain, like all truths. Obviously because it's transcendental" (Breillat, *Anatomie* "Special Features"). It can negatively affect our lives and/or it can reveal something about the true nature of existence.

Breillat often describes the perspective of her films as being the Gaze of Shame or as the Gaze of Obscenity. She investigates the processes by which women internalize the externally espoused shame regarding the sexualization of their maturing bodies. The films in her body of work show women who progressively become more fearless as they overcome the shame of being a sexual being: "Parce que qu'est-ce que c'est que la peur? C'est la peur du regard des autres et le poids du conformisme" (Breillat, *Corps* 33). It is

for this reason that she first wanted to make movies—to combat systems of thought and of filmmaking that encouraged the narcissistic male's desire for conquest and the shaming of female sexual agency (25-26).

Mirrors are a major motif in each of the films discussed at length in this paper. The symbol of mirrors, and looking through them, suggests the Romantic notion of introspection as a means of self-defence. Mirrors suggest formation of self via socialization. Mirrors as motifs occasionally point to the irony between our true self, an intangible reality, and the mental projection of how we see ourselves, how we adopt the way others' perceive us, and so on. This is an ongoing, dynamic process of constant change. The Romantics encouraged self-reflection as a means of making one's own sense of the world and its workings. Rigid systems of thought, anything presenting itself as having all of the answers to human reality, were in complete contrast with the ambiguous, fluid conception of Truth adopted by the Romantics. Anything inflexible was viewed as fallacious, with the exception of the adamant belief in the adoption of an unshakable will in the pursuit of one's ideals. Windows occasionally act as substitutes for mirrors when characters experience a revelation in thought in Breillat's films.

Mirrors and narcissism also have a common heritage. The origin of the myth of Echo and Narcissus can be traced back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is an epic poem, written by one of the masters of love poetry, which exhibits a style reflective of Romantic ideas such as process and transformation. Even though different translations of the original poem exist with variations in the format of the narrative, on a general level, the same

important points come out of most versions. In Arthur Golding's translation of the tale, Narcissus, a teenager of extraordinary beauty, wanders the forests and glens oblivious to the desires of everyone else he meets. Rather, he realizes they desire him, but he feels nothing towards them in return, treating others with cold reproach. All of his lovelorn female and male admirers become resentful as they pine away from their unfulfilled desires. One of the goddesses, Rhamnuse (also known as Nemesis), decides to teach Narcissus a lesson for thinking he is above everyone else and for neglecting to reciprocate any feelings to another. One day, as he happens upon a brook and kneels to grab a drink, he sees his own reflection and he falls madly in love with his own image without realizing that it is an unreal projection of him. From this point on, he never leaves the water's edge as he tries to attain this entity that has bewitched him. Eventually, he withers away to death from the pain of his unrequited love. Other versions of the story recount that he drowns after chasing his image into the depths of the water.

Echo, a female nymph who falls in love with Narcissus, exhibits interesting parallels to the women in love shown in Breillat's films. Narcissus is said to have had many admirers, but Echo's personal struggle is explained at length. Upon seeing him for the first time, she follows him as he walks around the woods. Hearing her, he speaks out to find out who or what is trailing him. Too timid to assert herself, Echo simply repeats each of the things he says while continuing to hide her identity. Soon after he asks her to join him, at which point she steps toward him. When he sees her, he cries out, "I first will die ere thou shalt take of me thy pleasure" (3.487). He is saying I will never give you any part of me

including my affection. She responds, "Take of me thy pleasure," (3.488) shamefully running back to the woods after being spurned, to live alone "in dens and hollow caves" (3.491), and to die from sorrow:

> Through restless cark[i] and care
> Her body pines to skin and bone and waxeth wondrous bare.
> The blood doth vanish into air from out of all her veins,
> And nought is left but voice and bones, The voice yet still remains;
> Her bones, they say, were turned to stones. From thence she, lurking still
> In woods, will never show her head in field nor yet on hill.
> Yet she is heard of every man; it is only sound
> And nothing else that doth remain alive above the ground. (3.493-500)

Repeating only half of his words, she typifies what we see in several of the films—women who give too much of themselves to men who do not reciprocate the attention the females desire. Everyone suffers, including Narcissus, as a result of his elevated sense of self. What Narcissus loves is a superficial projection of himself. It is elusive, unattainable, because it does not exist. This kills him. Echo is too dependent on his approval, she cannot even speak her own words, and she loves him too much, which results in her demise. One lesson from this poem is that object-love has the potential to diminish an individual's sense of worth unless it is returned: "Tandis que le désir de plaire à quelqu'un qui, de toute façon, ne vous aime pas en réalité, c'est misérable. C'est la perte de l'orgueil. Et moi je pense que l'orgueil est la chose la plus importante" (Breillat, *Corps* 27). It is a vulnerability that has the potential of being highly destructive.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, women historically did not have access to authentic love because they were subjugated by institutions of male dominance and consequently they were not treated as equals (Singer, *Nature* 313). The woman in love

grew up in a world in which freedom of action was given to the male, resulting in its attribution as a valued male aspiration (313). Young girls were trained to think of the male as a god and inherently superior (313). Their love became a wish to merge with a god-like being (313). She concluded that genuine love could only be feasible when there was equal respect between the two people involved (313).

Humankind has been preoccupied with its position in relation to nature since the beginning of time. Progress that has been initiated by civilizations has distanced humanity's relationship with the natural world. This sense of having a handle on many things humanity was at the mercy of at one time or another has increasingly encouraged a sense that we are somehow in control of our environment and external factors. Coming out of an overwhelmingly patriarchal history, which credits males with many of these endeavours, gives credence to de Beauvoir's conclusions. This assumed authority was greatly augmented as a result of the scientific advancements of the Enlightenment which preceded the Romantic period: "The more power Man had over nature, the more his knowledge and skill went to his head, and the deeper became his contempt for the merely natural and accidental, for all irrational data" (Punter 171). Interestingly, it is always the women who engage in looking through mirrors, the more Romantic way of evolving, in Breillat's films. The men in love in her films lack this depth of thinking even in *Anatomie de l'enfer* (*Anatomy of Hell, 2004)* and in *Une vieille maîtresse*, which deal more with the transformations of the male characters through the deconstruction of their patterns of desire.

Many ideas that came out of Romanticism became major influences for psychoanalysis. On a basic level, this notion of self-reflection as a means of self-improvement and healing, the elevated significance of the inner world, became a tenet of psychoanalytical thought. Scientists began placing more importance on the relation of social dynamics to the mental and emotional well-being of people. Freud's discoveries attempted to systematize the workings of the mind. Catherine Breillat, along with many others since the inception of psychoanalysis, has argued its credibility as it is understood by Freudians. According to Breillat, psychoanalysis is problematic for a number of reasons:

> La psychanalyse travaille sur le déni mais pour l'admettre comme quelque chose qui sauvegarde l'homme. … La psychanalyse reste quand même le garant de la société qui parlait des femmes dites « hystériques ». Mais enfin, ces femmes hystériques, elles avaient des raisons de l'être. Elles étaient tellement censurées, camisolées. La psychanalyse part du principe que l'identité de la femme est de ne pas avoir de pénis. Moi je pense que ce n'est pas de « ne pas avoir » qui constitue l'identité de la femme. C'est d' « avoir » : avoir le pouvoir de créer, le pouvoir d'engendrer, le pouvoir d'être, le pouvoir de réfléchir. … La psychanalyse est le reflet absolu de cette vision de la femme. La psychanalyse est faite pour les hommes et par les hommes. (*Corps* 128)

In referring back to some of the values of the Romantics, we can infer in addition to these comments, which also allude to this point in an indirect way, that the attempt to classify something that is obviously a dynamic process is fallible. It is the expression of a certain period in time and it reflects the ideologies of the people who had the authority to make such claims. Breillat's take on psychoanalysis resembles the criticism the Romantics had of the Enlightenment in that it is unsafe and foolish to place too much faith in the categorization of a phenomenon that is in movement, since cultural values change.

Breillat does believe in the therapeutic and insightful role of art. Part of her reasoning seems to be that art is open to numerous interpretations, and that it is not rigidly defined in what it is trying to communicate: "L'art, c'est beaucoup mieux. Parce que ce qu'on dit en art, on le maîtrise pas, ca vient tout seul. ... Psychanalytique si on veut mais pas contrôlée, pas mesurée déjà avec des mots qui sont des remugles du monothéisme" (128). The personal interpretation of art is beneficial because it creates the opportunity for self-directed introspective analyses. In *Corps amoureux*, she recounts how the making of each film is also cathartic for her in that she confronts and overcomes her own limitations while learning more about her own inner workings: "Je les fais pour m'aimer moi" (149). Vassé, the interviewer featured in *Corps amoureux* (and not to be confused with David Vasse who is the author of *Un cinéma du rite et de la transgression*), describes the interviews she performs as a platform for Breillat's own self-discovery because one gets the sense that she is discovering things about herself as she speaks:

> Catherine Breillat parle pour avancer et se construire, se trouver. Elle ne parle pas tant pour se raconter que pour créer un espace dans lequel la pensée puisse éclore, s'élaborer, se métamorphoser. Se raconter comme on mène l'enquête. ... Le mouvement qui anime la parole de Catherine Breillat évoque celui d'une spirale: on croit tourner en rond et on est soudain propulsé à l'étage supérieur, là où les idées redeviennent vivantes parce que inédites, résonant au plus intime de nous. ... Comme une spirale, la parole de Catherine Breillat nous fait croire que nous sommes arrivés à destination, pour ensuite lever le voile: le voyage est infini. (7-8)

The Romance of Catherine Breillat is an attempt to interpret her films using a discourse that incorporates her anti-theoretical stance rather than from a scientific point of view.

Breillat's films function as mirrors of us as well: "Parce qu'on ne peut pas se connaître quand on He ne se reconnaît pas. C'est donc comme ça que je me suis reconnue,

donc que j'ai commencé à exister" (Breillat, *Corps* 16). We need to look. The inclusion of graphic scenes forces us to become desensitized to our programmed responses to such imagery in order for the viewer to transgress their own beliefs because she believes a deeper level of reflection is required. This includes the need to acknowledge the existence of what she believes to be discrepancies in relationships. Women often thank her for her films because they made them realize something about themselves or their lives that was at the core of their unhappiness (125). Her films point to our own limitations by exploring what she believes to be the motivation behind heterosexual male and female desires.

The inclusion of content of a more personal nature creates the opportunity for spectators to experience a heightened level of empathy with her characters. Martine Beugnet in *Cinema and Sensation* goes into further detail about the ways in which the current trend of the Cinema of Sensation, primarily in France, uses certain stylistic devices to blur the boundaries between spectator and image even more so than conventional films. She posits the overuse of close-ups as the key tool in how viewers are drawn haptically into a more intense phenomenological engagement with onscreen imagery (65). To this I would add their inclusion of highly personal subject matter (e.g., graphic, unsimulated sex scenes) which shocks the viewer's usual expectations while watching a movie. Her extensive use of voice-over narration in many of her films and the numerous instances of self-reflexivity (e.g., mirrors, the same subject matter in each film, the look of her stars, and the re-use of actresses) can also be put on this list. Beugnet's placement of these films within a more Deleuzean, or phenomenological and postmodernist, methodology

corresponds with an ambiguous, yet holistic, Romantic view of experience. Her films create an artistic experience that aim for a more complete synaesthetic immersion, or understanding, of certain truths that she is searching for herself, and that she wants to confront the viewer with, so they will examine their own preconceptions. Not only does this more intimate engagement with the spectator offer the opportunity to narrow any widened gap created by a sense of "Otherness," but it also helps us realize our need to love ourselves more as well.

II) The Search for Origins

Romanticism was a reaction to the Enlightenment which believed:

> Valid, objective answers could be discovered to all the great questions which agitate mankind—how to live, what to be, what is good, what is bad, what is right, what is wrong, what is beautiful, what is ugly, why act thus rather than thus—and these answers can be obtained by some special method recommended by the particular thinker in question, and that all these answers can be stated in the form of propositions, and all of these propositions, if they are true, will be compatible with one another—perhaps even more than compatible, perhaps they will even entail one another—and taken together these propositions will constitute that ideal, perfect state of affairs … we should all like to see happen. (Berlin 63-64)

The Romantics, disenchanted by the absolutism of the Enlightenment, asserted the significant need for a re-integration of elements associated with the body in art and in living life. Life as imagined before socially prescribed rules, life as it was imagined during some other nostalgic point in history—a point of origins—was valued: "Pour vivre, il faut donc trouver des points d'ancrage. Le goût du passé peut alors se préciser comme primitivisme, comme désir de ressourcement dans l'origine" (Gengembre 15). Truth and beauty were more likely to be found in nature rather than through cold logic. Incorporating

the idea of non-linear thought and that which was foreign, Orientalism became very fashionable among the Romantics:

> Parmi les origines ... l'Orient occupe une grande place. Le programme tracé par Friedrich Schlegel annonce superbement l'ambition de cette renaissance par l'Orient : « C'est en Orient que nous devons chercher le romantisme supreme ». (Gengembre 15)

Institutions, theories, and doctrines were all constructions of patriarchal civilizations and they could only serve humankind for a time being, but with "time and an indomitable will these had to be overthrown because they confined the unlimited will" (Berlin 144-145).

Nostalgia for previous times, including the Middle Ages, was rampant in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The importance placed on will power, along with the notion of humans as centres of meaning making, was accompanied by the medieval notion of the quest. It was a highly esteemed virtue to keep moving despite the costs in the attempt to overcome adversity. This was meant to be done with an intense, insatiable, and hopeful desire to achieve some higher goal: "Effort is action, action is movement, movement is unfinishable—perpetual movement. That is the fundamental Romantic image" (106). In some of her interviews, Breillat relates the experiences of her protagonists to the pursuit for the Holy Grail:

> Oui, s'exercer et vaincre sa peur, c'est un chemin rituel. C'est ce qu'on appelle le chemin initiatique, ce n'est rien d'autre que la quête du Graal. C'est un chemin dangereux, sur le fil, non pas du rasoir mais de l'épée. (*Corps* 67-68)

According to Gérard Gengembre in *Le romantisme*, it was the heart that drove one to this virtue (10). This statement correlates exactly with de Marigny's analogy (a leading character of *Une vieille maîtresse)* of the wounded horses of medieval knights that would

propel themselves onto swords during battle in keeping with the dynamics of love relationships. This need to go back to what she sees as the origins of sexual desire is linked to Breillat's aversion towards theory:

> Sometimes I wonder if psychoanalysis exists simply to protect bourgeois society. I don't think it helps us. I think we must go further. We must return to the origin. I believe Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866) is more important than knowing girls suffer from penis envy. I don't think so. I think they suffer from being beaten up by boys when they're little, from having their skirts pulled up, and from being told "You can't do that, you're a girl." That … yes. But that is social. It has nothing to do with having a penis. (*Anatomie* "Special Features")

Breillat believes that these origins can best be communicated through the art form of myth.

III) Breillat and Realism

> Et moi, je n'ai pas envie de faire des choses réalistes. Le réalisme, c'est hideux.
>
> Ce n'est rien le réalisme. Ce qu'il faut, c'est la vérité.
>
> On ne vit pas dans la réalité, on vit dans le mythe, et le mythe c'est la vérité.
> **-Catherine Breillat, *Corps amoureux***

In this section, I will argue against the common association of "Realist" to Breillat's work, rather than "Romantic," by discussing an artist who she makes direct reference to in interviews and in *Anatomie de l'enfer*. Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) is often cited as being the father of Realism, the art movement that followed Romanticism. He is also often typecast as being Romantic in his earlier days. Part of this contradiction is due to the fact that these labels have been ascribed decades, sometimes even up to a century, after he existed, amidst all of the befuddlement in academia as to how Romanticism or even the Romantic Period should be uniformly defined. Realism continued to esteem the natural, just as many of the Romantics did, yet the Realists did this with a more scientific

approach. A lack of interference on the part of the artist, in the reproduction, was stressed (Boas viii). Realism was rendering something artful for the sake of saying that anything could be the model for a piece of art. Subjects that were often ignored by the art world for being too earthly and ugly, subjects that were exactly what art had always tried to distance itself and its appreciators from, became the obsession of the Realists. The Realists, such as Courbet, forced patrons to look at the unlookable as if it were a photograph: "Man was immediately removed from his supernatural pedestal and brought down to earth" (vii-viii).

The Romantics pushed for an assertion of the role of the individual and of the natural. Unlike the Realists' appreciation of nature, this was a means towards salvation for the Romantics. It was something to strive towards and it was linked with the ideal. Emotional embellishments and human desires were of less importance to the Realists than to the Romantics: "He [Courbet] seemed to think that he could see things as they were, as objective fact, emotionally neutral" (49). As indicated by the quotations at the beginning of this section, Realism fails to account for shifts in subjectivity. A large part of human relationships is based on the creation of fictions that we tell ourselves. The idea of being in love is a fiction that is intertwined with the reality of sexual attraction. The two are not mutually exclusive. They are two parts of a whole. Sometimes these two parts of ourselves work in tandem. This phenomenon is the peak of human existence. Irony is the result of incompatible fictions in the minds of lovers. Breillat is interested in depicting how the mental and corporeal elements of love work within and between men and women.

Martine Beugnet's association of the blurring between object and subject in the films that I will be discussing in my chapters disqualifies Breillat's vision as like that of the Realists. However, Breillat's understanding of confrontation is very similar to Courbet's understanding of objectivity. Both Courbet and Breillat value primitive subject matter that is often traditionally deemed aesthetically unpleasing in a Classical sense. However, Breillat's preoccupations with desire, with social dynamics, and with characters that obstinately pursue what it is they esteem qualify her more as a Romantic than a Realist. She purposefully shows these images that usually have to do with the body because she believes salvation lies in their recognition, in owning up to them, and in finally transgressing the shame associated with them. There is also the implication of guilt and choice, essentially existential issues, which play out in her films. She often employs vivid colours; her mise-en-scène reeks of decadence. Her films are cyclical in nature and they are obsessed with the same themes. She did not happen by these images: they are highly constructed with a certain purposeful end in mind. They are not experiments or products of chance. She also blatantly states how she uses filmmaking as a vehicle for her own personal form of catharsis. Her preoccupation with desire, with emotions, does not situate her films easily into a Realist tradition. Her uncompromising vision in filmmaking is indicative of the authenticity in the portrayal of her beliefs.

IV) Love and Meaning in Life

> Every person in love thinks they're unique and eternal. They see themselves as unique individuals. Our sexuality makes us conscious that we are unique individuals.
> **-Catherine Breillat, *Anatomie* "Special Features."**

> Il n'y a pas de couple fondé sur le mode naturaliste. Ça, c'est pour les animaux. Le coté réaliste est tellement bien vu chez les Bidochon[ii]! Je n'ai pas l'envie de faire ça!
>
> Le sentiment amoureux nous propulse hors du temps humain. J'ai moi aussi cet espoir que l'amour va me délivrer de moi-même. Le sentiment amoureux est une exaltation, un désir idéal.
> **-Breillat, *Corps amoureux*.**

Historically, the term romance was first introduced into language during the Middle Ages (Cuddon 758). Medieval romance embodied many differences from both of the two forms of romance that have already been discussed. However, there are a few elements of medieval romance, a topic which interested the Romantics, which do influence Breillat's vision. Courtly love comes out of this tradition. Andreas Capellanus's *The Art of Courtly Love* establishes the very precise rules for noblemen in how they should have conducted themselves during this age when it came to anything to do with love, sex, and relationships. The highest love was one for a noble woman, who was often married to another man, and this meant elevating her to a god-like level of reverence. One could make love to her through romantic gestures such as being a participant in a tournament and purposely losing if it was her command. However, one was never allowed to actually sleep with this most beloved. She was untouchable and above the mundane world because she was so exquisite. For Breillat, the long lasting effect of this aspect of courtly love has been a big problem for contemporary love relationships:

> L'amour disons « courtois » est une supercherie … favorable à l'homme … la décision spontanée du lien amoureux est vite perçue comme un abus (de séduction, de pouvoir), pris dans son acception de tromperie et d'illusion. En sublimant la dame, l'homme projette son désir à la hauteur de ce qu'il en attend, conformément à son propre intérêt. Ce n'est donc pas exactement la

> femme qu'il désire, mais l'image de cette femme proportionelle à son désir. … Aimer pour soi, pas pour l'autre. (Vasse 36-37)

Breillat encourages the pursuit of love however she believes putting women on pedestals, as one does in the courtly tradition, negates the reality of women. The reality of women, who have sexual desires and sexual bodies (e.g., that menstruate, that have pubic hair), has been made shameful. In turn, many women feel the burden of these over-idealistic trappings. They become embarrassed by their desiring bodies; they are treated differently for becoming sexual beings. This guilt negates what Breillat sees as the larger purpose of human sexuality: "Hell is nothing but guilt. The anatomy of hell is the female body" (Breillat, *Anatomie* "Special Features").

The origins of desire are what Breillat is investigating through breaking filmic conventions. For her, the natural association made between gender and desire should be deconstructed. She is critical of how the sexes have been socially constructed to act out their desire which, she feels, has caused a derailment away from a healthier and more fulfilling adoption of sexual practice. The way desire is expressed and the way relationships are formed are affected by external forces. Breillat hopes to provoke an unlearning of gender-normative thought in order to get back to a more authentic reality of the goodness of these desires.

There are a number of sources that have contributed to this derailment: "Civilization in general has evolved as a panoply that often restrains the sexual in order to accentuate something else" (Singer, *Sex 33*). Judeo-Christian thought has traditionally presented a love for God and for the Church as a surrogate for mundane love between persons: God is

unlimited love. During certain points in history, interpersonal Eros was heavily connoted with sin and women were depicted as secondary citizens: "Early Christianity treated man's love for god [sic] as a passionate experience that would make all other passionate experiences unnecessary. Not only unnecessary but harmful to the soul and sinful" (22-23). It was during the Romantic Period that there was a liberation of the passionate: love became God (27). It became "the ultimate means of transcendence" (Gengembre 15). Breillat's films offer subtle criticisms of the role organized religion has played in the derailment of the attainment of reciprocal true love between men and women.

The Romantics, as stated earlier, exhibited distrust for many established schools of thought. They were also experiencing the rise of the Industrial Revolution. There are many similarities between our current way of life and that experienced by the Romantics. The role of the Church has diminished even more since then. The belief in the existence of God has waned quite a bit especially in the more developed countries of the world where technology and urbanization have greatened the distance with our connection to nature. The creation of products and theorems[iii] has grown at a speed never known before in documented history. The invention of psychoanalysis has, according to some, greatly contributed to what has been coined as "The Century of the Self" (Curtis, *Century*). With all of this progress, something is left wanting in our consciousnesses. The films of Breillat hope to awaken and to frighten people at the level of their own sensibilities. These films remind us of our own mortality and they push us towards realizing the weaknesses of

contemporary culture. Perhaps a more honest love for people as they are in the real world can help create deeper meaning in existence:

> Through love people bestow exceptional value upon other persons. The recipient of our love becomes so intimate apart of our being that the beloved's continued existence may matter more to us, more than our own. Love is a way of saying to another person that "you shall not die." (Singer, *Sex* 69-70)

> Vassé: C'est pour atteindre cet idéal que vous faites des films?
> Breillat: Je crois que oui. (Breillat, *Corps* 205)

Breillat's films are instrumental in reminding us of our responsibility in the regulation of our own behaviour:

> The central sermon of existentialism is essentially a Romantic one, namely, that there is in the world nothing to lean on. All else are alibis, right of obedience ... you are simply pretending that you are not deciding, when you have in reality decided but do not care to face the consequences of the fact that it is you who have decided. ... Even when you say: I am partly unconscious, I am the product of unconscious forces, I cannot help it, I have a complex, it is not my fault, I am driven, it is because my father was unkind to my mother that I am today the monster that I am—this, according to existentialism (which is probably right on this point), is an attempt to curry favour or to obtain sympathy by transferring the weight of responsibility from your shoulders (because it is you who makes the decision) somewhere else. All explanations are false and all explanations are explaining away ... This is the stoic sermon of existentialism and it derives directly from Romanticism. (Berlin 142-143)

Literature Review

My bibliography includes sources that touch upon the three main fields I will be using in my discussion of four of Breillat's films: literature on this director, literature on Romanticism, literature on the director's own conception of her work. Despite consulting many sources on the topic of Romanticism, Isaiah Berlin's *The Roots of Romanticism* became the overwhelming basis for my conception of this topic. Even though I consulted many other secondary sources, some that I have referred to in citations, I found that their systematic approaches were inadequate in their representation of facts. Many points about

Romanticism were inevitably left out by these writers despite presenting themselves as definitive guides. Berlin begins by saying that Romanticism is a difficult topic to fully account for in any academic discussion. By beginning with this statement, and by adopting a speaking style that accounts for all of this subject's contradictions (it is a transcription of a series of lectures compiled by Henry Hardy), Berlin provides a very comprehensive understanding of this confusing concept. He accounts for the constant re-questioning of what Romanticism stands for, and he recognizes its connections to contemporary philosophy and art.

Corps amoureux, another major source of information on Breillat, is a collection of interviews done with Claire Vassé for France Culture. This major resource for my thesis allowed me to make connections between her artistic intentions with notions of Romanticism. Vassé clearly indicates in its introduction that she did not want to overlay any of her own interpretation onto the filmmaker's ideas. Instead, this series of interviews are presented in the original format. I have tried to develop these connections between Romanticism and Breillat's thoughts through the textual analysis of some of her work.

A few texts that I consult and whose arguments I incorporate into my own are Tanya Krzywinska's *Sex and the Cinema*, Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation*, Claire Clouzot's *Catherine Breillat: Indécence et pureté*, and Irving Singer's *The Nature of Love* and *Sex: A Philosophical Primer*. *Sex and the Cinema* provides a historical overview of the representation of sex in film along with summarizations of how sex in cinema is discussed in academia. Her findings on the division between the representations of sex and love in cinematic history, and the more current association of the term "transgression" with sexual imagery, were of particular interest to me. *Cinema and Sensation* helps me

identify ways to discuss the affect of explicit imagery, through the use of certain stylistic devices, on the viewer. *Catherine Breillat: Indécence et pureté* provides hard-to-find contextual information for some of Breillat's earlier films. To find additional contextual information for this, I also consult a series of websites that were recommended to me by film librarians and professionals in the film industry: *Variety*, *Box Office Mojo*, and *Unifrance*. I enlist the help of Breillat's producer and some of her international distributors to find more information regarding the funding of her films, about issues she encountered during shooting and exploitation, and on the reception of her films by censors and film festivals around the world. Irving Singer's books offer an overview of the treatment of love and sex through the ages by different thinkers. This, along with some other texts such as Ray's, allows me to narrow down what it is that qualifies her as Romantic. Additional reading about Realism also helps me to narrow this down.

David Vasse's *Un cinéma du rite et de la transgression* also presents a textual analysis of Breillat's films (he only discusses her filmography up until *Anatomie de l'enfer*). He focuses on interpreting recurring symbols that he notices in her movies in a haphazard way. I disagree with many of his findings, including his statement that she is not interested in the pursuit of the love ideal. He neglects to consider the enlightening role of irony and social critique. He fails to consider how her use of confrontation and contradiction pose difficult questions on topics that are often ignored in mainstream cinema. His research did help me zero in on my decided path of investigation, but I chose not to rely on his ideas.

The majority of reviewers in film periodicals, such as Linda Williams and Ginette Vincendeau, recognize that Breillat's use of sex differs greatly than the representation of

sex in soft and hardcore pornography. These writers tend to focus on popular discussions on the differences between pornography and art, situating her within a wider movement of hardcore art cinema. These are usually discussions on the potential ethical issues involved with incorporating more sexual content in mainstream films, on the effects this aesthetic switch has on spectatorship, and on the possibly limited continuation of these practices into the future.

Occasionally, the discussion in the critical literature revolves around whether Breillat's films can be determined as feminist or women's films. I have purposely avoided adopting a feminist interpretation because I wanted to present an alternative, original way of viewing her films that incorporates her own beliefs. Breillat has repeatedly disassociated herself with these two labels because 1) she wants to be seen as simply an artist rather than as a female artist, 2) there have been many feminists who have taken a great dislike to her depiction of women, 3) she feels like it might scare off some of her potential viewers since, for some people, feminism has a negative connotation, and 4) she dislikes labels that are potentially alienating and stifling. Instead of disputing her feminist "credentials," I have chosen to focus on corroborating her "I am a Romantic" view.

The popular press, written for a different audience than academic film criticism, usually does not present her films in flattering light. Reviews in the daily press, which I consult from a variety of international sources, also usually do not inquire into her reasoning behind including explicit material in her movies. However, reviews do show us how she is received by the general public, and, incidentally, by those who believe in the social values that she wants to destroy.

My method of interpretation of a filmmaker's oeuvre in relation to Romanticism is rarely seen in Film Studies with the exception of Lesley Brill's *The Hitchcock Romance*, Richard Allen's *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*, and P. Adams Sitney's *The American Avant-garde, 1943-2000.*

Corpus

In this thesis, I have chosen to concentrate on *Une vraie jeune fille* (1976), *Romance* (1999), *Anatomie de l'enfer* (2004), and *Une vieille maîtresse* (2007) because they function as a cycle: each film progressively works towards stripping away layers of socialized sexual expression as a means of working towards the Romantic love ideal. In *Une vraie jeune fille*, we witness the beginnings of the internalization of female shame. *Romance* continues the same theme except within a romantic relationship. The ending of the film suggests the leading female character overcomes these restraints. Both *Une vraie jeune fille* and *Romance* rely on the presentation of the leading characters' subjective point of view. This stylistic device creates an intimacy between these characters and the viewer. Marie of *Romance* functions as a figurative continuation of the character of Alice in *Une vraie jeune fille* during a later stage in life. *Anatomie de l'enfer* places the narrative of *Romance* within the abstract form of a myth, which concretizes Breillat's preoccupation with the origins of desire. It marks a transition because the male character, rather than the female character, experiences a transformation. This happens to him because he is removed from his narcissistic pedestal as a result of the intimacy he experiences in observing "the Woman." It also marks a turn in Breillat's filmography wherein she begins to investigate the minds of her leading male characters rather than just the female ones. Her latest film, *Une vieille maîtresse*, presents a representation closest to the attainment of

the love ideal through the male character's acceptance of nature, and through an equalizing enforcement of androgynous features within the two leading characters.

There is not very much that is different between any of her films. The differences that do exist are subtle. In a sense, they are the same film repeated over again with only slight deviations. Between *Une vraie jeune fille* and *Romance,* Breillat made *Tapage Nocturne* (*Nocturnal Uproar*, 1979),[iv] *36 fillette* (*Junior Size 36*, 1988), *Sale comme un ange* (*Dirty Like an Angel*, 1991), and *Parfait amour!* (*Perfect Love!*, 1996). After *Romance*, she went on to direct *À ma soeur!* (*Fat Girl*, 2001), *Brève traversée* (*Brief Crossing*, 2001), and *Scènes intimes* (*Sex is Comedy*, 2002). It is as though each film builds on the others as Breillat pushes her own limitations. The female in *Une vraie jeune fille* does not end up with the object of her desire, and this story is told primarily from the point of view of Alice. Lili of *36 fillette* is also a highly physically developed, lonely teenager fresh out of puberty who struggles with the burden of maintaining her virginity while feeling sexual desire. The man she is interested in is a middle-aged, promiscuous sexual predator. Eventually, unlike Alice, she sleeps with a friend she meets at the beach. *Brève traversée* and *À ma soeur!* also deal with the topic of virginity. The first one investigates the nuances of a clandestine relationship between an older woman and a teenage boy while on a ferry going from France to England. *À ma soeur!* focuses on the relationship between two sisters during summer holiday with their parents. It is told primarily from the point of view of Anaïs as she witnesses her beautiful sister's experiences with love and with losing her virginity. This film also plays with the conventions of the horror film genre. *Sale comme un ange* plays with the genre of police drama. The wife of the happy couple, Barbara, sleeps with her husband's partner, George, who then tries to dominate her. She quickly

loses interest in him. The film ends with George attempting to humiliate her at her husband's funeral by screaming out that she is a whore. The film ends with Barbara walking away from him in the cemetery, seemingly unaffected by his abusive taunts. *Parfait amour*! explores, once again, the dynamics of an affair between an older woman, Frédérique, and a younger man, Christophe. Despite their initial attraction to one another, the two characters are presented as having very little in common with one another. The film ends with him murdering her very violently, but as in many of Breillat's films, Frédérique does not allow him to completely debase her. Since there are so many similarities between all of her films, it would seem redundant to discuss all of them unless this was a book. Most of the subjects, and their slight differentiations, are covered without my being too repetitive in my discussion of *Une vraie jeune fille*, *Romance*, *Anatomie de l'enfer*, and *Une vieille maîtresse*. There are several additional connections between these films which are included in the following chapters. I will now proceed to a detailed textual and contextual analysis of these four key films.

Part One: Female Desire

Chapter One
***Une vraie jeune fille:* The Learning of Shame**

> Le dégoût me rend lucide.
> **-Alice, *Une vraie jeune fille.***

Synopsis and Contextual Information

Une vraie jeune fille is an adaptation of a novella, *Le soupirail*, that Breillat wrote when she was seventeen years old. The film chronicles the homecoming of Alice Bonnard, the seventeen year old protagonist of the film, set during the 1960s, for a month of summer holidays. *Une vraie jeune fille* is a story about Alice's transition from being a girl to a sexually desiring woman. Alice preoccupies herself with writing in her journal and with daydreaming. Surrounded mostly by unsympathetic and restrictive adults, Alice becomes increasingly isolated and reactionary, often in a sexual manner, in both action and thought. Her attention increasingly focuses on Jim, one of her father's employees at the sawmill, who at first spurns her and who is then presented as becoming more intimate with her. However, the division between reality and her imagination become increasingly blurred as the film progresses. The film ends with Jim's murder. The future of both Alice and that of her parents' marriage is left unclear at the end of the film.

Breillat's *Une vraie jeune fille*, the first film she ever made, was banned from the public for nearly twenty-five years due to its explicit and controversial material. André Génovès, the owner of Les films de la Boétie ("beaucoup de Chabrol et Delon") and the film's producer, thought sexuality seen from a woman's perspective would be a big seller (Pätzold 1). He wanted to be credited for creating the first female director in pornography

(Azoury 35). Though she was commissioned to make "a titillating softcore, stroke piece, she infused the material with an unsettling candidness about the shame, disgust, and violence associated with female sexual awakening" (Katadotis 25). After the completion of *Une vraie jeune fille*, Génovès became bankrupt and the adoption of the X-rating had "sent the genre back to an economic ghetto [my translation]" (Azoury 35). Breillat shot the film using a crew that came from the pornography industry (Clouzot 35). It was while filming that she first learned how to use a camera (Azoury 35). *Une vraie jeune fille* was shot within a month on a shoestring budget (35).

Pièrre-Richard Müller of Artédis came into its possession after the producer's catalogue was sold off (Potel 1). The negative had always been blocked by the laboratory (1). It was owed money for the film's processing because of the producer's financial problems, although the original was allowed to be shown at festivals (1). Müller apparently tried to make a copy of the film illegally without the use of an inter-negative, which could have seriously damaged the original (1). Afterwards, according to Breillat, her film was exploited in Triple-X theatres by Müller who tried to profit off of her name once she became more popular as a director (1).

Une vraie jeune fille was initially given an 18+ rating, but upon its theatrical release it was re-classified in France with a 16+ rating (Azoury 35). The critical success of *Romance* coincided with the interest of distributors wanting to buy her first film. Her ongoing legal battles with Müller have since ended, and she has been awarded full rights to the movie (35). However, the film's problematic history has negatively affected its

release and, consequently, its exploitation (35). According to *Unifrance*, it has not been picked up by many distributors around the world. According to *Box Office Mojo*, its worldwide box office gross is $17 245. Philippe Manasseh of Métropole Films, its distributor for Québec, said it totaled a theatrical box office gross of $6 898 (E-mail). It was allowed minimal screenings at festivals before it was picked up by Mongrel Media for distribution in the rest of Canada (Griffin C7). Its first screening was at the Rotterdam Festival in 1998 (Dumais 52). Compared to some of her other films, it has not played at many film festivals (*Unifrance*; *Variety*).

In terms of criticism on *Une vraie jeune fille*, there is not as much written on it, compared to the amount written on some of Breillat's other films. Overall, critics in the popular press seem to be divided about it. Around half of them think it is disgusting and the other half thinks it is intelligent. Critics who vehemently dislike Breillat's work tend to be journalists who work for newspapers whereas critics who like her tend to work for both newspapers and for film journals. One critic who really stands out in her hatred towards Breillat's films is Manon Dumais of Montreal's *Voir* whose article "Mémoires d'une petite culotte" sarcastically begins: "Érotico, porno, intello: qu'importe le motto, chantons le sexe bien haut! Catherine Breillat, devenue grande prêtresse dans le domaine, parle de son premier film, qui prend l'affiche. Une fesse qui se cherche ..." (52). Dumais continues to rip apart the acting in *Une vraie jeune fille*, its sense of rhythm, but it is clear that she is offended mostly by its inclusion of risqué material. Like the majority of critics who dislike Breillat's films, Dumais fails to rigorously engage with Breillat's supporting arguments in

favour of her artistic decisions. Instead, critics like Dumais instinctively react with disgust to her films, and immediately tagging them as "pretentious." According to Bruce Crumley, "the daily *Figaro* called it 'an exhibition, a stain, an insult to the body's intimacy, which humiliates women,' urging for a boycott of the film" (53). Other journalists, such as Hays for *The Montreal Mirror* and Katadotis of Montreal's *Hour*, commended her "uncompromising vision" and "tough honesty" (26; 25). Katadotis goes as far as calling her "a trailblazer" who "we are still catching up with" (25).

Identity: Who Is Alice?

As Alice develops, the viewer is invited to watch how she learns to naturalize feminized sexuality: a sexuality characterized by passivity and self-disgust. As a character, she is reminiscent of Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* in her attempts to navigate a surreal world, a world that is representative of coming to age. Both of these characters interestingly look alike (blond hair), and even dress similarly (same shade of blue, same headband). A lack of parental empathy or compassion leaves her on her own to make sense of the bodily changes that come with puberty (Fig. I.I).

The story begins by introducing her through voice-over narration while she is riding a train. Much of her speech is communicated this way. It is unclear whether the words spoken are the inner voice of Alice in real time or if they are a retelling of events at a later point in the plot as written in her diary. Through this device a sense of fluidity in timing is established. Alice's quick introduction expresses her misanthropic view of other people: "I

hate people. They oppress me." It is interesting to note the contrast between the way she feels about society and family with her girlish looks and mannerisms around others. Certainly not how a proper, young girl should think. The highly feminine tone of the song which follows adds to the irony of the scene.

Soon after the scene from inside of the train, the camera shifts to film its arrival at the station while the following plays:

> Suis-je une petite fille
> Je ne sais pas, je ne sais pas
> Oh, bien, et une grande fille
> Vous le savez bien pour moi
> Je vous en prie
> Dites, dites, dites, dites, dites-moi
> Je vous en prie
> Oh, bitte, bitte[v]
> Ce que vous aimez de moi

This is the essential theme of the film, repeating itself numerous times. "Suis-je une petite fille" is Alice's soundtrack because it sums up her preoccupations. The lines hint at Schlegel's understanding of Romantic Irony. This sense of being both a little girl and a big girl simultaneously, oscillating between being one or the other, is a key idea of *Une vraie jeune fille.* Alice, even though she is physically "very well-developed for her age," often acts and speaks like a child just as the title of the film indicates. This is one way of interpreting some of the shocking things that she performs: they are performed out of naivety and innocent curiosity.

However, even though there is evidence to show that much of her actions are those of a curious innocent, there is also evidence of Alice embodying a defiant strength of will. Upon asking if she is happy to be home, Alice responds to Martial, the family's personal

hired man, by turning on the radio to this song where it plays again. "Listen to that," she says in a daze, looking upwards with what appears to be momentary release and enlightenment, "I would do anything for that woman." This song offers Alice self-recognition and guidance for her current predicament: coming to terms with growing up female.

A few sequences later, we encounter the same song again on her family's television to which Alice enthusiastically listens. She can commiserate with the singer's frustration and confusion. The singer acts as a guide, unlike her unhelpful parents who only work to deny her awakening sexuality and to cast unexplained shame onto her. She is defiant towards others, but she is also highly dependent on them, which adds to the story's complexity and reiterates this notion of people as mirrors that Breillat believes to be an essential part of being human. The desire to be loved is expressed by the singer: she wants to know what she needs to do in order to be loved. Sung in what could be described as a very feminine style—posing modestly with her head downwards as she sniffs and twirls a big flower in the musical footage[vi]—she pleads to be told *by another* "who would know best" how to make sense of these changes in her body which affect how people view her and treat her.

Since one can interpret Alice's actions and her interactions with others in a variety of either reprehensible, recognizable, or pitiable ways, this tension, this choice, is where morality—choosing one or the other based on our own values—comes into play. The song, "Suis-je une petite fille," not only points to what Alice is experiencing, it also points towards our own role in this divisive thinking. Is she little or big? How should Alice act and how should she be treated by others? For this reason, to provoke the audience to

ponder these questions, the film ends with an instrumental version of "Suis-je une petite fille," a more melancholic rendition, which plays to its end alongside a black screen.

Mirrors have a significant function as motifs in *Une vraie jeune fille*. They act as metaphors for introspection. They evoke the idea of perceptiveness, one way of understanding Romantic Irony, in that something appears to be itself even though it is not the actual self. Each time Alice looks into a mirror, she sees something different about herself even though, physically, she is the same person. It has to do with the projection of thoughts: how we and others see ourselves.

The first time a mirror plays a role in the trajectory of the storyline is right after Alice enters her bedroom for the first time after returning from the school year. Foreboding music plays as Alice, upon closing the door, expresses that "a feeling of oppression moved in." Her not-so-wonderful vacation with her parents has begun. Soon after, she stands in front of her mirror to change into her pyjamas where she "hideously" undresses herself claiming, "I only liked seeing myself in bits." She has begun to internalize a sense of shame towards her maturing body when she experiences it as a spectator. She backs over to her bed where she vomits excessively all over herself: "I sat up cautiously. Liberated by the vomit's warmth, by the sweetish smell it gave off. Disgust makes me lucid. It was at that moment that I decided to write my diary because I couldn't sleep. That would've meant giving in, it would have meant obeying." Within this excerpt, there are links established between writing and self-exploration as a source of strength for resistance. It also includes this notion of looking at that which disgusts ourselves in regards to our nature (vomit, nudity) in order to dismantle internalized, and socially constructed, senses of shame.

The second instance a mirror enters the film is during Alice's recapitulation of her time spent at girls' school. After audaciously staying awake past curfew, purposefully placing her hand between her legs to defy the night supervisor, she turns to her bedside mirror and traces her name across it with her wet finger. It is through her sexual maturation, her desire, which she comes to self-identification: Who is Alice? Her process of self-analysis is conveyed by looking at herself through mirrors (Fig. I.II).

The third mirror scene takes place, once again, in Alice's bedroom. This sequence takes place after Alice is called a whore by her mother for wearing a bikini and then being degraded further by her while eating supper. While doctoring her report card to make it seem like she received higher grades than she did, Alice decides to take her pot of red ink and to rub it on her nipples and genitals: "I decided to see what I'd look like if I was a whore as my mother said." She is projecting an image of herself which her mother has told her she is: "I stared at myself until I cried [catches her breath: my insert]. I can't accept the proximity of my face and my vagina. I cannot." Even though it is a fact that she has both a face and a vagina, she is socially made to feel ashamed that she has both. Her sense of identity negates this part of her being. The abstract notion of her sense of self is at odds with the reality of her physicality. It is through candid, fearless exploration that she struggles to make sense of this conflict.

Setups that are associated with mirrors also act as a point of self-reflexivity for the spectator. Towards the end of the film, for example, Alice sits directly facing the camera with her legs spread wide-open as she touches her vagina while testing the viscosity of her vaginal discharge. This scene, although there is no actual mirror, works similarly like the

others except it pushes the belief in the importance of introspection further by including the audience in this process.

Media, such as the musical episode that was discussed earlier in the chapter, is presented as playing a big role as a mirror to unguided youth. There is a second later musical interlude which mesmerizes Alice just as much as the first one. It features an arrogant young male wearing a leather jacket who sings about how he has decided to never again become emotionally attached to a girl after having his heart broken once. This is how desirable men are taught to act and it is how the women who find them sexually appealing expect them to act. Alice is attracted to a second boy who copies the look of this singer in the way he dresses and in his mannerisms. He even wears a pin on his leather jacket with a picture of this musician as do all of the guys in his group of friends. When she goes to watch him at the bar as he gambles (interestingly he is a gambler like the narcissistic Ryno de Marigny from *Une vieille maîtresse*), the same song plays in the background. Men, just as much as females, are socialized into their sexuality. Magazine cut-outs, artefacts of pop culture, decorate the entirety of Alice's cottage. All of these pictures, except for one of the Pope that is placed above the television (perhaps indicative of the newly powerful influence television had on society), are headshots of beautiful women posing suggestively. They serve as reminders of how women are taught to behave in order to be accepted by others and in order to be seen as desirable.

There are some interesting subversive takes that do not play a large role in the film, but that do exist, regarding Christianity. Alice uses the same ink she received as a gift for her Communion, a ritual representing one's oath to God, to write her journal as a means of renouncing the female corporeal shame that Breillat, in her interviews, traces back to

religion. She later "exorcises" the "obscenity" by using the ink to highlight her sexualized body parts. She has "all-night vigils" of non-stop writing as a means of maintaining her independence from all of the external forces she sees as potentially repressive to her being. She is also aligned with the figure of Jesus in a couple of subtle ways. The exorcism she performs with the ink is reminiscent of the stigmatization of Christ—the wounds inflicted from his crucifixion are like the red circles she puts on herself for display in the mirror. She is also later bound with chicken wire in a pose resembling Christ's crucifixion on the cross (although she is on a mound of dirt). The wire looks like the crown of thorns he was forced to wear while being humiliated in front of his persecutors. For her, Jim is presented as her persecutor, very clearly established by a low-angle shot of him towering over her, laughing at her for desiring him.

Alice's existence before writing her tale is presented as absolute tedium. We see attempts at maintaining a deadening form of social decorum, and a lack of dialogue or real intimacy between Alice and her parents. The episode of having tea together for the first time in the plot strangely mirrors the Mad Hatter's tea party in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* The Mad Hatter's party was a mockery of keeping up the semblance of social mores, and it was a classic scene full of activity as the other guests continuously presented elements of trickery (riddles) related to Alice's burgeoning maturity. Teatime in *Une vraie jeune fille* is stifling. After her mother asks Alice to talk to her and her father, nothing happens except silence for what feels like an eternity. Individual shots of each of these characters—Alice, her mother, her father—show them silently and awkwardly watching each other, surveying their own actions, while sipping tea with their jam and bread. The sound of flies buzzing incessantly plays throughout the sequence. Houseflies, through the

use of extreme close-up shots, are shown to be either dead or struggling to free themselves from the stickiness of the flypaper hanging above the kitchen table. These flies and their predicament become a metaphor for the blocked and shameful (since flies are often considered dirty) animality of those in this environment.

Sensuous Animality

Alice has a preoccupation with the natural and the senses. Instances of sequences highlighting the importance of sight, touch, smell, and sound are often included in the narrative trajectory for no obvious purposes in relation to continuity. These sequences situate Alice within the realm of nature or to highlight her own experiences of curious exploration (Fig. I.III). She is often aligned or shown interacting with the animal world. She pays more loving attention to her dog upon arriving at the cottage than to her parents. During one of her mirror scenes, she removes her underwear. This is followed by two sequences showing her dog ceaselessly sniffing them. This positions sexual maturation with animals and mundaneness. After her dad reveals that he had fired Jim, a close-up shot is shown of Alice on the floor with her dog licking her face in a way that suggests the erotic. Again, there is no need for this inclusion in terms of conventional narrative norms. The inclusion of this act does not contribute to the progression of the basic narrative trajectory. He licks her face including her lips which she puckers as if to kiss him. She gradually lies down onto the floor as he continues to lick her face, and eventually he mounts her. After seeing Jim with his girlfriend at a town dance, Alice visits a beach that is littered with garbage and the rotting carcasses of dogs covered in flies. There is obviously a relationship between her sexual desire, it being thwarted, and the death of dogs, which are symbols for her sexuality (the animalistic side of her being).

Alice's mother is aligned with poultry—perhaps a play on the colloquial terms poule, chick and/ or Mother Hen that have found themselves within everyday language. Alice steadily becomes associated more and more with chickens, something that she takes on from "following her mother," as the film progresses. Chickens seem to represent a certain type of femininity, one that is socially acceptable: a kind of bourgeois femininity that her stay-at-home mother represents and forces her into becoming. Alice seems most receptive to learning this while watching her mother enthusiastically cleaning a chicken for supper (Fig. I.IV). Alice then expresses hateful disdain towards her mother and the chickens when she breaks an egg on purpose in the pen. In a surreal scene featuring Alice with Jim, chicken feathers come to represent the type of femininity she adopts—one of submissiveness—in an attempt to attract Jim's attention. She crawls, from the right side to the left of the screen, in front of him with chicken feathers sticking out of either her genitals or backside (it is not clear) as she echoes the clucking noises her mother made earlier while calling the chickens to come and eat.

While discussing the subject of chickens, which she thoroughly enjoys killing, Alice's mother calls them stupid and says that they are the one animal she feels no pity for. As a woman, she is characterized as hysterical and as a nag. She is somebody who prefers "less to more" (she says this to the shopkeeper) and who "doesn't cost anything" (she says this to Alice's father). She treats the chickens the same way she treats herself and Alice. Women seem to be much harsher on female youth than the males in this film: women play a stronger role in their naturalization of shame. The shopkeeper also makes several hateful remarks to Alice's mother regarding Alice's physical changes and her behaviour that serve

to perpetuate the shaming of the sexually mature female body. Men, on the other hand, are usually presented as sexual predators.

The Wilful Imagination as Resistance

It is difficult to know with certainty which sequences in *Une vraie jeune fille* are real or the result of the protagonist's imagination. The title credits (written on a lined sheet of paper), the use of narration, and Alice's continuous referencing of her journal inconspicuously let the viewer know that many of the sequences in the film are actually products of her writing (Fig. I.V). Examples that suggest that many of the film's sequences are imaginary creations are the ones concerning the love lives of her parents which are in stark contrast with how they are presented before she begins writing in her journal. When her father is off gallivanting with his mistress, the young woman's clothing suggests the absurd. Not only is she overly processed (she wears bright blue eye shadow and she has dyed red hair resembling that of Alice's mother's), but she is also wearing a brightly coloured patterned dress like something a prostitute from a western would probably wear. This image of what women who have sex look like, a ridiculous stereotype presented through excess, repeats itself in *Romance* and *Une vieille maîtresse*. Previous to this scene, Alice was left by her father on the side of a road after riding with him in their family's car. She says he did this "because it suited him." What is presented following this scene could be a real affair or an extension of what Alice believes to have followed after being stranded. In the sequence preceding Alice's car ride with her father, we learn that the reason for Alice running away temporarily was her mother's hysterical outburst. We see frustration, but the real source of this frustration (e.g., money problems, her husband's affair) is unknown. Later on in the film when Alice returns home and witnesses a highly

melodramatic confrontation between her mother and her father by a pile of burning rubbish, her mother pines away for lost loves while the father admits to cheating on her throughout their marriage. It is a bit too theatrical as a representation. A device often used to heighten the emotionalism of such sequences in conventionally melodramatic films that accompanies this scene is non-diegetic music. Since this film is probably the near total construction of Alice's diary writing, and since there was something odd about the credibility of her father's staged tryst (the girl's dress), it is possible this scene is also a creation to vivify her otherwise dreary stay at her family's home. It also reveals what she is learning to internalize. On the other hand, if this event is real, it provides a commentary on the nature of their marriage. Earlier on, Alice's mother carries on smilingly about how much she and Alice's father were in love when they first met, and how it was mutually agreed to become married. Theoretically, their marriage was a union based on one of the highest of Romantic ideals: true love. By the end of the film, upon discovering Jim's dead body killed by a rifle Alice's father had set up to deter animals from eating their corn, Alice's mother, in a hysterical outburst, cries about how she should have never *begged* him to marry her and how she should have divorced him a very long time ago. We see a disintegration of the love ideal by the end of the film. However, the ambiguous nature of previous sequences makes it difficult to understand what exactly contributed to this disintegration. Is it a momentary reaction to a traumatic incident, or is it the result of a series of events?

Not only do we know that Alice enjoys writing, and that it saves her from the oppression of being with her family, we also know that she is prone to daydreaming. While sunbathing, she dreams that she is with Martine at the beach, behaving impetuously,

and then making out with a random guy who catches her attention. The setting is exactly the same one found on the postcard Alice sent under the guise of Martine. For all we know, Martine does not even exist. Yet this is one episode relatively early on in the film where it is clear that the film switches between the real and her imagination. Her vision ends with her mother pouring cold water on her back, waking Alice out of her dream. As the film progresses, the division between reality and her daydreams, or her imaginative creations, becomes increasingly vague.

On several occasions, stylistic choices make it clear that this film is primarily from the point of view of Alice. This supports the argument that much of this film is based on her diary entries. After falling victim to a flasher at the fair who forces her to watch him as he masturbates, Alice returns home only to be overly affectionate with her father. As she snuggles beside him, through shot/reverse shot editing, we see an extreme close-up of her eyes imagining her father's penis being exposed through the zipper of his pants. There is a connection between Alice being flashed with her being aroused or with her simply having a revelation as to what male genitalia look like for the first time in her life. Both are assumptions because the meaning of this scene is difficult to understand. Either way, this sequence is an example of how much of the film is constructed according to Alice's perspective.

Love as Fiction

The sequences shared by Alice and Jim are highly ambiguous. It is later revealed that his real name is Pierre-Évariste. "Jim" was her invention which is another indication of how many events are actually portrayals of Alice's highly active imagination. This uncertainty plays around with many tenets of Romantic thinking. In coming together and

providing Alice a temporary respite from the oppression she experiences in being at home for the holidays, her daydreams about being Jim's love interest are examples of how many Romantics believed coupling was a means of metaphysical escape. On the other hand, they are not united by the end of the film and there is also quite a bit of evidence indicating their romance never existed in reality. Even though the summation of Jim and Alice's relationship is left unclear, there is more proof for the latter being true. Even if their relationship is all in the realm of the imagination, it is still presented as an ideal—it is something Alice is driven towards. It is definite proof of the redemptive power of the imagination: an even more important value of Romantic thinking that encompasses more of the essence of that movement than the notion of love. The possibility of the story being both or either is very Schlegelian. It also leads into another one of Breillat's arguments that comes out more in her interviews rather than through her films. She is often quoted as saying that all love is fiction: it is a narrative that we create ourselves; it is an artistic creation. Alice's relationship with Jim is presented literally in the realm of fiction. The portrayal of her mother's own disillusionment with love, or so her mother says while standing by the burning pile of rubbish, has to do with how she purposely lied to herself throughout the years about her husband's fidelity to keep up the appearance of being a happy couple despite her suspicions.

What initially spurred me to re-examine my own understanding of events in the film was Jim's exceedingly small hot pink car that he drives to Alice's house. This happens after what, stylistically, looks like a surreal scene in which the two of them masturbate together. Jim wipes his ejaculate on Alice's chest. Shortly thereafter, Alice gets up and runs off shouting for him to get lost in a way suggesting rejection of him rather than

remorse for her actions. Later on, when he arrives at her house to argue with her father, the reason for the argument is unknown because their words cannot be heard by the spectator. It is insinuated by the series of events thus far that their argument is the result of his actions with Alice. Before the argument scene, but after the masturbation scene with Jim, is the sequence shared between Alice and her father alone in his car. Once in the car, she says through narration, "I told him everything." What is *everything*? Everything about her mother and her hysterics? Everything about Jim? Or, everything about both? It is unclear. All of these are plausible interpretations.

Earlier in the film, Alice was reprimanded by her parents for riding her bike into town. Both parents expressed their concern over the danger she poses towards herself: luring potential sexual predators. If, indeed, Jim had just driven up in a hot pink car and argued heatedly with her father for whatever reason, the likelihood that Alice is able to drive away with her lover, alone, is improbable. It is shown that they end up making out in his car and she demands that he get her the Pill from Switzerland before they have sex. This episode is followed by a sequence with her in her bikini dancing with the radio playing in the family's kitchen. Her father reveals that Jim's visit was really about his demand for being paid overtime. Why would her parents not say anything about her running off with someone they just had a big argument with? Was this another one of her daydreams that she has had while sunbathing? What is real and unreal easily blurred into each other during the Jim-father argument sequence. Even if she did not get into the car with him, either way he still had an argument with her father. The next time Alice and Jim are shown together, they are in the same place they parked the previous time in the forest, making out. Jim miraculously got the Pill from Switzerland in what is a relatively short,

and unrealistic, period of time. Plus, Jim's car has suddenly changed from being hot pink to dark blue. This is one more indication that the sequences between Jim and Alice, or at least the ones which suggest the beginning of a sexual relationship, never really happened.

The storyline ends with Jim's death and with Alice putting away her diary in her suitcase. It is difficult to comprehend her facial expression in this scene. It does not reveal how to properly identify the events leading up to this event. If he had argued with Alice's father to be paid more, he could have been in the field, late at night, attempting to steal the money that was owed to him. Since he did have a girlfriend whom he would soon be marrying, or so it is suggested by his mother's advice that this girl will need to be a good cook for her son, his motivation could have very well been theft rather than a sexual encounter with Alice. The act of putting away her diary as her parents deal with the police outside after finding the dead body seems to indicate a connection between her diary writing and his death. Was he her muse rather than her real-life lover?

Alice's will to live is wrapped up with the creative force of fiction writing, and with her drive for sexual love. Jim's death marks her defeat by the repressive external forces that surround her. Her creative force is also subdued which is marked by her putting away the journal in her suitcase.

Conclusion

Une vraie jeune fille depicts the quest of a defiant young girl in search of the attainment of love. Alice overcomes obstacles through her reliance on the imagination, and through her ownership of the sensual. The text itself blurs the division between truth and non-truth, between mind and body, through its inclusion of intimate material, and through its depiction of reality/imagination. References to "the quest," and references to self-

reflexivity (through the use of mirrors), involve the viewer in their own moral inquisition. The use of contradiction in the presentation of these values, stylistically and narratologically, is Romantic Irony.

In *Une vraie jeune fille*, we witness the beginnings of the naturalization of the Gaze of Shame internalized by the pubescent Alice, who is encouraged to become a teacher like Marie of *Romance* coincidentally. In *Romance*, we see a twenty something year old woman who is dealing with the aftermath of having internalized this self-hate and its effect on her intimate relationships. The girl in the first film tries to fight the process of being assimilated into this way of being. The woman in the second film progressively learns how to overcome the wounds that have previously been inflicted: "*Une vraie jeune fille*, c'est *Romance* en mode mineur. Catherine Breillat reconnaît que ses deux films se réfléchissent l'un l'autre" (Dumais 52).

Chapter Two
Romance: The Unlearning of Shame

> You only like me when there's a table between us.
> **-Marie to Paul, *Romance***

Synopsis and Contextual Information

Romance is a chronicle of an elementary schoolteacher's quest for fulfilment. The film is told primarily from Marie's (the teacher's) point-of-view. Unhappy in her relationship with a boyfriend who neglects her sexually and emotionally, Marie pursues physical gratification with male strangers. Each of her sexual meetings serves as a rite of passage. They help her transgress her feelings of self-disgust. She becomes empowered the more she searches for ways to deal with her unhappiness. By the end of the film, she no longer believes that she needs a man to make her happy. Instead, the conclusion suggests that her newfound motherhood will give her more meaningfulness in life.

Romance, Breillat's sixth feature-length film, was her first big commercial and critical success. It was first shown at the 1999 Rotterdam Film Festival where it was a huge hit (Lim 114). Its promise as "the most intensely and graphically sexual film ever made outside of the porn industry" contributed to its appeal to audiences: "Word travelled fast after the press screening, resulting in a frantic rush at the evening premiere" (114). The inclusion of Rocco Siffredi, a popular porn star, in the cast as one of the film's protagonists added to the hype surrounding the movie. *Romance* was also Breillat's first foray into working with Jean-François Lepetit (producer) and Yorgos Arvanitis (cinematographer). This collaboration may have helped secure funding for her films. The quality of the cinematography of her work became visibly more sophisticated after the

formation of this partnership. Following the success of *Romance*, Breillat became very prolific in filmmaking. Breillat began completing a film almost every year.

Controversy surrounding this film arose due to its investigation into the division between pornography and art. Its release initiated a quagmire for censorship classification boards around the world. It created a precedent for a slew of films now typified as hardcore art. According to Lepetit, her films have never had a problem with the censors in France (E-mail). The co-producer of *Romance*, Richard Boidin[vii], said that he found little that was shocking in the project: "Every day, television news programs project images of greater violence against women. What's extraordinary about *Romance* is that it lets a woman's desire speak. So-called sexual films are almost always presented from a man's perspective" (Camhi 13:2).

There was a demonstration against the screening of the film in Sweden that caused a stir (Séguret 3). The mayor of Stockholm, Viviann Gunnarsson, threatened to cut the Stockholm Film Festival's funding if it chose to screen it (3). This protest was primarily organized by feminists who thought it was pornographic and that it was degrading to women (3). It ended up being shown despite these threats (3). The British Board of Film Classification did not feel it deserving of an X-rating (3). However, the Municipal Council of Bournemouth (Dorset) banned it within its jurisdiction (3). Apparently, this only helped increase its popularity in the rest of the country (3). In the United States, independent distributors did not need to have their films rated by an American censorship board (2). The media in the United States has the right to deny exposure of a film if they feel the picture presents a message that goes against their values (2). This ended up happening to *Romance* in Seattle (2). Two of its major newspapers did not want to advertise the film (2).

Consequently, the film was never released theatrically there (2). It was shown mostly in small theatres and in ninety cities (2). The final box office figures for the United States were considered a huge success for a French film (especially for a director who was hardly known) (2). It was immediately banned in Australia although the censorship board was nearly equally divided in its ruling (nine were against its release whereas eight were for it) (2). Paul Byrne, a critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and a former director of the Sydney Film Festival, publicly ridiculed the censors' decision (2-3). After the film was released in New Zealand without any commotion, *Romance* eventually was allowed theatrical release in Australia with an 18+ rating (3). The film has been sold to forty countries, which is also rare for a French film from a relatively unknown director (3).

Romance earned 350 939 Euros in the French box office (Mazureau, E-mail). It cost approximately two million Euros to produce (Lepetit, E-mail). According to *Box Office Mojo*, it earned $1 314 053.00US in the United States. It was a European box office hit (Taubin 160). It was only Breillat's second film to have been commercially released in the United States (Sklar 24). It rallied much support in terms of financing and distribution compared to all of her other films (*Variety*). Arte, Studio Canal, and Le Centre de la cinématographie are some of the big names that were involved in its production (*Variety*). It played at many renowned film festivals, but it did not receive any awards (*Variety*). It was ignored by both Les Césars and by Cannes despite doing better abroad than many other French super-productions such as *Jeanne d'Arc* by Besson (Séguret 1).

In terms of its critical reception, there are some viewers who feel *Romance* is a movie that changed their lives, and there are others who feel, as with *Une vraie jeune fille*, that it is pretentious. One unnamed journalist who wrote an article on it for *Le Journal de*

Québec believed its commercial success was mainly due to its promise of extreme sexuality onscreen (W6). He/she argued that it was a film for voyeurs, for people too embarrassed to go into a porn theatre or video store, and for "pseudo-intellos" (W6). Overall, *Romance* was "a boring film lacking in passion" (W6). This journalist discredited any of Breillat's supporting arguments for her stylistic choices, and she/he suggested it would have been better for people to go directly to a sex shop where they could at least find pleasure without any pretentiousness (W6). This journalist's immediate and flippant discrediting of Breillat's discourse without engaging in a debate with her ideas displays his/her laziness, and perhaps reveals her/his own reason for wanting to see the film.

An insufficient engagement with Breillat's arguments seems to be a recurrent theme in all of the articles by critics who dislike her work. These critics are unable to realize how her depictions of sex are a reaction to pornography rather than being pornographic. Some recognize that it is meant to provoke thought, but many of these same critics seem to believe that it would be boring to have to think so much. The authors of negative criticism also have a tendency to make personal attacks on Breillat:

> Driven, it seems, by feelings of low self-esteem dating back to her dumpy adolescence ... voluptuous in her 20s, she's on the chunky side these days, with a tendency to arrange herself like a stately boxer. Her shoulders are broad. Her jaw is wide. She looks like a woman capable of absorbing a mountain of shocks. Breillat accentuates this with a characteristic slouch, elbows on thighs or hands on knees, as if ready to launch herself in an instant at a critic's throat. Catherine and her prettier sister Marie-Hélène learnt about sex from liberal parents who gave them the Marquis de Sade and Lautréamont to read. The girls also, if Catherine's films are to be trusted, indulged in some precocious experiment. (Secher 016)

In *Corps amoureux*, Breillat fights back[viii] by saying that these types of critics do not just hate her, but that many of them seem to hate women in general (126). Her aesthetic risk taking seems to have pushed a few conservative critics' buttons.

In *Corps amoureux*, Breillat explains how she wanted to make *Romance* right after *Une vraie jeune fille*, but that she had to wait until the 1990s to be able to make the kind of film that would have been deemed acceptable by censors to be shown (138):

> Now, 25 years later—and following *Romance*'s generally positive reception by critics and audiences—Breillat believes the public is ready to deal with *Une vraie jeune fille*. "The film is the same, public attitudes have advanced," Breillat says. (Crumley 53)

Also, she had to overcome her own personal self-doubts in order to find the courage to make such a controversial film (Breillat, *Corps* 138). It is not hard to see the similarities and the natural progression made between the thoughts she is exploring in *Une vraie jeune fille* and those developed in *Romance*.

Romance begins with what would normally be the right romantic couple except in this film they have already united and they are no longer happy. This film begins where many classically romantic films end. Despite depicting characters who say that they are "in love," *Romance* explores the negative dynamics which come out of the courtly romantic tradition.

Paul as a Narcissist

Our first introduction to Paul is on a fashion shoot. He is a male model. From this point on, Paul is presented as a highly narcissistic individual. As a fashion model, his purpose is to be admired for his "perfection" from a distance, and his vapidity feeds into a meaningless existence. He is in a godlike position of power within his relationship with Marie.

Many important points can be read into the initial sequence of the film which takes place at a photo shoot. He is instructed by the photographer on how to pose in order to fit the usual expectation of what it means to be a masculine matador. Prior to being

photographed, he is shown to be made up with makeup using, of all things, a hot pink sponge. During the shoot, his female companion is instructed to look more passive and to crouch down a bit (she is taller than he is) while Paul is told to "stand taller … be edgy. A matador relates to death, anxiety, so be edgy." This instruction to act a certain way suggests the construction of socially-ascribed gender roles. It also suggests how these ways of being are propagated through the media.

Paul's way of relating to women is established by the type of gaze he has at the coliseum in Arles. It is like the look of a matador in battle. This look is later echoed in the club (Fig. II.I). Paul knows Marie is watching him on the dance floor as he tries to pick up other women while dancing seductively. Once she is pregnant, she becomes less of a challenge for him, more of a mother figure (therefore sexually undesirable) and more of a possession. Paul openly treats Marie even worse than he did before because he believes he can do this without suffering any repercussions. His facial expression in these scenes sums up the important role of looking in the dynamics between men and women in relationships. His look communicates his need to dominate her in order to feel in control and superior. The conquest temporality Breillat speaks of in *Corps amoureux* is embodied by these shots. His way of looking at her suggests that the interaction between Paul and Marie is some sort of a battle. It eventually becomes an aggressive competition or one-upmanship for Marie to reclaim the self-respect she loses as a result of his mistreatment of her.

The mise-en-scène of Paul's apartment speaks volumes about the nature of their relationship. Everything within it is anaesthetically modern, uncluttered, and blindingly white, including their clothing. The first time we see the apartment, Paul is lying in bed watching a male gymnastics tournament. This sequence adds to the notion of an

atmosphere that places a high appreciation on the body beautiful, on aesthetics, and also on the valuation of narcissism. Paul is in complete control of his actions. He is completely unemotional in relation to Marie's frustrated behaviour. She has become a possession like any other in his apartment. Their relationship has reached a certain state of comfort for him because she is his unquestionably.

Prior to this scene, Marie confronts him about her feelings of being neglected. He has not slept with her in months and she does not understand why since he says that he loves her. She says to him in a restaurant, "You only like me when there is a table between us." A sense of equality is missing from their relationship. He can only stand her as long as they are separate, reinforcing male-female paradigms, because he cannot stand being a part of her and what she represents. He calls the shots and he is undemonstrative, which creates a chasm between them. This distancing does not necessarily contradict his decision to stay with her. She still serves the function of being there to remind him of his superiority. Otherwise, he would not be able to prove this to himself if he were all alone. He needs another person to project off of and one who feeds his ego by constantly desiring him one-sidedly. The last time he sleeps with her after finding out they are going to have a baby boy, it looks more like he is using her body to masturbate with rather than it being an intimate encounter (Fig. II.II): "Exaggerated narcissism prevents one from engaging in the kinds of interpersonal interactions needed to be pulled out of oneself ... diminishing the capacity to experience Eros" (Ellis 33-34).

Marie as a Romantic

Marie, who has already become attached to him, idolizes Paul. As she stresses in a dictée that she gives to her class about the similarities and differences between the verbs

avoir and *être*, and then through an inner monologue to herself while standing in their apartment's window, she realizes that she has really been "had." She is his girlfriend, the one he says he loves. However, she does not feel valued by the one she loves the most. *To be* and *to have*: love is presented as something that promises and withholds simultaneously. Her need for love from Paul degrades her, but it also offers the possibility of the highest of ideals. The statement made by this dictée also points to other themes in the film such as what it means to be a woman in contradiction with how it is truly experienced.

As indicated earlier, the Romantics were preoccupied with the extremes of emotion, and for many of them this included the painful side of love. The Romantics were far from being a light bunch. Love was an all consuming flame that could drive one to the depths of despair, even to suicide, to madness, or to breaking the law (e.g., incest, even necrophilia, are often discussed in Romantic works of literature, and there are instances of these things happening in the lives of some of its biggest contributors). They were a group of radicals exploring all of the possibilities of the human psyche and of the human heart. Limitless movement, a lack of self-restraint, towards the pursuit of an ideal was a necessity. Marie cannot renounce the beauty of the desire to love (Breillat, *Corps* 147). Despite being "had," degrading herself and suffering within this relationship, Marie, ultimately, is the epitome of a Romantic hero(ine). Since she *is* his, she pursues her physical needs with others while remaining faithful within the abstract: she only loves him, he is her idol, he is her obsession. However, since he does not "honour her," and since in Breillat's Romantic world the physical is just as important as the ideal, she sleeps with other men. She cannot shut off her physical needs nor can she stop loving him: both are equally important to her.

Marie exhibits a great strength of will. She is a force of action. Following the discussion of the possibility of having children together, Paul tries to calm Marie down by telling her the story of Circe. More specifically, he advises her to stop trying to fight against her present situation and to accept it because he does indeed love her. Rather than submitting and repressing an essential part of herself, she follows her own convictions. She wants Paul so she stays. She cannot make him sleep with her, but she wants sex, so she goes out and she gets it. The way her sexual desire is expressed is coloured by her divided loyalties. It is not necessarily an expression of her innate masochism. It is important to notice that when discussing physical intimacy with Paul it is referred to as "making love" by Marie whereas when she sleeps with other people it is called more typically vulgar terms such as "screwing," "fucking," and "becoming a hole." After being with Robert for the first time, she says something that elucidates this point: "It's all I can be in my head ... In my head, there is Paul. He could've reconciled me with my body but he didn't want to do that. Because I don't like my body, I was an easy prey. I mean a victim. I felt like lost luggage." She has learned to hate her body. Since she hates her body, she only sleeps with men (who are not Paul) whom "she hates."

Marie is an equalizing force. This resonates with the reciprocity, the need for equality, in Romantic love. She is trying to regain what Paul has taken from her: her self-respect. Kant, who was a part of the Enlightenment, but whom many accredit for being a major inspiration for Romantic thought, wrote that the biggest evil a person can commit is to try to dominate another: "Kant in his moral philosophy is particularly rabid against any form of domination of one human being over another. ... Exploitation is an evil" (Berlin 71). Paul, because he knows he has a hold over Marie's affection, is in a position of power over

her. Kant's ideas also highlight the concept of an individual's power to choose (a basic existentialist value): "It is the commitment [to making a choice] or the non-commitment alone that makes it a value for you" (72). This is not only about the existential assertion of an individual's power to choose in situations. It also reasserts the notions of integrity and values made through the strength of one's will. What is most disturbing in *Romance* is Paul's behaviour because he chooses to treat her this way.

There are many elements of the mise-en-scène which refer back to an essentially holistic vision of the world. Circle motifs repeat throughout the film especially at the Asian restaurant where the couple always dines (Fig. II.III). Robert's apartment is outfitted with silk screens and with artwork resembling female genitalia placed throughout it (Fig. II.IV). He describes it as being what women like. These elements subtly reinforce the idea of process, fluidity, and a non-linear way of understanding the film. The ending of the film, the birth of Baby Paul, reinforces the strength of motherhood. The stress on nature, cycles, chaos (the mysteriousness of the ability to create life) links matriarchy with many recurring symbols and styles emphasized in Breillat's filmography. The rigidity of the Enlightenment which proposed the finite classification of thought insinuates a form of death. Power structures, which disable growth, are the opposite of the creative force of Romanticism which emphasizes the role of action and the access to infinite possibilities. It is no wonder that Paul's death occurs and that it is juxtaposed with shots of Marie giving birth to new life.

Marie often speaks via an inner dialogue. This movie highlights self-introspection. It is important to remember that Marie is in process: she is going through a journey of self-discovery and growth. Her reflections on the nature of love, on the sexes, are often

contradictory and hard to follow. Since *Romance* is primarily narrated from Marie's point of view, the viewer also has to take into consideration that she is sometimes an unreliable narrator. That being said, the fact that she throws herself into her experiences and that she is constantly using her insightfulness to understand her miserable relationship with Paul is important. At least she is searching and trying to understand—that is the point—as opposed to remaining in a stagnant state of ignorance. Unlike Paul, she is constantly looking into mirrors as she is going through this process. As in *Une vraie jeune fille*, mirrors play a role in understanding the importance of looking. One example would be the scene where she is walking with her eyes closed down Robert's hallway as he guides her from behind, and then he instructs her to open her eyes. Together they look at her image in a dingy mirror while her underwear is around her ankles (Fig. II.V). His presence, his looking with her, makes it easier for her to accept "the proximity of her face to her vagina."

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus upon seeing Echo tells her, "I first will die ere thou shalt take of me thy pleasure" (3.487). We see this happening several times between Paul and Marie. He denies giving her pleasure and he denies exhibiting pleasure himself. This would bring him back down to his humanness. Romantic writers and Breillat alike have described the sexual encounter as a moment of self-annihilation: "Love is a metaphysical craving for unity, for oneness that eliminates all sense of separation between man and his environment" (Singer, *Nature* 288). Instead, Paul chooses a loveless self-sufficiency. "Caressing" him according to his strict guidelines, "not all of the way," presents the one-sidedness of their relationship which seems to revolve around his phallus.

This dictatorial sternness reinforces his need for control and his belief in his own superiority.

Love and Binary Thinking

Out of the four films discussed in this thesis, *Romance* most explicitly explores the negative residue of courtly love. The age old virgin-whore dichotomy is brought up repeatedly in the narrative. One way of reading Paul's treatment of her is that she has become the idealized woman who is loved, and who is therefore treated as being above the materiality of sexuality despite her own yearnings. Paul can no longer defile Marie by having sex with her unless it means procreation and even then he pulls what she calls "a Virgin Mary" on her. To paraphrase Marie's words, her pregnancy was "a near Immaculate Conception from a drop of seminal fluid" although the credibility of her narration is questionable[ix]. At one point he says that he could no longer love her if he had to sleep with her on a regular basis. While oscillating a mirror between her face and her genitalia, Marie says, "Paul is right. You can't love a face if a cunt goes with it." Robert recounts a liaison he had with "Grace Delly" who approached him while at Cannes. He did not recognize her until after they had spent a day having a lot of sex together. Once his friend pointed out to him who she was, he approaches her to ask why she did not reveal her true identity. She tells him that if he had recognized her, he would not have taken her the way she had wanted because with Grace Delly "you wear kids' [sic] gloves." He responded in agreement.

The brothel scene, where women are physically divided into two parts by a barricade that looks like a guillotine, further elaborates this issue. The upper halves of the women, in a crisp white room, are seen with their lovers who hold onto their hands as they look

admiringly at them, while the bottom halves are whored-up with ridiculous brothel-like hoop skirts (reminiscent of the skirt worn by Alice's father's mistress) as dirty, ugly, strange men have their way with them (Fig. II.VI). High love is seen as separate from a love that includes sex even though both halves belong to the same woman. The first one is good; the second one is bad. Breillat, in presenting overtly sexualized female characters such as Marie, often comments on how there is a problem between male ideals of love and the real, desiring woman. In creating such explicit material, Breillat is stressing the need to rectify these incongruities between notions of sacredness and profanity. For Breillat, the two are inevitably linked and the two should no longer be forcibly divided from one another because this division causes much disharmony.

Notions of obscenity contribute a great deal to this divisiveness. In showing imagery that is supposedly obscene, Breillat wishes for this association to be dissolved in the audience's consciousness the more it is shown. Marie's first bondage scene with Robert plays a major role in her transformation. Her image is filmed in a longshot, so that her entire body becomes a spectacle. Using very few edits, we are forced to watch her unblinkingly like Robert, so that we can learn by his example to call the desiring sexual woman beautiful. It affirms and fulfills her need to be acknowledged as desirable because, as Robert says to Marie, "You cannot yearn for what you cannot accept." This scene is in direct contrast with one from *Une vraie jeune fille* where Alice's nude body is shown, through a series of close-up shots that create a disjunctured fragmentation of her image, restrained with chicken wire while Jim laughs at her. Here, the female learns to associate shame with her desire because of how she is treated by her companion. Marie is overcoming what the female has been taught in *Une vraie jeune fille* (Fig. II.VII).

Breillat created the name Caroline Ducey for the actress who plays Marie because she liked the way this name sounded. Ducey sounds like the French word *douce* which means soft, sweet, or gentle. In *Corps amoureux*, Breillat said that she chose this actress primarily based on how she looked during the casting call (175). She wanted someone who looked like Joan of Arc (25). Someone so beautiful, with a body so sublime, that nobody or nothing could "abîmer" (spoil her or bring her down through shame) (25). Marie is associated with a sense of innocence through a number of other devices as well. While in Paul's convertible making out with Paolo, a stranger whom she had just met in a café, Marie calls this indiscretion "a childish desire, a pure desire." This labelling harkens back to the notion of origins that was discussed earlier in the introduction by linking it with a rawness that somehow preceded the shaming learnt during puberty. Marie works with young children. Being an elementary school teacher suggests certain qualities regarding her character (e.g., goodness).

Since Paul is a narcissist, he has a difficult time with being associated with anything typically considered grotesque. Anything of the "ugly," natural world would remind him of his mortality. He is disgusted when Marie says that she likes the smell of his genitalia, and then when she says that his penis reminds her of a baby bird. In contrast, Marie, while with Paolo, makes the declaration that women quite enjoy dirty things: "Obscenity doesn't bother women." She adds an anecdote of how women must hide their used tampons before sleeping with men because it would make them unattractive to their lovers. The inclusion of depictions of highly personal female experiences helps to align the viewer with Marie's character. By facing supposedly obscene acts and imagery, such as gynaecological exams

and close-ups of unshaven female genitalia, Breillat wishes to reunite what we think it means to be female with the actual female body.

The birth of Marie's son affirms the purity of her desire. His presence serves as the creative end of having sex. Paul is an antagonist who stands in the way of a more Romantic ideal of love: one of selflessness. He has been replaced by his son. This is expressed visually through the montage of shots of the explosion that kills Paul with close-up shots of Marie's vagina as it expels her baby. She can now fulfill her need for love through the love for her child. As she attends her boyfriend's funeral, she smiles as she caresses Baby Paul's head. She is not punished or anguished over his death. Instead, she appears happier. The film ends with a funeral, but the last shot confirms the renewal of life and love by ending with a medium shot of Marie smilingly holding her child. Her portrayal here resembles iconographic imagery of the Virgin Mother. (As a side note, religion plays a subtle role in the understanding of this film)[x]. Marie's name connects her to Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. This symbol is significant in comprehending the film as Romantically Ironic because to reach this end she must cheat on her lover and then kill him. The figure of Marie challenges the audience's expectations because she is both whore and virgin mother. She is not just one or the other. It also instils a sense that this movie is functioning within a cycle:

> As the Mother begets the Son, the Son begets the Mother. His act is the creative counterpoint of the process. By begetting the Mother, he purifies her. He purifies her and himself, *uno acto*. He turns the Babylonian Whore into a Virgin. (Robert to Marie in *Romance*)

This purification spoken about in Robert's story resembles words spoken by Marie during an earlier point in the film where she says that physical intimacy is about more than just the honour of having a man fill her void of loneliness because it brings her back to "a

metaphysical state … that is her purity." Naming the baby "Paul" establishes him as a substitute.

A = a and/or a ≠ a

The "X" at the end of *Romance* in the opening credits does not necessarily refer to the film as a pornographic, or as an inverted, solely ironic version of a Romantic story. This "X" also refers to the double Xs of the female chromosome. For Breillat sex (as in genitalia) is where it all begins. This is a Romance which is based upon being sexed female. The "X" stands in for the physical desiring body whereas "Romance" refers back to its highest aspiration. It refers to the algebraic "X" representing multitudinous possibilities which are a constant and indicative of concepts of hazard. "X" as a symbol suggests mirroring: if it were to be cut or folded in half, the other side would be identical. This, of course, is a means of navigating the Romantic universe. Interestingly, the "X" symbol also cracks the word "Romance" in the opening credits making it look like a shattered mirror, and perhaps referring to a shattering of the ideal (Fig. II.VIII). The colouring of the words, "X" being red and "Romance" being white, relate back to the primary colour scheme of this and many of her films. The ideal, desexualized, apathetic, deadened, and deified Paul is always in white. Robert, the not-so beautiful Casanova who reawakens and feeds Marie's passionate desires, is always in red as is his apartment. Finally, "X" also points to the question of film censorship and X-ratings which Breillat subverts in her film. She does this through the inclusion of explicit material and of a well-known porno star, Rocco Siffredi. Censorship, according to Breillat, encourages the same obscenity complexes Marie tries to overcome. It perpetuates the separation between good girls and bad girls.

Breillat walks a fine line in her choice of narrative and filmic style. It is easy to label the film using a psychoanalytical mode of analysis. However, this approach does not always work. For example, Robert, the headmaster of her school, could be superficially seen as a sadist because he ties her up. However, he does not receive sexual gratification out of this: he says this to her as he is doing it. In fact, he is simply listening to her and doing whatever she wants him to do. He offers to let her dominate him, to have "normal" sex (the list goes on)—it is up to her to choose. The sequences with Robert render him more as a Prospero type of character than as a sadist. Robert is an older, helper-guide who helps her achieve her goal. He is even the headmaster at the school where she teaches. Curiously, both characters are educators, which ties into this as being a quest for knowledge. She is sick of doing all of the chasing. With Robert, in getting tied up, she does not need to do anything which is what she wants. It is how she rectifies Paul's ignorance of her. More than anything, the initial tying up scene between Robert and Marie is a response to the similar scene shared between Alive and Jim in *Une vraie jeune fille*. It marks a transition. In *Romance*, the man acknowledges the connection between the abstract notion and the reality of being female (her face/the ideal and her genitals/the animal) through looking at her (depicted through a longshot), and bound together by the rope. Robert calls this display of her body "beautiful," which is a major difference from the message communicated by the similar shot in *Une vraie jeune fille*. Paul could also be labelled as sadistic in his denial of pleasure to her. If she was a masochist, she would have received pleasure from this lack. However, she actively pursues sexual gratification elsewhere. This functions to undermine his power over her because he is oblivious to her affairs. He can only sense it—when she enters the apartment after a night with Robert

wearing a red dress rather than her usual white garb—and momentarily feels the need to reassert his sexual domination over her by finally sleeping with her after months of abstinence. Also, the film ends with her blowing him up. She is not happy in this relationship and she puts it to an end. With Paolo, who is a very masculine looking man (muscular, virile), she rules as well. He asks permission to perform certain sexual acts with her and he is the one who wants to experience tenderness with her. He becomes vulnerable in her presence.

The rape scene functions as a fulfilment of a desire she speaks of in the scene shown previously to it. She speaks of wanting a stranger to ravish her which may explain why she does not try very hard to stop him from penetrating her when it happens in reality even though that was not a part of their deal. He calls her a whore, saying that "[he] reamed [her] real good," to which she screams back, "I'm not ashamed!" It is about the transgression of the unreachable ideal of woman, to show how "the mystique is dead" and how the woman is simply "a load of innards." The rape is an obstacle that she refuses to allow to shame her or to bring her down. Admittedly, these scenes are dangerous. Scenes such as these can be very misleading partly because of the way we have been trained to understand these sorts of images. An insufficient interpretation of this scene would be to view it only as a rape or only as evidence of her infidelities having gone too far. Marie's strange verbal reaction to her attacker, her thoughts as the rape happens, and the context of the storyline so far make it unclear as to how to make sense of the rape in relation to the narrative development of Marie as the film's main character. The complexity of this scene, how should one interpret something that is ambiguous, may be one reason why Breillat is

outspoken about how to understand her films. Nonetheless, it is a "heavy" scene that is difficult to fully comprehend, all of Marie's cerebral discourse notwithstanding.

Conclusion

On an ending note, Kant believed that what makes us human is our ability to make decisions despite our pasts: it is this that distinguishes humans from animals (Berlin 72). In the last sequence of *Romance*, Marie looks into the camera and says, "They say a woman isn't a woman until she is a mother. It's true. Nothing that happened before really matters." If we assume that there is some truth to what she believes about the role certain men play in contributing to the creation of an unreachable ideal, perhaps this confrontation can help some viewers realize the effects of similar actions in their own lives, and encourage them to choose to change their behaviours. The authenticity of Marie's convictions as portrayed on the screen is instrumental in moving viewers into thinking. The viewer is led to believe that the leading female character has unlearned the corporeal shame that had held her back from loving herself. Following this film, Breillat attempted to take on what it is that motivates male desire in Breillat's *Anatomie de l'enfer* and in *Une vieille maîtresse*, adopting a more male perspective.

Similarly to Alice in *Une vraie jeune fille*, Marie confronts the shamefulness of her body within her relationships with other people. The viewer is allowed access to her mind's processes through the use of voice-over narration. We witness her attempts to make sense of the issues she has with herself and with her lover through sexual encounters and through mirrors. Unlike Alice, she has united with the object of her affection only to be disappointed. The female in this film learns to find love for herself instead of depending on the men in her life to define her self-worth. The inclusions of explicit sex scenes, and

the candor of the protagonist's feelings, act as mirrors to the audience. It is the director's intention to provoke viewers into delving into the recesses of their own minds.

The conflicting dynamics between abstraction and reality are at the forefront of *Romance*. Its graphic material reunites a commonly reiterated division between mind and body found in mainstream features. We are invited to watch the clashing contradictions between lovers as a way of understanding the origins of these incompatibilities, in the hopes of transgressing these beliefs and behaviours. Romantic values are presented mostly through the character of Marie, but also through some of Breillat's aesthetic choices. Irony is the result of the contradictions that arise during Marie's pursuit for knowledge. It is through contradictory sequences and shots that truths are discovered in *Romance*.

Part Two: Male Desire

Chapter Three
Anatomie de l'enfer: In the Realm of the Mythical

Synopsis and Contextual Information

Anatomie de l'enfer is the story of two characters aptly named the Woman and the Man. After meeting by hazard in a gay bar, the Man saves the Woman from killing herself in the washroom as she slits her wrists. Upon leaving a pharmacy and having her wounds bandaged, the two agree to meet again at the Woman's isolated oceanside manor. She says that she will pay him handsomely if he will watch her where she is unwatchable. This notion of a contract—together with the fact that the Man is a homosexual—is meant to establish this "looking" as objective. Inevitably, he is unable to remain objective. This confrontation with her body, and with her grace in being vulnerable—along with their dialogue—moves him to feelings of intimacy. On the fourth night of their exchange, she pays him and he leaves her. He finds himself in a bar, completely changed as a person. The character's confrontation with himself through looking at her body is an encapsulation of Breillat's overall directorial vision in its most basic and mythic form:

> It is through other people that you come to understand yourself: this basic existential premise is taken on by the woman in the attempt to reconcile herself with her body and she chose a homosexual man in rebellion against the loaded hetero stare, a stare that always looks at a woman with the desire to possess her. (Bickerton 40)

For some time, Catherine Breillat wanted to produce the filmic adaptation of *La maladie de la mort* by Marguerite Duras, but she was unable to obtain the rights to do so (Breillat, *Corps* 252). Instead, she decided to write her own book, *Pornocratie,* which differed only slightly from the previous text by its inclusion of a homosexual man (252).

The screenplay for *Romance* also played a big role in the visualization of *Anatomie de l'enfer*. In an interview with Geoffrey Macnab, Breillat disclosed:

> After finishing *Romance*, I immediately felt like remaking it. It wasn't that I wanted to disown it, but I knew the subject had two sides. ... [I wanted to push] some of the 1999 movie's key themes to new extremes. I wanted to present a close-up of the female sexual organ ... to ask if this is what sexuality is really all about. (20)

In *Corps amoureux*, Breillat expands:

> Au départ dans *Romance*, je n'étais pas du tout dans la métaphore. ... Donc dès que j'ai eu terminé *Romance*, j'ai eu envie de le refaire. Je voulais absolument remettre en scène le même scénario. Je me disais qu'après tout, Corneille et Racine avaient bien monté deux pièces sur le même sujet et que ça avait donné quelque chose de très différent. Je savais qu'on pouvait refaire *Romance* exactement pareil, avec les mêmes mots, et que ce soit totalement différent. (152-153)

Anatomie de l'enfer was very poorly received during its world premiere at the Rotterdam Film Festival in January 2004 (Porton 66). Even critics who usually enjoy her films were saying that it was "patronizing," "pretentious," and "a chore to watch" (Lee 72). Overall, it did not reach the public very well (Clouzot 126). According to *The Montreal Mirror*, "reporters and theatre-goers were hightailing it out [of the theatre]" and that an old woman vomited during the tampon scene (Rowland 36). The *New York Times* wrote that Breillat, despite being "a gifted filmmaker," had created a "painfully foolish" film in *Anatomie de l'enfer*, which was "full of tedious dialogue" (Dargis). Dargis continued to say that it was less engaging than her previous work, that it was not introducing any new material, and that this failure could very well be an indicator that she was at the end of her career.

I have devoted less space in my discussion of Breillat's work because I also found it to be a difficult piece to totally understand. There is less dialogue and narrative action in this film compared to her other ones: it is too minimalist, too abstract. This may be in

keeping with an aesthetic of myth, of getting down to the fundaments of her artistic vision and beliefs about gender relations. This is one reason I chose to include it in my discussion. There are a few connections between this film and Breillat's other ones that are not expressed by any others. It marks a transition from adopting the female perspective to that of the male's, which I believe is very important in the development of Breillat's filmography.

The film was made for around the same amount of money as *Romance* (Lepetit, E-mail). It was shot in Portugal within a month with a team of fourteen people (Clouzot 130). She had difficulty trying to secure financing. Its funding did not come from as many sources as *Romance*'s did (*Variety*). It played at many international film festivals, but it did not win any awards. *Anatomie de l'enfer* earned 54 316 Euros in France which is considerably lower than any of her films since the making of *Romance* (Mazureau, E-mail). It earned $34 506US in the States (*Box Office Mojo*). There were no reported issues with censorship. It is possible that Breillat's usual shock factor had worn off due to the increasing acceptance of hardcore art conventions in mainstream cinema.

The film's narrative is very allegorical, which makes the film's message difficult to decipher. The dialogue spoken is heavily intellectualized. The mise-en-scène reflects this by being very minimalist. This helps to articulate the mythical quality of the interchange between the Man and the Woman, as being somehow the foundation, or the origins, of obscenity: "C'est une oeuvre philosophique qui cherche à savoir ce qu' est exactement l'obscénité" (Lepage A5). Interestingly, Breillat has said that she most identified with the male character in this film because he seems more human than the Woman, played by Amira Casar, who is presented as an ethereal, mystical guide who helps him become more

human. The Woman is at ease with her body. She is strong within the vulnerability she presents. This is part of what makes her seem otherworldly. He can no longer shame her into submission. This portrayal of the female, as an offshoot of Marie, has gotten over her shame. There is a progression in the functions of the leading female characters in each of Breillat's films. Alice acquired shame in *Une vraie jeune fille*, Marie lived through it and eventually got over it. Here, the Woman is nearly totally above it and we are allowed entry into the narcissistic male's mind in an attempt to understand the origins of male desire.

Female Body as Hell

The journey of the Man has a duration of four nights. During the first night, the topic of female body hair arises. She asks him if she should have shaved her armpits, to which he replies:

> It doesn't matter how much women shave. Even if you removed the hair from your crack you wouldn't be rid of your obscene nature. On the contrary, the skin stays lumpy like the neck of a chicken. Every pore exudes the irritation of the pulled hairs like microscopic sexual swellings. ... The depth of this obscenity, its feminine depth ... is what those who like you hate you for. When you spread your legs we're revolted by the overly bright colour of the sloppy, shapeless aspect of your hidden lips, the thinness of their skin though here and there it's lumpy, a skin that sweats, that oozes, a pestilential skin, like the skin of frogs. Frogs, at least, have the decency of being green, but their thighs can be spread as wide as yours. It's not what we see: it's your denial of the obscenity which frightens us most.

Body hair is traditionally attributed with sexual voraciousness. The Man here makes it shameful for her to have these physical characteristics. He relates her physical characteristics to those of chickens and frogs—animals with unattractive associations. He situates her within the natural or animal world. He goes on to describe how he must drink to forget "this bestiality"—to forget that he too is subject to the forces of a natural world lacking in order, and to mortality. He reveals that "this bestiality" is inescapable for her

because she is a woman. It is revealed by her female body. He also discloses how this notion of shame springs from the narcissistic male's need to dominate women in order to control their own personal fears. Breillat, in the *Special Features Interview*, added that she specifically chose a very hairy female body double to stand in for Amira during the extreme close-up shots of her genitals because it would be even more provocative and "obscene."

The origins of stereotypical female and male behaviours are explored through the use of flashbacks to the childhoods of the Woman and the Man, which go back to specific episodes when they each developed certain qualities attributable to their genders. As a boy, the man climbs a tree, nurtures some baby birds by feeding them mealworms that he had been collecting in a tin, and then he carries one down in his shirt pocket. During the descent, he accidentally kills it. He promptly and viciously throws it to the ground, and he proceeds to stomp all over the messy carcass. He relates the black tufts of her pubic hair to this gawking, ugly baby bird, and to his disposition of hatred towards anything that reminds him of his vulnerability as a mortal. The narrator, who is Catherine Breillat reading from *Pornocratie*, says at the end of this scene: "To this day the child that became all men retained the horror of the slime that mocked him." Interestingly, Marie in *Romance* describes Paul's penis as being like a baby bird. He does not visibly take offense in that scene, but in hindsight, she was effeminizing him by making such a statement since birds in Breillat's films usually represent femininity and female animality.

In contrast, the flashback of the Woman has several points of reference. It resembles the sequence from *Une vraie jeune fille* when Alice, while bound by chicken wire, is tormented by Jim laughing at her. It also is similar to Marie's gynaecological exam in

Romance. The taunts from the young "doctors" who perform their own type of pelvic examination on the Woman as a child act as a precursor to the violation of Marie in her exam. The staging of the Woman as a child looks very much like Courbet's *The Origin of the World.* She is encircled by green shrubbery that serves to place her, unlike her male cohorts who stand over her, within the natural world (Fig. III.I).

At the end of the first night, the Woman falls asleep and asks the Man to continue watching her where she cannot see herself. He goes to the medicine cabinet of the washroom where he finds a tube of red lipstick. Instead of returning to his chair, he goes to her body to smear the lipstick all over her genitals, her anus, and on her mouth. This act is very similar to the sequence in *Une vraie jeune fille* where Alice reddens the parts of her body that others deem obscene. He proceeds to aggressively penetrate her as she continues to sleep. After she has been made to be obscene, she becomes fuckable. Eventually, after climaxing, he breaks down and cries. Relatively unaffected, the Woman wakes up to soothe him through his breakdown, reminding him that it is only the first night of their journey together. Before she falls asleep, he explains how the warmth and softness of women is a lying trap, and that it is this fear of vulnerability—in a sense, the embracing of mortality—that make men hate women.

There are reminders of the role Christianity plays in this dynamic between the Man and the Woman. The Woman is presented very much like Jesus. Like him, she exhibits an all-knowing serenity in the face of all that the Man throws at her. It is through her pain and suffering that she is able to move him to empathy. This is very much like the intention behind the martyrdom of Jesus. As she lies on her bed, her pose mimics the one of Jesus on the huge cross hanging above her on the wall. The luminescence of her skin is very

similar to the pallor of this representation of him. Even though the Man saves her from slicing her wrists, and even though he agrees to enter into a contract with her, one gets the impression that she always had some sort of ulterior motive behind inviting him to watch her. When he returns to her house for the last time, all that is left is a white sheet with her menstrual blood on it. It serves as a visual connection to the Shroud of Turin. Simultaneously, but not necessarily imperative to one's interpretation of the film, Breillat is critical of the role of the Church in its role in creating female corporeal shame:

> Rocco Siffredi is his most violent and misogynistic when he feels threatened. In the bar, he presents sex in the ugly way it is presented in pornography ... with no emotion or love attached. It's the way all censors and religious creeds teach us it's an abominable act. But when he realizes the vulgar terms he's using are a lie, he begins to cry. Religion would have us believe that sex is simply about the flesh when in fact it's about something higher and more idealistic. (Macnab)

Breillat, once again, subverts the association of obscenity to womanly experience with something that does not usually have that connotation.

Motifs

Blood, a motif found in many of Breillat's films, returns in *Anatomie de l'enfer*. Menstrual blood, according to the Woman, is considered "the dirtiest of all types of blood." "Its fertile powers scare men," says the Man, "It bleeds but it does not come from a wound." As in *Romance*, the discussion moves onto the subject of tampons, but this film goes a little bit further with its connotation with shamefulness by creating another contradictory connection between it and medieval knights. In *Anatomie de l'enfer*, the drinking of the blood from a tampon becomes a symbol of the Man's entering into a contract with the Woman. It serves as an equalizing force. Medieval knights were known to drink the blood of their enemies as a sign of respect. It implied that one was worthy

enough to be considered an equal. This act between the Man and the Woman indicates a shift within the overall quest towards the ideal Breillat pushes for through her films because he begins to see her as an equal rather than an obscene Other.

The last image of the Woman, falling or being pushed into the ocean, must be read symbolically rather than literally. It is surreal like the shot of her slicing her own throat while in the pharmacy. The scene of her falling does not fit into the film in terms of narrative continuity. It marks her entrance into the Man's consciousness. By this point, she has transformed his way of thinking. The Man attempts to kill the Woman by stuffing a rusty hoe into her genitals because he begins to experience intimate feelings for her, which he would prefer to repress. It marks a return to Greco-Romanic myth, that of Neptune or Poseidon, where water became male (*Anatomie* "Special Features"). However, he cannot debase her through his claim of dominance over her. The narrator, using Breillat's voice as the Man's inner thoughts, soon reiterates that "this ocean, like a woman, could engulf you and make you vanish into its loins." Water, particularly the ocean, is a recurring motif in Breillat's filmography. Its symbolism becomes more apparent through this vocalization, along with the numerous shots of the ocean as its waves hit against the rocky coastline (Fig. III.II).

Presenting the female body in totality as a cinematic image is like putting up a mirror in front of the Man, so that he can move from barbaric thoughts to feelings of intimacy (Macnab). The Woman's body serves the function of the mirrors in Breillat's previous films. The Man arrives at a deeper level of self-knowledge by engaging in a dialogue with the Woman, and by looking at her where she is unwatchable. He learns to transgress his hard-held beliefs that her naturalness is obscene and hateful.

The cinematography of *Anatomie de l'enfer* creates the look of a painting for the film. The Woman appears to be posing as if for a painting throughout the movie (Clouzot 136). This aesthetic reminds us of the importance of the role of art in the process of self-realization. Art acts as a mirror of our inner being. Art presents an opportunity to express an unimposing conception of origins through the use of story. The Woman, who adopts a pose similar to that found in nude painting, more tangibly interacts with the usual implied spectator of such pieces of artwork, the Man. The Woman is able to get under his skin by having him vocalize what he sees when he looks at her. He eventually is moved to tenderness through this confrontation.

Conclusion

Even if it alienated many audiences, *Anatomie de l'enfer* successfully makes visual the origins of the topic that Breillat repeatedly investigates in all of her films. We see some recurring Romantic symbols such as the ocean and mirrors. She is still fascinated by the importance of realigning the idea of woman with the reality of women by showing, and by stressing the importance of recognizing, a woman's body in its entirety. Irony may not play as big of a role in this film compared to her others because this film is minimalistic in its representation of plot. As she pushes herself to surpass new boundaries, Breillat is also moving backwards in an attempt to understand the beginnings of the issues surrounding sexuality and intimacy. The educative role of art and myth are put to the forefront in this piece. It marks an important transition by attempting to reconcile the other side of the same story she always tells: it is now time to include a dissection of the man's viewpoint. If, as she expresses in interviews, she is interested in initiating social progress, it makes

sense for her to offer another side of the same story she tells repeatedly. To not do this would be a type of censorship regarding the totality of this phenomenon.

The final scene of *Anatomie de l'enfer* resembles the depiction of the Sublime in many Romantic paintings: "Dans la séquence finale, l'opérateur met une pointe de romantisme artistique. Siffredi est debout sur la falaise, la mer déchaînée à ses pieds. L'homme court vers le phare où la femme qu'il aime est au bord du précipice" (Clouzot 136). Clouzot goes on to suggest that this change in the visualization of her film is "un avant-goût de ce que sera le roman de Barbey d'Aurevilly, prochain projet de la réalisatrice" (Clouzot 136). It also adds a twist in her usual representations to include an investigation into the male side of the story. In effect, her last two films, *Anatomie de l'enfer* and *Une vieille maîtresse,* are an effort to equally present both male and female versions of the usual dilemmas one finds in her work. *Une vieille maîtresse* is a rendition of the origins of the issues she preoccupies herself with in all of her films by using a more accessible (dare I say, conventional) format.

Chapter Four
Une vieille maîtresse: Conquest and Dissolution of the Male Narcissist

Synopsis and Contextual Information

The latest film Breillat has made takes place during the Romantic Period. It is set in 1835 according to the introductory credits, and it is an adaptation of a text representative of late Romanticism. It begins with the time just before the marriage between a penniless, gambling libertine, Ryno de Marigny, and a beautiful, teenaged aristocrat, Hermangarde de Polastron. Even though Hermangarde's grandmother, the Marquise de Flers, has very few reservations about this upcoming union, her friends, the Comtesse d'Artelles and the Viconte de Prony, are very critical about it. They foresee inevitable problems for Hermangarde in marrying someone who lacks the typically attractive attributes of a husband. To make things worse, de Marigny has had the same mistress, the notorious Vellini, for nearly a decade. After a night-long confession to the Marquise regarding his past, he promises that he will be a faithful, loving partner to Hermangarde. They get married, but he eventually returns to Vellini.

Une vieille maîtresse is the first of Breillat's work to have been selected to compete at the Cannes Film Festival. It was included in the running for the *Palme d'Or* award in 2007, but it lost to Cristian Mungiu's *4 Luni, 3 Saptamini Si 2 Zile* (*4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*). This film's cumulative international box office total has been approximated as being about one million American dollars (*Box Office Mojo*). It received a significantly larger amount of funding through a variety of sources, roughly $14 million US (*Variety*; Lepetit, E-mail).

Just before shooting the movie, Breillat suffered from a cerebral haemorrhage that hospitalized her for five months (Hohenadel 14). She was left paralyzed on one side of her

body, and she was unable to walk. She began to suffer from frequent epileptic seizures afterwards (14). Eventually, she willed herself to walk again (14). She credits Lepetit's enthusiastic encouragement for helping her return to filming (14). Her doctors told her to stay away from television and computer screens, but, clearly, to finish this film she did not follow their suggestions (14). Breillat had to purchase an insurance policy to be able to secure funding for the film (14). She named Claire Denis to fill in for her should she have been unable to complete it herself (14).

On numerous occasions, Breillat has said that if she had lived during the Romantic Period, she would have been d'Aurevilly, the author of the original story (Breillat, *Cannes Press Release*). She wanted to produce an "ultra-romanesque" (Lapointe WE64) film, and to portray "a period just before the rise of the bourgeoisie—which extinguished the enlightenment that allowed writers to discuss emotion and desire and knowledge" (Macnab).

Innumerable critics have criticized *Une vieille maîtresse* for not being provocative enough. Chris Knight of *The National Post* wrote that it was "quaint," and that "the story might've been scandalous back then but not now … the style [historical drama] doesn't suit her here" (B4). Brendan Kelly of *The Montreal Gazette* gave it one star out of five, adding that "Breillat takes a surprisingly pedantic approach to the story, making a film about passion that is strangely lacking in passion" (D4). On the other hand, there were quite a few critics who did like it. American critic Barry Paris gave it a near perfect rating (3 out 4): "This is sexy stuff, for a costume drama" (C8). The *Globe and Mail* also really liked it:

> Catherine Breillat's period piece, *The Last Mistress*, is the kind of film that makes you long for the days when libertines and courtesans roamed the great

> capitals of Europe. ... It's a daring cinematic feat. There's nudity, gravity-defying sexual acts and a bewildering appetite for blood during foreplay, but the most explicit part of *The Last Mistress* remains Breillat's adaptation itself– drunk on ideas, luxuriating in social rebellion. As much as she loves to feast her audience's eyes on images of the carnal and the passionate, Breillat prefers to whisper words (more like speeches, actually) of wisdom into their ears. You may wish to bring pen and paper to the theatre to write down some of the exquisite dialogue for future pilfering. (R15)

As usual with her work, Breillat equally attracts intense hatred and enthusiastic reviews.

The different format of this film, a historical drama, could be interpreted as an opportunity for Breillat to break her own taboos by making something more accessible to a wider audience. This accessibility of the film could also account for her invitation to Cannes. It could also be the reason behind the significantly larger amount of money she received to produce the movie. Moreover, the higher number of investors could also account for the more "pedantic," or safer, conventional approach used in the film.

All of Breillat's films up until *Une vieille maîtresse*, which she wrote the screenplay for, were based either on original screenplays or on adaptations of books she had written herself. This film takes on the perspective of the narcissistic man who is "in love." We are presented with the representation closest to the Romantic love ideal of all her other films in this piece. The sexual desire of the exceedingly handsome Ryno de Marigny (an extension of the character Paul in *Romance*) is deconstructed to identify its true original motivation: to supplement his "amour-propre." He occupies the finite realm of the conquest. Upon winning her over, his desire to attain her should have withered away quickly as it did after seducing his other lovers. This desire that is rooted in the need to conquer is finite because it ceases once it has secured the possession of its object. What ultimately robs him of his elevated sense of self-importance are elements of nature: he is

shown as being victimized by phenomena that are beyond his control that relate to his physicality.

In an interview she gave at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, Breillat said that even though *Une vieille maîtresse* is a period piece and a bit less shocking than previous works in her filmography, it still fits into her overall artistic vision: "I didn't betray myself" (*Cannes Press Release*). However, the unsettling conclusion of *Une vieille maîtresse* suggests Breillat still has quite a bit to expose and to overcome.

This film is an adaptation of a currently well-received text. At the time of the book's publication, like many other Romantic texts, it was seen as immoral and pornographic. It was not published until quite a few years after d'Aurevilly wrote it (1846 and 1851, respectively). At the beginning of the film, the opening credits read that it is set during the time of Choderlos de Laclos (1741-1803). De Laclos wrote *Dangerous Liaisons*, a frequently reproduced tale for both the stage and film since its initial publication. It is an intriguing tale about sex and deception among Parisian high society in the late 18th century. Breillat creates an explicit link between her views and those of the Romantics by producing this film. *Une vieille maîtresse* is an extension of the same topics she explores in every single one of her films to date. It is an adaptation of an artefact produced during the actual historical event known as the Romantic Period which explored similar issues to her obsessions, and it situates her preoccupations within another time. This film links her thoughts with those of the works of other Romantic authors. These elements of source and setting serve as rhetorical devices (her films are opportunities for her to develop arguments). They help to clarify what it is she is trying to express in and through film. In placing her usual preoccupations within a real-life historical movement, and in presenting

herself as analogous with other authors, she strengthens the persuasiveness of her own views. Her production of *Une vieille maîtresse* serves to prove that what she has been preoccupied with for so long is Romantic.

Recycling

Une vieille maîtresse is a film set in an earlier time period from the present. That being said, Breillat incorporates many references to her previous films even though the others took place during more contemporary times. Nearly all of the main actresses from her other films are recast in *Une vieille maîtresse*. Dominique Laffin (*Tapage nocturne*) died from a suspicious death during the mid-eighties. Charlotte Alexandra disappeared from the film world shortly after the release of *Une vraie jeune fille*. Delphine Zentout (*36 Fillette*) and Anaïs Reboux (*À ma soeur!*) are unaccounted for although Roxane Mesquida, the actress who plays Anaïs's sister in *Á ma soeur!*, has a large role in *Une vieille maîtresse*. Isabelle Renauld (*Parfait amour!*) and Sarah Pratt (*Brève traversée*), the often discussed Comtesse de Mendoza, are listed in the finishing credits, but they do not appear onscreen. With the exception of Roxane Mesquida (Hermangarde), Amira Casar plays the largest role of any of Breillat's other recycled actresses in this film, a famous opera singer introduced in a party scene. Her costume looks quite a bit like the colours associated with her in *Anatomie de l'enfer.* The regality she represents, dressed as a goddess, speaks of her equally regal and other-worldly essence in the previous film.

Obvious motifs that play significant roles in Breillat's older films—chickens, water, mirrors, blood—connect this film with her overall filmography. These inclusions both ask viewers and force them (if they have seen her other films) to think back to the other instances where she has used these performers and symbols. *Une vieille maîtresse* works

like a cycle which constantly refers back to itself and to its own artificiality (it shows the presence of its author). It places the blatant Romantic discourse of *Une vieille maîtresse* within her previous work. This back-and-forth synergy, yet another value of Romantic thought, is a major theme of the film. The Romantic obsession with origins, and with understanding the workings of human interactions on a more universal level, is also highlighted. Breillat's subject matter and expressionistic style go back to an earlier time. This preoccupation with the problematic dynamics between the sexes is not just a contemporary phenomenon; it is shared by people throughout the ages.

Not only does the entire film function as a reflection of Breillat's previous work, but within the film itself there are endless connections between sections of the plot and between characters that present these elements as inextricably linked. *Une vieille maîtresse* epitomizes the dialectical opposition of Schlegel's logic. It presents a world of both finite and infinite forces, and how these interrelate in an overlapping, cyclical manner.

Ryno as a Narcissist

Ryno de Marigny, arguably the leading character in the film, is a narcissist. Half of the film is from his point of view, but he is not introduced until relatively late in the narrative compared to the introduction of other characters. The first encounter onscreen between de Marigny and Vellini presents him as an unlikeable character. After Vellini is antagonized by de Prony's taunts regarding the upcoming marriage between her long-time lover and a younger woman of high aristocratic ranking, Vellini emotionally breaks down in the presence of de Marigny. He consoles her at first by saying, "What do they know about us?" Afterwards, Hermangarde is shown in a series of takes to be waiting patiently for him since they had an appointment at that time. These are intercut with images of

Vellini and de Marigny having sex on a rug made of a tiger hide. He then dishes out a series of very hurtful insults to her before dumping her, according to him, for forever. She has lost any purpose for him and she is replaced even though he is not exactly totally faithful to Hermangarde during their engagement either.

In recounting to the Marquise de Flers the history of his ten-year-long relationship with Vellini, de Marigny reveals himself as having been even more of a narcissist when he was younger. At the age of twenty, he was spending all of his time acquiring women and gambling. The women he would get, and one example is shown, were too easy, according to him, because they felt abandoned by their husbands, and this made them lacking in character. (One reason for this could be that courtly life did not encourage the self-development of females). He had grown bored of all of these facile conquests. He accepts the "challenge" of "seducing a real woman," or so Vellini is described by the Vicomte de Mareuil. The staging of Vellini and de Marigny's first recognition of each other suggests a battle between his predatory will to overpower her and her thwarting of his advances. On the other hand, he is also established here as her victim. She is the one really in power at this point in their relationship. This is suggested by the use of a low angle shot from his perspective while he is looking up at her while she is seated in her carriage. The music which plays evokes an ominous tone for the future of their relationship. Her repulsion of him is a result of her overhearing him insult her for being both extremely ugly and "moricaude"[xi] to de Mareuil. They experience attraction and disgust at the same time for each other.

She vocally identifies his weakness while breaking a glass with her bare hands at the dinner table of the costume party: his "suffisance"[xii] is exactly what she manipulates into

overpowering him. Her body language while he is near her reveals her disdainful feelings for him. She ignores his presence; she cuts him off in mid-speech. Being a narcissist, he cannot stand being unable to triumph over someone who is so ugly (she is described as ugly in the novel) and who is married to a much older man (suggesting that this should be an easy win). This is augmented by the backgammon scene where he loses everything to the Baron de Nestley while Vellini, displaying exceedingly warm affection towards her husband, taunts and blows cigar smoke into de Marigny's face. Despite saying assuredly to his friend the Vicomte that he would not lose any of his money in the game, he loses much of it. He is spurred on by the heightened challenge of winning over Vellini because she forces him to work to win her over. The heightened challenge she creates elevates her worthiness as a reward should he succeed in winning her over. Not so dissimilarly from Marie in *Romance*, de Marigny is motivated to win over Vellini because he wants to reclaim the self-confidence she has taken away from him. Superficially, he calls his pursuit of Vellini "his cause" and "the only thing he has left to live for" to de Mareuil. There is an obvious lack of sincerity in his use of these words. We are aware of what initially spurs him into action—a dare. The smirk on his face while making these declarations to the Vicomte also reveals the inauthenticity of his proclaimed sentiments.

De Marigny enjoys being a spectacle. Events become increasingly dramatic once he forces Vellini to kiss him, followed by his striking of the Baron's face with a whip. It makes him seem like a man of deep feeling, but really he is just trying to attain the object of his goal, and to keep up an aggrandized presentation of himself. He stops his comrades from disallowing her to attend the duel because he knows it is what she wants. He allows the Baron to shoot him because anything could happen—it makes him look like a hero.

During an earlier scene, Vellini reveals to de Marigny that she desires longevity, so he pretends to offer this to her. He will go to any length because, ultimately, he cannot stand losing.

Like previous narcissistic males portrayed in Breillat's films, such as the Man in *Anatomie de l'enfer* and Paul in *Romance*, Ryno enjoys the bravado of recounting his sexual conquests. While having sex with Vellini, he brags about what makes him attracted to the Comtesse de Mendoza. (Apparently, he is attracted to the sacrifice she makes in succumbing to him despite not taking pleasure in the sexual act). Vellini then uses this information to manipulate his vanity. As a result, Vellini succeeds in breaking up the relationship between the Comtesse and de Marigny. He is blind to his own faults, and his self-love leads him to hurt those who love him because his self-interest is more important to him.

The transgression of narcissism in the leading male character goes a step further in *Une vieille maîtresse* than in any of Breillat's other films. In *Romance*, Paul divulges a little about his inner workings before being blown up by Marie. However, this could be interpreted as being too alienating to some of her male viewers since it is so harsh. In *Anatomie de l'enfer*, the Man is transformed by actually looking at the Woman, and this changes his inner constitution. The problem with *Anatomie de l'enfer* is that it is an abstraction of Breillat's philosophy and too abstruse to be accessible to the majority of audiences. In *Une vieille maîtresse*, de Marigny enters into the contract last seen in *Anatomie de l'enfer* without totally realizing what he has done. While de Marigny is recuperating in bed, Breillat takes great effort to suggest the importance of the cook's bleeding of a chicken into a white teacup, which the camera zooms in on while a fire burns

behind her in a fireplace. (Passion, fieriness, and the Four Humours will be discussed at further length later on in the chapter). A goblet is then shown in close-up to have the chicken's blood poured into it, and then it is elegantly presented by a butler to de Marigny for his consumption. In order to become stronger, he must drink the chicken's blood. In *Une vraie jeune fille*, women are explicitly equated with chickens. Breillat has been quoted as saying that in drinking the menstrual blood of the Woman, the Man of *Anatomie de l'enfer* enters into a contract where he must watch her where she is unwatchable. He is then inevitably moved to feelings of closeness to her despite his initial objectivity. The staging of the chicken blood in the goblet in *Une vieille maîtresse* marks de Marigny's entrance into the realm of the female. He needs the woman (the blood) and the ability of self-reflection to become stronger and more evolved. Not only that, but the thought of Vellini, and her late night adulterous meetings with him, helps him to physically recover. The close-up of his wound is reminiscent of a line the Woman speaks in *Anatomie de l'enfer* in discussing female genitalia: when it menstruates it looks like a wound, which disheartens men. The removal of the bullet is visually very similar to the close-up of the Woman's vagina as it expels a stone dildo. Ryno is effeminized by this reminder of his mortality. It is under these circumstances that he enters into an affair that spans a decade with Vellini.

Subjectivity

It is in this film that the viewer is given the opportunity for the first time to experience extended first-person narration by the character that would normally be considered the antagonist in one of Breillat's films. The Man in *Anatomie de l'enfer* expresses his thoughts frequently through confessional dialogue with the Woman. However, his

thoughts are read by Breillat using voice-over narration. The dialogue of *Anatomie de l'enfer* is also highly literary and dense. It reads more like a treatise rather than a subjective experience. The Marquise de Flers, a representative of the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, plays the role of judge to de Marigny's confession. He is never shown looking at himself through mirrors the way women usually are in Breillat's films. The lack of insight into Vellini's thoughts contributes to our difficulty in ascertaining how to interpret the ending of the film in terms of female empowerment. She is shown on several occasions to peer deeply into mirrors during integral points in the film although the thoughts which would usually accompany these types of shots are missing (Fig. IV.I). De Marigny's subjectivity is equally partial: he recollects events that are not his immediate reactions, only responses at the request of the Marquise and at the threat of losing access to Hermangarde. He confesses for her acceptance and not necessarily for the right reasons. He is subtle in his use of language. For example, when blatantly asked how long it has been since Vellini was his mistress he immediately responds that she has not been for a very long time (which is a lie since he was with her the night before), to which he follows with a chuckle, a pause, and then proceeds to explain that she has not been in his heart for a very long time. He is not a reliable narrator. The Marquise seems deceived despite being the person who is supposed to assess his quality as a suitor, and despite being old enough to know better. She accepts his answers a little too quickly. She interprets his long lasting tumultuous relationship with Vellini as proof that he will bring the same endurance and depth of feeling to his marriage with her granddaughter. This marriage is to be her "chef d'oeuvre," a true fiction of artistic merit. Her two closest confidantes, the Comtesse d'Artelles and the Viconte de Prony, repeatedly criticize her choice of a well-known

penniless libertine as the husband of "la fleuron de l'aristocratie." De Prony even suggests that this marriage is the product of the Marquise's reading of too much "lovey-dovey" romantic literature (all in the realm of the fantastic). De Marigny's highly personal and emotional disclosure exemplifies the Romantic valuing of the personal, but such confidentiality would not have transpired before this time between an aristocrat and her granddaughter's potential husband. The personal exchange between de Marigny and de Flers shocks other characters such as d'Artelles because it was an unheard-of practice. Yet at the same time this personal exchange is partly what wins over the Marquise.

The fluidity of time, the possibility of it being both fatalistically predetermined and hazardously inexplicable, plays an important role in *Une vieille maîtresse*. The past, present, and future fall into one another. The middle of the film, de Marigny's recounting of his story with Vellini, is sandwiched by a more immediate past and future. Within the visual representation of his story, there are many connections between what has just happened within the plot and what will happen after the wedding. For example, he is shown sitting in the same opera box as Vellini at a point in the narrative before he even meets her for the first time. Following this, he is shown descending the stairs to escape the amorous advances of a married woman. In a sequence that takes place outside of either his or the Marquise's viewing, Vellini mounts the same stairs. The scene is shot in exactly the same way as the one with de Marigny with the exception of Vellini being followed by a brood of admirers. She is seated with these other lovers in the same box de Marigny had been seated in with his earlier paramour. The angle of the balcony's balustrade, the direction of the characters' gazes, and the types of editing processes used in no way suggest that this portrayal of Vellini is through either the Marquise's or de Marigny's

subjectivity—the two characters who participated in the envisioning of the earlier shots. If anything, these sequences show how both Vellini and de Marigny, bored with other lovers, are inextricably bound by some unknown cosmic law, and how neither of them feels at ease in the mecca of bourgeois high society, the Opera, where people go to show off and to gossip about others. In a sense, each is too individualistic, too anti-social, too animalistic, too Romantic, to fully integrate into this world of conformity (Fig. IV.II).

Vellini and Marigny as Equals

After both Vellini and Marigny cheat on their spouses, to whom each outwardly appears to be highly devoted, more similarities are visually created between these two lovers. Vellini and de Marigny are shown to have two liaisons with one another at dusk, a decade apart from the other. Vellini, earlier in the plot, and then de Marigny when he is married, sneak back to their spouses before sunrise. Even though the locations are different, each character is shown to cautiously mount staircases which are identical in the direction in which they wind, consequently creating another link between Vellini and de Marigny. Their history as a couple repeats itself. He initially pursues her against her will while she is happily married, but eventually she succumbs to him. Vellini pursues him while he is happily married. He returns to her despite swearing he never would. Each willingly goes to the extreme lengths of self-humiliation, even to the point of death (de Marigny with the duel, and Vellini by either throwing herself onto the rocks or encouraging him to shoot her).

This sense of balance is not only created temporally, it is also suggested by the androgyny of both characters. "Beauty," says Breillat, "is always feminine," an idea to which the extended close-ups of the smooth-faced, delicate-featured de Marigny pay

homage. Vellini, during the costume party, says to the opera singer, "I hate all that is feminine except when it is found in young men," after correcting her identification of her costume as "une diablesse" rather than "un diable." Curiously, we never learn Vellini's first name. Rather, she goes by her family name which oftentimes is a mode of address reserved for men, which also adds a touch of notoriety to her persona. It places her in a position above the normal world of women. She occasionally dresses as a man, smokes cigars, and participates in activities usually reserved for men (e.g., fishing). She has the freedom of a man by being financially independent.

Vellini breaks the socialized "nature" of what it means to be a girl by embracing her own moral code regarding her sexuality. She owns it and she is unafraid to assert herself despite being considerably aged (for that time) and supposedly ugly. It is written on her body: she wears a huge pink camellia flower in her hair (it is basically a stand-in for vaginal sexual arousal). She even curls two strands of hair on her forehead into the shape of a heart, (or it could symbolically refer to either the curvature of her bosom or bottom). There are identical visual markers that are associated with Vellini and Robert from *Romance*. Interestingly, both of these characters are associated with fulfilling sexual desire, instructiveness, and ugliness. She is able to keep de Marigny because, like Robert with Marie, her trick is to not make him feel tied down to her. Elements of the décor of Robert's apartment, such as statuettes of upwardly coiling snakes, are found again in Vellini's boudoir. A similar use of colour and textures—deep reds and mahogany woods—are associated with each of them. Animal prints and animal skins abound in her wardrobe and belongings. Her behaviour, which reveals all that she is feeling, is very instinctive like an animal's. This lack of self-restraint, its implied sincerity, contributes to her being "the

crazy girl that no one can resist," as de Marigny says during a sequence shared with Vellini in a garden. There is the suggestion she may even sleep with women when she shares a kiss on the lips with her servant. She wields a great deal of power over her first husband and over de Marigny. Men flock to her as easily as women do to de Marigny. She is like a supernatural force. While smoking a chicha pipe in some unnamed garden (she is often portrayed within natural environments), she reveals her boredom with her other male lovers who seem completely devoted to her. She seems to like the chase, the feeling of never quite being solely possessed by one lover, just as much as de Marigny does.

Vellini and de Marigny share many of the attributes valued by Romanticism. Both characters carve their own way through society by living life according to their own terms. Notions of hazard, that life is a gamble, are best embodied by de Marigny. These two lovers are united by a shared embrace of their emotional selves. Vellini may be the more passionate of the two, as well as the more wilful and sincere individual in her affections and mannerisms, but together they create the best Romantic couple due to the mixing of their masculine and feminine attributes.

One aspect of the characterization of Vellini that seems problematic in relation to Breillat's overall artistic vision is her presentation as being a demonic Other. Why does the sexually assertive woman necessarily have to be an exoticized Saracen? She is described as being of partial Arab descent (interestingly two of the sexually undesirable or sexually harmful males in *Romance* are also North African or Middle Eastern—the rapist and the man who penetrates Marie during the brothel scene), and consequently she, who is brown skinned, is also considered not very good-looking. Her outsiderness is made more explicit when she moves to Algeria with de Marigny to escape the confines of Parisian social life.

This was unheard of at the time. Integrating into the Berber life, they live in a hut surrounded by uncivilized desert sands. She adopts the dress and the toilette of the neighbouring women (e.g., charcoaled eyes, metal coins as jewellery). Upon returning to Paris, she continues to wear North African clothing and to practice some Algerian customs, or she chooses the vividly coloured clothing of Spain which also has an extensive overlapping history with Arabian culture.

Her lineage—the product of an extra-marital affair between an Italian princess and a Spanish bullfighter—suggests that a certain Mediterranean fiery temperament runs through her veins. For many centuries, including the time the novel from which *Une vieille maîtresse* was adapted was written, belief in the Four Humours was considered a norm in medical practice. It is a system of belief that linked human sickness, physiognomy, and personality traits to a person's type of blood. Often described as "la déesse de la caprice," Vellini would be categorized as choleric because of her over-the-top display of passion and power. She exhibits considerable will power. However, there is some suggestion that her strengths are not within her control. Instead, they could be attributed to her physical constitution.

While dressed as a devil, Vellini is shown to be playing with tarot cards. Within the tarot deck, there is a card called "the Devil," which is an inversion of "the Lovers" card. This card has many associations and different authors claim different connotations for it. Essentially, this reference plays into the whole argument of Romantic Irony. It presents a couple bound together by chains to the Devil and to each other, suggesting bondage to one another. The couple's stance mimics the pose of the couple on the Lovers card who are presented as seeking the path towards God and enlightenment through each other. Sex,

darkness, and the occult are some of the Devil card's signifieds. Curiously enough, it is often connected to the astrological sign of Scorpio, which is a water sign although it is often associated with desert landscapes, like Algeria, because that is where scorpions are found (like the one that kills their daughter). While Hermangarde and de Marigny are on honeymoon in Normandy, a letter arrives from Vellini dated November 12th, which lies within the dates allotted to this astrological sign. It might seem inappropriate or outdated to bring these ideas into what should be a serious academic interpretation of film. However, at one point in time, they were taken very seriously by society at large. Many Romantics experimented with alternative ways of understanding life including the occult. These symbols and references overlap extensively throughout *Une vieille maîtresse*, to such an extent that it is hard not to take notice of them. Moreover, they suggest a more important theme presented by *Une vieille maîtresse*—how man is a part of nature rather than above it. This fear is at the core of narcissistic masculine desire, according to Breillat. On the other hand, the biological or pre-determined fatalism the astrological motifs suggest do not fit well within the more existential bent of Breillat's vision. Perhaps this inconsistency can be attributed to the filmic version being an adaptation of a historically dated text, or to the notion of contradiction within Romantic Irony.

The character of Vellini, who is associated with the mysterious power of nature, is the one who teaches de Marigny, in his own words, how to love. Drawn into "the habit" — once again in his words—of his previous affections for Vellini, he inevitably finds himself swept into her absolutist take on love. The film's temporality suggests these characters function in a world that is full of cycles that dictate the outcome of their lives and relationships, which are ultimately out of their control. The one character that is most

closely associated with these near supernatural patterns, Vellini, seems to have the greatest hold over the workings of her world than any other. She is the one who is able to break through the barriers within de Marigny that have stopped him from realizing the potentiality of the Romantic love ideal. United they form the right Romantic couple for these reasons.

The wedding sequence presents an interesting dilemma regarding interpretation for the audience. Two highly misogynistic passages from the Bible are read during the ceremony. The first reading is from the Gospel according to Matthew that outlines the illegitimacy of adultery. The altar boy reads that people who enter into marriage must realize that they have a duty to God to remain faithful, and that those who are unable to maintain these vows should remain single. A man is allowed to break their vows if his wife is found to be a prostitute or an adulterer—these are the only grounds for divorce. The reading of this passage brings up some interesting questions within the discourse of the film's narrative.

There are two scenes, the first with Vellini and de Marigny at a church while she prays, and the second with de Marigny and Hermangarde at the altar getting married, which mirror each other exactly. This creates an interesting link between Vellini and Hermangarde. Vellini, who cannot stay with the husband she no longer loves after falling for de Marigny, is left by him. She has no other choice but to enter into prostitution as a result of following her heart. After being with de Marigny for a decade, the setup of this scene leaves one questioning. Once again the virgin-whore dichotomy is attacked by Breillat. Is de Marigny's marriage with Hermangarde, which came after "la liaison qui existe" with Vellini, the truly adulterous arrangement? The circumstances which led

Vellini into her current predicament are not accounted for by this reading of the scripture, which points to the passage's hypocrisy.

What is even more disturbing is the staging of the women while the second even more misogynistic passage is read by the priest. It describes how women were made for men, and how they must veil themselves because of their obscenity and lower status. While this is read, the Marquise is shown crying from the happiness of the moment which is in direct contrast with the content of the priest's words. Hermangarde, who is veiled, is centered onscreen, beaming from experiencing what is probably one of the happiest days in her life. The sequence ends with a shot of Vellini who has been up in the balconies all along watching the ceremony with an air of confrontation. The positioning of Vellini at the end of this sequence, jeering, suggests the ironic component of the sequence with a strong Romantic aura.

Vellini is almost always surrounded by natural or external environs—eating ice cream in the square, riding her horse through the Bois du Bologne, at the duel by the pond, in some undisclosed garden (twice), in the Algerian outback, by the coastal waters of Normandy. Even when she is indoors, she is usually surrounded by indicators of the natural, or she is simply naked and having sex. Hermangarde, on the other hand, is almost always presented indoors dutifully within the realm of domesticity. She seems unable to withstand the world outside of the aristocracy. She has a hard time riding her horse while trailing de Marigny. Later on, when she is advised to not go out since she might catch a draft, Hermangarde sees Vellini in the distance by the cliff which immediately breaks her heart.. When Hermangarde is naked, her aesthetically offensive parts (her underarms, her pubic hair) are hidden, as is most of her body when she is diagnosed with a miscarriage.

She quickly covers her bloodied legs after being attended to by her doctor. De Marigny's relationship with Vellini stands the test of time because it incorporates more of the real—she knows the real basis of his desires. The woman that wins presents the Romantically Ironic version in which the ideal is inevitably tainted by the real: the two are inseparable.

Nature

A link is made between the natural environment and de Marigny's fluctuating behaviour. The love of men seems to be as fleeting as the changes in the seasons or as the currents of the tides. Hermangarde jokingly describes herself as "la femme de l'amoureux de la mer" while on honeymoon far from the perceived dangers of "le voisinage de cette femme." De Marigny's name sounds like the French words for sea and swamp (*mer* and *marais* respectively). Water is often a signifier for the female unconscious in Breillat's films. Characters repeatedly return to the ocean when in deep need of reflection or when their work in transforming the male psyche is completed. De Marigny cannot escape the nets of Vellini, who has now become a fisherwoman, because the sentiment for her still exists within him. She knows his mind so well that she can predict his behaviour. Hermangarde is warned before discovering Vellini's presence that she is in a place where "le temps change vite." De Marigny shortly thereafter sleeps with Vellini. His consciousness is linked with the quick changeability of his surrounding environment. While having tea with his wife, he broods about having an ill-fated destiny, suggesting that these actions were somehow out of his control.

Cycles are highlighted once again within the concluding sequence of *Une vieille maîtresse*. D'Artelles and de Prony are shown being driven in a carriage discussing the topic of this love triangle. The film began almost identically with a similar carriage scene

with these two characters, but now d'Artelles, departing from her previously caustic self, is thoroughly surprised by de Marigny's return to Vellini. She says that she had never seen a love as great as the one de Marigny displayed for his wife. De Prony, on the other hand, said his return to Vellini was as calculable as an eclipse. The end results of relationships are intertwined with nature and the environment.

Conclusion

Une vieille maîtresse, compared to the rest of Breillat's films, exemplifies Romantic values and a Romantic aesthetic the best. The endlessly layered connections made between elements within this and her other films visually create a style that reflects the Romantic Period's beliefs regarding the nature of truth and reality. Cycles are emphasized in a number of ways that point to ironic influences in this world. The differences between characters, especially between Vellini, de Marigny, and Hermangarde, are not rigidly defined. The spatial positioning of sequences shared between these characters is influential in posing questions regarding the morality of masculine narcissism and the virgin-whore paradigm. Symbols for nature play a more significant role in presenting a world in which the narcissist male is subservient. This film highlights the importance of the personal in its representation of male subjectivity. This also helps to balance out the overwhelmingly female perspective usually presented by her films. *Une vieille maîtresse* marks a transition in Breillat's filmography where some of the barriers that previously stopped the attainment of the Romantic ideal in her other films—female self-hatred and male narcissism—are now confronted with a greater resolve.

Conclusion

Relying heavily on interviews Breillat has given about her work, and relying on paradoxical Romantic concepts, this study has tried to establish links between these ideas and her films. The redemptive qualities of the imagination, the significance of introspection, the role of the will and the individual, the elevation of elements associated with the body, and the socialization of our consciousnesses are Romantic themes that I have discussed through the analysis of four of her films: *Une vraie jeune fille*, *Romance*, *Anatomie de l'enfer*, and *Une vieille maîtresse*. Breillat employs irony, the conflict between elements, as a means of exploring truth. It is through contradiction that she hopes to provoke the viewer into a more profound state of personal reflection rather than creating a safe, escapist haven during the screening of one of her films. This strategy of unsettling points to her belief in the social role of art.

Breillat's first film, *Une vraie jeune fille*, explores the ambiguity in identity formation. The social ideas of what it means to be a girl versus the physical changes experienced by Alice during puberty are portrayed through the inclusion of personal subject matter. Through a defiant will and a vivid imagination, Alice attempts to reconcile how she is seen by others with her own desires. The blurring of reality/imagination, the use of motifs (like mirrors), the emphasis on the tactile (empirical knowledge acquired through a journey), and the referencing to writing are stylistic choices made by Breillat that help to recreate a Romanticized film aesthetic. Alice's highest goal, to unite with Jim, a fictitious lover, is pursued as a means of owning her desires and of deflecting the oppression of being home for the holidays. Unfortunately, the ambivalent tone of the film's conclusion is not optimistic because it suggests Alice's resistance is defeated by her social environment.

Romance, Breillat's most critically acclaimed film, is a continuation of some of *Une vraie jeune fille*'s themes. Marie, a twenty-something year old elementary schoolteacher, is unhappy in her relationship with Paul. This unhappiness stems from her own self-hatred, which is rooted in feeling ashamed by her female body. This is augmented by Paul's mistreatment of her. The viewer is invited into the recesses of Marie's mind as she strives to understand the core of her unhappiness. Through extensive introspection and adulterous escapades, Marie begins to become more whole once she can accept her sexuality with her self-respect. Breillat attempts to confront the viewer in several contradictory, and cinematically unconventional, situations regarding Marie's sexual desires and her identity. The film's conclusion suggests Marie's quest for empowerment has been successful since she is no longer dependent on her boyfriend's approval in order to feel secure with herself.

Anatomie de l'enfer, the most difficult of Breillat's work to understand and to interpret, is an attempt to place Breillat's usual preoccupations within the format of a myth. Using *Romance*'s screenplay and her novel, *Pornocratie*, *Anatomie de l'enfer* is meant to be an abstraction of the role socialization, or the power of the gaze and the internalizations of looks, has on the incompatibilities between the sexes. The Man is moved to tenderness by confronting the "obscene" body of the Woman. Breillat more explicitly explains in interviews how this is her goal in making films: to provoke a transgression of beliefs in male/female viewers that perpetuate strife in heterosexual relationships. Irony plays less of a role in this piece compared to her other films. *Anatomie de l'enfer* ends looking like a Romantic painting.

Une vieille maîtresse offers the closest representation of the attainment of the Romantic love ideal in any of Breillat's films. The film's cyclical representation of

characters and events are presented as ambiguous for this reason. Divisions between character types and the division between humankind from nature are not clearly defined. It is an ironic stylistic device that raises moral issues for interpretation. The leading male character, Ryno de Marigny, is transformed the most in comparison to any of Breillat's previous male characters. He is united with Vellini, his most compatible choice, because he transgresses his initial overly esteemed sense of self-importance.

Without disputing the legitimacy of her reasoning, there are a few issues Catherine Breillat fails to address in the messages she communicates through her films. How can we ever ascertain what is a more natural form of sexual expression? Is the debunking of corporeal shame sufficient? How will we ever know if we get there? She does not address the needs of people who do not fall within her presentation of heterosexual relations. She fails to realize some of the social contexts that have shaped her vision. The rise of feminism in the Western World has affected the construction of masculinity as well. Not all men are like the ones she presents as archetypes in her films. Conversely, not all women in reality fit into Breillat's depictions of females either. It might be to her benefit to create a film that investigates the socialized processing of becoming masculine more closely in a way that does not require the integration of women into the plot.

Breillat's Romantic-styled philosophy seems to resonate through the work of several of her French contemporaries. Philippe Grandrieux, who directed *Sombre* (1998), *Une vie nouvelle* (2002), and *Un lac* (2008), adopts a highly tactile aesthetic for his excursions into questions on the division between mankind and the animal world. His blurring of impulse and nightmare into realistic narratives veers towards a more experimental style than the films of Breillat. Bruno Dumont, who I believe produces work very similar to hers, also

investigates the truths that arise through the documentation of conflict between humankind's conception of self with the natural environment. He does this primarily by employing non-actors, playing with genre, adopting a series of rhythmic long takes that allow the activity that happens on-site while filming to create his storylines. Gaspar Noé's work falls within notions of the Gothic (a subcategory of Romantic literature). He presents us with the monstrous sides of our being in order to shake us to the core. All of these filmmakers are creating exciting texts that make visual the major quandary of occidental philosophy: the division between mind and body.

I have provided detailed accounts of four key films by Catherine Breillat in relation to her oft-stated intentions of reviving a Romantic sensibility, ethics, and aesthetics in the cinematic portrayal of gender relations. In doing so, I hope that I have made a small contribution towards the understanding of this major, late twentieth and early twenty-first century film director.

Endnotes

[i]Cark (Def.): Perturb, unhinge, disquiet, trouble, distract.

[ii] Bidochon (Def.): Based on the context it is used in, it refers to traditional family structures that reflect a bourgeois (and therefore mediocre) ideology.

[iii] Systemized theories of thought.

[iv] Unfortunately, *Tapage Nocturne* is unavailable in North America. Based on the very few articles written on this movie, it seems very similar to *Romance*. There is a young couple. The female, Solange, feels ignored by her lover, and she pursues numerous sexual partners in order to vindicate her feelings of emptiness. It is difficult to engage in any further discussion of this film with scarcely any information on it.

[v] Bitte (Def.): German for the word "please."

[vi] Even though it appears to be a music video in the film, the advent of this medium came after the release date of the film. Scopophones did exist although the musical footage that would play on these would not have played on television.

[vii] The director of cinema at Arte, which is the French-German cultural television channel known for its leftist leanings (Camhi 13:2).

[viii] Her statement suggests that there are many critics who make personal attacks on her, like the previous example.

[ix] Earlier in the storyline, before embarking on her infidelities, she says through voice-over that she would not have children with anybody other than Paul. We see the rapist ejaculate into her, and she has many more sexual encounters with Robert than she does with Paul. Is Paul really the father or is it just her wishful thinking?

[x] Paul the Apostle was the founder of the Christian Church. Breillat often refers to the role of the Catholic Church in perpetuating hatred towards women and in making sexual love sinful. Marie's boyfriend, the stranger she sleeps with, her baby, and then the bartender in *Anatomie de l'enfer* are all named Paul.

[xi] Moricaude (Def.): Brown skinned like a Moor.

[xii] Suffisance (Def.): His high sense of self-importance.

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Appendix

Chapter One: *Une vraie jeune fille*

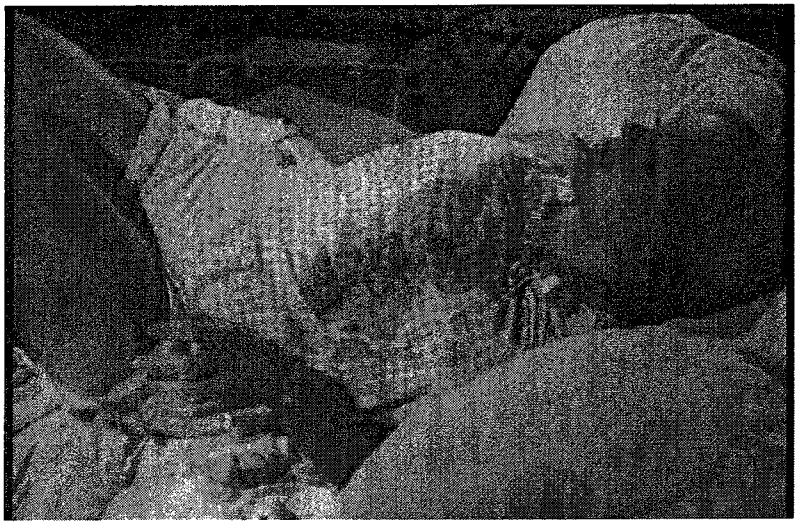
I.I

Striking similarities between Breillat's and Carroll's Alices.

I.II

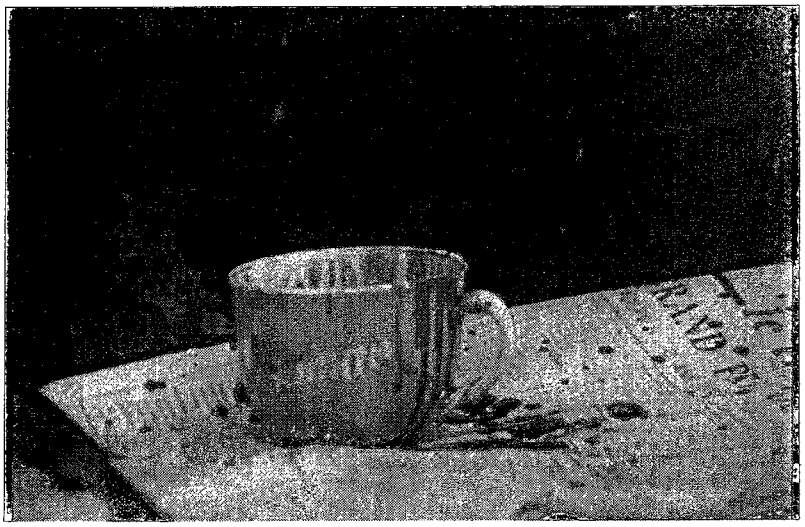
The exploration of personal identity vis-à-vis sexuality, socialization and introspection.

I.III



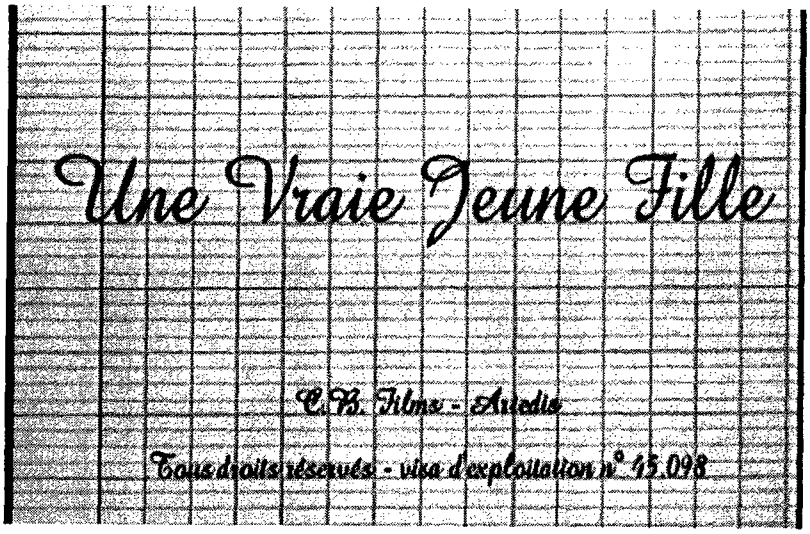
Alice's pre-occupation with tactile sensuality.

I.IV



The relationship between poultry, motherhood and female blood.

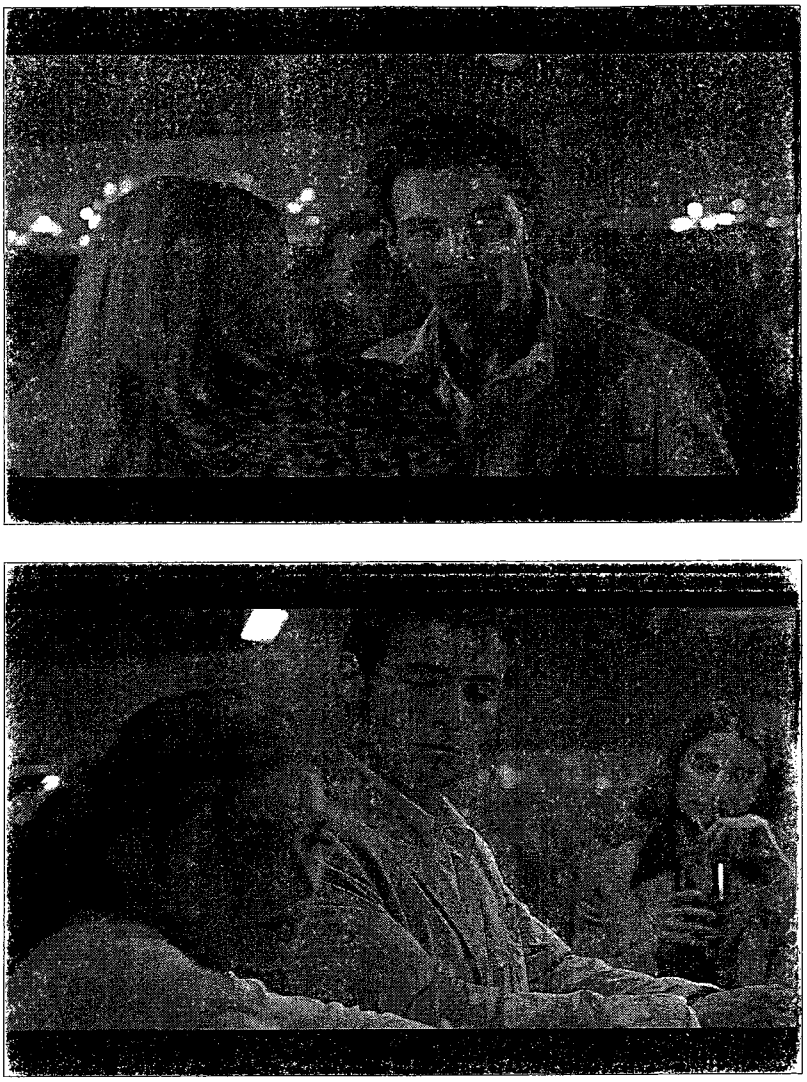
I.V



Diary writing: the importance of subjectivity in building social resistance and personal identity.

Chapter Two : *Romance*

II.I

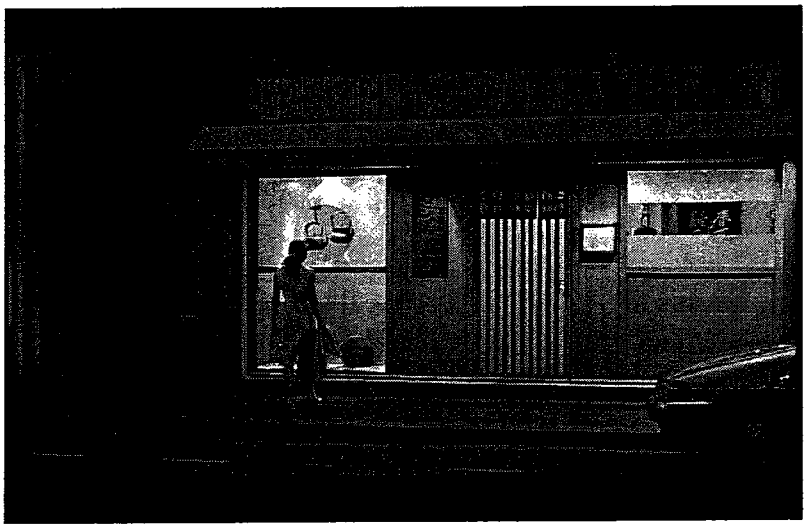


Mr. Matador: The look of conquest.

II.II

The sex act and male narcissism.

II.III

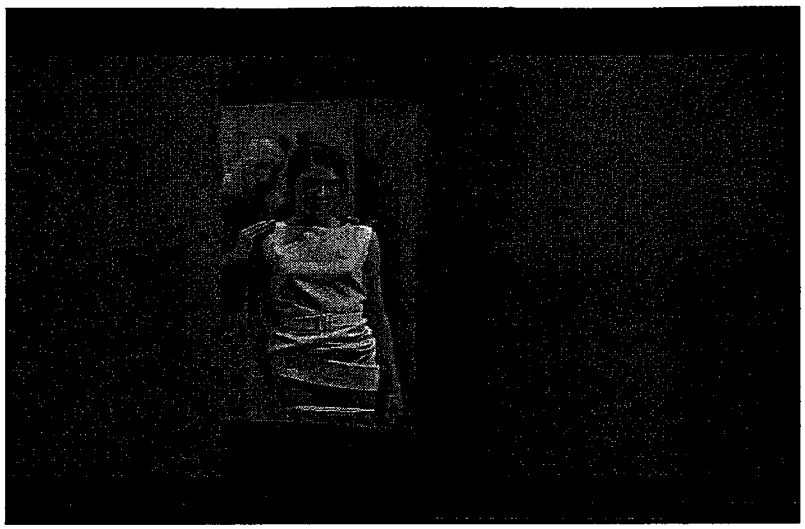


The circle motif and a Romantic worldview.

II.IV

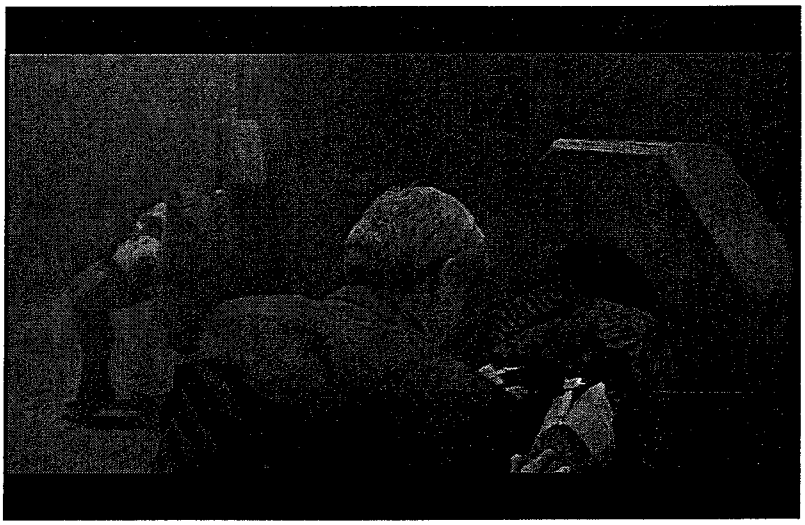
Circle motifs abound in Robert's apartment.

II.V



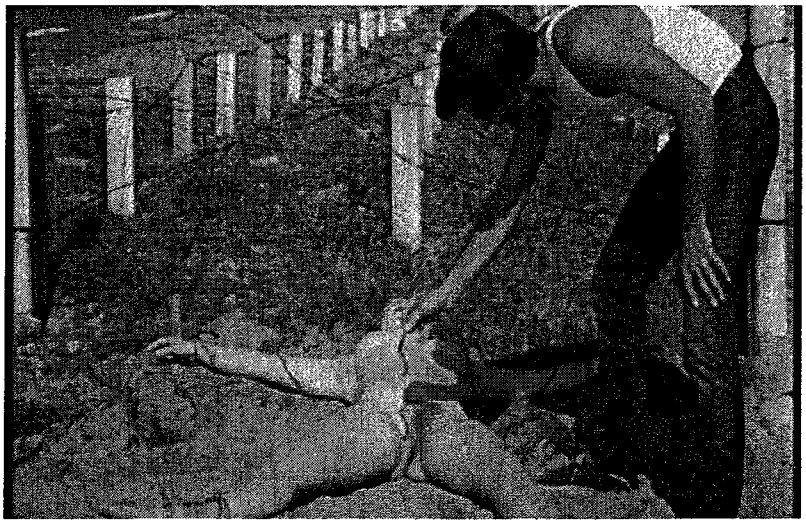
Becoming whole: the role of mirrors and looking in self-acceptance.

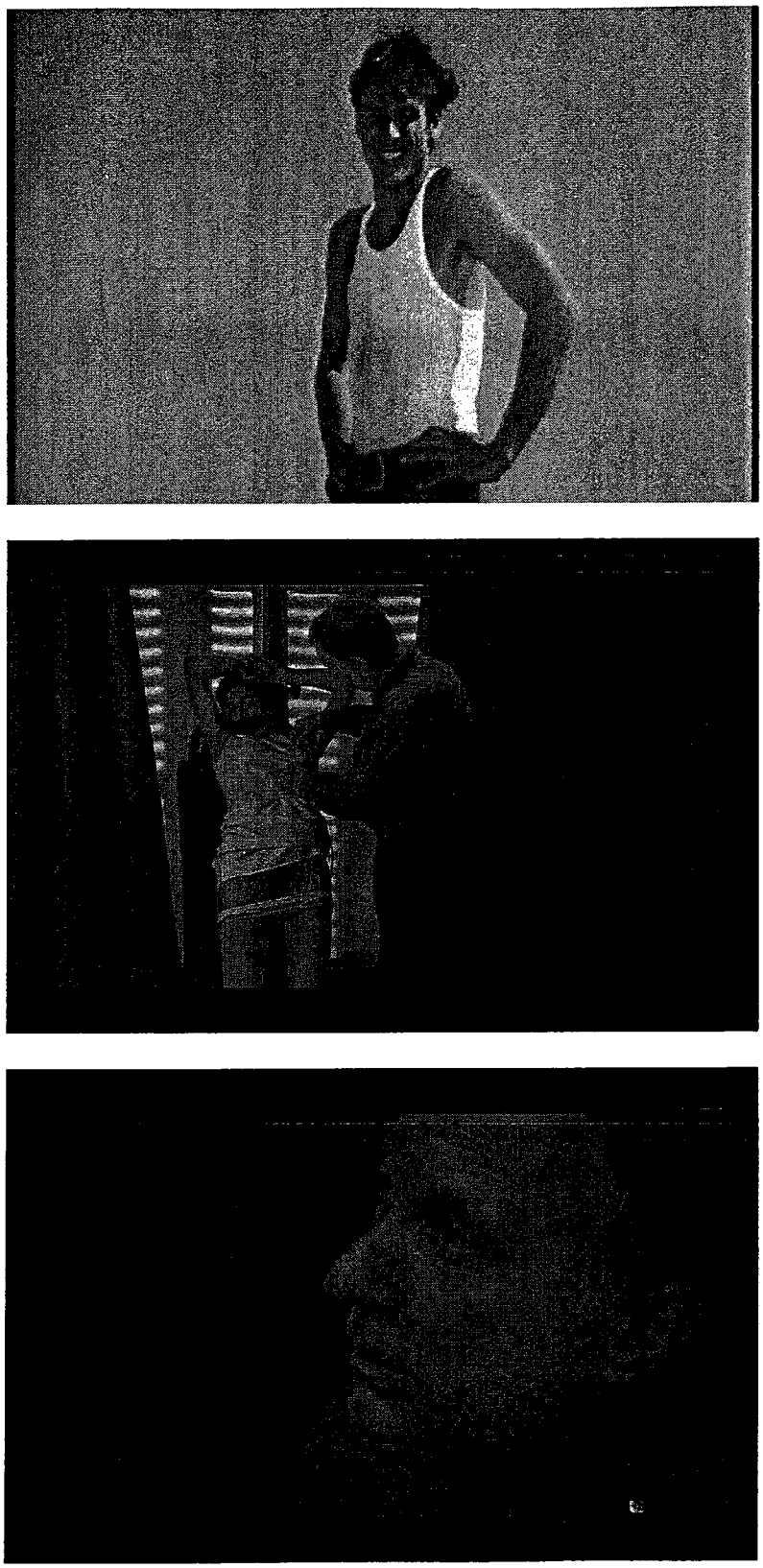
I.VI



The virgin/whore dichotomy made visually explicit.

II.VII





The female mind/body division: overcoming corporeal shame.

II.VIII

Irony: the conflict between the ideal and the real.

Chapter Three: *Anatomie de l'enfer*

III.I

The female sex, Courbet and Naturalism.

III.II

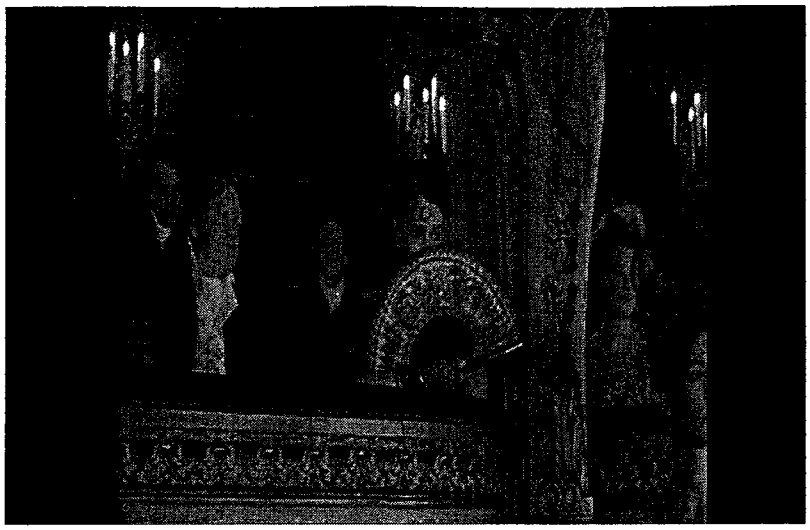
Shift: The Man meets the Romantic unconscious.

Chapter Four: *Une vieille maîtresse*

IV.I

The mirror motif is continued without the inclusion of female inner dialogue.

IV.II



Lapse in space/time: Vellini and de Marigny as cosmically bound.