**Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 21-25**

# *Fat Girl*: Fusion, confusion, and the primal scene re-configured

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Filmmaker, novelist and screenwriter Catherine Breillat has been described as a "porno auteuriste," an *enfant terrible* who published an erotic novel (*L'Homme Facile*) at age 17 and appeared in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1982) as a young actress – a "notorious transgressor" whose films often elicit aggressive responses from audiences in their graphic depiction of female sexuality, particularly as they explore the erotic lives of adolescent girls. In her 2001 film *Fat Girl* (released in France as *A Ma Soeur!*) she continues her sexual investigation with a simple story of two sisters, the beautiful 15-year old Elena, and 12 year-old overweight Anais, during a family vacation at a seaside resort where Elena is seduced by Fernando, an Italian law student, as her sister looks on. But this is no typical coming-of-age story. In what has been referred to as the film's "coda," *Fat Girl* ends abruptly with the a series of brutal images during which both Elena and the girls' mother are horrifically murdered at a highway rest stop, suddenly forcing Anais into her own sexual initiation.

Despite Breillat's reputation for explicit sexual imagery, the film works hard to de-eroticize Elena's seduction. Rather (as in her other films, most notably *Romance* (1999), its focus is on the woman as desiring subject rather than fetishistic object of the male gaze. Elena's naked body is neither fragmented by the camera nor is her conventional "anorectic chic" bonyness glamourized; she is no nymphet, a la Kevin Spacey's teenage seductress in *American Beauty* (1999). Breillat shoots the two seduction scenes which are the core of the film's structure (the first is 25 minutes long, 1/3 of total running time) in a series of languid long shots; the camera remains cool and dispassionate – literally keeping its distance as the sexual dance plays against abstract monochromatic green color patterns of the bedroom mise-en-scene. The camera appears to be more interested in documenting the semi-comic, awkward process of adolescent sexual behavior, clinically observing Fernando's calculated caresses and cajolings interspersed with extended conversation as Elena's struggles with her notions of romantic love, respectability, and desire to please her first lover.

Equally important in terms of the privileging of female desire is the film's focus on Elena's active curiosity and engagement of sexual experience, a subversion of the conventional notion of the virgin as innocent victim of the unscrupulous seducer – although it is clear that Fernando indeed has precious few scruples; he runs the gamut of coercive techniques to win his prey – sophistication, threats, sulks,

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protestations of ardor and promises of futurity, finally convincing Elena to first engage in anal intercourse as a "proof of love": "the back way doesn't count" he knowingly reassures her.

The film's central theme then, would appear to be the deconstruction of sexual rituals, organized here around the social myth of virginity. Elena's hesitation to "lose" her virginity makes her vulnerable to Fernando's deception (believing a ring he steals from his mother to be a token of his eternal love) just as her conditioned over-valuation of virginity serves to repress the full expression of her desire. Thus the film interrogates the tension between desire and shame embedded in the construct of virginity, a conflict which Elena seeks to mitigate with romantic notions of love and permanence. After her first night with Fernando, she asks him "Do you love me all the same? Will you wait for me to [pass my exams] so you can marry me?"

This duality is mimicked by Anais as she rehearses her own sexual future; she practices kissing while swimming in the pool, asking an imaginary lover: "How can you disgust me and attract me at the same time?" Later she stares at her pudgy body in the mirror, lifting up her dress to expose her developing breasts, and announces to the image: "Slut!"

But while Anais is forced to postpone her own fantasies of sexual encounter – trapped in the cocoon of her still pre-pubescent round body as she trudges through her dreary summer *ennui* behind her curvaceous sister and passionate boyfriend – as a "fat girl," her social invisibility and marginalization also gives her the ability to penetrate not only Fernando's deception but her sister's self-deception as well. Unlike Elena, who needs to believe that she should only lose her virginity to the man she loves, Anais announces early in the film her own radical sexual ideology: "The first time should be with nobody" … "a boy I don't love." Unlike her sister's sentimental romanticism, Anais is a precocious cynic; she separates sex from love, thinks virginity worship is "stupid," and with a wisdom far beyond her 12 years, comforts the eventually betrayed Elena with the tough truth that her summer seducer has "already forgotten you."[1]

Reading the film as a feminist, ideological, or developmental text on adolescent sexuality, however, is not sufficient to explain the two central elements of its structure: the long seduction scenes at the core, and the abrupt violent conclusion. For illumination here we look to Freud's original formulation of the primal scene, in which the act of *looking* provides the link between the psychoanalytic understanding of sexual development and the spectatorial gaze intrinsic to film theory.

Despite much controversy in the century that followed the publication in 1914 of the Wolf Man case – during which. Freud shifted both from an original insistence that the infant actually *witness* his parents' intercourse to the position that it may be imagined in fantasy (perhaps as a displacement onto the parents of a prior observation of copulating animals) as well as from the initial view that it is not the origin for neurosis but rather universal and "phylogenetic," – the primal scene nonetheless remains fundamental to the psychoanalytic understanding of infantile sexual life, trauma, the Oedipal conflict, and adult psychic development. And central to its importance is the notion that the infant's real or imagined experience of the primal scene contains elements of *both* arousal and fear, pleasure and anxiety, and (later on) curiosity and shame – a mixed bag of responses to be re-enacted throughout subsequent stages of psycho-sexual life. And so it is with Anais, pretending to be asleep in her bed across the room but "peeping" through her fingers to look at the unfolding scene of her sister's lovemaking. Importantly, it is a look that has already been forbidden. Before Fernando's secret arrival in the bedroom, Elena has ordered Anais to go to sleep, warning: "You hear nothing and see nothing." As we watch Anais watch, her gaze mediating the complex nature of this forbidden seeing for the film's spectator, we enter the territory identified in *The Imaginary Signifier* (1975) in which Metz links the pleasures of cinematic spectatorship to scopophilia and the sexual drives – both scopic and invocatory (the pulsion invocante,

[1] In *Romance* the protagonist says: "Love is stupid. It's just a power trip" and states her desire "to be fucked… without any sentimental bullshit."

the desire to hear) rooting it in the tension of the "unauthorized observation" of the primal scene, the keyhole "Peeping Tom" aspect of illicit pleasure that Bazin described as the "quasi-obscenity" (1959) of cinematic voyeurism.

The camera moves from its framing of the couple on Elena's bed to Anais lying, wide awake, in hers; most of the sexual intercourse is then recorded through the long shot from across the room that tells us were are filtering what follows through her point of view. The camera's subject is Anais' face as she processes the sounds we hear in the background – cries of pain from her sister, loud noises and moans from Fernando. Here the privileging of the aural, rather than the visual, may refer us back to Freud's analysis of hysteria in the case of Dora whose trauma derives from the disturbing sounds of her father's heavy breathing in the parental bedroom next door. (It is also interesting to note here, in view of the anal penetration taking place in this scene, Freud's speculation in the *Introductory Lectures* that the primal scene fantasy originates in the child witnessing *more ferarum* – dogs copulating from behind).

In the 2nd, shorter bedroom scene in which Elena decides to allow vaginal penetration, (reflecting developmentally the progression from anal to genital stage) the camera focuses exclusively on Anais in her bed while only the legs of the coital couple are visible on their bed across the room in another continuous long shot. They are filmed in soft blurred focus – as if the event might be taking place in the past or in Anais' fantasy, which would be consistent with Freud's revision of his theory. The sounds of Fernando's panting and groans are augmented in the diegetic space, while this time, Elena remains silent, until finally Anais turns away, curls into a foetal position, and cries. Are the tears for herself, or her sister at this point? Since the film is also interested in the sibling relationship (significantly it was released in France as "A MA SOEUR!; and Breillat herself says it was about "A soul with two bodies") the question of sibling identity fusion – as well as the more obvious rivalry and periodic camaraderie – is thematically and cinemagraphically active throughout and may thus partly explain Anais' tearful response to her sister's painful defloration. In a scene reminiscent of Bergman's *Persona*, Anais and Elena stare into the mirror, Elena noting that despite their striking difference, "I do feel as if I belong to you… Hating you is like hating a part of myself." At other points in the film the two girls' identity appears purposely confused, so at times their voices in dialogue are indistinguishable, or they wear the same color. Anais' tears also serve as yet another reference to the film's ideology – the loss of what Breillat calls Elena's "sentimental ethics" along with her virginity. But the powerful affects contained in the image of Anais' body, convulsively shaking in the foetal position, also enact the rage, impotence, fear and exclusion that mark the other side of the pleasureable voyeurism and arousal that Freud attributed to the primal scene experience. In this context it is important to go beyond sibling fusion to the fact that Elena and her summertime lover serve as parent surrogates within her family: the "real" father appears only briefly, only to bark at his daughters and complain about business to his wife before disappearing back to Paris and his office; the mother is self-absorbed, ineffectual and disorganized, unavailable to either of her children, detached and seemingly clueless as to their inner lives. In contrast, Elena, when not engaging in aggression and competition with her kid sister, is touchingly maternal: Anais reminisces "You played mommy with me when I was a baby" and Elena, (perhaps penitent the morning after her cruel treatment of Anais during her tryst) swaddles her in a towel at the pool and feeds her a huge piece of bread at the breakfast table; later, when Anais is carsick, it is Elena who holds her head while the irritated mother puffs on a cigarette from a distance. In turn, as Anais tags after these parent surrogates she complains bitterly about being the "ball and chain," of the parental diad who exclude her yet force her to witness their sexual intercourse.[2] Moreover all children,

[2] In one of the film's most poignant scenes on a deserted beach, left alone while Elena (in her slinky red dress) and her lover continue their sexual play, Anais lies at the water's edge, and gets her own dress wet: she is discovered, naked and shivering, by the couple, who look down at her fat awkward body squatting next to a blasted tree stump; whereupon Anais, exposed and humiliated by their gaze, looks down in shame.

Freud claimed, would adopt from the primal scene experience "what may be called a *sadistic view of coition*." Thus Anais as child may well be interpreting the scene as Fernando the father assaulting and hurting Elena the mother, suggesting the traumatic potential in her forced witnessing of their intercourse. Equally important in this context is the sadomasochistic and perverse processes Freud was to describe in his essay "A Child is Being Beaten," (1919) in which the witnessing child experiences the guilt, fear, and erotic pleasure of watching another (initially a sibling) being beaten by an adult.

We must also remember too that beyond its relationship to trauma and pathology, Freud saw the primal scene experience not only as crucial in organizing the Oedipal conflict but also in the pre-genital stage as well, where the child, awakening during the night experiences the oral rage of frustrated desire; after all, now he is not able to access the mother or her breast because she is being assaulted by the formidable father. This oral aggression, which Arlow (1978) identified in Mishima's use of fire in his novels as a symbolic vengeance on the copulating parents, is enacted in *Fat Girl* by Anais' constant and compulsive eating. In the scene at the café where Elena and Fernando meet, Elena flirts with her new boyfriend as he sensuously kisses her fingers, while Anais, ever the observer, shovels in huge mouthfuls of a banana split across the table; in still other scenes she is filmed biting on a long phallic-like taffy candy while her sister and Fernando continue their courtship. During the fateful ride back to Paris at the end of the film, she sits in the back seat devouring snacks, spilling an occasional chip on her plump thighs. While the depiction of food as substitution for repressed sexual appetites is an all too common trope of the outsize woman, here it gains resonance within the context of the primitive oral aggression associated with the primal scene dynamic.

And it is at the beginning of this long car ride back to Paris that the film abruptly shifts from its languorous rhythm of sleepy seaside resort and the summertime seduction as the two sisters drive north with their mother along the grim highway, huge trucks and roaring motorcycles crowding their small car as night closes in, and we appear to be leaving the sharply realized world of the film for a nightmarish symbolic landscape. The frazzled and exhausted mother finally pulls in to a deserted rest stop, where both she and Elena fall asleep. Anais once again wakeful and watchful, stares out into the night (still eating her taffy) when suddenly the windshield is shattered by a wild and disheveled man wielding an ax. In quick succession he decapitates Elena, strangles the mother, and drags Anais into the woods, where he stuffs her yellow panties into her mouth, and rapes her. After only a brief struggle, she puts her arms around him, mirroring Elena's gesture earlier when she "gives up" her virginity to Fernando.[3] In both scenes, the gesture is poignant, more awkward child seeking protection from harm than desiring woman. Then Anais removes the gag from her mouth (it seems clear to her attacker she is not going to scream) and looks at him wordlessly. The glance they exchange is ambiguous; it might seem to contain some tenderness. Then the man disappears as suddenly as he had arrived. The police just as mysteriously appear, wrap the two bodies and other evidence in plastic, and escort Anais from the woods. She denies being raped, declaring "You don't have to believe me if you don't want to."[4] It is within this very disavowal that the many meanings of the film and its startling conclusion are embedded. First, it is not in Anais' view, a rape, but the enactment of her ideological project to have her first lover be "nobody" – a completely anonymous man who suddenly appears from "nowhere." Second, (given Breillat's choice of this over a previous ending in which a hospital doctor is examining her after the attack) it is to the police that Anais makes the denial; the patriarchal law of the father who would encode her experience as crime, – or resisting any attempt to interpret the fantasy which she keeps hidden in her unconscious beyond the symbolic order of language and analysis.

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[3] Breillat wanted one continuous take (long tracking shot) which only a stunt man could do, which she feels worked because "it is a quiet body that puts Anais on the ground and assaults her. An actor would have been much less assured in his moves. He taught Anais how to fall. "Symbolism takes the place of realism (the yellow panties as a mouth gag) – but it proves to be even more violent."

[4] Breillat sees rape as a potentially liberating experience, which disturbs some critics and has won her the support of the male critical establishment, according to Ginette Vincendeau in *Sight and Sound*.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that the entire finale is indeed Anais' sadomasochistic primal scene fantasy projected on the screen in which she transforms her unconscious rage and aggression, the "residue" material of the summer's experience, into a lurid rendition of Red Riding Hood's forest encounter with the ravishing wolf. Significantly, by creating the fantasy (much like the cinema director) Anais also masters the traumatic aspects of her experience by reversing her passive position as mere witness to the primal scene. Instead, she becomes both active author of the scene as well as its protagonist; in this fantasy the rapist most vehemently rejects her sister and mother to chose Anais as the object of his desire. And as the creator of this scene, Anais forces *us* – we have no choice, just like she had none in the bedroom – to look at the image of her own sexual assault, thereby forcing us also to confront our own ambivalence – be it fascination, shock, or arousal, both simultaneously horrified and fascinated as we witness the violent images enacted upon the screen.

Anais' gaze in the film's final image, a freeze frame of her face turning to look out at the camera (Breillat's *homage* to the ending of another adolescent narrative in Truffaut's *400 Blows*) has been alternately described as triumphant, defiant, hopeful, and dissociated[5] – but ultimately remains enigmatic. Thus, as we confront cinema's strange and disturbing capacity to make the invisible visible on the screen before us, like all film spectators we are left with the task – as Mulvey famously said of *Peeping Tom* (1960), Michael Powell's seminal film on scopophilia – "to decipher the hieroglyph that the voyeur may see but cannot understand."

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[5] See Hussey, op. cit., for a discussion on the dissociative theme in the film, including Anais' song about the werewolf presaging the rape, and notes that her final gaze is not direct but rather off to the right of the spectator – i.e. dissociated.