



**CRUEL FLESH:
FILMS OF THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY**

Romance

The films of the New French Extremity and the accompanying focus on Gaspar Noé examine an important, controversial and highly violent cinema movement. They are not suitable for all.

The film you are about to watch may contain very dark themes, graphic imagery, and scenes of a very upsetting nature including sexual violence and body horror.

Catherine Breillat on 'Romance'

The film foregrounds sexuality to explore the relationship between men and women. How did you hope or imagine the film would play to male and female audiences?

From what I read about the film and what I experienced by going to screenings, looking at it and talking to the audience, most of the women were very happy about the film because they thought it was the first time a movie talked about something they wanted discussed. Men thought it was very interesting as a tool to explore something they maybe didn't know enough about or needed to know more about.

How did you relate to the character of Marie, and what was your relationship to the developing sexual philosophy that she narrates through the film? Is there any ironic distance?

I have no distance from the film. When I set about shooting *Romance*, I thought I would film what is not said, and when it was finished it was a revelation for me – to look at it and see the meaning of it once it was done. I had no distance. I made it as I was doing it; the film happened as I was shooting it.

So your two different roles – as writer and director – both came together in the process of making it?

There was a complete dissociation between the screenwriter and the filmmaker. I wrote the screenplay on a daily basis, and [as a screenwriter] my first interest was the sentimental, romance story, *then* the sexual exploration. On a day-to-day basis, it was like going down to hell, seeing how far I could go. It's a bit like *Looking for Mr Goodbar*, where you see how far you can go and how down you can go. Because it was done on a daily basis I could hold down the self-censorship that comes from preconceived ideas. So when the filmmaker in me made the film, it totally turned around the sense and meaning of what was written in the script. As a scriptwriter the good quality was the sentimental story and what was negative was the sexual exploration. As a filmmaker what became apparent when I saw the film was that the relationship between Marie and Paul – this passion – is in fact degradation, and the sexual journey is in fact a revelation, a transcendence.

The text that the film most reminded me of was The Story of O in its exploration of self-annihilation and masochism, although it has a happier

ending. O is politically problematic for women, so how do you anticipate responses to the open exploration of masochism in Romance?

I don't explore masochism. On the contrary, the relationship that Marie has with her boyfriend is based on masochism and self-depreciation. On her journey she goes through scenes of masochism and learns to free herself – exactly the opposite of *The Story of O*, which posits the norm is pleasure through masochism and through being dominated. The headmaster in *Romance* doesn't initiate her through masochism: on the contrary, he uses her masochism to take her to the other side and free her from masochism. He uses the fact that she is used to masochism, through her relationship with Paul, to take her somewhere else. It's what we call fighting fire with fire. The film is an initiate's journey. It is like in the myth of King Arthur, when Lancelot is on the dangerous path and on the edge of the razor.

But the way you articulate that, it sounds like the men teach her this rather than her learning it from her experiences. Is it a self-realisation?

Yes – she is the one who chooses them.

I want to ask about the explicit sexuality of the film. I was interested in the fact that in many ways it's the male body which is most explicitly exposed in this film.

I don't think the male body is exposed in this film. The actor who was going to play Paul (Sagamore Stévenin) didn't know he was going to play Paul, because to start with he was going to play Paolo – the other part – and then I hired a real porn actor to play Paolo; in the end [Stévenin] moved on to play Paul, so he didn't realise that he would be a little bit exposed. Obviously a female filmmaker sees more of men than men themselves. Male filmmakers are shy and far more prudish about this.

Are you interested in male spectacle because you are a female filmmaker?

Naked males on screen are very interesting and I don't see why it should always be women on display up there for men.

Would you ever consent to your film being cut?

In France the thing which could have created a problem is the fantasy brothel scene. If they had wanted it censored there I wanted to keep the sound running over a black screen, and outside the cinema, as people leave, give them a VHS of the thing which had been cut. If there is censorship, people should know there is censorship and why. Censorship should be seen as a scar, which is why I wanted to keep the sound running over a black screen. If the film is deemed to be obscene then the scene has to be identified and [its obscenity] explained.

That's all bound up with the way that pornography has been classified in this country. So how do you define the relationship between this film and pornography?

Pornography doesn't exist. What exists is censorship which defines pornography and separates it from the rest of film. Unless, that is, people think that as a race we are pornographic – in which case we need an operation! Pornography is the sexual act taken totally out of context, and made into a product for consumption, by using the most debased feelings or emotions of people, when in fact in daily life sexual acts are surrounded by emotions, consideration for the partner, pleasure and so on, which do not come within the pornographic depiction. So pornography as an industry is a

prostitution of the common and valuable human emotions and acts which everybody does in their day-to-day life. There are no actors, because they don't carry any emotions, they don't carry character. They are just flesh. Rocco Siffredi, the porn actor who plays Paolo, says the same thing.

So what distinguishes this film from pornography?

In *Romance* the images portray an idea and the characters experience emotion. The viewer intuits the emotion through the images he is watching. That is the difference between it and pornography.

The film explicitly transgresses the boundary between acted sex and real sex, so how did you deal with that on set – from the actors' and the crew's point of view?

There's a lot of hypocrisy in putting a moral value on the question 'Are they really doing it or not?' If you look at what most mainstream actors are doing now, more and more the love scenes are very intimate and very frank, so it's hypocrisy to ask: 'Do they really penetrate or not?' Actors do not simulate: they don't simulate emotions, so at the same time they cannot simulate pleasure – they have to act it. So as they are not going to be able to simulate pleasure, they are going to have to act pleasure. After that it's just really a physical detail. The difficulty is not in the performance from the actor while they are on set; the difficulty comes afterwards. Are they going to be seen performing the act on the screen by society, by their close family, by the people they're in relationships with – this was the real difficulty.

So did the actors find that difficult? Were they happy to enter into this?

The only problem I had was between Rocco Siffredi and Caroline Ducey, because they were coming from two worlds totally apart. For Caroline it was almost like a sacrificial ritual and she was exalted every time she went from one experience to the other; she pushed herself every time, and was happy to achieve that emotional range, so it was no problem. I did explain before to Caroline that there should be no censorship, there should be nowhere that we would have to stop, because censorship defines obscenity, and I didn't want to do anything obscene. It was more a trip of self-discovery, and for Caroline to go as far as she wanted, it was an exaltation to reach that stage.

So in a sense the actor's relationship to the role mirrored the movement of the role itself in that self-exploration?

Yes, but not totally mirroring, because Caroline in her personal life is not as repressed or prudish as Marie is in the film – she didn't have the same baggage.

Interview by Linda Ruth Williams, *Sight and Sound*, October 1999

ROMANCE

Director: Catherine Breillat
Production Companies: Flach Film, CB Films, ARTE
With participation of: CNC - Centre national de la cinématographie, Procirep, Canal+
Executive Producer: Catherine Jacques, C.J. Production
Producer: Jean-François Lepetit
Unit Managers: Samir Larrif, Jean-Marc Maestracci, Max Belmessieri, Laurent Charchaude, Eric Margolis, Philippe Guérinel, Denis Oliveau-Lebreton
Production Manager: Eddy Jabès
Production: Anne Rogé
Location Manager: Alexandre Putman
Post-production: Bernard Brun
1st Assistant Director: Michaël Weill
2nd Assistant Director: Fabrice Bigot
Script Supervisor: Séverine Siaut
CASTING: Michaël Weill, Estelle Bertrand, Nicolas Lublin, Guylène Péan, Jacques Grant, Catherine Hofer
Screenplay: Catherine Breillat
Director of Photography: Yorgos Arvanitis
Camera Operator (Birth Sequence): Roger-Paul Tizio
Steadicam: Éric Leroux
Editor: Agnès Guillemot
Art Director: Frédérique Belvaux
Additional Art Directors: Pierre Gerboux, Alexis Forestier
Set Decorator: Valérie Leblanc Weber
Costumes: Anne Dunsford Varenne
Carla's Wardrobe: Christian Lacroix
Wardrobe: Janet Latimer
Make-up/Hair: Claire Monatte
Additional Make-up: Pascal Thiollier
Additional Hairdressers: Antoine Amador, Christian Moralès
Titles: Ercidan
Music: D.J. Valentin, Raphaël Tidas
Music Co-ordinator: Jean-Marie Leau
Sound: Paul Lainé
Mixer: Eric Bonnard
Sound Editor: Emmanuel Augeard
Sound Effects: Pascal Chauvin
Subtitles: A. Whitelaw

Cast

Caroline Ducey (*Marie*)
Sagamore Stévenin (*Paul*)
François Berléand (*Robert Weil*)
Rocco Siffredi (*Paolo*)
Reza Habouhossein (*man on stairs*)
Ashley Wanninger (*Ashley*)
Emma Colberti (*Charlotte*)
Fabien de Jomaron (*Claude*)
Carla (*model, Arlès*)
Pierre Maufront (*photographer, Arlès*)
Antoine Amador (*hairdresser, Arlès*)
Roman Rouzier (*echographist*)
Olivier Buchette (*senior doctor*)
Emmanuelle N'guyen (*midwife*)
Nadia Latoui (*nurse*)
Sylvie Drieu (*attendant*)
Samuel Chartier, Alexis Gignoux,
Muriel Grégoire, Sébastien Jochmans, Emmanuel Salengro (*interns*)
Mélissa (*Marie's stand-in, dream sequence*)
Christian Poutrasson (*man alone, dream sequence*)
Roberto Malone, Coco, Steve Cox, Jean-Pierre Daniel, Fovéa,
Bernard Garreau, Pierre-Gustave Hervé, Kosta, Alain Lille, Kevin Long,
Aziz, Marco, Karine Menachemoff, Angélique Polosse, Salomé,
Cédric Samson, Yamine, Tamerhoulet, Tramber, Vince, Caroline Virly

France 1999©
99 mins

The screening on Fri 6 May will be introduced by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London.

CRUEL FLESH: FILMS OF THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY

Carne + La Bouche de Jean-Pierre

Sun 1 May 11:50; Thu 12 May 20:45 (+ Q&A with Lucile Hadžihalilovic)

Baise-moi

Sun 1 May 18:20; Sat 7 May 20:50

The Ordeal (Calvaire)

Mon 2 May 12:30; Sun 22 May 18:20

Man Bites Dog (C'est arrivé près de chez vous)

Mon 2 May 15:10; Tue 10 May 20:55

Sex and Death, but Make It Arthouse

Tue 3 May 18:10

Trouble Every Day

Tue 3 May 20:30 (+ intro by writer and creative Sophie Monks Kaufman);

Tue 24 May 20:45

Criminal Lovers (Les Amants criminels)

Wed 4 May 20:50; Sat 14 May 12:00

Pola X

Thu 5 May 20:25; Sat 28 May 17:50

Romance (Romance X)

Fri 6 May 18:00 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London);

Tue 17 May 20:45

Philosophical Screens: Romance

Fri 6 May 20:00

In My Skin (Dans ma peau)

Sat 7 May 17:50 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London);

Thu 19 May 20:40

High Tension (aka Switchblade Romance) (Haute Tension)

Mon 9 May 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by author Alexandra West);

Sat 28 May 12:20

Inside (À l'intérieur)

Sat 14 May 20:50; Thu 26 May 18:20

Them (Ils)

Mon 16 May 20:50; Sun 29 May 18:20

Irreversible (Irréversible) (theatrical version)

Sat 21 May 17:45

Martyrs

Sat 28 May 20:50; Tue 31 May 20:40

Horror à la Française

Free to view on the BFI YouTube channel from 11-31 May

BFI Courses: City Lit at the BFI: New French Extremity

Every Tue from 10-31 May 18:30-20:30