

“I Only Like Seeing Myself in Small Bits”: Catherine Breillat’s Reflections of the Female Body

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Abstract

Catherine Breillat is a director famed for her depiction of women undergoing sexual and emotional transformations.

Throughout Breillat’s narratives the bodies of her female protagonists become sites of personal exploration that challenge the patriarchal construction of femininity, and the use of shame, powerlessness, and binaries that constantly tear women in two, to oppress the female sex. This article explores the motif of the mirror in three of Breillat’s works, analysing how it is used as a prop that allows for a visual reflection, and psychical self-reflection, of the female characters, and as a double for the camera/screen with which the director critiques the misalignment between the patriarchal construction of the feminine,

and actual female experience. With reference to the work of Luce Irigaray, it argues that through the female protagonists of *Une vraie jeune fille* (*A Real Young Girl*, 1976), *Romance* (1999) and *À ma sœur* (*Fat Girl*, 2001) Breillat seeks to rupture the construction of femininity from within, and by doing so, her characters can be seen to open up the path for the development of woman-as-subject.

Keywords: Catherine Breillat, Luce Irigaray, Psychoanalysis, Woman-as-subject, Female sexuality.



Introspection and female reflection in Catherine Breillat's *Romance*

Introduction

In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) Luce Irigaray uses the metaphor of the mirror to argue that man can only see a lesser version of himself reflected back in the mirror that he holds up to women.¹ This flat mirror is unable to see her sexual organs, that which she possesses and he does not, as it is unable to go inside of her. Irigaray contends that therefore in phallogentric patriarchal culture the clitoris, vagina and womb must all be subservient to the male member; even combined, their psychic weight is never more than a non-entity, a nothingness that

shocks through what is absent. As Irigaray wrote in her later text *This Sex Which is Not One*, even though women can be seen to have not one sexual organ but many, it is counted as none – “The negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ”.² She contends that the same is true for female sexual pleasure, which is predominately represented in male terms via the privileging of penetration; a representation that she believes must be countered:

We need to discover what makes our experience of sexual pleasure special. Obviously, it is possible for a woman to use the phallic mode of sexual pleasure and there's no lack of men or pornographers to tell women that they can achieve extraordinary sexual pleasure within that phallic economy. The question remains: doesn't that economy draw women out of themselves and leave them without energy, perceptions, affects, gestures, and images that refer to their own identity?³

This article will propose that the films of the French director Catherine Breillat attempt to answer such a challenge.

Throughout her career Breillat has explored female sexuality, often combining provocative hard-core imagery with philosophical treatises on sex and subjectivity. Her films detail the journey from self-estrangement to independence that her female protagonists embark on, whilst simultaneously challenging the social and cinematic construction of femininity. In an interview with Robert Sklar, Breillat explains: "Women need to reintegrate the idea that sexuality, the sexual act, cannot be what we are shown so complacently... The words used to describe women's sexuality, the censorship and shame that society inflicts

on women, create a very schizophrenic condition. As a filmmaker I realise that images are nothing if they are only images."⁴ Using the motif of the mirror, this article will use three of Breillat's films to demonstrate how her project of tracing the development of female sexuality attempts to interrogate the construction of femininity in the phallic economy. It will propose that Breillat's scenes of her female characters looking at their own reflections allow for these women to reflect on both their physical appearance, and undergo a process of psychological self-reflection that enables them to progress in their journeys of sexual discovery. The combination of the reflected image, and the characters' verbal reaction to that image, transforms these moments into an Irigarayan speculum that attempts to open up and reveal feminine subjectivity. Simultaneously, these mirrors act as a double for the camera/screen with which the director critiques the misalignment between the patriarchal construction of the feminine and actual female experience.

Early Initiations: *Une vraie jeune fille* (1976)

Throughout her career Breillat's use of hard-core imagery and real sex has led her to receive such titles as the 'auteur of porn' or 'art-porn provocateur'. However, this is a position that she strongly rejects. Breillat argues that pornography is the sex act taken out of context, and therefore it can be claimed that her films, the majority of which are directly about the context of female sexuality, cannot be considered as pornographic. Instead Breillat explains that she attempts to portray sexuality as "a subject and not as an object", with the sex act being directly tied to the subjectivity of her female protagonists.⁵ She argues that in pornography sex is made into a product that is consumed without emotion or thought, whereas her own work highlights the often contrasting beliefs and feelings that her characters, and the audience of the films, have towards intercourse. As Linda Williams argues in *Screening Sex*, Breillat appears more interested in the negotiations around sex, rather than the act itself.⁶ These negotiations occur both between sexual partners, and in the minds of the

films' female protagonists as they navigate the transformations that are taking place in their developing sexualities. It is this emphasis placed on the relationship to sex that distinguishes Breillat's films from pornography, despite their hard-core imagery. Instead sex is the vehicle that allows these characters to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their position within society.

Nevertheless, in contrast to her later work, the production context for Breillat's first film *Une vraie jeune fille* (*A Real Young Girl*, Catherine Breillat, 1976) actually was the soft-porn industry, with its producer wanting to create a film like *Emmanuelle* (Just Jaeckin, 1974), but helmed by a female director. Yet due to a number of issues the film never received a full release and only attracted real attention and a proper release when it was screened in 2000 as part of a retrospective of Breillat's work. *A Real Young Girl* follows 14 year-old Alice on her holiday from boarding school, staying with her parents in a remote part of France. As with many of her works, Breillat uses a

voiceover throughout the film to express Alice's internal monologue, allowing the audience to hear the young girl's thoughts about the behaviour of her parents and her own developing sexuality. The film fluctuates between actual events and Alice's sexual fantasies, blurring the boundaries between the two so that the audience are left in a state of limbo, unsure as to what is her imagination and what is reality. Alice falls for a young worker at her father's lumberyard called Jim, fantasising about him and his potential taking of her virginity. The couple get together, but before they have sex Jim is accidentally shot by a device set up by Alice's father to kill the pigs eating his crops. Alice, unperturbed by Jim's death, packs up her belongings and returns to school.

Tanya Krzywinska proposes that Breillat's films rework the sexual initiation and self-discovery format made popular in the 1970s with films such as *Emmanuelle*, *Histoire d'O* (*The Story of O*, Just Jaeckin, 1975) and *Bilitis* (David Hamilton, 1977). Breillat did indeed write the screenplay for

Hamilton's film, and *A Real Young Girl* can be considered as the starting point in the trajectory of her work from this format into more direct forms of sexual, philosophical and political critique. As Krzywinska argues, sexual initiation films not only tended to have a higher degree of female authorship in their narratives and production, but could also be seen to provide women with "pro-sex texts that presented a different view of women's sexuality than the 'bad girl' representations of sexual women seen in noirs and melodramas made in Hollywood".⁷ Krzywinska contends that these films presented their viewers with "the depiction of women as sexual subjects rather than simply objects of desire", with the role of the female author or protagonist allowing for the development of subjectivity and "sexual self-determination".⁸

In *A Real Young Girl* Breillat uses the motif of Alice's bedroom mirror as a site to explore the girl's relationship to her body and her sex. The mirror allows for a visual reflection of her physique and a

psychical self-reflection that is captured through the combination of her image and voice-over. On her first night at home Alice retires to her bedroom and stands in front of her mirror as she undresses, a position that she repeats throughout the film. In the voice-over the young girl says “I only like seeing myself in small bits”, as she takes off each item of clothing and replaces it with another. As she carries out

this act the camera frames first her thighs and crotch, before moving up her torso to her chest, mirroring her words. After taking her time over this process she falls back onto her bed and vomits over herself. Explaining that she has been liberated by the vomit and that disgust makes her lucid, she takes out her diary and begins to write.



The female body as ‘bits’ : Breillat’s cinema charts an abject journey of self-discovery

Alice’s unwillingness to see herself as a complete whole represents her inability to align her emerging adolescent sexuality with the beliefs of her parents and society; the supposed shamefulness of the female

body leaving her no option but to reject her own image. As Adrienne Angelo argues, the film’s use of close-up images of bodies, both male and female, focusing especially on the genitals and orifices such

as the mouth and ears, does not, as would be expected, fetishize them.⁹ Instead, Angelo argues that these visual isolations correspond to a transgressive adolescent perspective. Alice's sexuality is polymorphous, extending beyond just one part of her body. However, as her sexual awakening continues throughout the film she overcomes her disgust at her own body, and embraces the fact that her developing sexual desires do not fit with the virginal societal ideal. As Douglas Keeseey argues, during the process of sexual awakening Alice is able to begin to comprehend that "it is not her body, but others' negative view of it, that is unnatural and obscene".¹⁰ During the course of the narrative Alice learns to find pleasure in the taboos that surround her virginity and to understand that her body is so much more than can ever be reflected in the flat mirror. She is able to accept and eventually embrace her own physicality. It could be for this reason that Alice continually explores the inside of her body. In the memory that she records in her diary straight after undressing in this first mirror scene she is shown writing her

name on a mirror in her own vaginal discharge. Throughout the film too, she inserts objects such as spoons and pebbles into her vagina, is shown picking wax out of her ears, and penetrates herself anally with a bottle.

In the second scene in front of her bedroom mirror Alice again undresses, this time painting her vagina and nipples with ink to see what she would look like as a whore. The sight of her painted body shocks Alice, and her voiceover decries "I can't accept the proximity of my face and my vagina". Even though this is a statement of horror and disgust Alice is now able to comprehend her body as one being, albeit an abject one. She is caught between the stereotypes of virgin and whore, neither one nor other, but with society offering her no possibility of a middle ground. Yet as the film progresses Alice is able to see that adults do not uphold the moral laws that they preach, with her parents' relationship beginning to break down due to her father's promiscuity. This realisation allows her to fully embrace her own sexuality. In the

last scene to be played out in front of her mirror Alice marks the front of her nightshirt with ink claiming it to be “like a sex”, marvelling at the dark stain spreading out on the fabric. She grabs a candle and whilst dripping the wax on her fingers – a liquid glossy like her own discharge or Jim’s semen – she declares: “symbols don’t scare me”. She is able to display her sex with confidence, literally wearing it on the outside of her clothing.

These three scenes that occur before her bedroom mirror display Alice’s changing relationship to her body and her desires. Initially she is unable to comprehend her body, she is then disgusted by it, and finally she learns to accept it. Through fantasy and sexual exploration, Alice is able to transition from a child-like pleasure of the erotogenic zones into a sexual being that is in control of her whole body. Alice’s moments of reflection in front of the mirror display an Irigarayan interrogation of the inability of that flat surface to fully depict the female body. Alice seeks to understand her own body, and connect together her experiences,

desires and sensations with what she is told by society and her parents about how she should behave and how she should regard her physique. Mirror and camera become one as they visualise the exterior of Alice’s body, yet it is an image that can never be fully complete. Instead her thoughts, portrayed through the voice-over, act as a speculum allowing her to be opened up to both herself and the audience, and her sexual nature to be fully revealed. Traditionally the female form is broken up and fetishized by the camera, as represented by the segmentation of her body in the mirror. However, by revealing Alice’s own disgust at her form, Breillat calls into question the patriarchal construction of the female body as one that can never be whole as it is missing the all important penis, and this is where her work comes into alignment with that of Irigaray.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray argues that Freud can only ever see the reflection of man in the mirror that he holds up to women: “The ‘differentiation’ into two sexes derives from the priori

assumption of the same, since the little man that the little girl is, must become a man minus certain attributes whose paradigm is morphological – attributes capable of determining, of assuring, the reproduction-specularization of the same. A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman.”¹¹ Irigaray contends that as the mirror in which man sees himself is a flat surface, it can only reflect the female genitals as a hole, and therefore as something that is lacking. It cannot see inside, revealing the organs that women possess and men do not.

However, as Margaret Whitford argues, Irigaray’s use of the mirror is not to give an account of female psychosexual development, but instead it is a critique of the patriarchal construction of sexual difference.¹² Irigaray argues that in patriarchal society only men are subjects, with women being the *other*. Men are able to achieve this subjectivity through culture and society, whilst simultaneously women – through motherhood – are identified with nature and inert matter. Due to this,

Irigaray believes that in the phallic economy sexual difference does not exist, as there is only one sex: masculinity. In order for women to exist as subjects, then they must establish their own sexuality that does not exist at the expense of any other form of sexuality. Through doing this a space will become possible for woman-as-subject.

Whitford contends that many people have mistakenly read Irigaray’s exploration of the imaginary as an attempt to use the pre-Oedipal to claim a space for the feminine that is outside of the symbolic order. However, it is impossible to consider the imaginary and the symbolic as separate to each other. Instead, Irigaray is challenging the way in which women have been conceptualised, rather than attempting to create a new theory of femininity. She is using psychoanalysis to analyse psychoanalysis; not just trying to offer an alternative to the system, but instead is interrogating the current system. This is necessary, for as Whitford explains, to move from a system of sameness (the manner in which Freud and Lacan

structure the world) to one of multiplicity (such as Derrida suggests) “bypasses the possibility of the position of woman-as-subject”.¹³

Shaming sex: *Romance* (1999)

Irigaray argues that in his three essays on female sexuality Freud reveals the true nature of the phallogentric oppression of women: that it is a desire for the same. Sexual difference, argues Irigaray, is therefore “a derivation of the problematics of sameness, it is, now and forever, determined within the project, the projection, the sphere of representation, of the same.”¹⁴ She contends that women can only constitute death or nothingness, a lack. Man can overcome this lack through intercourse, and the stressing of his activity in the act of reproduction. Through reproduction the man can produce more of the same, a son, and by giving him his name can enter into immortality through the symbolic return to this own origin (his birth).

Irigaray contends that the child produced from this male-driven reproduction is

always masculine. Adapting Freud’s statement that “the little girl is a little man”,¹⁵ Irigaray writes that “THERE NEVER IS (OR WILL BE) A LITTLE GIRL” (her capitals).¹⁶ Freud does not even consider the possibility of a vaginal or uterine stage through which to speak of female sexuality, with the only option open for women being phallic action, envy, or repression. Irigaray contends that the little girl must envy the penis, for this reassures its value. She argues that “If woman had desires other than “penis-envy”, this would call into question the unity, the uniqueness, the simplicity of the mirror charged with sending man’s image back to him – albeit inverted.”¹⁷ To follow Irigaray’s reading of Freud would be to argue that phallogentric society must label women as shameful, envious, jealous, greedy, desiring of the penis that they cannot have because it cannot comprehend anything that is not related to the phallus. Woman must despise her own sex – her erotogenic zones and her pleasure – so that man can reassure himself from his castration anxieties and place himself as the point of all origin.

It is this critique of the phallic domination of the sexes causing women to find shame in their own bodies and desires that unites Irigaray and Breillat. Both work from within, turning the male appropriation of the female body in on itself in order to create a potential future space for woman-as-subject. Director and philosopher share a desire to rupture the façade of femininity created for women by men, and to find a new position for the feminine that reconnects mind and body through the exploration of female sexuality. Both can be seen as wanting to fight against symbolic law and reconnect a woman's experience of herself with her own image of herself. By doing so, they are rebelling against the two-dimensional representation of femininity that can be seen in the patriarchal mirror and calling for a psychical self-reflection by the woman it reflects.

In an interview promoting the release of her sixth feature-length film *Romance*, Breillat explains how once a girl starts menstruating and therefore becomes a woman, she is deprived of dignity: "As far

as sexuality and woman's sexuality in particular are concerned, women are given an image of themselves that has lost its dignity. I've never believed that that person was me. I need to be able to look at myself in a mirror, and that image does not suit me."¹⁸ Breillat believes pornography and the modern depiction of the sex act direct the way that women feel they need to behave, creating a psyche where they are able to "find pleasure in shame", arguing that:

What is important is to attain a vision of oneself – including a vision of oneself while making love. The taboos, prohibitions, and shame that surround women's sexuality are necessary because desire comes from taboos. But at the same time, since these taboos and prohibitions must exist, they have to be transgressed. Transgression is the very condition of their very existence.¹⁹

Breillat is not attempting to depict a purely new form of female sexuality, but one that is able to break free from its traditional constraints through transgression. Her female protagonists embody the patriarchal condemnation of woman to such an extent that they rupture it, and by doing so, clear a ground for woman-as-subject. Breillat claims that she makes

films because she wants to describe female shame, but when considering her characters in this process of rupture, they can be seen as revealing the mechanisms of the shame, and through doing so, overcome it: “Instead of saying that this act is taboo and therefore ugly, I’d rather say that it’s taboo but it has to be shown in its entirety. That’s the only way to restore female dignity.”²⁰

Romance depicts a woman’s exploration of her sexuality and its relationship to the men in her life. The film’s female protagonist Marie is in a sexless relationship with her male-model

boyfriend Paul, and begins to seek out new sexual experiences as a means to assert some power over her love for him. It is not that she wants to leave him, instead it is a private game of transgression that is all about Paul, but to which he is not privy. She has a brief love affair with Paulo – Paul’s opposite in both physique and personality – before engaging in sado-masochistic bondage with Robert, the head teacher at the school where she works. At the end of the film she is impregnated by Paul and then causes his death through a gas explosion that happens at the same moment as their son is born.



Sadomasochism and fatality mark Catherine Breillat’s *Romance*

In *Romance* Breillat continues to use mirrors to allow her female protagonist to undergo a process of inspection, self-reflection and to mark the stages of her transformation. At the beginning of the film Marie's inner monologue is first introduced via a voice-over when she is standing in front of a mirror looking at herself blankly. After her affair with Paulo, Marie again looks into this mirror, but her expression has altered. She appears more relaxed and pleased with her actions. By cheating on Paul, and then rejecting Paulo, she has gained some control over her emotions. Later, Robert makes Marie look at herself in a mirror before each of their two bondage sessions.

When Marie initially consents to Robert's offers of tying her up, she can only nod and mumble in agreement. As he walks her along a corridor he stops in front of a mirror and demands that she look at herself. Marie's willingness to accept her reflection shows her complicity in these events, as well as Robert's need for that complicity. At their next encounter Robert again draws Marie up to his mirror. Like Alice in *A Real Young Girl*, every time Marie faces her own reflection she has moved forward in her journey for self-discovery. Marie now revels in her reflection, and instructs Robert over the parts of her body that he is not allowed to constrain.



Mirrors and the journey to self-discovery in *Romance*

Alice's sentiments that she cannot accept the proximity of her vagina and her face are repeated in Marie's relationship to her sexual organs. After her impregnation by Paul and a hospital visit where a procession of young doctors give her an intimate examination, the film cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot of Marie looking at her vagina in a hand-mirror, the angle of its glass reflecting only her sex and not her face. As her monologue speaks the words "Paul is right, you can't love a cunt if a face goes with it" Marie turns the mirror so that it reflects her blank expression. This declaration marks a shift in the film, as Breillat starts to visually depict her protagonist's thoughts. In the next scene Marie imagines a place where women lie with a wall dividing their bodies in half, their lower part available to be penetrated anonymously, the upper lying sedate and calm in a sterilised and civilised environment. The split bodies of the women portray Marie's sentiments that the vagina and the face should never be seen together, bringing the figures of the virgin and whore into one body, but still keeping these binaries distinct and separated,

negating the possibility of woman-as-subject. By showing this ultimate patriarchal fantasy Breillat ruptures it, revealing the perverse position that women are forced in to by a society that makes them choose between sexual pleasure and purity.

Lynsey Russell-Watts proposes that Breillat's formal style in *Romance* – exemplified by the mirror sequences – creates a simultaneous motion of pulling the audience in and pushing them away. Russell-Watts contends that in a number of scenes Breillat's framing fragments Marie's body, working to both break audience identification with her, but also universalise her experience. Furthermore, she suggests that the position of the camera in the mirror sequences makes the audience explicitly aware of their own position as viewing subjects:

Here, the camera and Marie appear to be in the same place, producing the double effect of us looking and seeing ourselves reflected back *as* Marie, and of her reflection looking directly at us. In the same way, then, that Marie as sexual

subject demonstrates both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic characteristics, we as spectator are both put into the film in the position of Marie, and also challenged by being caught looking at her. As Marie questions her sexual desires and pleasures, we must examine our own role as visual pleasure-seekers.²¹

Therefore, at the same time as Breillat's female characters must look inwards at themselves in order to continue on their journey of self-discovery, these moments in front of the mirror also demand that the spectators of these films go through the same process. Breillat refuses both the positions of passive receiver and objective desirer (such, as she argues, is experienced when watching pornography) to those who watch her films, opening the development of female subjectivity out beyond the screen.

Mirrors, bodies, murder: *À ma sœur* (2001)

Breillat has argued that women are bred into accepting that their bodies – and the sexual desires that come from them – are shameful, but as a director she seeks to

utilise this shame so that it may lead to the sexual awakening and exploration of her characters.²² Her work suggests that shame causes women to separate their minds from their bodies, to choose between the positions of purity (virgin, wife, mother) or sexual enjoyment (whore). As Keesey writes in his monograph on Breillat:

“Under the male gaze, a woman is not allowed to develop her own identity as a physical and spiritual being but instead she is ‘cut in two’, her body severed from her soul as she is forced into a stereotyped gender role.”²³ It is this choice between being a sexually-free woman and therefore being labelled a whore, or attaching great symbolic weight to virginity, that lies behind Breillat's *À ma sœur* (*Fat Girl*, Catherine Breillat, 2001), a film that follows the director's common themes of sexual awakening, virginity and the young female body. *Fat Girl* is the story of two young sisters, Anaïs and Elena, on holiday with their parents. Beautiful and slim Elena falls for a young Italian student called Fernando, and overweight Anaïs can only look on powerlessly as the man seduces her older sister, taking her

virginity. Their parents discover the love affair and the girls' mother instantly drives them back on the long journey home. In the final few minutes of the film the girls and their mother stop to sleep at a truck stop, where a lorry driver breaks into their car, killing Elena and her mother. He drags Anaïs into the woods and rapes her, but she is the only one of the women to survive.

Anaïs and Elena's views on sex and virginity are as contrasting as their appearances. Elena is naive and romantic, ready to succumb to Fernando's seduction and believing his promise of engagement. Conversely, Anaïs explains to her sister at the beginning of the film how she doesn't want her first time to be with anyone that she loves, instead wishing it to be with a nobody so that they are unable to hurt her emotionally. She reiterates this desire again later on in the film after Elena admits that she is scared about losing her virginity to Fernando, and at the end of the film her wish is ultimately granted. Elena on the other hand, allows herself to be swayed by Fernando's constant

manipulations, initially agreeing to let him anally penetrate her on their first night together, before relenting and letting him take her virginity on the second.

Between these two nights of penetration Anaïs is shown standing in front of a bathroom mirror in her nightgown. Revealing her plump pubescent body, she holds the fabric of the nightgown up over her face, mirroring a similar pose to that which her elder sister used during her first night-time liaison with Fernando.

However, whereas Elena's veiling of her face conveyed a childlike attempt to hide, or an expression of shame, Anaïs's eyes look out over the fabric almost coyly, as if performing a seduction. She speaks the word "*putain*" (whore), like Alice's painting of her body in *A Real Young Girl*. Yet for Anaïs this word has a double meaning. It is not clear whether she is calling her sister a whore, as she is mimicking her gesture, or if she is performing a role, a make-believe character that she wishes to be, one that is sexually free and in control of her own body. The young girl's use of the word

whore in this context incites the audience to question the term. Is her sister a whore for being so easily swayed into having sex with Fernando, or is Anaïs a whore for refusing to see her virginity as something sacred and desiring to have relationships with more than one man? Earlier on in the film she entertained herself in the swimming pool, pretending that the steps and the diving board were two lovers that she must coax and cajole. She played at being a sexually free woman, one that is not tied down to only one lover: “Now that I know that men like me, I want other experiences... Women are not like bars of soap you know, they don’t wear away”. The words spoken by Anaïs in this game form the equivalent to the voice-overs of Alice and Marie. Even though the young girl only speaks one word to herself when she stands in front of the mirror, it comes with the weight of these earlier articulations of her developing sexuality.

Anaïs’s performance in front of the mirror is interrupted by Elena entering the room. As the two girls look at their reflections in the glass and embrace they are able to

discuss their true feelings about each other, expressing a closeness and a love/hate relationship that only siblings can have. Side by side their visual contrast is as striking as their individual approaches to the loss of their virginity; the weight that they each place on that first penetration. Like Alice, before the mirror they are able to inspect their outer bodies and verbally reveal their inner emotions, a physical reflection and a psychological self-reflection.

It is this critique of the binary of whore and virgin – of female sexual pleasure and the renouncement of that pleasure that is seen to come with virginity and motherhood – that allows Breillat in *Fat Girl* to rupture the patriarchal construction of femininity. Anaïs could never be considered a whore, as she is a young girl, but through her unwillingness to give up either her sexual independence or her desire for sexual pleasure she reveals the double standards that confront her in patriarchal society. Her sister places great symbolic weight on the idea that vaginal penetration is the most important act,

believing that she stays virginal and pure until it takes place, even though she has had anal and oral sex with Fernando. For Anaïs on the other hand, vaginal penetration is just one of a number of sex acts, each as important as the other, and something that can be completed relatively unemotionally if need be. Through the demystification of the loss of her virginity and the reducing of the symbolic importance of vaginal penetration she is therefore able to challenge the supremacy of the phallus. In her childhood innocence she presents the beginnings of woman-as-subject.

Like Irigaray's use of psychoanalysis to analyse and critique psychoanalytic theory, Breillat's characters embody the patriarchal construction of femininity so as to question, and in some cases rupture, its façade. Alice, Marie and Anaïs's reflection and self-reflection in front of their mirrors documents this process of the attempt to shed the binary of virgin and whore designed to control their sexual power, and to find a feminine counter to the power of the phallus. Throughout these narratives,

Breillat's characters are able to transition from self-estrangement and shame to a transgressive and polymorphous sexuality that rejects the phallic economy. By doing so, they reveal the potential of Irigaray's woman-as-subject: a subject that is female without suffering the constraints of patriarchal 'femininity', one who is able to see in her own (self-)reflection everything that she *has* rather than *lacks*.

¹ Irigaray, L. (1974) *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by G. C. Gill, 1985. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

² Irigaray, L. (1977) *This Sex Which is Not One*. Translated by C. Porter, 1985. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 26.

³ Irigaray, L. (1987) *Sexes and Genealogies*. Translated by G. C. Gill, 1993. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press. 20.

⁴ Sklar, R. (1999) "A Woman's Vision of Shame and Desire: An Interview with Catherine Breillat", *Cineaste*, 25 (1). 25.

⁵ Williams, L. R. (1999) "The Edge of the Razor", *Sight & Sound*, XI (10). 12-14.

⁶ Williams, L. (2008) *Screening Sex*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 276.

⁷ Krzywinska, T. (2006) *Sex and the Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press. 69.

⁸ Krzywinska, *Sex and the Cinema*, 65.

⁹ Angelo, A. (2010) "Sexual Cartographies: Mapping Subjectivity in the Cinema of Catherine Breillat", *Journal for Cultural Research*, 14 (1). 47.

¹⁰ Keesey, D. (2009) *Catherine Breillat*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 20.

¹¹ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. 27.

¹² Whitford, M. (1988) "Luce Irigaray's Critique of Rationality", In Griffiths, M. and Whitford, M. (eds.), *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 109-130.

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- ¹³ Whitford, M. (1991) *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*. London and New York: Routledge. 83.
- ¹⁴ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. 26-27.
- ¹⁵ Freud, S. (1933) "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis: Femininity", In Strachey, J. (ed) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol. XXII. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis. 118.
- ¹⁶ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. 48.
- ¹⁷ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. 51.
- ¹⁸ Sklar, R. "A Woman's Vision", 25.
- ¹⁹ Sklar, "A Woman's Vision", 25.
- ²⁰ Sklar, "A Woman's Vision", 25-26.
- ²¹ Hottell, R. and Russell-Watts, L. (2002) "Catherine Breillat's Romance and the Female Spectator: From Dream-Work to Therapy", *L'Esprit Créateur*, 42 (3). 77.
- ²² Sklar, "A Woman's Vision". 25.
- ²³ Keesey, *Catherine Breillat*. 1.