

Anatmy Of Hell (Anatomie de L'Enfer)

Review By Megan Spencer

Catherine Breillat's films have been called everything from “arthouse smut” and “unwatchable” to “original” and “emotionally powerful”.

There is no debate however, over whether the French filmmaker is an intellectually rigorous and uncompromising artist.

Breillat has made a career from investigating sex - its politics and aesthetics – through film and writing, with an emphasis on female sexuality and the feminine body.

As you might expect Breillat's latest film *Anatomy of Hell* is no exception, a kind of sexual 'laboratory experiment' laced with - amongst other things - fantasy, feminist philosophy, religious symbolism and garden tools.

According to Breillat, *Anatomy of Hell* is a sequel to *Romance* (1999), Breillat's essay on the meaninglessness of sex. It is also a film she felt compelled to make.

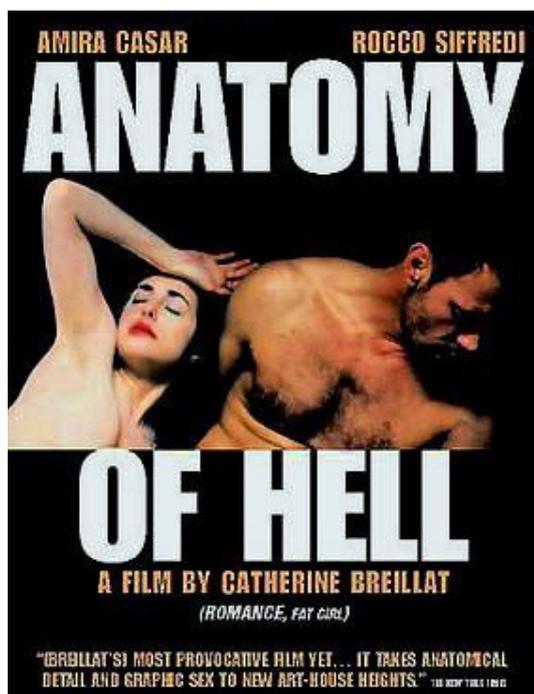
Romance is very present: you can feel it seeping from *Anatomy's* pores - its style, detachment, intellectual didacticism... And so *Anatomy of Hell* revisits an unhappy shell of a woman desperately in search of something to relieve the monotony of her existence. The Woman (played by actress Amira Casar) invites a 'mortal enemy' into her home, a misogynist gay man. She pays him and dares him even to confront his repulsion of women by investigating the insides of her body.

As she did in *Romance*, Breillat chooses to use the (very) recently-retired Italian porn star Rocco Siffredi in this pivotal role. Befitting his porn status Rocco gives a robot-like performance as a man who tries to exorcise the hatred he carries for women and their bodies. In turn Casar's female character is motivated by a kind of similar yet inverted desire: to overcome hatred of herself for being the one thing men resent most in the world. (The 'Adam and Eve' scenario evoked in her lonely room is about as subtle as a sledgehammer but provides the film's one and only laugh.)

There is no denying Breillat is a serious artist and that her films possess serious intentions - this isn't the more chaotic, 'part-social dialogue, part-exploitation' mash up of say a *Baise-Moi* (2000). In this case it's *all* dialogue and *all* art, very considered and very deliberate.

Anatomy of Hell is the third Catherine Breillat film I have seen. I found *Romance* to be laboured, monotonous and ultimately banal, and *Fat Girl* ('A Ma Soeur', 2001) courageous, emotionally powerful and deeply engaging. With *Anatomy of Hell* I found it a similarly alienating experience to that of *Romance*, yet still felt compelled to discuss the film's ideas at hand after the ordeal was over, in spite of its heavy didacticism and dreary ideology.

Perhaps *Anatomy of Hell* is a better 'read' than a movie (*Anatomy of Hell* is also based on Breillat's own novel, 'Pornocratie'.) I found this to be the case with Susanna Moore's novel of 'In The Cut'. It was a much more satisfying experience over Jane Campion's recent, nervy film adaptation of it - another literary treatise on female sexuality and power (or lack thereof.)



But let's get to the sex: the sex scenes that are causing the current threat to *Anatomy of Hell's* theatrical release in Australia this week, while they may be “distasteful” to some, you could hardly call them erotic, transgressive, titillating, gratuitous, or particularly disturbing.

While they are graphic they are also depicted within the specific context of Breillat's 'thesis'. As a result they come off as slightly absurd and detached. They are also infrequent. This is very much a film that examines ideas about a woman's body through the medium of film. That's the point; nothing more.

Further, as an artist and a woman Breillat must be allowed present her thesis, through her chosen medium – to have agency over her domain so to speak, that of female sexuality and physicality. Much the same as male filmmakers do in the realm of pornography. This is her answer to many of the questions raised about sex on film, sex in society. She must be allowed to answer, ponder, question, refute.. The film is her thesis. She must be explicit .

It must also be allowed to be seen. Even if we don't 'get' it or like it (and plenty around the world do.) We must be allowed to see *Anatomy* within the prism of our Classification structure. Otherwise what good is it?

Have we forgotten that cinema is a collectively sanctioned space for us to have conversations with ourselves, about ourselves? And that arthouse cinema – the space squarley inhabited by Breillat's films – is where these sorts of 'more difficult' or 'less binary' cultural conversations about anything and everything, occur?

A largely allegorical scenario, *Anatomy of Hell* might be a dull conversation or an exciting one or an offensive one, but regardless it deserves to be heard by any consenting adult who chooses to participate in it.

That's what the 'R' rating is for..

More about Catherine Breillat [here](#).

Words by Megan Spencer © (2004)