

# Dis-Articulations of the Real and the Artistic Image in Contemporary French Culture

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## Abstract

Contemporary French culture is pervaded by a polemical critique of the relation between the image and the real, in particular in relation with the increasing popularity of the overtly sexual content of avant-garde films by filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat or Gaspard Noé. This article aims to examine the mechanisms and characteristics of the apparently ambiguous reflection – or articulations – of reality in Breillat's cinematic image. In so doing, I establish a connection with the socioeconomic theory developed by Jean Baudrillard on the relation between contemporary images and the real. Reading Baudrillard's polemical critique in relation to Breillat's polemical image and questioning their mutual resonance will precipitate a rethinking of Breillat's cinematic ethic and strategy in relation to its socioeconomic context – the ascendency of publicity and pornographic images upon the visual environment of contemporary France as analyzed by Baudrillard.

**Keywords:** French cinema, pornographic image, real, female body

As the polemical French filmmaker Catherine Breillat once noted: ‘Se regarderdans le miroir, c'estpouvoir se regarder droit dans les yeux’(Le Vern). Being the medium of a self-reflection, mirrors indeed embody the encounter between a viewer and his or her own image. These encounters constitute crucial sequences in Breillat's films, which always play with the reflective power of mirrors. As critics and scholars have analysed, mirrors constitute for Breillat a symbolic medium for her feminist reflection, confronting her characters' patriarchal gaze by showing pure images of the female body and, by extension, displaying their own misconception of the female (Vasse). However, as Hobermanpoints out in ‘Gray Anatomy’, Breillat's films are more self-reflective than simply reflective. Indeed, Breillat's films themselves work as a symbolic medium of self-reflection, since, through the reflection on the characters' patriarchal gaze, the viewers' gaze is also challenged. For Hoberman, watching Breillat's films in fact consists in ‘watching the watching’ of the female.

However, as Breillat argues in interview: ‘An image exists only when you give it meaning, and that meaning depends on your vision. [...] Cinema never films reality [...] People do not always realize that. They

think that in cinema an image is an image, but that is not the case' (Sklar 26). Breillat's cinematic image, instead of being the medium of a truthful self-reflection of reality, would thus be a damaged mirror, which reflects its referent but in a distorted way. This essay aims to examine the mechanisms and characteristics of the apparently ambiguous reflection – or articulations – of reality in Breillat's image of the female. In so doing, I will establish a connection with the socioeconomic theory developed by Jean Baudrillard on the relation between contemporary images and the real. Reading Baudrillard's polemical critique in relation to Breillat's polemical image and questioning their mutual resonance will precipitate a rethinking of Breillat's cinematic ethic and strategy in relation to its socioeconomic context – the ascendancy of publicity and pornographic images upon the visual environment of contemporary France.

### **How and when has the real become unwatchable?**

Catherine Breillat has now become a well known figure of contemporary French cinema. She is particularly famous for violating a traditional implicit rule associated with cinematic representation: the taboo of sex. Associated with the feminist artistic movement that developed in France since the 1970s with female artists such as Catherine Millet and Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat films sex and the female body in an unusually overt way that flirts with the limits of pornography and of representation itself. This is particularly true in her film *Anatomie de l'enfer*, produced in 2004, which she considers to be the acme of her cinematic style (Clouzot 134). This film begins with a chance encounter at a gay nightclub, as a result of which an unnamed woman (played by Amira Casar) pays an unknown man (played by Rocco Siffredi) to, on her instructions, 'watch her where she is unwatchable' (*Anatomie de l'enfer*, my translation). During four nights, the man will explore her body, watching the female, the unwatchable. This film's scenario in fact derives from Breillat's novel *Pornocratie*, itself borrowed in part from Marguerite Duras's *La Maladie de la mort*.

What interests me in Catherine Breillat's film, and oeuvre in general is the reaction of the public. Indeed, when I first watched *Anatomie de l'enfer* a couple of years ago now, I went through a series of emotional states and had to wait few weeks before formulating a first judgement on this film. I was first extremely shocked and disgusted, like I think most of her public, but then I progressively questioned the reason behind such a violent reaction. What is so shocking in Breillat's work? Her image obviously. The close-ups, the way she shows the female body, the queasy details, the displayed intercourses are an ordeal for the viewer. Maybe hell itself, of which she shows the anatomy. However, when you think about it, these images are nothing but 'natural' images: a body, genitalia, sex. This is the truth of the body, the body in all its reality, but that I apparently could not stand when first watching *Anatomie de l'enfer*. In fact, the body as shown in Breillat's film seems to be 'less real' than the body shown in the erotic shades of pornography or in the mass media displaying of photoshopped model's bodies. As such, it appears that Breillat's image shows something 'unwatchable' but that, in fact, happens to be most real. I was thus left with one question: How and when has the real become unwatchable?

Catherine Breillat is not the first to discuss this issue in the French intellectual landscape. The sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard did it before as he was studying the transformations of contemporary societies due to the rise of mass consumerism, mass media and neoliberalism. Baudrillard indeed described the postmodern condition as the experience of the ‘death of the real’. For him, the invasion of the public space by mass media images changed human self-perception and perception of reality: what we think is the real is in fact only a reality-show, a ‘simulation’ of reality while reality itself becomes inaccessible, unwatchable. To illustrate this argument, Baudrillard takes the example of Borges’ fable *On the Exactitude of Science* in which an Empire was represented in a map that was so precise that it actually was of the size of the Empire itself. Progressively, the people began to consider the map as the true Empire and, what was actually the Empire was abandoned and turned into a desert. The image created an alternative reality. For Baudrillard, our contemporary societies are similar: images are simulacra, they have no link to reality anymore, they just create another, different reality. Moreover, in trying to preserve an appearance of reality, these images exaggerate their non-existent relation to reality up to the point of becoming ‘hyperreal’, as Baudrillard puts it (*Simulacres* 1).

However, Baudrillard warns, such an intricate relation to the real is, in itself, ‘diabolical’ because utterly deceptive (“Evil Demon” 85). He argues: ‘[Images] only seem to resemble things [...] Or rather, they really do conform, but their conformity itself is diabolical.’ (ibid.) These images deceive the viewer who believes in their faked reality. As in Borges’s Empire, the simulation replaces the real, which is abandoned underneath the hyperreal images. Reality is condemned to desertification and disappearance from disuse: it turns into the ‘désert du réel’ (*Simulacres* 10). This is why Baudrillard sees images as developing ‘a fatal strategy of denegation of the real and of the reality principle.’ (“Evil Demon” 94). As such, the contemporary image is, Baudrillard suggests, a copy without prototype, what he calls a third order simulacrum. He points out:

The secret of the image [...] must not be sought in its differentiation from reality, [...] but on the contrary in its “telescoping” into reality, its short-circuit with reality, and finally, in the implosion of image and reality’ (“Evil Demon” 93).

### **An ambivalent relation to the real: Breillat’s cinematic image**

For Baudrillard, every contemporary images are affected by this phenomenon and carry a twofold creative and destructive power regardless of whether they are photographs, ads or even cinematic images (“Evil Demon” 84): they all are hyperreal simulacra characterized by their ‘telescoping’ into reality. Catherine Breillat’s cinematic image does not seem to escape this rule. At the origin of fierce debates on the limits of representation and the relation between images and reality, her films – *Anatomie de l’enfer* most notably – have often been criticized for the supposed triviality and superficiality of their images. The latter supposedly show, at the same time, *too much and not enough*, are too close and too far from reality. As Manohla Dargis, New York Times

critic argues: "Anatomy of Hell" is more than a lapse; it is a *brutal self-parody* of a filmmaker who, having stripped down to the nitty-gritty once too often, may finally have *nothing left to show*" (12, my italics). For Dargis, as for many detractors of Breillat's film, images in *Anatomie de l'enfer*, on the one hand, a form of 'brutal parody' of representation, a succession of too close close-ups that exaggerate the triviality of the real. And, on the other hand, they simultaneously seem superficial and from any deep meaning. Many critics may disagree with Dargis' negative critique – as I do – yet she does pinpoint a crucial characteristic of Breillat's cinematic style: the ambivalent relation of her image to the real.

Breillat's images indeed develop an ambivalent relation with the real. The omnipresence of pornographic motifs, reinforced by the use of close-ups to capture female genitalia and the naked body in general, highlights the close relation Breillat's image cultivates with the real. Uncompromising in the displaying of the body, Breillat's image insists on the sexual body, displaying it in all its queasy aspects. The viewer cannot but be overwhelmed by these unavoidable images that show *too much, too closely*. However, this insistence on sexual motifs, what Grønstad calls the 'visual illicit', seems to contrast with the blurred reality of the film. Set up in vague spatiotemporal and narrative frameworks, giving no indication whatsoever of date, place or even names, the film indeed blurs the limits of reality. The story also gives a clear importance to the dream, taking place during five nights, five dream times – the one of the encounter and the four experimental nights – and filming the woman asleep. Moreover, the woman's suicide attempt and the references to mental illness add a schizophrenic dimension to the film. Accordingly, the viewer never knows what is true and what is not; what is a dream – or nightmare – or the real. Like the man looking through the damaged mirror (see figure 1), the viewer does not know if what he sees is the real or a distorted reflection. This distorted gaze corresponds to Baudrillard's analysis of the 'telefission of the real' ("Evil Demon" 88), its distortion by contemporary images. It is all the more so as the first message on the screen at the beginning of Breillat's film indicates that the actress, Amira Casar, has been replaced by prostheses during the sequences of sexual intercourse and the close-ups on genitalia. Accordingly, even the most basic aspect of bodily display is based on a trick. Conversely, when Amira Casar's actual body is filmed, it looks like a puppet or a doll (see figure 2): as Emma Wilson argues, its stillness, unnatural ivory colour and 'dormant materiality' seem unreal (18). The woman looks more like a doll – Hans Bellmer's dolls in particular, as Clouzot points out (12) – than a real human being (see figure 3).

### **'Parce que je suis une femme': on showing images that are not watchable**

Breillat's images in *Anatomie de l'enfer* develop an ambivalent relation to the real. Her images, like the ones described by Baudrillard, flirt with the limits of reality, being exaggeratedly close to the real and far from it at the same time. However, Breillat's images do not match Baudrillard's vision of contemporary images. Indeed, Breillat's images set off many debates and are seen as exceptions rather than the norm. My point is that, if Breillat's images perfectly embodied what Baudrillard criticizes, they would not cause such debates and would

look like those of Hollywood or Disneyland – which Baudrillard often mentions as examples of how contemporary images have become hyperreal and mere simulacra. In fact, I think that if Breillat's images do share aspects with the hyperreal and simulacra contemporary images while not being totally like them, it is because Breillat plays with the characteristics of the image in order to reverse their 'veiling' of reality. In other words, Breillat's image, I argue, play with and distort the characteristics of the image as analysed by Baudrillard in order not to veil reality but, on the contrary, to unveil it. As such, Breillat's film is the *Matrix*'s 'red pill' that reveals what the real truly is, the desert of the real and tries to inhabit it again. Interestingly, *Matrix* screenplay is based on Baudrillard's theory and the screenplay even includes some quotes from his books such as the following: 'Welcome to the desert of the real'.

What leads me to think of Breillat's image as a revelation of reality is that the quest for reality is a crucial motif in the film. The film is centred on an attempt to reveal what is real and what is not in the fake images of female bodies shown by pornography and the photoshopped models on publicities. The film indeed opens with the enigmatic woman's statement, 'parce que je suis une femme', which is used by the woman as a justification for her suicide attempt. Breillat's film seems to respond to such a statement, highlighting what it implies to be a woman in contemporary societies and what being a female truly means. This quest for the reality of the female is made in spite of – and, as Breillat highlights, in order to change – the man's merciless gaze upon the female. As Breillat stressed: '[*Anatomie de l'enfer*] est le parcours initiatique de l'homme' (Devanne). Breillat opposes and tries to change the reality of the female as conceived by the man. The man being here for both the film's character and the contemporary audience, either male or female, influenced by a patriarchal logic. This patriarchal logic is expressed by the man's affirmative peremptory sentences, his conception of the female appearing as indisputable: 'La fragilité des chairs féminines impose le dégoût ou la brutalité', says the man. Breillat firmly opposes this reality. Accentuating the contrast between the disgust and inclemency of the man's gaze upon the female, and the uncluttered and pure aspect of Amira Casar's body, Breillat insists on the unfairness of the man's severe judgement. The four-night exploration of the woman's body thus appears as an exploration and revelation of the contemporary misconception of the female.

Crucially, for Breillat, contemporary images are at the origin of such patriarchal misconceptions. In her screenplay to *Romance*, she describes the contemporary image as 'une forme de prostitution audiovisuelle' (8), a prostitution of reality. For her, the over-eroticization of the female body and its technically-implemented transformation in photoshopped adverts alienate the reality of the female. Accordingly, Breillat, like Baudrillard, puts the blame on contemporary images for their damaging effect on reality. Crucially, Breillat's film appears to dig out for and reclaim this forgotten, damaged real. As Breillat explains:

All the images of sex and bodies that we see are marred by perversion. [...] Artists have the responsibility to represent sex from another point of view. This is what I have to address, and what I must do is show images that are not showable (Murphy).

*Anatomie de l'enfer* is about showing the ‘unshowable’, watching the unwatchable (Grønstad). This is encapsulated in the main theme of her film: as Breillat reminds us ‘essentially, she’s paying him to watch her where she can’t be watched’ (Murphy). The viewer is encouraged, forced even, to face the unwatchable: the fact that an alternative reality exists behind the veil of contemporary images and conceptions of the female. As Breillat points out: ‘The difficulty lies in the attempt to see ourselves in a different way than we are envisaged by society’ (Murphy). Her film thus consists of a surgery of the gaze: it is a dissection of the viewers’ vision of the real, aiming to free it from the pre- and mis-conception the latter have of their reality. *Anatomie de l'enfer* thus helps the audience to cultivate ‘an eye capable of seeing something other than what is given to be seen’, as Silvermann puts it(227). Breillat’s camera itself, opening up a new vision of the female for us to see, embodies this alternative, freed gaze. Filming through the damaged mirror, as a symbolic reminder of her attempt to distort our perception of the real, Breillat’s camera captures an alternative order of reality, revealing its very possibility and existence (see figure 2).*Anatomie de l'enfer* thus indeed is *The Matrix*’s ‘red pill’ that reveals the presence of an alternative reality behind the simulation, the fake reality of the ‘matrix’. As Breillat nicely puts it, her image ‘donne une existence à ce qui existe’ (10).

I however must emphasise that, if Breillat’s image suggests an alternative reality beyond the simulation, Breillat’s project is not a nostalgic call for retrogression or a return to some original reality that would lie behind the veil of simulation. Her project as well as her art has, as she puts it, ‘l’exigence d’être novateur’ (ibid). This is why her image aspires to offer alternative possibilities, alternative orders of reality, freed from the simulation but different from some long gone original reality. Baudrillard himself, in his later works, questioned the very possibility of the supposedly original real, coming closer to a Lacanian interpretation of the real as ‘impossible’. As such, Breillat offers the possibility of an alternative order of reality to her audience. While it shares aspects with the Baudrillardian hyperreal and simulacrum image, Breillat’s image thus reveals the deceptive nature of the simulation, instead of contributing to it.

#### **‘Le cinéma, c’est de la peinture [...] en mouvement’**

A question remains, however: why does Breillat’s image, at first sight, resemble Baudrillard’s perverse image? I read this inchoate resemblance as a consequence of the unfamiliarity of contemporary viewers with images that exceed the simulation. Breillat’s image, unlike Baudrillard’s hyperreal one, only appears exaggeratedly real to the viewers because they forgot what is real. As such, it seems to me that what is so shocking about Breillat’s image is not so much her ambiguous relation to pornographic images, but the gap between what advertising and pornography make us consider as the real, and Breillat’s unveiling of the possibility of an alternative order of reality.

Breillat's alternative displaying of the reality of the female is what, for her, makes her oeuvre a 'cinéma moral' (Breillat8). Her cinematic ethic does not focus on morality through the filming of moral actions or trying to impart a final moral – 'la morale au cinéma' (*ibid*). On the contrary, she wants to show the truth of the female body, to reveal it as it is without judging it. This is precisely where Breillat's image and Baudrillard's theory meet again: Breillat's 'cinéma moral' opposes the 'immoral' image as described by Baudrillard ("Evil Demon" 84). With her 'cinéma moral', Breillat undermines the 'immoral logic, without depth, beyond good and evil, beyond truth and falsity' of the image's telescoping into the real that Baudrillard identified ("Evil Demon" 90). I thus see Breillat's work as a deconstruction of the image in order to create a new one. Indeed, her work on the image goes so far as to upset the most basic logical and causal relation of representation that links it to the real: it dissects the viewers' perception of their reality, as it were. As such, Breillat's film only keeps the most basic structure of images, its *anatomie*, in order to completely rethink and recreate it. This deconstruction can be read as an attempt to reach the 'degrézéro' of the artistic image, echoing Roland Barthes' 'degrézéro de l'écriture'.

As I previously noted, Breillat's project is fundamentally innovative and does not aim to regress to an original form of reality – or of image. However, Breillat's reconstructed image does appear to draw on the experience of artistic images of the past. If Baudrillard clearly expressed his nostalgia for the paintings of the old masters (*Critique*), Breillat also demonstrated her desire to turn her moving image into a moving painting. Indeed, as Emma Wilson suggests, Breillat's moving image in *Anatomie de l'enfer* brings to life the static image of the sexual paintings of the nineteenth century (see figure 4). Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, Manet's *Olympia* and Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* are resonant with the choreography of the bodies in sexual relation, the contrast of the colours, the succession of close-ups, and Amira Casar's positions in the film. In fact, *Anatomie de l'enfer*'s stills themselves served as the basis for an artistic exhibition before the film was released (Tylski). As Breillat insisted during an interview 'J'ai toujours dit que pour moi le cinéma, c'est de la peinture [...] en mouvement' (Tylski).

### The future of images

However, I consider that this step backwards in art history constitutes the foundation of Breillat's innovation. She gives a possibility of futurity to contemporary images through the creation of a new image on the ashes, on the *anatomie* of previous forms of images. Her image would thus be conjugated in Kristeva's 'future perfect' (364), this time thought to re-conceive a different future. Breillat creates the image that *will have been* if the media, consumerism and capitalism had not turned images into a destructive process. She gives a possibility of future tense to the image through a step backwards into its past. Breillat's image is thus a bridge between the past and the future of the image. Crucially, in giving a future to the artistic image, Breillat fundamentally opposes Baudrillard's critique. Indeed, Baudrillard polemically announced the death of the image and contemporary art in general. He suggested:

Maisquepeut encore signifier l'artdans un monde hyperréalisted'avance, cool, transparent, publicitaire? Quepeut signifier le porno dans un monde pornographié'd'avance? Sinon nous lancer un dernierclind'oeilparadoxalcelui de la réalité qui se ritd'elle-même sous saforme la plus hyperréaliste, celui du sexe qui se rit de lui-même sous saforme la plus exhibitionniste, celui de l'art qui se rit de lui-même et de sapropredisparition sous saforme la plus artificielle: l'ironie. ("Complot")

However, for Kellner, 'Baudrillard's dismissal of art and aesthetics blocks the necessary work that needs to be done. While his analyses are certainly a provocation to new thinking and practice, one must go beyond Baudrillard to make his insights productive for aesthetic theory and practice today'. By offeringa possibility of future to the artistic image, Breillatgoes against – even beyond – Baudrillard's pessimistic critique.

There remains a final question of whether this is a step beyond or towards Baudrillard. Kellnerindeed wisely questions how consciously provocative Baudrillard's critique was. As Turner reminds us: 'The provocateur in Baudrillard was just as strong at the end of his life as in his early years when he first encountered, and embraced, pataphysics' (2005). As a practitioner of this science of imaginary solutions, his critique indeed matches the pataphysical strategy seeking to upset traditional Cartesian logic in order to open up new intellectual perspectives that the movement wanted to create. This is whyBaudrillard's death sentence can be read as an attempt to shake an artworld that is running out of steam and to encourage contemporary artists to generate a resurrection of the image.Lotringerg further argues:

The only legitimate reason art would have to exist nowadays would be to reinvent itself as art. But this may be asking too much. It may not be capable of doing that, because it has been doing everything it could to prove it still is art. In that sense Baudrillard may well be one of the last people who really cares about art.

Baudrillard polemically stated that art is not art anymore, encouraging people to recreate art instead of searching for proof that art is art. And this is precisely what Breillat does: she deconstructsand recreates the image in order to recreate art and thus reality itself, in a sense fulfilling Baudrillard's hopes.

Both relying on the polemical aspect of their works and theses as a way to shake the art world, Baudrillard and Breillat both implement a strategy of disruption to end what Baudrillard calls 'la dictature des images' ("Complot"). Grønstad argues in that sense:'Rather than being stigmatized as representatives of an over-hyped "shock cinema", I suggest that the films in question [Breillat's films] more usefully be regarded as an antidote to the numbing complacencies and stock humanity of much mainstream cinema' (164).Allowing her public to watch the unwatchable, and, by so doing, disrupting the alienated gaze of her audience,Breillat's image frees the

audience's perspective from the dictatorship of the image. Through disruption, and the valorization of an 'other' image, Breillat thwarts the 'complot de l'art', that, in Baudrillardian terms, 'can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, alter it; (but) never disturbs the order, which is also its own" (*Critique* 110). What is promising in Breillat's image is that it does disturb this order. Her images are the explosion Baudrillard was waiting for when he described with feigned pessimism: 'What will happen will never be explosion but implosion. Never again will we see energy in its spectacular and pathetic form [...] but only the cold energy of simulacra, its distillation in homeopathic doses into the cold systems of information' ("Evil Demon" 90).

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## Appendix



Figure 1: Catherine Breillat, *Anatomie de l'enfer* (screenshot)



Figure 2: Catherine Breillat, *Anatomie de l'enfer*(screenshot)



Figure 3: Hans Bellmer, 'Die Puppe', 1934

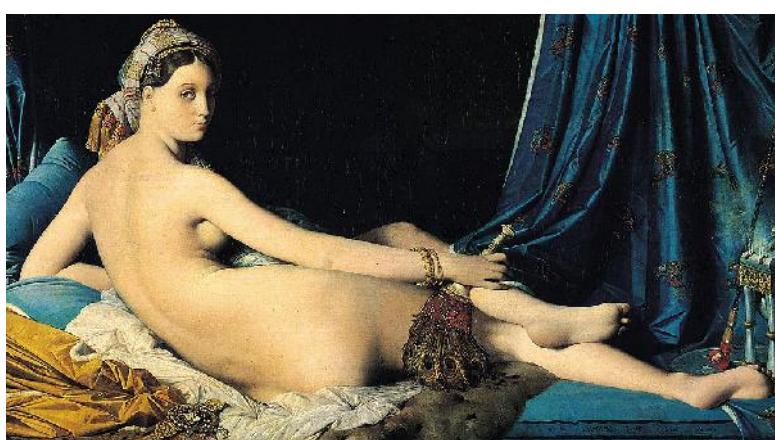


Figure 4: Manet, *Olympia*. 1863

Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814

Catherine Breillat, *Anatomie de l'enfer*(screenshot)

Courbet, *L'Origine du monde*, 1866