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## MOVIES

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# Anatomy of a film both graphic, abstract

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Vivid portrayals of sex were plentiful at this year's Toronto Film Festival, but for sheer, confrontational, anatomical detail, none came close to Catherine Breillat's ultragraphic *Anatomy of Hell*, which she adapted from her novel "Pornocratie."

The film, which opened Friday, stars French actress and model Amira Casar and Italian porn star Rocco Siffredi as nameless strangers who come together in what eventually reveals itself to be a fable about the dark side of men's feelings toward women's bodies.

The story, or what there is of one, goes something like this: A woman brushes hands with a strange man at a gay club, then descends to the ladies room to slit her wrist. ("Because I am a woman," she later explains to the man, who comes along in the nick of time.) Later, she employs some very convincing methods to talk him into a deal: She will pay him if he agrees to come over and watch her "where I am unwatchable" for four nights. Much of that time is spent naked and asleep on the bed. The rest is peppered with some of the most jaw-loosening sexual images ever committed to film. (A body double is used for the extremely up-close-and-personal scenes.)

I'll just say: used tampon, aftermath of removal, new uses for lipstick, garden hoe. One afternoon, at the Hotel Inter-Continental in Toronto, the pretty, vivacious fiftysomething director explained herself.

**Question:** How did this film come about?

**Answer:** Contrary to what everyone believes, I didn't go as far as I would have liked with my [1999] film "Romance." When I finished it, a French magazine asked me if I thought I'd made a porn film. I realized that although I had tried to go as far as I could, I hadn't gone far enough. In "Romance," Caroline examines herself in the mirror and asks how it's possible for her sex to co-exist on the same body with her face. But the right way to film it would have been to place a mirror between her legs, and pan from crotch to face. I couldn't do that to the actress. I liked her, and she would have been lynched by the media.

**Q:** Why did you title this latest movie "Anatomy of Hell"?

**A:** There's a fundamentalist view of women's bodies in our culture. Taken to the extreme, it makes even hair become obscene. If you cover something with a veil, you make it obscene. I wanted to show the most difficult thing to look at in order to inoculate the viewer, as if with a vaccine. It becomes impossible to say that something is obscene if we change the aesthetic codes.

**Q:** But the characters start off in a Paris nightclub, wearing Prada. Why set the movie in an affluent setting in the present-day Western world if you wanted to talk about fundamentalist attitudes toward women?

**A:** In the modern age, in Western society, sex is subject to the legal system, to absurd laws. Consenting 16-year-olds can engage in certain sexual activities that it is illegal to show them doing, when it would be better for them to see these things than to do them. The fundamentalist culture is in our so-called secular society.



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**DIRECTOR:** "There's a fundamentalist view of women's bodies in our culture," France's Catherine Breillat says.

**Q:** Yet the imagery in the film is mostly Christian. A crucifix hangs above the woman's bed.

**A:** Well, I found this 18th century bleeding Christ that I thought really resembled Amira. Amira is in a position of sacrifice and in a position of knowledge. She serves as a source of revelation to the man. By watching her, Rocco experiences horror, awe, violence and then emotion. She humanizes herself through her sexuality. Animals use sex just for procreation. But humans project themselves in the abstract, we project emotion and thought. We invent ourselves through sex. We invent a fiction, with language, and that's what makes us human.

**Q:** Are these characters meant to represent the first man and the first woman?

**A:** Yes, and specifically, the first gaze. The first man seeing the first woman, looking at beauty for the first time and seeing the object of beauty as something obscene. I wanted the man — and he had to be a man, not a boy; someone with a mature sexuality — who doesn't like women to see a woman for the first time. It had to be a man who hadn't had previous sexual experience with a woman. So the answer was a sexual being gazing upon a woman for the first time, who goes from horror and awe to the desire to murder to the emotion of love. For a man, falling in love is close to the desire to kill, because he ... becomes vulnerable, surrenders to the other. There's a fear of being seduced. This is why men have made women submissive.

**Q:** Your film is an attempt to express this idea, but do you feel that it will change the way anybody thinks?

**A:** I think cinema is far more complex than that. As opposed to writing, cinema allows you to express contradictory feelings simultaneously. Different impulses can coexist .... It's far more complex than can be summarized in words. I wasn't making a political manifesto. What struck me, what I didn't expect to see, was the pain and solitude Rocco experiences.

**Q:** At times, there was laughter coming from the audience. Do you see humor in the film?

**A:** I think it's the discomfort, like the little boys in the film who laugh at the little girl's body. Once we reach the age of reason — about 7 years old — we laugh at our discomfort about the

body. But we are laughing at our own fear. Segregation between the sexes leads to a fundamental awkwardness. So viewers regress to their early childhood.

**A:** What was it like to adapt the script from your own novel?

**Q:** In this case, the subject was so fundamental and essential that I felt I had to use the medium of words. I feel like I made a silent film, by the way. That's the universe I was looking for. It allowed me to transpose a world of silence. The novel is recounted using the woman's first-person voice, whereas the film is from the male perspective. This wasn't a conscious choice; actually I became aware of it on set.

**Q:** You chose a very stylized, art-directed look. Why set it in an old, abandoned house by the ocean?

**A:** I looked at it as an odalisque in Renaissance painting, as religious painting. I also wanted to make it so that it didn't look anything like pornography, so I had to take it out of context and make the body sacred. It's at once an image of sexual ecstasy and religious ecstasy. I wanted to take the body out of the very trivial aspects of daily life. The sheets are made of hemp, they are handmade. In the last shot, when Rocco holds them up, they look like the fabric in a Renaissance painting. Rocco looks as if he is holding the Shroud of Turin or something.

**Q:** Are you happy with the response to the film?

**A:** Here in Toronto, yes. In France, the response was yes on the one hand and on the other hand absolutely not. People said there was a great deal of controversy around "Romance," but it wasn't the case. It got mostly good reviews. With this one, it was black or white. Some critics said I should have been executed for this film. I could have done without that. It's funny when hatred of a film extends to hatred of the filmmaker.

**A:** What are you working on now?

**A:** My new project is very different. I want to make a film about love and passion with more epic sweep, more romance. I'm adapting the novel "Une Vieille Maitresse" by Barbey d'Aureville. This time I'll be much kinder to the audience. I am very romantic, I have a very romantic side, and ... I want to show my romantic side without this apotheosis of violence that characterizes my films.