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Contemporary Women Directors

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### Reaction Papers 3: *Fat Girl* (2001)

Most of us are brought up and taught the idealized facades of adolescent love. We are told through endless stories and fairy tales that young romance is enchanting, magical and a sexually liberating experience. Unfortunately what we don't hear is that such experiences are also painful, frightening, and reckless and can be based purely on lies and deceit. Many young men are willing to tell a young woman anything in order to get in bed with them and because the women want it too, she is willing to pretend to believe what he is telling her. Catherine Breillat's brutally honest *Fat Girl* tells such a story. A story about a 15 year-old girl's first sexual experience with an older boy, and her pudgy 12 year old sister who stands by jealously witnessing the loss of her older sister's innocence.

In Cristina Bogdan's article *New French Extremity: An Exigency for Reality* she talks about the 'New French Extremity,' which is a term coined by critic James Quand in 2004. The term refers to "a selection of directors whose films embody a new aesthetic of naturalistic violence and symbolic transgression" (Bogdan 1). Many of these filmmakers listed in Bogdan's article are names I recognize but the one director that stood out above the rest was filmmaker Gaspar Noe. Similar to Breillat's film *Fat Girl*, many of Gaspar Noe's films also tend to

constantly push the boundaries of sexual violence. Bogdan mentions Gaspar Noe's *Enter the Void* (2009) which is a film I have not yet seen. But I have seen his earlier controversial film *Irreversible* (2002); and like *Fat Girl*, that was a film that also made me incredibly uncomfortable and uneasy throughout. Like in *Fat Girl*, *Irreversible* also has two shocking sequences: one that involves an extreme sexual act and one of extreme horrific violence.

And yet even though both films do push the envelope, I found them both not exploitative in nature. Exploitation is meant to make violence and rape purposely shocking, exciting and immorally entertaining for its audience. Both these films were meant to deeply horrify. To disturb. To have the spectators ponder their own lives and how we take for granted the many simple pleasures that we are given. The main reason why *Irreversible* is effective is all because of the chronological way the story unfolds for the audience. Since it's told in reverse order *Irreversible* becomes a fundamentally different kind of film. For Breillat's *Fat Girl*, the film's extended central sex-scene between two underage teens might be explicit, but it is excruciantly personal and sympathetic in its polarizing honesty.

Unlike the many vulgar sex comedies that get released every year, *Fat Girl* has something important to say to young adults. Like what Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* said to teens in the 60's, *Fat Girl* is a film that examines the repressed sexuality of young adults and the growing pains of social hypocrisy in the new millennium. Why is the topic of sex such a controversial and taboo subject matter, especially here in the United States? We can have a variety of mindless gross-out sex comedies that pertain numerous crude bodily fluid jokes, but once a film really tries to delve into the serious taboos of what makes us sexual creatures (*Last Tango in Paris*, *Kids* and *Shame* immediately come to mind), we stamp these films with a NC-17 rating and limit the minimal amount of theater releases.

A lot of *Fat Girl*'s dislike stems from the shocking and jolting ending conclusion that comes out of left field and gives the spectator a huge slap back into reality. "NFE directors whose movies I have discussed above represent a new path towards the exploration of reality in the contemporary world" (Bogdan 1). I can understand why audiences would be stunned and even angered with an ending like this. And yet at the same time I admire Breillat's courageousness in not giving the film a gentler and more conventional studio ending. The film, like life, gives us sudden inexplicable events that are heinous and tragic, but they unfortunately do happen. For Breillat to not give into audiences formulaic expectations is extremely refreshing. To present a cold, hard and uncompromising film with such risky spontaneity and free-will is something I find highly commendable for an artist.