

## Session Eight Lecture Notes: Girls, Women, & Psychic Assault

Professor Eugenie Brinkema

21L.435/CMS.840 - At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation

This week, we turn to girls, women, and psychic assault: all those questions for the next paper on language and lies and persuasion and betrayal, they turn on this week in many ways. Things to watch for:

(1) duration; both of these films defer or delay the scene(s) of violence in some ways... both have been misread by spectators who thought they wandered into the wrong genre forms, and, likewise, they have been accused of duping spectators: what do you make of that, esp. as each film also thematizes betrayal, trickery, duping, etc.?

(2) language: in Breillat, in particular, attend to the multiplicity of forms of language: persuasion, seduction, promises, lies, defiance, brutality, cruelty, but also song, also fantasy, also rescinding, also correction;

(3) does our discussion of violence change once women are the focus, either as victims or as aggressors? Women in these films do many things, including control the gaze of the audience (if you know your feminist film theory, you can see how Breillat in particular is playing with formal conventions and reversing them in many ways)... how does sexual difference change how we think about force external to a system that denatures it? At all? A bit? Only in certain cases? The addition of sexual to sexual violence, either as the mode of how violence takes place or how that violence is gendered seems to matter quite a bit here...

I scheduled this week after the one on Fight Club precisely because of how that text figures woman as a marginal or disruptive figure (vis; "I wonder if another woman is really what I need..."); this week puts that figure back at the center: what does that do to our thinking on identity and violence?

(4) Finally, where and what exactly is violence in these texts? Is it visible, knowable (by characters or spectators), fixed or mutable, certain or ambiguous... does violence "take place" (in the real, on flesh, as a definitive event) OR is violence itself open for debate, is it contestable, is it uncertain? What happens to a critical account of violence if/when/as the film itself refuses to cast something as violence? Or if the image casts something as violence and language undoes it? How does criticism deal with that tension?

***Girls, Women, Psychic Assault:*** Violence of language and the language of violence (seduction, persuasion, betrayal, lie, confession). Violence itself as a contested site within the films: who is the (actual) agent of violence; who is the (actual) victim of violence?

HOW DOES IT MATTER FOR CRITICISM IF THIS IS LEFT TROUBLED OR COMPLEX OR UNDETERMINED? How can we think/write about it if we don't necessarily know it when we see it, or if we see something different from characters?

Violence: is not where you expect it to be (*Fat Girl*, with the trucks; 9 min. sequence; at the rest stop) and may even be contested from within the whom (who is done violence to; which kind of violence is worse; who is to blame for or who caused violence)?

### About... *the four L's*

#### Love

Both of the films this week started out as "love stories" and then abruptly turned into horrifyingly violent films.

Clichés of love (idealism of romantic love; violence that subtends that)

#### Language (Rhetoric; Truth/Betrayal; Psychic Assault)

Forms of language: Bargaining, persuading, negotiation, bullying, insulting, teasing, denying language; using language to undo violence – claim it never took place; persuasion, seduction, promises, lies, defiance, brutality, cruelty, but also song, also fantasy, also rescinding, also correction

Yoshikawa, planning audition: don't trust pictures, trust composition (Audition)

#### Loss/Grief

romantic loss/grief re: wife; material loss of tongue and foot; loss of innocence; loss of virginity; loss of life; loss of illusions – and what does it mean *rhetorically* to figure any/all of these as losses?

#### Loneliness

Are these films about **what Loneliness will do to people** (perhaps *Fight Club* and, next week, *Frisk*, is also about that...). What kinds of lengths are people driven to due to loneliness? (Lies i.e. the audition for a new wife; but also violence, rage at loneliness not being overcome?). Two lines from the film: "the whole of Japan is lonely"; "Japan is finished"—does loneliness finish you off? **What lengths can people be driven to try to find connection?**

Middle children of history (or unwanted children of history)

Today: historical Loss—born too late to meet the people who interest her (Anais)

"Japan is finished... where are all the good girls? (history is over; greatness is in the past) (Audition)

### AUDITIO/Odishon

#### Title

Audition = sample performance; *putting on display your talents*; trying-out (for a role/ attempting to get something)/but also **hearing** and the ability to hear/literally related to "power

of hearing,” “hearing” as in a court trial; and trial for a performer (relate to sound, with word “deeper” in torture scene)

"Words create lies. Pain can be trusted"

**casting call/audition scene** (impersonal, quick cuts, mediated through video) 27 m in // stark formalism anticipates something disturbing (too neat)

Single chair; empty space (29 min in, her framing)

Deception (him to her; her to him)

**Loss / Grief**

Asami dressed in white (bridal/marriage color, but in Japan, also for mourning)... but also blank slate, space of pure inscriptive potential

Long black hair (evil yurei—Japanese ghosts/vengeful spirits with unfinished business on earth -- convention)

**NB: Visual composition**, including of her bent over with sack waiting for the phone call.

SHOW quick cut to the body bag and her bent over/the smile at the call

\What comes out in the second set of conversations over dinner?

→ Jump cuts (in *Audition*; date conversation; sense of distraction; punctuation; undo truth)

What is he attracted to her? Her trauma; appropriates it for himself (interchangeable women)

**blurred lines between fantasy and reality**

ballet shoes

excess (tongue, fingers)

**hallucination** / poisoned – passes out; remember conversations

(second time) vs. idealized first time; fellatio scene and bag – thing crawls out missing pieces (tongue, fingers); she brings it milk/vomit – she ties cord around his throat (ballet instructor)

Form:

Spectatorial Time and affect: experiencing of being lulled into feeling one way and then the affective shift. Assault on the spectator.

Critical reception: Feminist?

Is Asami's revenge comprehensible? Justifiable? Revenge of women abused by men taken on other men (historical comeuppance)?

Catherine Breillat/*Fat Girl*

→ *400 Blows* (Truffaut) and **ending of *Fat Girl* (freeze frame)** – retelling the history of French Film as woman's (not coming-of-age and boys, but girls)

**Bit of relevant film history:** French New Wave “**La Nouvelle Vague**”

associated with time period; sometimes as narrow as 1959 – 1964

casual look (shooting on location, available light)

narrative (non)clarity and (dis)unity: jumpy, ambiguous connections

plots: loose connections (episodic, ambiguous)

- plot moves in fits and starts:

loose links, unmotivated scenes, ambiguous ending

- like neo-realism, loose, causally-unmotivated narrative

heroes: anti-heroes, drift, not strongly driven

ambiguous endings (end of *400 Blows*)

new cinematography (follow characters, flexible equipment)

handheld camera;

**violations of continuity editing:** violations of 30-degree rule = “jump cut”

→ **Jump cuts (in *Audition*;** date conversation; sense of distraction; punctuation; undo truth)  
30° rule violations.

**Breillat:**

Sexual desire as inherently ambivalent (like relation to food) (powerful possibility for pleasure and ecstasy, but also linked to shame, exploitation, compromise, disappointment, violence) – it is NOT natural; it is something woman have to negotiate (one must be self-conscious and contemplative about it; it's not obvious or inevitable)

Sexuality is sexual negotiation and humiliation and bargaining in *Fat Girl*. Anaïs and Elena (12 and 15); criticizes and jealous of Elena's sex (also mourns her losses with/for her). Women as trapped (men: contempt for the woman who sleep with them and contempt for those who won't; loss of virginity as form of freedom against new shackles by father who wants her examined for STDs). Comparative study of different forms of humiliation and liberation: the more truly violated of the sisters is the long, slow seduction of the girl who convinced herself of love than the one who was violently but quickly and impersonally raped.

“I know why I make films—partly because I want to describe female shame—but beyond that, cinema is a mode of expression that allows you to express all the nuances of a thing while including its opposite. These are things that can't be quantified mentally; yet they can exist and be juxtaposed. That may seem very contradictory. Cinema allows you to film these contradictions.”

—Catherine Breillat (interview with Robert Sklar)

Breillat is quickly becoming known as the “auteur of porn”—due to her use (most notably in her 1999 *Romance*, but we will discuss its appearance elsewhere as well) of unsimulated sex in her films. She has been obsessed with sex for some time now: her first novel received an over-18 classification when it was released in France; as Breillat was 17 at the time, she was not legally allowed to purchase her own text. (There’s a telling feminist moral in that anecdote.)

deLauretis, “Violence of Rhetoric” [The question: what is the violence of rhetoric?]

critique of two key poststructuralist thinkers: Foucault (rhetoric of violence) and Derrida (violence of rhetoric)

All *representations* of violence (concept and expression) occur within the symbolic order (vs. violence as act outside the symbolic). Representations of violence can’t be separated from notions of gender because the meaning of certain representations is dependent on gender of violated objects (all you need are two: sexual difference; point is the difference...) So, violence is en-gendered. (All representations of violence participate in a model of sexual difference.)

In other words, violence participates in the definition of violence. Difficulty of defining violence (slide from language which speaks violence to language which produces violence). (History of this position: rejection of empirical realism, which presumes that language gives us untroubled/neutral access to material reality and experience; signs, rather, pass through bodies and power). Key phrase, “technology of gender” = techniques and discursive categories by which gender is constructed; “en-gendering” of violence. (Subject is not “somebody” but “some body.”)

Ex: “rape of nature” requires simultaneously defining nature as feminine, and what is rapable as feminine. The phrase does not depict meaning: it produces meaning. Discourse and discursive analysis are not gender-neutral. “Violence is engendered in representation”.

Ex: in name of scientific objectivity/neutrality, gender violence legitimated

Two kinds of violence: one whose object is female (represented as feminine) and one whose object is male. Rape of nature = metaphor that works through image of male subject doing violence to a femininity other. Rhetorics of violence imply and take shape through routes of masculinity/femininity.

For the last few weeks in this course, we’ve been talking about identity and violence: with *Fight Club*, we talked about white masculinity at the end of the century, and the anxiety of a generation of men who felt lost to history and thus attempted to produce a series of traces, scars, destruction as the creation of a kind of material legacy. Then, we turned to gender, language, psychic violence, and all the specific problems that sexual difference poses for women. Now, this week we make a turn towards issues of desire, fantasy, sexuality, and an explicit focus on issues of knowledge and fragmentation in Dennis Cooper’s 1991 novel *Frisk*.

We’ve been using identity as a way of complicating the figure of violence in relation to less “obvious” forms of force (opaque violence; violence against property or history or the self;

structural violence; fantasized violence; violence with undetermined sources and targets; and even violence that does not reveal itself as violence, or is contested or denied as even *being* forms of violence).

We've also turned to repeatedly ask questions about love, intimacy, relations, affection, romance, loyalty, betrayal and illusions of the above: What is at stake if love requires defense through violent means? What does that say about violence, but what does it also say about love? **Can a terribly violent film can also be about love, transformation, affirmation—...**

Finally, we've asked about the implications of these texts for problems of language — when we asked about language in *Fat Girl*, we moved through a permutation of rhetorics of violence (what does it mean to call X “rape”?) and asked about the violence of rhetoric (persuasion, seduction, bargaining, negotiation, euphemism, lie, language that undoes the visible or denies the event)

And we ended class last time by taking this problem of language seriously as a problem for the critical task (i.e. yours) **in relation to the ending of the film:**

That ending forced us to ask: **Is violence therefore something that is characterized by the victim's view or is it something that is done in the perpetrator's view? Does the critic's choice of language mean violence did or did not take place?** In the end, who gets to accept or deny the violence of an act?

→ **The problem of rape and criticism. What to call this: if we call it rape, we have to override Anais' will (which is what rape is) and refuse her language; but if not, we deny what we see?** The naming is the problem and criticism is not immune to or indifferent to the logic of violence *in* the text itself.

**We continue that problematic this week in a novel dealing with fantasy, fragmentation and dissection, both a diegetic one and a critical one – posing the question of** what kind of dissection can we do as critics that doesn't repeat gestures of splicing, splitting, cutting, fragmentation, dissecting in the text...

The critic tries to know about, learn about, derive information from the text: but in this text, obsessed as it with the question of whether the sexual/material body is a form of flesh, bone and meat, or is it something with something deeper inside, that search for deeper, inside information becomes charged differently.

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CMS.840 / 21L.435 At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation  
Fall 2013

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