

Blu-Ray Review: Catherine Breillat's 'Fat Girl' Proves Unforgettable

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on May 11, 2011 - 7:26am

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CHICAGO – So many films come and go without leaving a permanent imprint on one's cinematic memory. Catherine Breillat's galvanizing 2001 drama, "Fat Girl," is most certainly not among them. I'll never forget the profound level of shock and unease I felt during my initial viewing of the picture, which was eventually followed by a deep admiration of Breillat's uncompromising bravery in tackling such disquieting material.

Ever since her 1976 directorial debut, "A Real Young Girl," the French auteur has made a great many moviegoers (particularly of the male persuasion) uncomfortable by depicting primal sexuality from a female perspective. She doesn't shy away from exploring the awkwardness and confusion that's often glossed over in most coming of age tales. The dangers posed by predatory men emerge as a tangible threat in her work, though Breillat never follows a predictably moralizing path when dealing with gender conflict.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

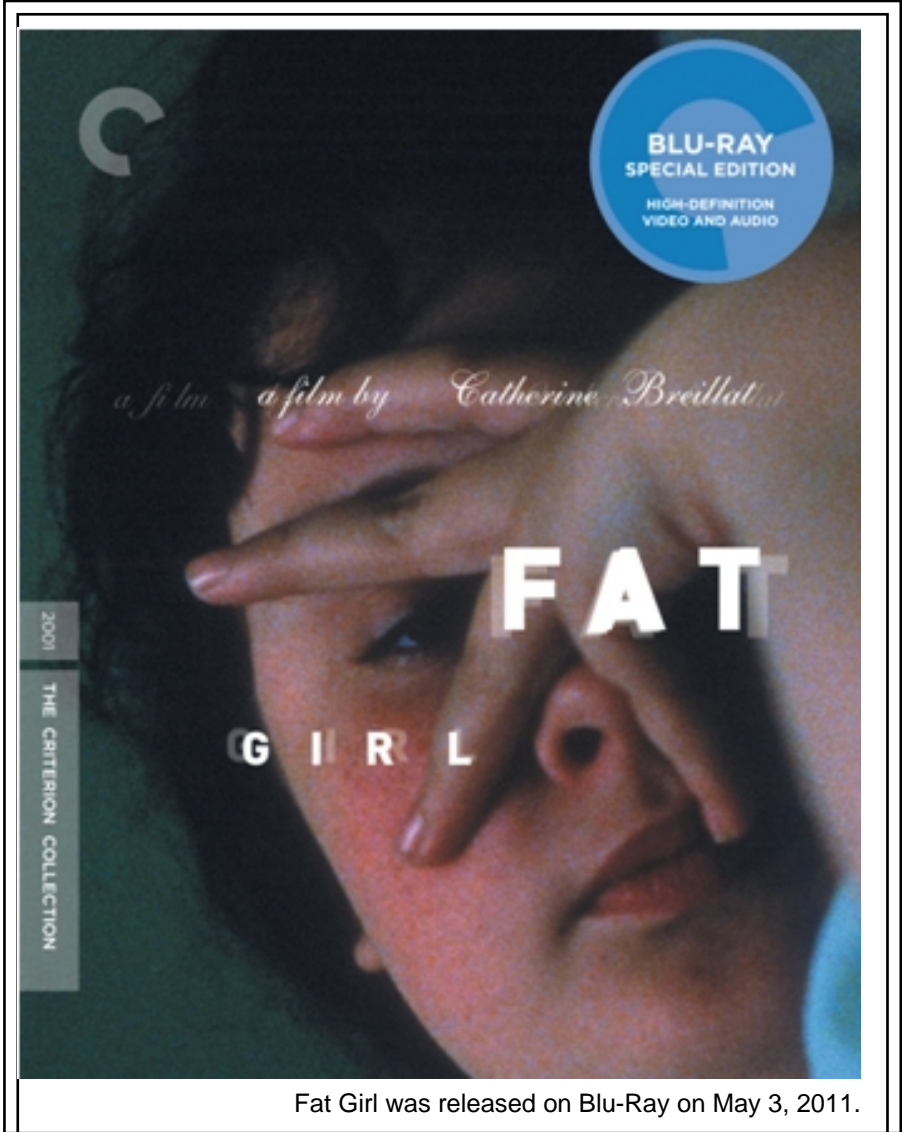
What surprised me upon my second viewing of "Fat Girl" was the tenderness that pervades certain moments between the film's two lead characters, portly 12-year-old Anaïs (Anaïs Reboux) and her photogenic 15-year-old sister, Elena (Roxane Mesquida). They're the type of siblings so strikingly different that it's difficult to believe they could be from the same gene pool. Elena makes no secret of the contempt she feels toward Anaïs, dragging her around town while on a sun-drenched vacation. Through Anaïs' pragmatic perspective, we observe how Elena is sweet-talked into bed by a smitten college student, Fernando (Libero De Rienzo). His methods of coercion work their magic on Elena, even as he outs himself as unsavory character who freely reminisces about dumping girls for kicks.

Like Anaïs, the audience starts to harbor a compulsion to peek through their fingers while watching this agonizing train wreck unfold. Yet when the exasperated preteen finally speaks up, the mere presence of another pair of eyes causes the suddenly sheepish Fernando to flee. It's the concern that Anaïs feels for her sister's dignity and well-being that ultimately makes up the heart of the movie. While Elena tricks herself into believing that her feelings for Fernando fall under the definition of love, Anaïs desires to have her own "first time" take place without the burden of emotional baggage.



Anaïs Reboux stars in Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl*.
Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

Much of the controversy surrounding this film is a natural result of its inherently explicit subject matter, though it's relatively restrained in comparison to Breillat's films about adult relationships, such as "Romance" and "Anatomy of Hell." Breillat can sense the line separating her art from exploitation, and in the case of "Fat Girl," she never crosses it. Yet her film is so psychologically bruising and emotionally graphic that the audience leaves feeling like they saw more than they actually did. The performances she elicits from relative newcomers Reboux and Mesquida are almost eerie in their authenticity. They consistently bring credibility to Breillat's heightened dialogue, which has an intellectual depth that allows viewers to dissect the characters with a certain detachment, thus making the film's disturbing elements more bearable. However, no force on earth could possibly prepare a first-time viewer for the final twenty minutes, which builds to one of the most singularly shocking endings in film history. It's hard to think of another picture that portrays the jarring daze and devastation of defilement with such brutal candidness.



Fat Girl was released on Blu-Ray on May 3, 2011.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

"Fat Girl" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), and includes the same modest yet provocative extras offered on its 2004 Criterion DVD release. An all-too-brief making-of featurette includes footage of Breillat crouching by a monitor, barely able to contain her excitement. She voices her view that cinema should be thought of as an initiation, requiring actors to leave their comfort zone. This was certainly true for 13-year-old Reboux, who discusses her initial hesitation for baring her breasts on camera. As the film's "virginal consumer item," Mesquida performed twenty consecutive takes of a key love scene until the director was satisfied. The disc features two additional interviews with the filmmaker, one of which includes more behind the scenes footage. Breillat explains the methods of manipulation she utilizes onset to get the necessary reactions, such as scolding Reboux for looking happy after Mesquida's character ditches her. Breillat's favorite actors are clearly those who refuse to maintain control of a familiar onscreen persona, thus inviting directors to guide them in exploring their untapped potential. There's a glimpse at the film's alternate ending, and the melancholy twist it brought to the final line of dialogue, delivered in the original cut with headstrong conviction.

The second interview takes place in the aftermath of the film's premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival. Breillat appears to be in good spirits after witnessing the receptive audience laughing at her film's satirically cruel moments of recognition (the disc's French trailer noticeably plays up the film's comedic aspects more so than the American one). "You don't fall in love with a stranger," the director notes, before making the dead-on observation that mere sexual impulses are so often sentimentalized by mainstream cinema. Her psychoanalysis of the two sisters is particularly fascinating since it gets at the heart of her story's integral themes. She refers to a close sibling as an unmerciful judge who must be "symbolically killed" in order for one to exist. Though this worldview may not be everyone's cup of tea, Breillat presents it with such unflinching honesty and riveting detail that it's utterly impossible to dismiss. To see "Fat Girl" is to linger in the mind of its fearlessly brilliant creator. Brace yourself for a truly unforgettable experience.

'Fat Girl' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Anaïs Reboux, Roxane Mesquida, Libero De Rienzo and Arsinée Khanjian. It was written and directed by Catherine Breillat. It was released on May 3, 2011. It is not rated.



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