

'C'était moi mais ce n'était pas moi': portrayal of the disabled body in Catherine Breillat's *Abus de faiblesse* (2013)

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Writer/director Catherine Breillat's most recent film *Abus de faiblesse* (2013) explores an important moment of bodily transition: the change from able to disabled body. This semi-autobiographic film follows the story of film director, Maud (Breillat's alter ego), who forms a destructive relationship with a conman, Vilko, after she suffers a disabling stroke. This film shows consistency with Breillat's previous work in its exploration of the constructed nature of the female body onscreen. In the past the filmmaker has portrayed moments of trauma and transition (such as childbirth, loss of virginity or rape) to subvert processes of objectification. The article argues that *Abus de faiblesse* challenges and subverts representation of the post-menopausal and disabled body onscreen. The film interrogates binary oppositions such as able/disabled and independence/dependency to challenge representations of the disabled body as 'other'. With reference to scholarly work on disability (Mitchell and Snyder 2006) and the aging female body (Markson 2003; Ussher 2006) the article suggests that Maud's sadomasochistic relationship with Vilko is driven by a quest to retain her subjectivity after her stroke. The article demonstrates that the film dissects the feared and the unknown territory of the aging female body.

Keywords: Breillat, the body, disability, aging, agency, control

The year 2013 saw the release of French writer/director Catherine Breillat's fourteenth feature length drama, *Abus de faiblesse/Abuse of Weakness*. This semi-autobiographical film follows the recovery of post-middle-aged film director, Maud Shainberg, after she suffers a debilitating stroke that leaves her partially paralysed. Determined to continue her film career, Maud launches into preproduction on a new project, casting the charismatic conman, Vilko Piran, as her male lead. Over the months that follow Maud and Vilko develop a destructive relationship, which ends with Vilko's disappearance following the theft of the director's fortune. At the conclusion of the film Maud is left destitute and the viewer is left to reflect on her own role in her downfall.

The plot events of this film are inspired by Breillat's own experience: the writer/director suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in 2004, which left her partially paralysed. Determined to recover and continue making films, after several months of hospitalisation and rehabilitation the director launched into the development of a film based on her novel *Bad Love* in 2007, casting conman and convicted felon Christophe Rocancourt as one of her main characters. Over the course of several months Rocancourt swindled Breillat out of almost €1 million, money for business ventures that he promised to pay back. Breillat chronicled their relationship in her

2009 novel *Abus de faiblesse* (a French legal term meaning ‘abuse of weakness’), claiming that Rocancourt had taken advantage of her diminished physical and mental condition. In this film of the same name, which features Isabelle Huppert as Breillat’s alter ego, the director casts French rapper Kool Shen as Vilko, a character based on Roconcourt.

The narrative presented in *Abus de faiblesse* is extraordinary in the way that it takes the struggles of a disabled, older female woman as its focus. In this article I will argue that the portrayal of Maud both challenges and subverts representation of the post-menopausal and disabled body. In doing so, I note that the portrayal of the central protagonist is consistent with Breillat’s previous work in its exploration of the constructed and at times, abject, nature of the female body. One can observe an exploration of binaries that plays out onscreen as Maud battles adversity to make her film. By exploring these points, I will demonstrate that *Abus de faiblesse* is a film that dissects the feared and the unknown territory of the aging female body.

Recent films by Breillat are significant in their portrayal of women in moments of transition, whether focusing on the adolescent or older woman. By traversing bodily states such as pregnancy and menstruation, or exploring events such as marriage, birth, miscarriage, rape and/or the loss of virginity, as well as the psychological traumas of relationship breakdowns, Breillat attempts to subvert processes of objectification and to interrogate the contradictions associated with women’s agency, desire and shame on screen. Most important, however, is the representation of protagonists who disregard patriarchal society’s expectations and seek to become agents of their own desire. Breillat has said ‘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 opposites’ (Breillat quoted in Constable 2004, 672). This ambition involves breaking down traditional oppositions of subjective/objective and masculine/feminine to rethink the body, identity and desire.

Abus de faiblesse explores another important moment of transition: one woman’s change from able to disabled body. Breillat interrogates binary oppositions such as independence/dependency and control/surrender to challenge screen representations of the disabled body as ‘other’. Additionally, Maud’s behaviour and presentation as a sexual being bring normative displays of the abject, post-menopausal body to the fore. My reading of the film will suggest that Maud’s sadomasochistic relationship with Vilko is driven by the protagonist’s desire to retain her subjectivity after her stroke. At a basic level, Maud tolerates Vilko’s lies and deceptions in order to keep him involved as lead actor in her film project. Her interactions with Vilko, in which both characters take pleasure in playing the alternate roles of ‘controller’ and ‘controlled’, provide the physically vulnerable Maud with a temporary sense of power and mastery over her situation. By engaging in this behaviour, Maud attempts to subvert the expectations that accompany her new status of ‘stroke victim’, a bid that is ultimately unsuccessful. For while she maintains a sense of agency as director over the course of the narrative, the film’s downbeat ending exposes the challenges faced by the disabled and aged, in terms of how they are viewed and treated by others.

In order to make my argument I will engage in a close reading of the film, analysing Breillat’s thematic and stylistic concerns in relation to the portrayal of the post-menopausal and disabled protagonist. In doing so I make reference to thematic and stylistic parallels with the director’s previous work to demonstrate a continuity of approach. To further aid in my investigation of the film I will refer to a number of texts that explore the post-menopausal

and/or disabled body. Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's work in *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006) will be used as a reference point for portrayals of disability on screen across various film genres, and I will refer to Jane Ussher's *Managing the Monstrous Feminine* (2006) and Elizabeth Markson's work on the aging body in cinema (2003) to unpack representations of the post-menopausal body onscreen. Susan Wendell's seminal 1989 article 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability' will assist in my exploration of the social construction of disability. The work of these authors will help build my case that Breillat's *Abus de faiblesse* provokes its audience by forcing reflection on portrayals of the disabled and aging female body onscreen.

Lastly, I will examine the casting and performance of lead actress Isabelle Huppert as Maud, which I consider crucial to Breillat's project. Writing on cinematic representations of the aged, Beugnet notes the importance of an actress's performance 'to escape the tendency to reductionism' (2006, 18). I agree that 'the liberation of the subject from a restrictive framework of stereotypes and allegorical visual tropes thus often rests on [...] memorable performances' (18). Certainly, Huppert's portrayal of Breillat's independently minded but physically weak protagonist sees the creation of a memorable and non-stereotypical disabled character. Furthermore, Huppert's striking performance draws upon her history of roles involving abject portrayals of the body and sadomasochistic relationships. This performance is highly implicated in the subversion of norms regarding the representation of the post-menopausal and disabled body on screen.

Breillat's breakthrough film *Romance* (1999) followed on from a significant body of work produced in the 1970s and 1980s in which the director repeatedly interrogated notions of female agency and desire. This landmark film follows the female protagonist's quest to find sexual fulfilment on her own terms, which involves motherhood and the eventual death of her husband. The films that follow involve other important moments of transition such as loss of virginity (*À ma sœur/Fat Girl*, 2001), or marriage (*Une vieille maîtresse/The Last Mistress*, 2007, *Barbe Bleue/Bluebeard*, 2008). *Anatomie de l'enfer/Anatomy of Hell* (2004) returns to the territory of *Romance* with its exploration of female subjectivity. With all of these films, Breillat has repeatedly and tactically deployed stylistic elements such as extreme close-ups or long takes to challenge binary oppositions, accentuate moments of transformation and to question female agency and subjectivity. The director's films, whether set in a contemporary, historical or fairy-tale world, are consistent in their exploration of the passages between different embodied states.

In the past Breillat's films have been considered a part of the confrontational trend known collectively as the *cinéma du corps* (Palmer 2006), 'Extreme Cinema' (Beugnet 2007) or the 'New French Extremity' (Quandt 2004). Gaspar Noé, Bruno Dumont, Jacques Audiard and the Austrian born Michael Haneke are noted as other key contributors to this mini-movement, which involves stark portrayals of the human body, sexual debasement, and transgressive urges in a fashion that is frequently disturbing and often horrific. In addition, these films stand out on account of their deployment of cinematic techniques that are designed to disturb the spectator in aggressive and confronting terms. Beugnet notes that they show 'a willingness to address [...] the corporeality of the characters and actors, of the filmic body itself and, by extension, that of the spectator' (2007, 33). The last five years has seen a continued interest in confronting representations of the body on screen, with a particular skew towards stark representations of the disabled body, as evidenced in other films such as *De rouille et d'os/Rust and Bone* (Jacques

Audiard, 2012), or *Amour/Love* (Michael Haneke, 2012). Like *Abus de faiblesse*, both of these projects feature female protagonists struggling with the consequences of permanent disability (due to stroke or accidental trauma). However, while many of Breillat's previous screen works have explored corporeal themes through representations of explicit sexual relations, *Abus de faiblesse* does not feature such extreme imagery as is typical of the *cinéma du corps*. Nonetheless, the director still manages to foreground issues of sexuality and gender when exploring the actor/director relationship.

The disabled and aging body in *Abus de Faiblesse*

At the time of *Abus de faiblesse*'s release, Breillat was aged 65, and her onscreen persona, the actress Huppert, was aged 60. This makes the film unusual in that it takes a post-menopausal woman, who is partially disabled, as its central protagonist. Female characters with these qualities are rarely granted the status of central character in contemporary cinema. Moreover, cinematic depictions of the older woman are rarely associated with expressions of agency and critical subjectivity. Markson notes that onscreen roles for older women are often associated with 'asexual motherhood, unattractiveness, genderlessness, or the grotesque', while the 'female cinematic sexual body remains young, pure, and fecund for the male voyeuristic gaze and as female role model' (91). Furthermore, Beugnet observes that, as well as having a shorter life span as a sexual being than men on screen, older female characters are less likely to 'retain a status as individuals, defined in terms of (actual or past) activities, professional, cultural, or political' (2006, 2). This limitation comes as a result of their function as sexual objects, which takes precedence over other means of definition. On French cinema Beugnet notes that the limited representation of older women is not just a problem associated with popular genres, but also with less mainstream films (2006, 3).

Writing about the portrayal of disabled bodies in cinema, Snyder and Mitchell note that common representations are found in the horror genre (the monster), the melodrama (the maimed and incapacitated male or female) or the comedy genre (faked impairment) (165). They note that 'as a vehicle of sensation, disabled bodies play an important role as either the threatened producer of trauma [...] or as the threat toward the integrity of the able body' [...] for onscreen bodies, and by extension, for the audience (163). In other words, our viewing of the disabled body is associated with the traumatic bodily experience of onscreen protagonists, which we project onto our own bodies. Furthermore, 'the extreme sensations paralleled in screen bodies and audience responses rely, to a great extent, on shared cultural scripts of disability as that which must be warded off at all costs' (163). In this sense, portrayals of the disabled body as vulnerable and out of control produce anxiety for an audience seeking to manage the conditions of their own materiality.

It is worth noting that old age is often associated with disability, and that disability is something that most humans experience before their death. Wendell makes the point that 'unless we die suddenly, we are all disabled eventually' (108). She argues for further recognition of this fact, which she believes 'helps us to see that disabled people are not "other", that they are really "us"' (108). However, Sue Halpem observes that, without first-hand experience, 'empathy for the disabled is unavailable to most able-bodied persons' (quoted in Wendell 1989, 110). Similarly, the elderly are also afforded little empathy. Beugnet notes that 'in the context of a late capitalist culture old age is a disease, equivalent to the categories of low consumer

value and low productivity; a social stigma that is acutely reflected in its status in terms of representation' (2006, 4). Such a view is reflected in common representations of the elderly onscreen, including in Haneke's aforementioned *Amour*.

The portrayal of Maud in *Abus de faiblesse* challenges the common representations of disabled bodies described by Snyder and Mitchell, as from the outset, the protagonist is presented as an individual with agency, with whom we can identify. The film opens with a close-up shot of a crinkled white bed sheet. A small body squirms beneath this cotton layer, and the camera pans upward to reveal the twisted grimace of Maud (Huppert), an unsettled sleeper. The spare but shrill non-diegetic sounds of a high-pitched cello signal that something is not quite right. Maud slaps her arm, finding that she has lost all sensation in it. She sits up in bed, naked and vulnerable but for the sheet that she wraps herself in. Her lack of clothing suggests that she is a sensual being who is comfortable with her naked body, and the absence of others indicates independent living. Maud tries to stand up but her legs too betray her, and she tumbles to the ground. A medium shot reveals her small naked body sprawled on the bedroom floor underneath an upturned chair (see Figure 1). A moment later the solitary protagonist manages to crawl towards the telephone and call for help. 'La moitié de mon corps est morte' she exclaims to the emergency operator¹. This moment is significant in that it shows Maud to be an active protagonist who seeks out the help available to her. As a single woman who is home alone, she takes control of the situation and accesses the help that she desperately needs.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Maud collapses on the bedroom floor (Strand Releasing).

The scenes that follow see Maud hospitalised in critical condition. She learns that she is now saddled with permanent physical disabilities as a result of her stroke but surprisingly, she does not show signs of despair. When a producer friend, Jean-Paul, visits Maud in hospital, the protagonist acknowledges her new bodily status, but vows to fight her disability. With slurred speech she comments that 'c'est le naufrage du Titanic. Mais si j' arrive à remonter à la surface, alors je serai une bombe atomique'². So begins an intense period of rehabilitation in preparation for her next film project, which allows her to maintain her subjectivity.

Moreover, Breillat challenges the notion that disability should be hidden in *Abus de faiblesse*, by returning Maud to the public world where she continues her work as film director. Further to the point that bodily weakness and illness is generally feared Wendell suggests that 'weakness, illness, rest and recovery, pain, death and the negative (de-valued) body are private, generally hidden, and often neglected' (1989, 111). Furthermore, a 'coming into the public world with illness, pain or a de-valued body' may cause tension as the (devalued body) 'encounters resistance to mixing the two worlds' (public and private) (111). However, in Breillat's latest film we see a central character who is determined to continue her daily activities in public and private. This involves meetings with cast, crewmembers and the auditioning of young actors, all of which is undertaken with decisiveness and authority. While Maud is physically weak, and often requires the assistance of her colleagues to move around a room, she generally appears to be mentally strong, refusing to focus on her illness and retaining her 'in charge' attitude. She is seen out in the world, lunching in restaurants and cafes, returning from meetings or trips to the supermarket. I note here that Breillat's representation

of Maud as an active professional woman also counters the negative tendency noted earlier in that she is an older female character defined as an individual 'in terms of (actual or past) activities, professional, cultural, or political' (Beugnet 2006, 2). As an older, disabled woman, Maud retains a sense of agency, whilst coming to terms with her changed bodily status.

Throughout the film, one can observe a series of stylistic approaches adopted to subvert the representation of the aging and disabled woman as 'other'. First with regard to cinematography, I note that Breillat provokes viewers by presenting them with close-up images of Maud's newly found disability, as seen through the eyes of the protagonist. For example, when Maud awakens in hospital, bedridden in a darkened room, she finds that she is unable to unclench her twisted and paralysed left hand. In extreme close-up, we witness her struggle to unclench the fist with her good, right hand (see Figure 2). Moans of frustrations are heard from off screen as she works to straighten one finger at a time. By positioning the audience in Maud's place, Breillat ensures that engagement, rather than detachment is central in terms of audience response. The point of view camera positioning and framing fosters empathy for Maud's struggle, while at the same time calling attention to the abject nature of the disabled body.

INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2. Maud unclenches her hand (Strand Releasing).

The use of close-up and extreme close-up shots of the body is a tactic frequently employed across Breillat's body of work. For example, as a means of subversion in both *Romance* and *Anatomie de l'enfer*, the director utilises extreme close-up shots to display subject matter that is normally unseen, such as a real birth experience and details of female genitalia. These close-up shots of graphic, taboo imagery accentuate moments of transition and draw attention to the trauma and bodily experience associated with childbirth and sexual penetration. In the notes accompanying the DVD release of *Anatomie de l'enfer*, the director comments on her desire to frame the parts of the body that are 'increasingly hidden or eliminated', including pubic and under-arm hair (2004). Writing on the use of close-up and extreme close-up shots, Beugnet comments that these are often used as a shock tactic in traditionally male audience-orientated genres, a convention now being reclaimed by women directors, including Breillat (2007, 93). In *Abus de faiblesse* the director uses this tactic to demystify the aging and disabled female body; the use of this jarring framing provides full disclosure of the subject it portrays.

Second, Breillat interrogates the concept of disabled body as 'other' by including long takes that communicate the extent of Maud's bodily distress in unedited 'real time'. Writing on views of the disabled body, Wendell suggests that 'when we make people "other", we group them together as the objects of our experience instead of regarding them as fellow subjects of experience with whom we might identify' (1989, 116). To counter this tendency, as well as using shots filmed from Maud's point of view, Breillat includes several scenes that feature long takes as Maud struggles with her condition. The long duration of these shots fosters an audience identification with the protagonist through the sheer amount of time they spend observing her struggles. These are portrayed in stark and unflattering terms. To take one

example, a lengthy later scene focuses on Maud as she suffers an epileptic attack whilst home alone. Maud sits at a small black table, and slowly manages, though struggling, to extract slices of meat from a plastic packet in preparation for her dinner. Her body starts to shake, signalling the beginning of the attack, and she falls to the floor with a groan. The camera holds on her shaking body as she writhes about (see Figure 3). The length of this drawn out scene, which is largely a single long take, places focus on the out-of-control nature of Maud's body, allowing the audience no escape from the realities of her disability.

INSERT FIGURE 3

Figure 3. Maud collapses in the kitchen (Strand Releasing).

This sequence is typical of Breillat's signature style, which involves 'muted colour schemes, exacting long takes, minimal editing and limited set-ups, little or no non-diegetic music, (and) static dramatic tableau with few camera movements' (Palmer 2011, 62). A similar approach to the portrayal of bodily trauma is taken in *À ma sœur*, when the teenage character Elena reluctantly loses her virginity to an Italian student while on holiday. In this film a 25-minute sex scene is assembled with minimal editing and one single shot of the couple on a bed lasting in excess of seven minutes. This long, single take adds to the sense of realism in the actors' performance, creating anticipation and making Elena's final experience, and her accompanying sense of humiliation and shame, all the more devastating. Likewise, in *Abus de faiblesse*, the long take creates a sense of realism and strengthens the audience's connection with Maud. Wendell makes the point that 'suffering caused by the body, and the inability to control the body, are despised, pitied, and above all, feared. This fear, experienced individually, is [...] deeply embedded in our culture' (1989, 112). I would argue that by showing long takes of the out-of-control nature of Maud's body, Breillat asks the viewer to confront and acknowledge this fear of the disabled body. Breillat's portrayal of Maud sees her as a subject of experience with whom we might identify, rather than an object from whom we can distance ourselves.

Non-normative displays of sexuality

Breillat's approach to narrative and stylistic concerns in *Abus de faiblesse* also challenges normative representations of the post-menopausal body through a focus on Maud's continued status as a sensual and sexual being. Ussher notes that in Western society older women are 'all but invisible within both high and popular culture- with the post-menopausal woman represented primarily as the crone, the hag, or the dried-up grandmother figure, her body covered, and her sexuality long left behind' (2006, 118). She refers to figures such as the evil stepmother (*Sleeping Beauty*) or the evil grandmother (*Hansel and Gretel*) as two examples of popular character types that appear in literature and film. Such representations of aging femininity in contemporary cinema reinforce Beugnet's point that the issues raised since the 1970s by feminist writers and directors, such as the 'otherness' of women onscreen, remain pertinent (2006, 2).

Moreover, Ussher believes that cinema 'displays (the menopausal woman body) as an object of disgust', a phenomenon that she believes to be underpinned by a belief that 'disease, decay, atrophy and senility are the inevitable outcome of the end of fecundity' (2006, 119). Markson agrees and notes that 'the postmenopausal body, having lost its reproductive (and by

implication, sexual) charm, neither is the object of the appreciative male gaze nor does it fit into contemporary cultural discourses about “ideal” female beauty’ (2003, 80). In this sense, a post-menopausal woman is denied the representation associated with youth or maternal femininity, and one might form the impression that she is no longer a woman of real interest to cinema audiences. On a similar note, disabled individuals are also commonly denied representation as sexual beings onscreen.

The staging of Maud as a sensual and sexual woman counters the tendencies noted above. At several moments during the film, the semi-nude body of actress Isabelle Huppert is given significant screen time as she dresses or dozes in bed. The appearance of Maud’s skin and nipples is in itself a subversive act as ‘seeing the scantily attired aging female body on screen remains taboo’ (Markson 2003, 98). But further to this, one can observe that Maud generally appears comfortable and relaxed in her skin, for example when Maud is lying in bed, seemingly contented, as she talks on the phone (see Figure 4). The shot is composed so as to include a painting of a Renaissance-style female nude that hangs over Maud’s head in the frame, hence drawing attention to the representation of the female body. This image evidences the influence of Renaissance artwork on the composition of Breillat’s shots, with the theatrical staging of Maud’s body and the colour palette of her bedding appearing in harmony with that of the painting. Moreover, the female bodies featured in the painting are rounded, sensual and healthy, and by aligning Maud’s reclined body with this image, Breillat celebrates the female form regardless of age and physical status. A glimpse of this painting is also seen in the film’s opening sequence, moments before Maud’s naked body collapses onto the floor next to her bed. The composition of this opening shot is also highly theatrical, with Maud’s unconscious body posed underneath an upturned chair as if a scene from a static portrait. This stylistic tendency towards theatrical staging of the female body is also seen in several of the director’s previous films, such as *Romance* and *Anatomie de l’enfer*.

INSERT FIGURE 4

Figure 4. Maud relaxes in bed (Strand Releasing).

When examining costume, I note that Maud’s clothing subverts expectations as it is different from that which is usually associated with representations of the post-menopausal women. Markson suggests that ‘the body of the older woman is often dressed to represent the “good” mother or grandmother’, with typical clothing including items such as the housedress, shawls or aprons (2003, 83). Even female characters who have never married or have no children are typically dressed in ‘motherly’ or ‘grandmotherly’ attire (86). However, Maud is most commonly attired in black trousers and shirt, which reflects her work as an edgy film director. Moreover, an early scene in the film follows Maud as she visits an orthopaedic shoemaker in the search for boots that will accommodate her now twisted and clawed left foot. Rather than accept the shoemaker’s recommendation, Maud designs her own set of boots, which she suggests should be black, with chrome buckles and studs, as she says ‘quand on est handicapé, il faut le look SM’³. Maud then sports these boots for the better part of the film. Her refusal of standard orthopaedic boots can be read as a reflection of her unwillingness to embrace the

stereotypical appearance of a disabled person. The boots also align her with a type of sexuality that is rarely associated with the disabled or older woman.

Independence/dependency, control/surrender

The exploration of binaries that is presented within the narrative of *Abus de faiblesse* is another means through which Breillat challenges representations of the disabled body. The concepts of independence/dependency and control/surrender are interrogated in relation to Maud's interactions with Vilko, as the protagonist moves fluidly between the occupation of these opposing positions. While Maud's disability makes her somewhat dependent on Vilko for physical assistance, she seeks to retain her subjectivity through the realisation of her film project. The need to retain the cooperation of her unruly actor is a motivating factor for her dispensation of funds, as I will now explore further.

Despite her disability, Maud's main concern throughout *Abus de faiblesse* is Vilko's role in the making of her latest film. When Maud first sees the convicted conman on television, she is attracted and intrigued. Vilko possesses the characteristics that she imagines for the male lead in her upcoming film. Maud is unfazed by Vilko's lack of acting experience, believing that rather than playing her character, he 'is' the character. She invites him to her home, and going against the advice of her colleagues, invites him to star in her film. The producer of Maud's film questions Vilko's credibility and suggests that casting him will make the film shoot difficult. He notes that Maud has always had a tendency towards the perverse, a trait that Maud later claims for herself. Indeed, she labels Vilko as 'un ostrogoth' and 'une grenade' at various points within the story, but it would seem that the riskiness of working with him is something that she actively seeks as part of her creative process⁴. Maud's preference for the casting of untrained actors mirrors that of Breillat, and one can note a parallel between the casting of *Abus de faiblesse*, and the film within the film, in that rapper Kool Shen (an untrained actor) has been cast in the role of Vilko. In both cases, the casting of a non-professional actor is intended to bring a sense of realism and authenticity to the role, which can be exploited during the film's production. By casting the actor that she most likes, despite the advice of her colleagues, Maud retains her agency as creative artist engaged in the realisation of her film project. Despite her weakened state, she strives to retain her independence and a sense of control as she goes about the challenging task of preparing him to appear in her film.

Vilko quickly accepts Maud's offer of the film role but he refuses to comply with her usual preproduction practices. For example, Maud is clear that she never sees her actors prior to shooting; however, Vilko replies that 'moi, vous allez me voir tout le temps'⁵. He then proceeds to make frequent contact and the demands for loans of money start not long after this director/lead actor relationship is established. Before long Vilko is making regular visits to Maud's abode, during which he seeks to impress her with stories of his government connections and get-rich-quick schemes. Maud, however, refuses to indulge him, and instead teases his crude masculinity and poor business skills. In return for the money and attention that he seeks, Vilko becomes a somewhat unwilling assistant to Maud. A sadomasochistic relationship is established with Vilko at one point exclaiming to Maud that 'ton grand truc, c'est vraiment de réduire les hommes en esclaves'⁶. The protagonist acknowledges her controlling role, replying that this behaviour is 'un avantage à être infirme!'⁷. This comment acknowledges

her willingness to exploit her situation and share the burden of her disability with Vilko as a means of maintaining a level of control over him.

The relationship between Maud and Vilko is one associated with oscillating notions of control/surrender and dominance/submission. The aid that Vilko offers (as both film actor/collaborator and assistant) is accompanied by various degrees of coercion. Maud displays her higher status by ordering Vilko to help her with her daily business, and signing checks for him as if the expenditure of money is of no consequence. But as the demand for money becomes more frequent, Maud's financial situation becomes unstable. Abandoned by her daughter over the holiday period, and unable to manage at home alone, Maud goes to stay with Vilko and is placed in an upstairs bedroom. She becomes completely physically dependent on him; he carries her down the stairs and performs other tasks for her. She has surrendered her physical freedom, but due to Vilko's desire for her attention and money she maintains a level of control over him. Conversely, Vilko takes advantage of Maud's physical frailty as a means of control, but must surrender a certain amount of his self-respect when doing so. Despite her weakened physical position however, Maud retains the upper hand, challenging perceptions of the disabled 'victim'.

One might draw parallels with the themes presented in Breillat's 2002 film *Sex is Comedy*, in that both projects explore the difficulty that a female auteur faces when working with a narcissistic male lead actor. This earlier film charts the struggles of another fictional Breillat alter ego, director Jeanne (Anne Parillaud) as she shoots a fictional film that includes scenes of graphic sex. Loosely based on Breillat's experience of shooting *À ma sœur* a year or so earlier, *Sex is Comedy* can be considered a 'self-reflexive meditation on Breillat's working methods as director' (Ince 2006, 159). As such, like *Abus de faiblesse*, the film makes the point that sexuality and desire can complicate a female director's objective of attaining the cooperation and obedience of a male actor. For example, in *Sex is Comedy* Jeanne directs both her male and female lead's movements in order to elicit the emotion that she seeks; however, the male actor is frequently uncooperative. At various times Jeanne has to take him to one side and coax him to perform as she desires. At other moments she displays aggression to establish her authority as director. As Ince notes, 'through her fictional persona Jeanne, Breillat shows women's film directing to be a tussle and a struggle involving an altered sexual economy' (2006, 163). Ultimately Jeanne's agency as creative artist allows her to succeed in capturing the performances that she desires, but this does not occur easily.

It is interesting to note that the character of Jeanne suffers from a foot injury for the entirety of *Sex is Comedy*, and wears an inhibiting cast on her lower leg. Like Maud in *Abus de faiblesse*, this leaves her with a physical obstacle as she attempts to go about her work. Ince suggests that Jeanne's injury 'symbolises the disadvantage Breillat sees women directors as suffering by virtue of their sex' (162), and I would suggest that Maud's condition in the later film could be similarly interpreted. While the quest of both fictional directors involves the achievement of personal, filmmaking goals, Jeanne succeeds where Maud does not; indeed, Maud's film doesn't make it to production. This ending of *Abus de faiblesse* suggests that the challenges facing Maud's project were insurmountable, leading to the eventual loss of her subjectivity. Maud's status as disabled person is but one factor at play in this complex endpoint, as I will conclude below.

Casting and performance

Moving on from the narrative and stylistic concerns explored above, I will now examine the part that French actress Isabelle Huppert's performance in *Abus de faiblesse* plays in subverting representations of the disabled, aging body. A veteran performer of more than a hundred film and television productions in France and abroad, Huppert brings an acting talent to the film that she describes as 'a process more of subtraction than addition' (quoted in Turk 2007, 162). Birchall notes her appearance in a 'wave of films that attempt to push the boundaries of female sexuality' (2005, 14), while McCann and Sorfa describe the 'blankness of her face' that 'can be transformed endlessly' (2011, 32). As I will argue, the actress's history of roles is absorbed into her performance as Breillat's disabled protagonist, a factor that shapes audience expectations and perception of Maud.

As one of France's biggest female film stars, Huppert has enjoyed a long career playing characters that can often be described as unsettling, amoral and somewhat repellent. I agree with Orr who suggests that to cast an actor of her calibre is to 'acknowledge (her) previous achievements and take stock of them' (2004, 106). From her breakthrough performance as a student who descends into madness in Claude Goretta's *La Dentellière/The Lacemaker* (1977), to the violent postmistress in *La Cérémonie/A Judgment in Stone* (Claude Chabrol, 1995) and more recently, as the sadomasochistic piano instructor in *La Pianiste/The Piano Teacher* (Michael Haneke, 2001), the actress has embodied characters that defy categorisation and explore the contradictions associated with female sexuality. Huppert is physically small but her characters are often fiery, headstrong and independent in their actions. Breillat describes the actress as 'very intellectual and middle class', these qualities being the opposite of those associated with the rapper Koolhaas (Dooley 2013, 193). As such, a tension is created between the different worlds that these performers occupy, which is informed by Huppert's history onscreen, and carries over into the fictional world of *Abus de faiblesse*.

In harmony with past performances, Huppert portrays Maud as a stoic and focused woman. Most notably, after the character's initial period of rehabilitation and recovery, she displays a distinct lack of emotion in regards to her changed physical condition. There is no sense of self-pity evident but rather, a sense of self-assurance in her role as film director. As such, her associations with Vilko are for the most part conducted in a business-like manner that is cool and distant. For example, when Maud first interviews Vilko in her home, she sits opposite him on the lounge with her disabled arm raised into a hook, reminding the audience of her changed physical condition. However, her face has recovered, and she speaks with a measured tone. As Maud recounts the story of her proposed feature film for Vilko, she displays passion and confidence, but does so without much physical movement. By contrast, Vilko explores Maud's home in a physical way (even climbing up her bookcase at one point). He seeks to inspire a reaction but Maud's vague smile gives few clues as to her feelings for him, or for her own position. In this sense Huppert's ambiguous performance contributes to the creation of a complex character whose motivations are not always clear.

By contrast the early rehabilitation sequence in *Abus de faiblesse* sees Huppert give a performance that breaks from her usual tendency towards blankness. When she is hospitalised following her stroke, we see a physically weak protagonist who exhibits visible emotional and physical distress, traits that are all the more affecting because they are not usually associated with the actress. I would argue that a scene in which Maud undergoes physical therapy is

particularly effective in generating audience empathy, as it sees Huppert temporarily play against type. In this particular scene, which is shot in a single 40-second take, the actress's body is draped over a large inflated ball in a hospital gymnasium, as she is coached through movement exercises by a male instructor. Maud stutters and cries loudly as she struggles with the task, then excuses herself for her poor progress and emotional outburst. This is a rare moment in which we see a vulnerable, suffering protagonist in the film, despite the narrative events that follow.

In sum, Huppert's casting is key in the creation of a non-stereotypical disabled character. Breillat draws upon the actor's established acting style to add a layer of complexity and ambiguity to the portrayal of Maud, but also shocks the audience by presenting physically and emotionally vulnerable displays that are rarely associated with the actress. Moreover, Huppert's past association with roles involving sadomasochism and madness adds to the complexity of her performance as a film director involved in a destructive relationship with her lead actor. Together these factors help to invoke a memorable protagonist that defies expectations of the disabled and aging woman onscreen.

Conclusion

Throughout this article I have highlighted Maud's quest to retain her subjectivity after her stroke and I have argued that her work as film director is paramount to this quest. My analysis of the film's narrative demonstrates the ways in which the protagonist's behaviour challenges stereotypical portrayals of the post-menopausal, disabled body, through her continuation of her career, her resumption of public life and her continued status as a sensual being. The director's continued use of stylistic devices such as extreme close-ups and long takes promotes audience empathy with Maud and minimises the sense of 'otherness' that is often associated with representations of the disabled on screen. Furthermore, Huppert's contribution as lead actress leads to the creation of a complex character that both challenges and subverts audience expectations.

However, as previously noted, the ending of the film suggests that the challenges Maud faces are somewhat insurmountable. Maud is bankrupt, Vilko disappears and the protagonist is called into a family conference to explain her financial position. When Maud's status of 'fraud victim' is made clear, she seeks to disassociate herself from her actions, claiming 'c'était moi mais ce n'était pas moi'⁸. In delivering this line, Huppert stares down the barrel of the camera, as if to address the audience directly and invite judgment on her actions. I read this moment as the protagonist's last onscreen attempt to publicly reconcile her status as disabled or impaired person. 'C'était moi mais ce n'était pas moi' might be reworded to 'c'est moi mais ce n'est pas moi,' reflecting the disparity between her inner strengths and abilities, and outward appearances⁹.

Despite this endpoint, I would argue that to dismiss Maud's project as a failure resulting from her disabled status denies the complex nature of the situation. The narrative of the film suggests that Maud's decision-making process, including the initiation of a master/slave relationship with Vilko, is driven by the need, not just to retain a sense of agency in her life and work, but to maintain her status as risk-taking filmmaker. Maud partially succeeds in this task, managing to negotiate a complex, sexually-charged relationship with Vilko for the most part of the film. Ultimately, she is the victim of a highly skilled and charismatic con-artist, and while her

disability and age play a role in this deception, they are not the deciding factors in her downfall. To take on such a project when dealing with the emotional struggles and bodily change brought about by disability would seem to have been Maud's mistake, but considering her high level of ambition, it is hard to judge her too harshly for this.

In this final scene Breillat further exposes the 'othering' of the disabled by presenting an upset and defeated Maud, as seen through the eyes of her distant and disengaged family members. This interrogation by her family is a humiliation, not just because of the exposition of Vilko's fraud, but because of Maud's shift in status to 'victim' in the eyes of others. Her family members do not understand her creative process, or her journey as disabled protagonist, and consequently, they see her differently to how she sees herself. By ending the film on this point, Breillat calls further attention to the challenge of overcoming stereotypes associated with the disabled body, which she has interrogated and challenged through the film.

As I have noted, this is not the director's first film with autobiographical elements, and one could, like reviewer Peter Debruge, consider the making of this project to be an exercise to 'attempt to understand the often-contradictory impulses that led to (Breillat's) predicament' with *Rocancourt* (2013). While the director's previous films have explored the contradictions associated with female agency (dissecting issues of consent and conflict with regard to sexual behaviour), *Abus de faiblesse* tackles these issues in the context of a non-sexual relationship between director and lead actor. This is a dissection of a different type of intimacy and transgression but one that remains linked to gender roles and sexual politics.

Filmography

Abus de faiblesse, 2013, Catherine Breillat, France.
À ma sœur! 2001, Catherine Breillat, France.
Anatomie de l'enfer, 2004, Catherine Breillat, France.
Amour, 2012, Michael Haneke, France/Germany/Austria.
Barbe Bleue, 2009, Catherine Breillat, France.
De rouille et d'os, 2012, Jacques Audiard, France/Belgium.
La Cérémonie, 1995, Claude Chabrol, France/Germany.
La Dentellière, 1977, Claude Goretta, France/Switzerland/Germany.
La Pianiste, 2001, Michael Haneke, Austria/France/Germany.
Romance, 1999, Catherine Breillat, France.
Sex is Comedy, 2002, Catherine Breillat, France.
Une vieille Maitresse, 2007, Catherine Breillat, France.

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ENDNOTES

¹ English translation: 'Half of my body is dead!'

² English translation: 'I've sunk like the Titanic but if I ever resurface, I'll be an atomic bomb'.

³ English translation: 'the handicapped need an S & M look'.

⁴ English translation: Maud labels Vilko a 'real character' or a 'grenade'.

⁵ English translation: 'You're gonna see a lot of me!'

⁶ English translation: 'your big thing is turning men into slaves'.

⁷ English translation: 'one plus of being a cripple'.

⁸ English translation: 'it was me but it wasn't me'.

⁹ English translation: 'It was me but it wasn't me' might be reworded to 'it is me but it isn't me.'