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film

Anal Probes

American documentarian, French philosopher put sex under the microscope

Sex/Life in L.A. Part 2: Cycles of Porn

Fans of the gay porn documentary—of which there seem to be plenty these days, as if we're in a rush to get them all out before the Bush regime throws us in prison—might remember Jochen Hick's 1998 film *Sex/Life in L.A.* Hick, a hunky porn fan from Germany, took us inside the gay porn world, interviewing stars like Cole Tucker and Matt Bradshaw, various hustlers, former Madonna boy toy Tony Ward (who famously masturbated in a bathtub) and other denizens of this rather grim world.

Now Hick is back with a sequel that updates us on some of the guys from the first film and tosses in a few new subjects. Tucker seems to be a secretary now, and horse-hung Bradshaw lives rather pathetically with his sister in the South. (He survived post-porn by decorating drug dealers' houses.) The hustlers of the first film have been replaced by their cyber-era counterparts: hotties in an Internet sex house rigged up with cameras to document their every little move.

Unfortunately, like its subject, this documentary soon becomes tedious, and finally numbing, as the same tired stories of "the hottest guy" and "that great orgy" appear over and over. Ultimately it's all about self-delusion and failed dreams, not to mention wilting hard-ons. Most of Hick's subjects are just not that interesting. But I suppose Hick might argue that's the point.

There's plenty of sex here, including penetration. Scenes in the Internet sex house and on the set of Hot Desert Knights' films show plenty of action, though it seems more perfunctory than passionate, despite the illicit thrill of barebacking. The sense of futility and fleeting charms that ripples through this world is in fact everywhere evident here. Hustler Kevin Kramer spends endless time trying to hook up as his beauty begins to fade, the boys in the sex house talk unconvincingly about their dreams of fame, and a cautionary tale documents one of porn's casualties, the gorgeous John Garwood.

Hick appears on screen to lament the total commodification of gay sex through porn. Someone should tell him 'twas ever thus, since the first commercial porn film was made, taking it out of the hands of amateurs privately documenting their hot trysts for the sheer joy of it and making it the business behemoth it became.

Anatomy of Hell

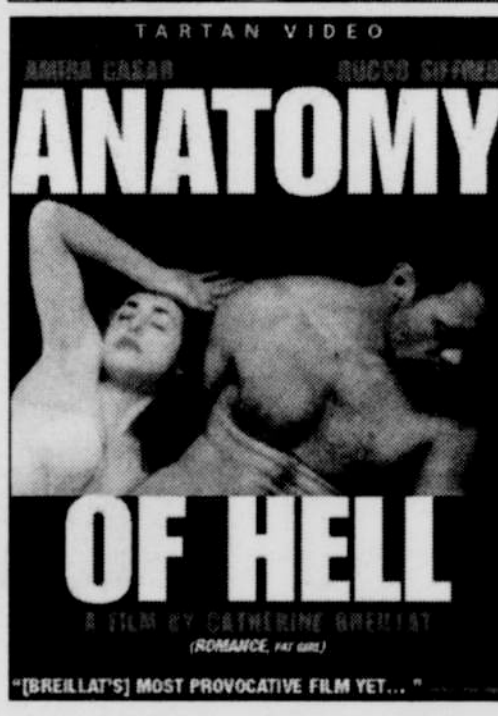
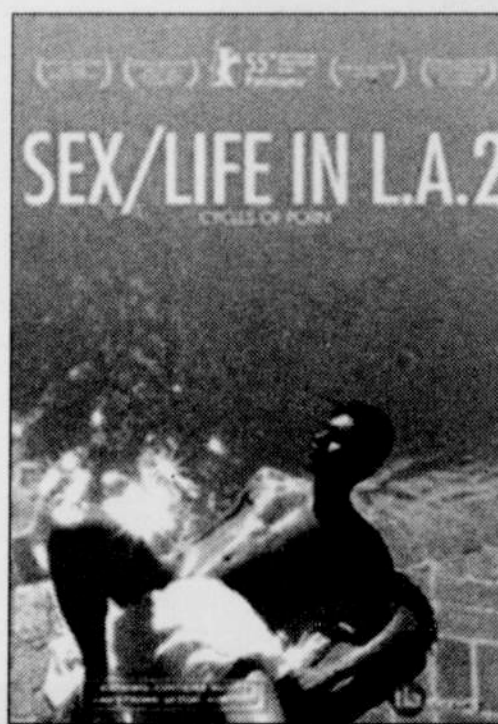
For filmmaker Catherine Breillat (*Fat Girl, Sex Is Comedy*), sex is not a moral, social, interpersonal or psychological issue so much as it is a philosophical one. Her latest provocation, *Anatomy of Hell*, is the most concise, confrontational example yet of her ongoing post-feminist dissection of all the troubling below-the-waist matters disguised by the politeness and productivity (not to mention clothing) of society. It's French in a way something like *Amélie* could never be, so alien to our current sexually moralistic cultural context that it gives new meaning to the term "foreign film."

The plot is derived from Breillat's novel *Pomocratie*: A handsome patron of a gay disco (real-life straight porn star Rocco Siffredi) finds a

woman (Amira Casar) in the bathroom who has just feebly slashed her wrist ("because I'm a woman," she explains). After her minor injury is treated, she offers to pay him to "watch me where I'm unwatchable." During the next four nights, the woman's isolated villa becomes the arena where they verbally and physically attempt to discover and articulate the meaning of sex and gender (shades of *Last Tango in Paris*). Exhibitionism and graphic rhetorical dialogue rapidly give way to elaborate, thorough sexual exploration. The camera is often virtually a gynecological instrument; there is no female orifice or fluid neglected by Breillat's trademark serene, stark visual compositions.

Though the film nonchalantly opens on an image of gay sex and is thoroughly accepting of homosexuality, *Anatomy of Hell's* sexual interaction and intermittent severe anti-

nomy between a gay man and a woman—the exact opposite of the *Will & Grace* approach—might disturb some queer viewers. But "political incorrectness" doesn't mean anything here. It's clear that any pro-or-con perceptions of sex are, in Breillat's view, irrelevant; she's simply being intellectually exacting of herself, the audience and the world. If the film seems unpleasant or excessive, Breillat is challenging us to ponder why that should be, to gauge and interrogate our own reactions. *Anatomy of Hell* is difficult but ultimately successful; it precisely and systematically attains its goal of confronting disgusted viewers with their own hypocrisy.



—Gary Morris

—Christopher McQuain 10