

Baise moi: The Art of Going Too Far

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From its title downward, *Baise-moi* (literally, *Fuck me*), a 1999 French film by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh-thi, aims at provocation. Adapted from Despentes's own novel, the film tells the story of two young women – one, Nadine, a part-time call girl, the other, Manu, an occasional porn performer – who meet on the run from murders they have both committed. There then ensues a road trip, combining armed robbery, more killing and occasional sexual pick-ups, culminating in Manu's death during a hold-up and Nadine's arrest. Described at the time as "*Thelma and Louise Get Laid*" (Williams, 2001, p.28), the film, shot in grainy digital video, achieved a certain notoriety for its numerous and varied scenes of non-simulated sex (Trinh-thi, along with actors Rafaëlla Anderson and Karen Bach, all had experience in the porn industry). In France, the film's initial PG-16 certificate (secured in part by the support of French filmmakers, such as Catherine Breillat) was later changed to an X certificate after campaigning from, amongst others, the National Front: a judgement that effectively hamstrung the possibility for the film's proper distribution and recuperation of costs (the film fared slightly better in the UK, however, where it was passed by the British Board of Film Classification). From both the censorship issues raised, to the host of critical and academic material it has generated, what is clear is that the film – almost irrespective of its aesthetic qualities – is a focus for debate about the limits of representation: or as the influential *Cahiers du cinéma* suggested, that it came to represent a juridical and in turn political cause, rather than just a cinematic one (Joyard, 2000, p.16). My aim in this paper will be to consider this political import from the point of view of representation. Analysing the film's strategies of excess and hardcore authenticity, I will ask to what extent such stylistic choices are productive modes from the perspective of representational politics. In going too far, does *Baise-moi* genuinely stretch the limits? Or does its trash aesthetic contain its subjects within the hollow provocation of cliché?

The use of genre

The film *Baise-moi* is never less than self-reflexive: it acknowledges that it is working within defined cinematic perimeters. As Manu insists at the beginning of the girls' road/death trip, it is important that their dialogue "soit à la hauteur" – that it comes up to scratch. This generic wink – familiar from Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997, remade 2008) – has the effect not of neutralising the film's power, but rather creating a sometimes vertiginous sense of dis-empowerment: that of a spectator held subject to the whims of authors/protagonists inverting the determining forces of genre cinema. From the outset, then, *Baise-moi* is attempting a new, extreme staging of the struggle for control between textual subjects and readers. The issue of representation in the film is, then, double-edged: as much as it is about representations of the (gendered) individual within cinematic fiction, it is at the same time about the authority and agency of the individual as representative. The failure to problematise representations risks overlooking the perspectives or even prejudices which subtend these representational framings: *who represents*, as much as what is represented and how, should be central to our present concerns.

Lisa Downing's assertion that "[s]earching for a straightforward 'message' may be the wrong way to approach *Baise-moi*" (2004, p.273) therefore has an understated relevance. For Downing, the film's "slick, existential nihilism" (2004, p.275) proceeds from its resistance to any one generic blueprint. In an implicit extension/perversion of the plot of *Thelma and Louise* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1991), Manu and Nadine's outlaw road-trip is loosely attributable to an initial rape: the reaction, however, is indiscriminately disproportionate to this rape which, generically, is its "cause". At the same time, the film is determined not to move outside the representational generic field in which it is immersed:

The film establishes the understanding that these women cannot be other than the products and constructions of an environment which imagines them. Nadine and Manu are, effectively, the products of...a dystopian imaginary milieu in which sex and violence are inevitably wedded together...They become the stylised products of a misogynist culture, in which they take action, an action appropriate to the nightmare of that culture.

(Downing, 2004, p.274-75)

Arguably *Baise-moi* embarks where *Thelma and Louise* leaves off: Scott's film famously leaves its doomed hero(in)es suspended in mid-flight, thereby simultaneously bridging fatalism and the possibilities of

imaginary extension. One can certainly argue that *Thelma and Louise* at once goes both too far and not far enough: generically inverted enough to unnerve predominantly male critics, yet too cautiously within the boundaries of Hollywood representational modes to transcend them completely. While an important film for the debates provoked, its simple inversion of genre's gendered norms through two of Hollywood's glamorous leading ladies (who emphasise their glamour and prestige *through* their transformation, their "going native", rather than despite it) arguably challenges representation only on the surface level; it takes the inverted gendering of generic protagonists as having its own political valence, as if such representations were a transparent and meaningful barometer of the re-ordering implicit and desired within and through Scott's film.

In *Baise-moi*, meanwhile, violence rarely has narrative justification: disproportionate at best, it is often entirely indiscriminate. Redemption and empathy, meanwhile, are proffered and rejected: there is no romance in the wings to retrieve Manu and Nadine from their wicked ways. Centring on the film's citational modes, I would argue that the violence perpetrated on the spectator's vision, the film's deliberate resistance to easily readable (and therefore redemptive) aesthetics, forms part of a strategy aiming to complicate one's relationship as reader to the film's textual subject(s). If our inability to make concrete assertions about the film – whether it is good or bad, likable or reprehensible – may seem to endorse its labelling as "slick, existential nihilism", we can at the same time suggest that this unsettling of response focalises the inherent will-to-pleasure and order within generic cinema; the way it is utilised mythically to provide imaginary negotiations of real problems. *Baise-moi*, in other words, just as it questions the boundaries of acceptable or desirable representation, refuses to accept the idea of textual representation's self-sufficiency. Rather, the pressing issues of violence and gender politics, thrown up within this particular generic mode, are considered within the nexus of power relations operating between text, protagonist and viewer.

One of the questions asked by the film, then, is who or what is the true "subject" of filmic representation. Is the protagonist of the drama contained within spectatorial pleasure, ultimately little more than the fictional other to be dealt with one way or the other? If not, in what way do the ostensible subjects of representation – the film's protagonists – attain any meaningful subjectivity? As characters – low-earning suburban women – both literally and symbolically outside the centre of privilege, how might they escape such a gender-social determination?

To analyse this we need to understand the film's inter-textual connotations in more depth. What has so far remained under-explored with relation to *Baise-moi* (largely through the failure within academic studies to distinguish between novel and film) is its stylistic debt not so much to films like *Thelma and Louise*, but to cheaply-made rape-revenge movies of the 1970s; films such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (dir. Meir Zarchi, 1977); a film whose violent depiction of rape and its even bloodier response would make it a focal point for the early 1980s concerns surrounding the ethics of film and the proliferation of video (Clover, 1993, p.114-16). *Baise-moi* owes a lot to this exploitation genre not just in terms of plot, but in its particular mode of depicting violence and gender. In the early sequences, which involve Manu seeking to protect both herself and her young petty-criminal friend Radouan, the violence dished out on the female protagonist (which builds up rhythmically to her eventual rape) is shown through abruptly edited, direct to camera gestures; first from the thug who warns Manu that he is looking for Radouan, and subsequently from the punch she receives, unexpectedly, from her sometime boyfriend Lakim (his punch is literally directed at the camera). Many of the male figures in the film are figured as violently gesturing mouths or fists (we could argue moreover that Nadine's paying client, a muscle-bound version of narcissistic sexual delusion, is intended to equate with these other representations of phallic aggression): a motif that is part of a broader strategy – inherited from the rape revenge genre – of reducing the male characters to schematic and often grotesque “types”. Consequently, we will see later in the film inverted examples of male heterosexual complacency as near-deformed caricature: all of whom receive suitably phallic punishment at the hands – and guns – of the women. We might read these caricatures as part of an aggressively inverted representational strategy at the level of gender; yet at the same time, as I am suggesting here, they are equally familiar as types within a citational and self-reflexively parodic sub-genre.

The film's opening out into the realm of cinematic (exploitation) genre increases its accessibility to a cross-gender audience who are adaptable with regard to gendered identification. As variants of Clover's “Final Girl” (albeit extreme ones), in that they are at once overtly feminine *and* masculine – typified by shots of Nadine posing with her new gun in her underwear, the weapon providing phallic reassurance for her sexed and potentially disturbing presence – they could be said to enact a particular kind of male fantasy which, contained as it is within the domain of cinematic fiction, neither unduly threatens nor undoes “the structures of male competence and sexuality” (Clover, 1993, p.51). One of Clover's avowed aims in her analysis of the slasher and rape-revenge flick was to illustrate how

the “brutal simplicity” of these so-called low cultural forms “exposes a mainspring of popular culture” (1993, p.116); that supposed “breakthrough” films such as *Thelma and Louise* were in fact offering – in their narrative of women within patriarchy driven to the “self-help” of revenge on “corporately liable” males – less extreme and, ironically, more corporate versions of the same (1993, p.234). It is against the backdrop of these discussions that we can consider *Baise-moi*'s efforts to exceed its cinematic predecessors.

Sex and consumption

Sexuality is the obvious area in which this takes place. For all the controversy surrounding the film's hardcore representations, its depiction of sex is never allowed to stabilise into easily readable patterns, or at least patterns that reassure the gaze of visual pleasure. As Shirley Jordan argues, to introduce sexual activity within the film in terms of a graphic rape sequence marks whatever follows in the film in indelible and potentially troubling ways (2002, p.132). At the same time, the attitude to the rape on the part of Manu, if we try to follow the rape-revenge logic, undercuts whatever motivation we might try to attribute to the ensuing events. In a controversial line taken straight from the novel, explaining her passivity to the rape, Manu seeks to deflect the impact of male violence: “C'est jamais qu'un coup de queue...C'est comme une voiture que tu gares dans une cité, tu laisses pas de trucs de valeur à l'intérieur...”;¹ an attitude seeking to deflect the “mythical female interiority, supposedly identified with the female sexual organs”, whose violation would in turn be a source of “fascinated stigmatisation” (Best and Crowley, 2007, p.172). We can therefore understand the psychoanalytic underpinnings of the classic rape revenge drama on the *validation* of the phallic: the violated avenger-castrator in this sense leaves the phallus intact (which also, in terms of Clover's Final Girl, the last-one-standing female protagonist of the slasher film, explains her perennial male-gendered appeal). For Manu and Nadine, while there is the aforementioned degree of corporate accountability for male phallic violence, the latter seems less a motive for their disproportionate actions than an opportunity: their flight – both in concrete terms, but also, in the sense just considered, as a flight from symbolic restraints (Fayard, 2006, p.72-73) – allows them to realise whatever they wish. The sex that this road trip affords, in the form of three scenes filmed in a conventional hardcore style (that is, replete with penetration and, in two instances, the “money” shot of ejaculation), are notable for their

¹ “In the end it's just a bit of cock... It's like parking your car in the estates, you don't leave anything valuable inside” (my translation).

absence of dialogue: these “good” partners, like the women themselves here, do not speak, and therefore do not reiterate the game of seduction and mastery. In *Hardcore*, her groundbreaking study of pornographic film, Linda Williams argues that the sex scene is equivalent to the “number” in the classic musical: a moment of suspension that is outside the continuity and causality of the narrative, self-sufficient and utopian in unqualified, ecstatic *jouissance* (1989, p.154). If the sex-and-death motif of the rape-revenge film reassures phallic mastery, then, this same mastery might be disturbed not so much by the withdrawal of female sexual pleasure but by its promiscuous, unabashed practice. Neither playing by generic rules, nor strictly reiterating the classic, masculinist codes of narrative visual pleasure (it is the women, after all, who are the mobile bearers of the look, while male bodies are objects of the gaze), the film evokes (good) sex neither as a commodity of exchange, nor as a signifier of lack within an economy of desire or revenge. Sex happens for the simple reason that it’s there to be had.

The idea of *Baise-moi*’s road trip as a means for the girls to “have it all” therefore focalises contemporaneous questions of female consumption and pleasure, especially in cinema. In her locating of reworked rape revenge motifs in 1980s and ‘90s “fatal femme” films,² Jacinda Read makes the important point that “neo-noir” readings seeking merely to recycle the gender-threat paradigm of vintage noir are problematically limited: “they work to install the backlash thesis as the only way of understanding feminism in the 1990s, a pessimistic position” (2000, p.155). The implication of Read’s argument, in particular its contesting dialogue with Clover’s work, is that the modern fatal femme – as its inverted inscription suggests – is no longer a threatening reflection of post-war male anxiety, but of equally threatening, though less disciplined, post-modern female subjectivity. As Read argues (with reference to *The Last Seduction*), the fatal femme is not a feminised being that is eroticised/masculinised, but rather the reverse: feminisation is the result of a shift away from, and always in excess of, eroticisation (2000, p.172). “Feminine”, of course, remains by implication something that resists both essentialisms and mystifications. The complex and uncontainable nature of Manu and Nadine’s actions, the movement between their bodies’ spectacularisation and abjection, between their violent refutation of male symbolic power and their consumption of the sexed male body, makes the complication of the issue the issue itself.

² For example, *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1993).

The incidental but no less significant implication of Read's work in relation to *Baise-moi* is the way it focuses on notions of "upward-mobility, consumerism and acquisitiveness" – central tenets of the Reagan-Thatcherite era – as "demand[ing] reinterpretation" from the viewpoint of gender politics (2000, p.157). For some critics, *Baise-moi* (the novel more than the film) critiques consumer culture through its emphasis on brand names, extending to the diet of chocolate bars, beer and whiskey that sustains the girls' ride (Fayard, 2006, p.64; Best and Crowley, 2007, p.167). Yet we should note on this point that the film's apparently uncritical appropriation of generic modes, taken to the point of excess, may not constitute the critique that critical consensus might suggest. What is potentially unsettling about the film, in fact, is that it depicts its protagonists' activities *uncritically*, suggesting a complicity with its actions: a complicity which is heightened by the motifs of sacrifice, loss and mourning that surround Manu's death at the end of the film, as her body is consumed by a funeral pyre at a secluded lakeside. That these girls seek to get what they (really really) want in a near-parody of girl-power individualist consumerism might prove extremely challenging – especially from the perspective of the protagonists as women living outside, literally and symbolically, the privileged centre. From this perspective, *Baise-moi* fits in with a tradition of the outlaw road film, in the mould of *Bonnie and Clyde* (dir. Arthur Penn, 1967), as that which modern capitalist societies barely repress. The latter film is a simultaneous dream-nightmare of rampant consumerism, the logical culmination of a libertarian, radical politics: it "fulfil[s] the worst and best dreams of capitalism...map[ping] the intersection of capitalism and desire" (Leong, Sell and Thomas, 1997, p.85-86). Yet *Baise-moi*, it might follow, does a little more than this, in that it seeks to highlight the suppressed gender issue at work in this dream-nightmare. We can in any case say that interpretive efforts to limit or close off the signifying potential of the film's economy of flight and consumption is always risking a prescriptive denotation, not only of gender boundaries, but by implication – given that "getting what one wants" is, at some level at least, central to the vast output of male-centred mainstream film production – of individual liberties.

The use of hardcore

The fatal femme cycle of films challenged prior conventions of representation; to return to my original question, however, to what extent is this countering of gendered representation at the level of the text sufficient? As Read concludes, the "having it all" ethos of sexy individualism operates in reverse, typically taking wealthy and successful western women as its models, rather than those for whom

such arguments and struggles have more vital day-to-day resonance (2000, p.175). This would appear merely to reiterate Manu and Nadine's status as marginal, confining their flight to the order of generic cinematic fantasy, and thereby, ultimately, the containment of their dangerous difference. We might simply choose to laugh the film off as too extreme to be true. But does this laughter ring true? Or rather, where would this laughter come from? Pauline Kael's comment on *Bonnie and Clyde* is pertinent here: "[w]hat looks ludicrous in the film isn't *merely* ludicrous...what's funny isn't only funny" (1972, p.199-200). But if so, how? The film is a fiction after all: the blood is fake blood.

Not, however, fake semen: and it is here that the film's use of pornographic modes and performers comes into play. Pornographic tropes – not just on the level of what is visible, but increasingly in terms of the technological means of rendering the visible – complicate the borders separating the fields of documentary and the fiction film (a process central, as far back as the 1950s and the arrival of lightweight cameras, to Jean-Luc Godard's film aesthetics: a fiction film being essentially a documentary of the performers, the fiction emerges in the gap between performer and character [Darke, 2005, p.21-22]). The increasingly domesticated and relatively non-perishable grain of the video, as opposed to the celluloid, image, is the default mode for retaining the present-ness of memory in the form of the home movie; just as it is the visual barometer of authenticity in the field of news reporting. Utilised within the field of entertainment film, then, it confuses "our very conception of inside and outside...of distancing... appropriation...and consumption" (Beugnet, 2007, p.52-53). While it is evident that pornography is something to be *used* as much as *watched*, both the pornographic and the immediacy of the digital within the conventions of the fictional feature film have a jolting effect, precisely by virtue of its transgressing the line of past-ness and aesthetic distance necessary – paradoxically – to the illusion of filmic reality. "As soon as we 'show it' [the sexual act], its charm is dispelled, we have 'gone too far'" (Zizek, 1989, p.110). By the same token, there is a proximity to *Baise-moi's* performers and performance space that oversteps the boundaries. The initial, shaky close up of Karen Bach as Nadine, especially as this longish take has no narrative motivation, no suturing effect of a reverse shot, can only draw our attention to the presence of a performer in the act of performing; an effect all the more heightened by Karen Bach's status within regular film distribution as non-star, a status which further collapses the distinction between performer and character. If the star in its classic pre-video definition plays on a simultaneous sense of distance and closeness – the illusion that these extraordinary physical creatures (Sarandon and Davis, for example) are ordinary working

people just like us – then Bach and Anderson’s presence and trajectory (recognisably dingy *brasseries*, poorly lit provincial streets and squares, unremarkable hotel rooms with overhead lighting) are tangibly present and jarringly close and familiar: uncannily so, in fact, given the typical repression of everyday texture and material from the cinematic imaginary. *Baise-moi* combines this proximity with its hardcore tropes to efface the fictional suspension of its textual subjects: taking the fiction-as-documentary aesthetic to its extreme, these performers are beings, not mere signifiers; and as such they resist easy assimilation within the modes of cinematic identification, or the “charm”, as Žižek (1989) implies, of the simulated sex scene. This proximity discloses the existence of the performers’ subjectivity (these are real women!), yet at the same time withholds the nature of this subjectivity: the visibility of sexual penetration, paradoxically, renders their interiority less, rather than more, attainable. Yet, in a final twist, it is in this resistance that they acquire their independence as subjects.

The stars and geographies of Hollywood’s great outlaw death-trips – Beatty and Dunaway, Sarandon and Davis, the American South and the Grand Canyon – enter into the play of spectacle, fantasy and contradiction at the heart of myth and its imaginary solutions. If there is a politics in *Baise-moi*’s game of representations, it is an effort to reclaim a bodily and gendered space of marginality from the more manufactured and standardised images of an increasingly *unrepresentative* visual economy (Beugnet, 2007, p.56-57). Like it or not, it claims for itself a space of bodily presence and pleasure both inciting of and indifferent to its audience. Referring to the scene of the girls’ first pick-up, and Nadine’s apparent look to camera during the act of sex, Best and Crowley conclude:

this is the porn performer Karen Bach, engaged in a scene of non-simulated sex... affirm[ing] to the pornographically inclined viewer the reality of her presence... And it is also, again, Nadine, but this time as enthusiastic consumer of pornography and a powerful locus of focalisation throughout the film. Her subjectivity, and this moment as a whole, are in fact both irreducible to and inseparable from the pornographic.

(Best and Crowley, 2007, p.178)

Nadine’s look to camera is in fact diegetically figured as, at one and the same time, a look towards Manu – who is having sex herself on the opposite bed – as well as the viewer: it is a look that both includes and excludes. If its extremes of real sex and fictional violence provoke, its real concern is where we are supposed to draw a line; not merely in representational terms, but in terms of personal pleasure, consumption and social place. In terms of more recent

(feminist) pro-pornography arguments validating both its use and practice, and at the same time acknowledging its make-believe violence as no more than an extension or reflection of mainstream representations, it brings into focus and questions the grounds of opposition between private experience and public morality. Appropriating digital technology's flexibility and accessibility, moreover, it engages with the contemporary politics of cinematic representation both in terms of performance and production; or in other words, not just what is being represented, but who has the means of representing it. In always going too far, it risks offence: yet its indifference to the fact, and its blank implication that such offence contains its own implicit censorship, is central to its often discomfiting strategies.

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