Disciplining Deviant Women: the Critical Reception of *Baise-moi*[1]

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Abstract:
Since the emergence of the New French Extremity genre, the depiction of both non-simulated sex and extreme violence in the medium of film has become a perennial issue that calls for new feminist discourses. This is even more so when a film includes subversive female sexuality and women perpetrators of violence. These topics need to be explored in relation to gender issues, as it is only when one radically subverts conventional cinematic representations of sex, violence, and women that the pervasive "mad" or "bad" dichotomy restricting our understanding of violent women in film can be weakened. The role of marginalised women directors who make subversive films must also be considered as it invites an exploration of the interventions that radical women can make, especially pertaining to the issues of sex, violence, and dominant aesthetics in film. Reviews by amateur and journalistic Anglophone and Francophone film critics are especially revealing of the dominant attitudes facing subversive, sex-positive, radical, and provocative feminist films and women directors. From this backdrop, this paper explores the socio-cultural reasons for the strongly critical reception of the contemporary French film Baise-moi (dirs. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000), from an anarcha-feminist perspective.

1 Anette Ballinger notes in *No Angels: Women Who Commit Violence* that "[f]eminism has shown a marked reluctance to deal with female violence, perhaps concerned that the subject will harm the feminist cause" (1). This unwillingness is with good reason because women are still considered either "mad" or "bad" when they kill. Nonetheless, we need new feminist discourses outside this dichotomy as our understanding of violent women is inadequate. Much can be learnt by exploring recent cases of radical artistic endeavours that treat the issue of women perpetrators and push the boundaries of established feminism. The contemporary French film *Baise-moi* is one such case that conveys a radical, sex-critical, and subversive discourse. As such, it is subjected to intense yet divided amateur and journalistic film criticism from the Anglophone and Francophone media, while its co-directors, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, are heavily critiqued.

2 Released on 28 June 2000 and based on the novel by the same name published by Despentes in 1994, *Baise-moi* portrays the story of Manu (Raffaëla Anderson), an occasional porn actor, and Nadine (Karen Bach), an occasional prostitute, as they separately experience traumatic events which drive them to murder. They chance upon one another and embark on a sexually charged killing spree across France until they meet their equally separate fates.

[1] This paper draws on material submitted as part of my Bachelor of Arts dissertation at the University of Manchester in 2012.

3 The film provokes a range of reactions that mostly centre on its inclusion of non-simulated sex, and which, along with its extreme violence, places it in the *New French Extremity* genre. This term, coined by James Quandt, denotes the relatively recent category of French films which include a predominant amalgamation of violence, torture, and sexuality (17). *Baise-moi* stands out from this recent trend since the late 1990s for art house films with graphic content (Downing, "French Cinema's New 'Sexual Revolution' Postmodern Porn and Troubled Genre" 265). This is because, despite sharing such taboo features with its contemporaries, it is one of the few which garners such vehement opposition: the film has a 21% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, and a "generally unfavourable" 35 out of 100 Metascore on Metacritic.

4 Films are a highly accessible visual medium and are products of specific social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. They play a role in the reflection on, and validation or contestation of, socio-cultural norms and expectations. The polemic critical reception of *Baise-moi* indicates the extent to which dominant contemporary occidental attitudes are still quite conservative and relatively untouched by radical feminist and anarcha-feminist ideas.[2]

5 From an anarcha-feminist perspective, this paper explores the socio-cultural reasons for the strongly critical reception of the film *Baise-moi*. As non-simulated sex in mainstream cinema is still somewhat provocative, and film reviewers often evoke the corresponding matter of female sexuality, the first section explores these issues. The second section is concerned with another overtly denounced element of the narrative: the extreme violence. As women commit many of the obvious instances of violence, this is logically followed by a consideration of women perpetrators. Finally, although the essay largely maintains a narrative perspective, the effect on the film reviewer of both the film's aesthetics and its wider context cannot be ignored, thus the third section explores the grainy filmmaking techniques and the critique of the co-directors.

The Taboo of Non-Simulated Sex and Disruptive Female Sexuality

6 "Femininity is whoring. The art of servility. We can call it seduction and make a glamorous thing of it. [...] Overwhelmingly, it's just about making a habit of behaving in an inferior way."[3] (Despentes 126)

[2] Anarcha-feminists oppose all forms of hierarchy and relationships of power, including class and race, and view patriarchy as a symptom of involuntary hierarchy, whereas radical feminists consider patriarchy as the primary and most profound source of oppression.

[3] All translations are my own.

7 Having undeniably offended some members of the public, the portrayal of non-simulated sex is easily the most *overt* reason for which the film is subject to intense critical reviews. This is explored with a focus on: the label *pornography* and its financial and cultural implications in contemporary French society; and the cinematic taboo of non-simulated sex on-screen.

8 The original un-cut version of *Baise-moi* is often labelled as pornography as it contains extreme and vivid scenes of a sexual and violent nature. The meaning of the term *pornography* is disputable, however, and the implications of its usage are financially and culturally important in contemporary France. Originally released with a 16 rating, the right-wing religious group *Promouvoir* and members of the *Front National* campaigned against the film. The French state council responded by replacing its commercial certificate with an X certificate, which effectively made it the first banned film in France in 28 years. Catherine Tasca, the Socialist Minister for Culture from 2000 to 2002, finally awarded the film the newly reinstated 18 certificate around a year later, after much protest led by the French novelist and filmmaker Catherine Breillat. In a documentary on the making of the film, Trinh Thi saw this as "an indirect economic ban" (Santarelli) because in France, pornographic films, unlike other French films, are not eligible for an advance against the box-office from the National Centre for Cinema and Animated Images (CNC). An X certificate meant that this early payment would have to be paid back, and that Philippe Godeau, the producer, would lose his investment and risk bankruptcy (Reynaud 3). The cultural implications of banning a radical film are equally important when considering the extent to which such radical ideas are permitted to enter, and have an effect on, mainstream culture. A film with an X certificate would not have benefitted from promotion of any kind; it would only have been allowed to be sold by sex shops which, Trinh Thi argues, would effectively have silenced their voices as the typical clientele of these establishments would not be interested in their film (Santarelli). With an 18 certificate, the film could be more widely shown in mainstream and art house cinemas around France, thus widening its prospective audience.

9 Concerning the label *pornography*, Despentes, Trinh Thi, and R. Anderson argue that *Baise-moi* does not fall under this category as, unlike their film, pornography is made for erotic and masturbatory purposes (Santarelli). Nevertheless, one must note that cinematographic pornography is generally defined by law as the inclusion of certain sexual on-screen acts including erection, fellation, penetration, ejaculation and incitement to violence (Nettelbeck 7), most of which the film includes. Yet labelling the film *pornographic* is a simplification. As Lisa Downing, Professor of French Discourses of Sexuality, maintains,

"[p]ornography displaced, fragmented, relativized, undermined is not pornography" ("French Cinema's New 'Sexual Revolution': Postmodern Porn and Troubled Genre" 278). The film could instead be considered *post-pornographic*, in that it fulfils most of the expectations for pornographic content, but contains a highly polemic, sex-positive discourse that critiques pornographic representation. Indeed, French queer theorist Marie-Hélène Bourcier suggests that *Baise-moi* is post-pornographic because the co-directors appropriate modern pornographic codes of representation and denaturalise them (380).

10 One of the reproaches made of the film is that it is pornography masquerading as "legitimate" cinema. "Nix," for *Beyond Hollywood*, writes: "The flick is controversial only in the sense that it shows hard-core sex in what purports to be a mainstream film" (1); and "Grim Ringler," writing for *Jackass Critics*, laments: "It seems as if its deep, but isnt. Seems as if its a porn, but isnt. Seems as if its a social satire, but isnt [sic]" (5). There is distinct frustration from reviewers that the film does not staunchly conform to the narrative and/or aesthetic expectations of either hardcore pornography or traditional, art house cinema (MacKenzie 317–318). In short, despite having had a relatively unremarkable first screening, the film immediately drew the attention of film reviewers thanks to the initial ban and the label *pornography*, which was undisputedly linked to the public's oversimplification of the visual inclusion of non-simulated sex.

11 Despite the polemic surrounding the labelling of *Baise-moi*, such a vivid portrayal of real sex in cinema is still taboo and faces strong opposition based on aesthetic and narrative reasons. The French cinema magazine *Studio* gave the film two stars in 2000 and called it a hard-core version of the American film *Thelma and Louise* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1991) that challenges the taboo about sex in mainstream cinema (Anon 30). This remark is rather justified, yet it requires further explanation. It is the *method* of using digital video to depict real sex in cinema, as well as the *representation* itself, which makes for unsettling viewing. Neil Archer, writing in the postgraduate electronic journal *E-Pisteme*, argues that the pornographic tropes in the film, which include not only what is depicted but also how it is depicted, are aesthetically disconcerting – the use of digital video "trangress[es] the line of past-ness and aesthetic distance necessary – paradoxically – to the illusion of filmic reality" (74). Concerning both the aesthetics and the narrative, Philip French, who reviewed the film in the *Guardian*, claims that the film is not erotic, but that the inclusion of non-simulated sex only "distracts the audience from other matters, torpedoing the overall sense of reality" (3). One could therefore conjecture that the film reviewers did not appreciate the conflation of the

porn genre with art house cinema that arguably attempts to open up a debate for serious, social commentary through its narrative.

12 Similarly, but specifically concerning the combination of sex and violence, it is possible that unfulfilled aesthetic, thematic, and generic expectations play a role in the reception of non-simulated sex in film. Jeffrey M. Anderson, for *Combustible Celluloid*, argues that "[t]o the film's detractors, the sex makes the violence seem more graphic and the violence makes the sex seem more unappetizing" (5). The overt portrayal of the sexual act, especially in the graphic rape scenes, removes its allure (the second one is in the scene of the sex club massacre, where Manu uses a gun to anally penetrate a man. The massacre begins when he gropes he non-consensually, implies that she should accept it because they are in a sex club, and then makes a racist comment). This point was picked up on by Richard Scheib, writing for *Moria: The Science-Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review*: "The film interestingly co-opts porn style filmmaking, although the intent is clearly to do anything *other* than show the sex scenes in an erotic or titillating light" (3). Overall, the conflation of two such provocative issues – sex and violence – arguably sets it apart from films that depict only one or the other. Linda Ruth Williams, writing for BFI's *Sight and Sound*, suggests:

> that this is neither a horror film nor a porn film may be part of the problem. [...] What's unusual is the conjunction of real sex and unreal violence, the confusion of authenticated pornographic fantasy and simulated violent spectacle. (11)

13 The uneasy relationship in cinema between the real and the simulated, as well as the film's conflation of genres, is therefore recognised by some film reviewers and academics as aesthetically and narratively disturbing. Accordingly, reviewers treat non-simulated sex in film as a problematic and taboo issue to which the film overtly draws attention. However, the inclusion of real acts of a sexual nature is not the only issue that incites less than favourable reviews. The film depicts the women's sexuality in an unconventional, potentially unexpected, and disruptive manner. This second part therefore concentrates on: the lack of female homosexuality; autonomous female sexual desire; and aggressive sexuality in the film.

14 Bérénice Reynaud, a French film critic, historian, theoretician, and film and video curator, accuses Despentes and Trinh Thi of not representing female homosexuality in the growing complicity between Manu and Nadine, thus not shattering this particular boundary (11). Perhaps it is true that the co-directors have a limited vision of female sexuality and are too phallus-centred for their film to be truly transgressive in all domains. Yet if these two seemingly heterosexual characters then become intimate – effectively for the spectator –

around the same time as they commit murder, it could be too easy to associate female homosexuality with misandry. In the scene where Manu and Nadine pick up two men and take them up to a hotel room to have sex, one of the men suggests that the women engage in homosexual activity with each other, effectively for his visual and sexual pleasure. Manu promptly throws him out. Within the narrative, Manu is rejecting the sexual desires of anyone other than herself and Nadine. In doing so, she is affirming her right to dictate her sexual encounters (in sharp contrast to her earlier experience of rape). Outside of the diegesis, the film hints at the contradictory heteronormativity of a contemporary occidental society by refusing to provide an explicit onscreen portrayal of homosexuality. This is a society in which female homosexuality is often evoked in the media merely for the visual pleasure of men and not for the erotic pleasure of the women themselves. In *Salon*, Charles Taylor – although adamant that the film is pornography – recognises this expectation and proposes that "the point of the [earlier] sequence [in which the semi-clothed women dance together], though, is that they don't have sex, thus defusing the male gratification that's the point of porn's ubiquitous lesbian scenes" (10). The characters are not going to become temporarily homosexual just because others (the men in the scene as well as the male heterosexual spectator) expect this, and their complicity does not automatically make them homosexual either. In "Des Marchandises Entre Elles," Luce Irigaray, Belgian feminist and cultural theorist, argues that female homosexuality is recognised only to the extent to which it is prostituted to man's fantasies (189–193). Therefore, despite what Reynaud deems as a limited vision of female sexuality, it is important, in this instance, that the film does not overtly depict any potential homosexual relations between Manu and Nadine within the narrative. This is so that the film may maintain its stance that women should have complete control over their sexuality (including the freedom to reject). This clearly involves denying the heterosexual male spectator the visual pleasure of an expected - but ultimately temporary and superficial - female homosexual performance. It is not only an example of the women defining their own limitations, but also a strong rejection of the normalised imposition of men's desires.

15 Not only does *Baise-moi* attempt to thwart narrative expectations of on-screen homosexuality, but it is also essentially a deconstruction of conventional heterosexual femininity. This is because it contradicts traditional gender roles, which can provoke subconscious opposition from a more conservative spectator. The definition of a "natural" woman stems from that which is considered un-masculine in dominant discourse. Despentes argues that women who know their sexuality, and who profit from it, are excluded from the

group as they do not respect the rules of behaviour for girls (105). It is in relegating women to the "inferior," "weaker," "fairer" sex and, most importantly, in normalising the belief that women are that which men are not, that taboos form concerning women's "unnatural" behaviour. P. French epitomises the misogyny inherent in many critical reviews when he labels the women in the film "whores" (2), implying with such terminology that their promiscuity sufficiently encapsulates them and explains their violent and unfeminine transgressions. As Anne Cranny-Francis et al. note in *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates*: "[H]eterosexist norms [...] assume a compliant femininity devoid of autonomous sexual desire" (40). The film rejects many of the dominant socio-cultural codes and conventions of an occidental patriarchal society in which women are not expected to *actively* seek sexual gratification. After they meet, the film portrays Nadine and Manu as *freer* sexual beings who now instead attempt to exercise their sexual freedom (including, as previously mentioned, the freedom to reject). The dismissive and reductive labelling of the main protagonists by numerous film reviewers reveals the latters' adherence to the conventional expectations of "natural" feminine behaviour.

16 Connected with many film reviewers' unease with the women's unconventional autonomous sexual desire is their focus on Manu and Nadine's aggressive sexualities. Maximilian Le Cain, in *Senses of Cinema,* calls the film "an almost apocalyptic view of heterosexuality, a loveless, predatory sexuality" (10), and Marc Savlov, for the *Austin Chronicle*, disparagingly summarises the film as "chock-full of the most unexpressive [sic] and predatory sexuality I've ever seen" (1). Any violence on the part of the women, which is reserved for the male realm, is not only treated as inherently sexualised, but also unfeminine and therefore unnatural. The close-up of Nadine's black stiletto heels covered in blood after having kicked to death the "dickhead condom guy" (the *only* man with whom they had a sexual encounter who they kill, contrary to many reviews) draws attention to this inevitable association. Nadine and Manu – as violent women forcefully creating their own path in public – are dangerous to traditional expectations about natural, docile, feminine sexuality. Nadia Louar, Literature and Francophone studies Lecturer, argues that it is the sexuality inherent in their violence which reveals the women's attempts to reposition themselves as subjects and not objects: "By sexualising the violence which is inflicted upon them, the women make themselves the wretched subjects of their objectification" (9). Likewise, Breillat, in an interview, insists that "[t]he two heroines in *Baise-moi* reclaim their sex through violence. Nadine and Manu actually go through with it" (Grassin 2). With the incorporation of this sexualised violent behaviour in the narrative, the film subversively

denounces an important oppressive element of our society: the sexist expectations of gender roles and "appropriate" behaviour. This may have contributed to the negative critical reception as the film disturbs conservative viewpoints.

17 The overall negative critical reception of sex and sexuality in the film reveals unfulfilled expectations on many levels, namely: that the film comply with either cinema's need for aesthetic distance or pornography's purpose as a masturbatory aid; that the women engage in homosexual activity; and that the women conform to conventional, heterosexual, submissive, "natural" and non-violent femininity. Clearly, the issue of violence in association with women is central to socio-cultural reasons for the film's negative critical reception and the following section considers this.

Extreme Narrative Violence and the Taboo of the Violent Woman

18 To be aggressive: virile. To want to fuck loads of people: virile. To respond with brutality to something which threatens you: virile." (Despentes 128)

19 While the non-simulated sex and the disruptive manner in which female sexuality is portrayed are both essential factors in the often negative critical reception of the film, another element of the narrative is brought out in reviews: the violence. The first half of this section consequently concentrates on: gratuitous, glamorised violence; arbitrary violence as nihilism or contestation of social injustice; and the revision of certain violent acts in filmic adaptations.

20 *Baise-moi* has come under particularly harsh scrutiny for its depiction of violence, most of which film reviewers and the censors deem "gratuitous" or "eroticised." This is especially evident in the cuts made to the initial rape scene, which, in the filmic release for British audiences in February 2001 and in the first British video release in May 2002, underwent a vital cut at the moment of penetration. The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) gives the following explanation:

> Cut required to an explicit close-up shot of a penis penetrating a vagina during a violent rape sequence, in accordance with BBFC guidelines on sexual violence which [sic] state that portrayals which eroticise sexual assualt [sic] may be cut at any classification level. (BBFC, "Baise-Moi Film Release 26/02/2001")

However, the use of this penetration shot within the overall context of the film is a way to reappropriate a stereotypical pornographic trope, therefore undermining the idea that the visual moment of insertion is automatically erotic. Furthermore, this initial reading is

supported by the reasons given for *waiving* the cuts in the latest February 2013 British release of the video (BBFC, "Baise-Moi Video Release 07/02/2013"):

> neither the nudity nor the real penetration are portrayed as sexual or titillating. On the contrary, the rape is presented as violent and horrific, and, in this context, the shot of penetration reinforces the violation and brutality. [... The] sequence [does not] make[] sexual or sadistic violence appear normal, appealing or arousing. There is never any suggestion that the victims enjoy the experience, and the audience is led to identify and empathise with the victims, not the perpetrators. (BBFC, "Baise-Moi" 2)

One could easily construe cuts to the initial rape scene as an effort to gloss over the horrific experience of sexual assault. The co-directors, by including the penetration, are explicitly *de*-eroticising shots of penetration; indeed, overt depiction does not automatically render the image erotic – context is vastly important.

21 In the British reviews preceding the latest 2013 uncut release, there is an expectation that the sexually violent sex scenes should not be portrayed as explicitly as they are in the film's other scenes of consensual sex, lest the violence be rendered erotic. Joshua Dysart, who reviewed as recently as August 2011 on *MUBI*, proposes that the film "gleefully fetishizes violence [and] rape" (2). While J. R. Gregory, writing for *Digital Retribution*, refutes this reading and instead argues that "the use of actual penetration during the rape makes for an uncomfortable viewing experience [and the film] depicts rape as unglamorous[, ...] completely unsanitised and confronts the audience with what is the reality for many women" (7). Noticeably, there are inconsistent interpretations of the same scene, but it is important to be aware of the reasons for this. Gary Morris, writing for *Bright Lights Film Journal*, suggests that it is the voyeurism felt by the spectator that makes for uncomfortable viewing (8). This feeling of complicity and voyeurism invites provocation, even if inadvertently, which could explain some less than favourable reviews.

22 The presence of gratuitous violence remains problematic for some reviewers who deem that certain "superfluous" acts of violence weaken any "serious" meanings conveyed by the narrative. Morris argues that the two most gratuitous scenes – that of the cash machine murder and the sex club massacre – "undermine the film's feminist/liberationist stance" (6). Anthony Julius, writing for the *Guardian*, agrees with this, suggesting that the "makers of *Baise-moi* [are] both feminist and misogynist" (12), which, however, signals an unsubstantiated contradiction within his review. He proposes that this polarity is due to the film's "fascination with what women are capable of when freed from constraint" (Julius 12), thus implying that the nihilistic side of the murders and violence is inherently unfeminine. This simplistic reading fails to take into account the institutionalised physical, emotional, and

psychological violence the women have had to face on a daily basis (particularly demonstrative of this point is the scene with Nadine in the bar at the beginning of the film, involving, separately, the misogynist boyfriend, and the man who objectifies a nearby woman). The sex club massacre may at first appear to be gratuitous, glamorised, and as detracting from any "serious," "feminist" meanings. Yet it can also be read as a violent denunciation of the middle classes - a reading that is even more supported by the juxtaposition of the wealthy businessman's murder in the preceding scene. The massacre reveals the contempt that the women have for a regulated and falsely constructed world in which the middle classes need to designate a place to free their inhibitions. Ultimately, as some of the violence in *Baise-moi* is not explicitly or sufficiently endorsed by particular narrative events, several film reviewers automatically think it is gratuitous without considering any deeper motivations for its inclusion.

23 As well as often being considered "gratuitous," the violence contained in the film is frequently deemed "nihilistic" due to Nadine and Manu's violent – but ultimately self-defeating – rejection of society's laws, norms, and conventions. Julius rightly notes that Manu and Nadine are not revolutionaries; however, he does not associate their "arbitrary violence" with its socio-cultural context (5), and nor does Paul Clarke for *Kamera*: "any intended message or intellectual vigour is lost amid an unrelenting, nihilistic atmosphere" (7). Many film reviewers saw only unjustified, socially unacceptable violence, and deemed the film "nihilistic" without searching deeper for the reasons for such a representation of violence and extreme outlook. This is arguably because of one (or both) of two reasons: the film was not explicit enough in its intended meanings and therefore does not stand alone as a cultural piece; and/or the public is not familiar with contemporary anarchist theories about the use of violence to contest social injustice (Gelderloos, for example, makes a case for violence). Focus by critics on the nihilism obscures the more political reading that their violence could also be an extreme contestation of social injustice. Howard J. Ehrlich, a sociologist and social psychologist, notes:

> Politics [...] encompasses everything we do in our daily lives, everything that happens to us, and every interpretation we make of these things. All of them have political meanings, because they are integral parts of the culture in which we live. (233)

Arguably, the film illustrates the radical feminist principle, "the personal is political:" Nadine and Manu's actions are a violent and personal protest against society's inability to protect them. Nevertheless, Downing warns us that "the deliberate postmodern play, signalled by the nod to Tarantino [in the sex club massacre scene], urges us not to take seriously the promise

of the possibility of freedom and transcendence through lawlessness and violence" ("'Baise-Moi' or the Ethics of the Desiring Gaze" 54). Their violence has roots, therefore, but the film does not portray this violence as a path to liberation. Although they do resort to a form of nihilism, their violence is not meaningless, but is instead a message about the social and cultural context for their behaviour. The film situates the characters in an unquestionably oppressive kyriarchal[4] society so that we may draw conclusions about the intertwined processes, oppressive structures, and ideologies involved in reducing an individual to view the world and human life as pointless. Those film reviewers who consider that the film's nihilism renders it less articulate about the effect of oppressive structures in society on the individual are simplifying and unreasonably dismissing the revolutionary and political potential of the film's narrative.

24 Even less acceptable for some film reviewers is the radical revision of a particularly violent scene from the source novel: the sex club massacre in the film replaces child murder in the novel. Reynaud identifies a truism in commercial film production that the murder of a child is the only thing for which most film patrons will not forgive you. Thus, replacing this scene from the novel with mass murder in a swingers' club in the film is, she asserts, a "cowardly compromise for simple reasons of mass marketing" (Reynaud 7). On a cultural level, *Baise-moi*, as a filmic adaptation of a novel, is therefore criticised in comparison with the literary source. Ginette Vincendeau, Professor of Film Studies, notes that "fidelity stubbornly remains the critical criterion" (xiii) by which a film based on a novel is most judged. In the documentary, Despentes and Trinh Thi explain that their motivations for cutting the scene of the murder of a child were both practical and ethical: "We'd have had to find a three-year-old kid to do it, but he can't decide this kind of thing" (Santarelli). It would be conceivable that it is precisely *because* of this particular truism that Reynaud mentions, that the film does not portray infantile murder. In his study on the different codes of literature and film, Brian McFarlane compares the "conceptual" nature of literature and the "perceptual" nature of film (26–27). In the novel one could *conceive* of such an event, whereas in the film the visual shock and *perception* of the act could eclipse the co-directors' underlying intended meaning that no-one deserves to die (Santarelli). Instead of inciting a debate about women perpetrators of violence, this scene could have arguably reduced the

[4] Kyriarchy is a feminist analytical category coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1992. It is a neologism "derived from the Greek words for 'lord' or 'master' (kyrios) and 'to rule or dominate' (archein) which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is a socio-political system of domination in which elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men and other men. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression" (Schüssler Fiorenza 211).

focus down to the shock of a child's murder on-screen. It may well be for mass marketing, as Reynaud disparagingly declares, but replacing this incident with another of high shock value allows one to depict, as closely as possible, the complete lack of limits on the part of the heroines, without transgressing the aforementioned truism of cinema.

25 However, it is not solely the extreme violence that is addressed by critics but also, most importantly, the women perpetrators. Anne Gillain, Professor of French *emerita*, notes that "the film's directors gave voice to something as new as it was revolting to the established order. [...] *Baise-moi* violates a taboo in the perception of the feminine" (203). For this reason, the second part of this section contemplates: society's notion of femininity in relation to the taboo of the violent woman; and the link between power, violence, and reviewers' focus on gender.

26 While many critics focus on non-simulated sex and graphic violence in *Baise-moi*, there is another central, but less often consciously identified, taboo: the violent woman. Cranny-Francis et al. note that the gendering practises of certain genres – in this case, the New French Extremity – are often "embedded in readers' expectations" (108). The disgust and the negative criticism shown by many film reviewers illustrate the extent to which this is the case. That is to say, it is not the violence itself which is disliked, but the violent *women*. In an interview with Despentes for the *Guardian*, Elizabeth Day notes that Manu's violent (albeit delayed) reaction to being raped is the "traditionally male response of undiluted aggression" (12). Men are socially conditioned to behave in a certain way and to accept these particular behavioural patterns as "normal," with aggression and violence being perceived as "an important means of achievement among men" (Baker 127). Moreover, *No Angels: Women Who Commit Violence* deals with real examples of women perpetrators of violence and can be rethought to apply to the medium of film. Sean French, in the same work, points out: "the horror of crimes, especially murders, committed by women is [...] understandable, if not rational. We react more strongly to rare events" (40), and J.M. Anderson also states that violence only becomes an "outrage" when committed by women (7), even as a last-resort reaction to continual oppression.

27 In the film, Manu fires a gun at her brother after his repeated taunts of "whore, whore" and the accusation that she enjoyed being raped. She clearly did not intend to kill him but had quickly fired in order to silence his verbal abuse. Violent women are inextricably linked with society's notion of femininity as they are commonly accused of either suffering from an excess of femininity: hysteric; or a lack of it: unnatural (Myers and Wight xiii). In some reviews, Manu and Nadine are perceived as unemotional, that is to say, as lacking in

"natural" feminine behaviour: "all they can really be, are written to be, are monsters. Manu and Nadine never connect with anyone outside of each other" ("Grim Ringler" 4). In *No Angels*, Elizabeth Stanko and Anne Scully note: "when women offend, their actions are assessed within traditional notions of appropriate femininity. [...] Self-control and non-violence are assured via suitable femininity" (61). Violent women disrupt these established assumptions about women that anchor the gender divide (Myers and Wight 22). Their violence is portrayed as a taboo to enable the mainstream definition of femininity to dominate, thus limiting their acceptable forms of "feminine" behaviour. It is probable that this taboo of the violent woman has had an effect on the reading of the film in some of the negative critical reviews.

28 Another way in which the gender of perpetrators of violence features in film reviews is concerning the link between power and violence. In her feminist manifesto, *King Kong théorie*, Despentes relates rape to the capitalist system by arguing that "[rape is] a precise political programme: the skeleton of capitalism, it is the raw and direct representation of the exercise of power" (50). The film also explores this intrinsic link between power and sexual violence committed by men, notably in the initial rape scene. Yet film reviewers dispute the extent to which this is successful in terms of clarity, with some, such as Raphael Pour-Hashemi, posting for *The Digital Fix*, evoking the inadequate treatment of this connection in the narrative:

> when the rapist relinquishes his forceful intercourse after noticing Manu will not put up a fight, he loses interest. This strong notion however, of rape being fuelled by ownership of power, fizzles in the air like most intelligent claims *Baise-Moi* suggests. [...] Rather than being a debate, *Baise-moi* should have rammed its ideology down its viewers [sic] throat. (3–5)

Yet other film reviewers either did not mention or did not recognise the aforementioned relationship in *Baise-moi*, which also includes a focus on pervasive "structural" and "cultural" violence against women (Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research"; and "Cultural Violence"). It is clear *either* that the film does not adequately portray the violence inherent in sexism, classism, *or* that many film reviewers are not sufficiently perceptive or educated in the matter. We can further contemplate this latter possibility.

29 To reappropriate the words of Cranny-Francis et al., the narrative addresses sexism "by the taboo act of speaking what sexist discourse attempts to silence" (93), especially through the use of resistant subjects (Nadine and Manu) who are aware, however inadvertently, of the oppressive nature of their kyriarchal society. The film does, in fact, consistently deal with the issue of power and violence – two such examples: the opening

scene where Nadine witnesses common misogyny as she sits at the bar; and the crude sexual harassment from the man in the street who asks Nadine: "Wanna feel my balls slapping your arse?". The initial rape scene, above all, treats the relationship between power and violence by subverting conventional pornographic expectations. Wencke Mühleisen, a Norwegian writer, gender and media researcher, recognises "the 'neutral' registration made by the camera, which systematically avoids the point of view of the assailant and the eroticization of the assault, as well as [Manu's] unexpected reaction" (119). This gang-rape scene is a remarkable portrayal of the horrors of sexual assault. The polar-opposite reactions from Manu and her friend suggest a variety of responses to rape, and the focus on Manu's impassive face de-eroticises the forced intercourse (in comparison to common hardcore heterosexual pornography in which the women visually express and verbalise their supposed pleasure, if not merely their presence (Johnson)).

30 Sexism, classism, racism, heteronormativity, and misogyny are arguably present in contemporary occidental society. It is because of the normalisation of these attitudes, and precisely *because* the co-directors' discourse is feminist and non-mainstream, that film reviewers may find it difficult to recognise them: their socio-cultural education may have taught them otherwise. What is more, film reviewers do not question the legitimacy of such normalised psychological, emotional, and physical violence against women, which the film exposes (especially through the aforementioned examples). Instead, it appears more shocking to some critics that these women are demonstrating their rage *physically and overtly* (instead of staying within their designated gender role, and internalising the anger or suppressing it). For example, Roger Ebert, an influential American journalist, film critic, and screenwriter, argues:

> A case can be made that *Baise-Moi* wants to attack sexism in the movies [... but] Manu and Nadine are man haters and clinically insane, and not every man is to blame for their unhappiness – no, not even if he sleeps with them. (4)

Ebert problematically formulates this form of defensive assertion as a "truth" rather an opinion (as countless critics are wont to do). Overall, it is the women's acts of murder, rather than the acts of everyday violence *against* women as an assertion of power, which reviewers primarily address and denounce.

31 The critical reception of the narrative violence reveals a focus on – and sometimes a condemnation of – its gratuity and the overall nihilistic tone of the film. Either the film lacks clarity or film reviewers are not attempting to consider the contextual reasoning behind this nihilism. With aggression considered a naturally "masculine" behaviour in contemporary

society, film reviewers respond more strongly to instances of female violence as it is a rejection of societal norms. They also choose to focus on the gender of the perpetrators more than the film's denunciation of an inherently violent kyriarchal system. Having explored the issue of *narrative* violence, the next section will concentrate on violence outside the diegesis of the film, namely, in relation to the filmmaking and the treatment of the co-directors.

A Rejection of the Dominant Textual Genres of Cinema and the Critique of the Co-Directors

32 "Stepping out of the cage has always been accompanied by brutal sanctions." (Despentes 22)

33 Following on from the issue of violence portrayed *within* the film's narrative, Archer maintains 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)" (69). The beginning of this section therefore focuses on: aesthetic relativism; and counter cinema as the visual rejection of the dominant textual genres of society.

34 Although reviewers often cite the cinematic aesthetics of *Baise-moi* as "proof" of inferior quality, this merely indicates an elitist, "absolute" view of filmmaking. Aesthetic relativism – the "doctrine that [...] truth [of beauty] itself is relative to the standpoint of the judging subject" (Blackburn 314) – is instead at play here. The gritty *mise-en-scène,* fairly simple script, natural lighting, low budget, use of a hand-held camera, low quality digital video, and punk-inspired soundtrack incite film reviewers to come to the conclusion that the film's grainy "look" either reveals the unprofessionalism of the crew or successfully mirrors the film's graphic themes. Edward Guthmann, from *San Francisco Gate,* argues: "[w]hatever message it wants to impart is overwhelmed by shoddy technique" (6); and Julius claims that "the film's visual language is lurid and tawdry, the acting is perfunctory, the script is uninventive and the soundtrack music dire" (9). Yet other reviewers propose that it is precisely *due* to the grainy filmmaking techniques that the narrative is intensified. For example Alix Sharkey, a British free-lance journalist, notes that "[t]he film's grainy, pseudo-documentary texture makes it even more provocative and disquieting" (7). Gregory also proposes that "[t]he use of digital camera giv[es] everything a grainy, washed out look, adding to the realism and downbeat tone that permeates everything" (11). Furthermore, within the film, the co-directors covertly acknowledge their focus on content rather than form – after having killed the gun shop owner, Manu laments, "Fuck, we've no feeling for

language at all, we're not coming up with good retorts at the right moment", to which Nadine replies, "We've got the actions right though, that's already something." Scott MacKenzie, in *Screen*, notes that this self-consciousness "signals an awareness about the ways in which critics and the public interpret and react to violent images" (318). It is clear that there exists a polemic surrounding the use of "real-life" aesthetics in the film, yet some film reviewers do not take into account the absolutist nature of their judgements of *Baise-moi*, and in doing so betray their dogged adherence to the dominant textual codes and conventions of contemporary mainstream cinema.

35 Following on from the vital consideration of aesthetic relativism, it is not only through a graphic, unsentimental narrative, but also through DIY punk aesthetics and *counter cinema* that Despentes's work challenges "the unquestioned supremacy of the male viewpoint in both film and literature" (Day 18). Despentes's and Trinh Thi's use of unknown actors, sometimes shaky camerawork, natural lighting, and digital video instead of film is a strong visual rejection of the dominant textual genres of cinema. Despentes notes that they encountered much opposition, even before the film was made, based on their aesthetic and cast choices (Santarelli). Despite many professionals trying to persuade them to use particular lighting, they resisted, in some part thanks to the support of the director Gaspar Noé. *Baise-moi* is essentially an example of punk aesthetics and ideology centred on anti-establishment values, individual freedom, and, most importantly, a "do-it-yourself" attitude to the creative process, which is intended to encourage self-sufficiency and self-empowerment. J. Hoberman, from *Village Voice*, recognises this when they associate the filmmaking techniques and this DIY, sometimes nihilist, counter-culture: "this journey to the end of the night derives a certain amount of punkish energy from its crude editing, cruddy-looking close-ups, strident soundtrack, and overall volatility" (6). This rebuff to the dominant cultural group and rejection of the cultural canon is also a radical rejection of the universalisation of masculine experience. Indeed, in *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film*, Claire Johnston, a feminist film theoretician, explores how some women's cinema can be considered "counter cinema" (133–143). Using what can be considered as a subversive choice of style, Despentes and Trinh Thi challenge a sexist discourse that defines what is possible to do or not do in film, and by extension, what is possible to say or not say as marginalised women in society. It is by drawing attention to the production methods used in their film and by opposing sexist ideologies – among other dominant and oppressive ideologies – that Despentes and Trinh Thi have rejected the notion that there is one "correct" method of filmmaking. Taken as a whole, film reviewers' dislike or public condemnation of these

unconventional and rebellious methods reveals their tenacious belief in the cultural supremacy of the dominant masculine textual genres of society.

36 While the violent rejection of dominant aesthetics evokes negative reviews, one must also address complex socio-cultural factors pertaining to the implicit critique of the co-directors themselves. Thus, this second part looks at: the transgression of the co-directors' social positions; and the intense media coverage as a form of male "privileged hysteria."

37 Although *Baise-moi* has an undeniable "trash" aesthetic, the negative criticism of the filmmaking appears to be linked more to the co-directors' and the actors' transgression of their social positions – marked through the depiction of aggressive female sexuality and violent women perpetrators – than the actual cinematic aesthetics of the film. Despentes, as a former prostitute, peepshow hostess, and outspoken punk, and Trinh Thi, as a former hard-core porn star, do not have any traditional training in cinema and come from marginalised backgrounds. This exposes them to harsher critique than they might otherwise receive, as "Stéphanie," in *Les Fées du Logis*, argues:

> This pornographic auteur film reveals the quandary raised when one shows, displays, and films sex – but not only that. The film shocks because two women made it. […] From the reactions it aroused, one can deduce that a desiring woman, a violent woman (and a desiring woman inevitably does violence) must stay in front of the camera, must be kept at a respectable distance, or must be watched by the careful eye of the filmmaker. Once the object of desire - this woman - becomes the subject of desire, and when this desire doesn't correspond to the idea that society has, everything is seen as going wrong. (1)

The real problem is that the film is about violent, non-white, working-class women (Karen Bach is half-Moroccan and Raffaëla Anderson is half-Berber), and is made by marginalised women, all of which is disturbing to the cinematic and media mainstream. This point is also made by Despentes: "we were simply too raw, too real for them" (Sharkey 31).

38 On a visual level, the co-directors' use of DIY punk aesthetics disturbs and undermines established gendered and hierarchical conventions in both society and the film industry. While on a narrative level, reviewers consider violence and hardcore sex, especially, as inappropriate subjects for women directors, which Despentes identifies:

> It's not that the book [*Baise-moi*] isn't good, according to [the] criteria [of the first critic in *Polar*], that disturbs the man. He doesn't even speak about the book. The problem is that I'm a girl who is directing a film with those kind of girls. [...] It's only my sex that counts. (117)

Hark recognises this taboo: "the establishment, I suspect, is outraged at women not only directing but acting in the genre traditionally reserved for its gender, that of violent, wanton

slaughter" (4). Essentially, the co-directors have transgressed the imposed socio-cultural limitations of their gender and class and have denounced these very same limitations in public. Despentes notes in her feminist manifesto that Trinh Thi received much condemnation because she defied her social positioning. Her transition from in front of the camera to behind it disturbed the sexist heterosexual male populace as she was no longer their sexual object: "She had to disappear from the public sphere. This, to protect men's libidos, who prefer that the object of their desires remains in her place, which is to say disembodied and, especially, silent" (Despentes 97). Equally, Despentes argues that the female porn performers' appearance in a non-pornographic film destroys the illusion that they are sexual toys (Sharkey 33). They take on a fuller and more realistic character. A woman can therefore face disapproval because she dares to refuse the gendered boundaries consigned to her by society. It also explains the overall negative critical reception of the film as the transgression of one's position in society disturbs established hierarchies.

39 Indeed, one must further explore this social reaction from film reviewers. In *No Angels* Laura Grindstaff and Martha McCaughey propose that the intense media coverage can be explained as a form of male hysteria. Using a psychoanalytical framework, they suggest that due to a cultural inequality between men and women, their psychosexual neuroses are displayed differently. This reaction to violent women is termed "privileged hysteria," which, "because of straight men's greater cultural authority, [i]s primarily discursive and textual rather than bodily or somatic, and therefore never seen as neurotic or a form of 'acting out'" (Grindstaff and McCaughey 144–145). Not only can this theory apply to the – mostly male – critical reaction to the sexuality and violence of the characters and the narrative, but also it is relevant to the underlying critique of the filmmakers themselves. As we have seen, many male film reviewers have responded negatively to the film, citing narrative flaws and poor quality aesthetics as the fundamental reasons for this. Yet it is possible that they are demonstrating a form of male "privileged hysteria," which, as it is supported institutionally, socially, and culturally, is not as easily acknowledged as such. Therefore, in the face of film reviewers' and the general public's oppressive ignorance, the filmmakers and their film are censured and accused of poor quality work.

40 Film reviewers either dismiss the film's aesthetics as poor quality or believe that they augment the coarse realism of the narrative. A negligible number of critics also recognise the film's visual origins in various counter-cultures, including punk and women's cinema. Overall, the negative criticism levelled at the film's aesthetics emanates from a persistent belief in the superiority of the dominant textual genres of society. However, there is also an

implicit critique of the co-directors themselves, which is linked to their transgression of their gendered social positions through their insistence on treating "unfeminine" subjects in film. The intense critical reception of the film can be explained as a form of male "privileged hysteria," both in response to the film and the women filmmakers.

41 The critical reception of the film's three key areas that incite polemic reactions (sex, violence, and cinematic aesthetics) is further understood with a consideration of gender in each case. Having explored the non-traditional manner in which the film depicts female sexuality and women perpetrators of violence, the negative critical reception of the sex and violence of the film is more comprehensively understood. It is possible that without the overwhelming controversy caused by the brief ban and the label *pornography*, the unconventional and grainy cinematic aesthetics would have invited less disparaging readings of the film. Also conceivable is that without such a dissident and condemnatory feminist discourse, film reviewers would not critique the co-directors as aggressively.

42 Ultimately, the media plays an intercessor role in maintaining the dominant cultural and social consensus by speaking superficially about *Baise-moi*. The narrative can potentially open up sites of negotiation for a critique of society and its inherent sexism and violence. Unfortunately, due to a number of socio-cultural reasons rooted in the inequalities and power struggles of a kyriarchal system, this debate has been largely one-sided. The critiques of the film constitute a nexus of polyvalent texts that, for the most part, support each others' largely negative reviews by making reference to, and focusing on, only a handful of unusual, subversive, or radical narrative and formal elements. What is more, many film reviewers have judged the film using the conventional and dominant textual codes and conventions of cinema, which are overwhelmingly influenced by the universalisation of masculine experience. It is therefore no surprise that (mostly male) film reviewers' reactions to the film often involve immediate defensive retorts and brief cutting comments expressed as evident truths, rather than considered explorations of the issues the film raises. Fortunately, a form of criticism that is decidedly more considered substantiated certain reactions, although usually these commentators were film theorists and academics rather than journalists or general members of the public. Nevertheless, film reviews often made numerous errors on the level of the narrative and credentials of *Baise-moi*, which not only clearly perverts the reading of the film on several occasions, but also reveals a distinct lack of professionalism and accuracy on the behalf of the film reviewers and journalists.

43 Once one explores a more extensive context – especially concerning the lived experiences of the filmmakers themselves – the scope for greater comprehension is widened.

Indeed, one must strive to understand its importance for a profound reading of the film. More research needs to be conducted on the ideal viewing conditions for particular films, whether this exposes their inability to stand alone as cultural pieces or merely acknowledges the possibility that more accurate outside influences on the reading of a film should be taken into account. A study of the influence that film reviews and critics have on others' readings of a film is imperative. This would allow one to specify further the impact of outside influences on a film's reputation. What is more, although heterosexuality and monogamy (versus promiscuity) in relation to the film were touched upon in the first section, this paper did not consider other privileges more substantially (for example, middle-class, white, cis[5], able-bodied, size). Further research in these areas would be welcome, especially including a more detailed consideration of intersectionality[6] and the kyriarchal system in which the ignorance and abuse of such privileges are intrinsic.

44 The reviews of Anglophone film critics reveal the dominant conservative tendencies pervading contemporary, occidental attitudes to films made by marginalised women. Consequently, radical feminist and anarcha-feminist ideologies are still considered deviant. In order to further feminist discourses on the subject, instead of limiting ourselves to the "mad" or "bad" dichotomy when exploring violent women in culture and society, one must instead focus on those who judge and label them. Overall, it is due to this subversive feminist discourse on a socio-cultural level (concerning non-simulated sex, female sexuality, extreme violence, women perpetrators, DIY punk cinematic aesthetics, and the marginalised socio-cultural status of the directors themselves) that the film receives such a negative critical reception. Through their critiques, film reviewers are attempting to discipline the deviant women of *Baise-moi*.Despentes puts this most pertinently, in her distinctly *trash* literary style:

> The real censor, evidently, doesn't pass through legislation. It's more a piece of advice that they give you. [...] Of course it must be forbidden for three hard-core porn stars and a former prostitute to make a film about rape. [...] Can't be having a film about a gang rape in which the victims don't whine about it as their noses run down the shoulders of the men who will avenge them. (120)

[5] *Cis* (which encompasses both *cisgender* and *cissexual*) is the term used to describe "individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity" (Schilt and Westbrook 461). This is opposed to the umbrella term *trans**, whose asterix is intended to make it an inclusive term for "all non-cisgender gender identities, including transgender, transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, genderfuck, genderless, agender, non-gendered, third gender, two-spirit, bigender, and trans man and trans woman" (Killermann 2).

[6] Intersectionality is "the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (Nash 1)

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