

# FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE GUN TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CAMERA: ADAPTING DESPENTES' *BAISE-MOI* FOR CINEMA

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## **Abstract :**

"C'est moins spectacle qu'au cinéma" (72) says Manu in *Baise-moi* (1993), after her first murder. While this comparison between reality and cinema underlines the lack of effect reality has, compared to the power of images, such a desire for cinematographic effects also represents the protagonists' will to not merely be the agents of their lives but the directors of their cinematography. However, despite the attempt to achieve a filmic aesthetic, the unusual violent and sexual acts performed lack the desired spectacularity.

In this article, I argue that the characters' will to direct images and the frustration deriving from the lack of cinematography runs parallel with Virginie Despentes' decision to adapt her novel into a film. Despentes' style, albeit aggressive, does not match the violence of the actions committed by her characters. In mobilizing Robert Stam's concept of adaptation, I show how, in focusing on the performance of the violent and pornographic reality imagined by the protagonists, the adaptation represents the cinematic actualization of the protagonists' actions in the novel. Their position on the right side of the gun to shoot at all opponents corresponds to Despentes and Trinh Thi's decision to place themselves on the right side of the camera to challenge a bourgeois voyeuristic audience.

**Keywords :** Adaptation, Feminism, Scandal, Abjection, Sexuality, Agency

"Not one of us has told the entire story of *Baise-moi*," wrote Virginie Despentes on her blog in February 2005 after the death of Karen Bach<sup>1</sup>, one of the film's two lead actresses. Beyond merely acknowledging Bach's important role in the creative project of *Baise-moi*, such a statement piques one's curiosity since it suggests a complex, even enigmatic story that nobody had yet fully grasped. Indeed, what is the entire story of *Baise-moi*? While not claiming to be able to answer such a question, I nonetheless propose to use it as a starting point for my analysis of Despentes' *Baise-moi* project. First, the question addresses the issue of origin. Where does the story start? With the film, directed by Despentes in collaboration with Coralie Trinh Thi, and released in June 2000? Or earlier, with the publication of the novel in 1993? The "us" Despentes is referring to seems to direct us to the first hypothesis. *Baise-moi* is the story of a project involving Coralie Trinh Thi (co-director), Karen Bach (aka Nadine), Raffaëla Anderson (aka Manu) and Despentes herself: the "*Baise-moi*" girls, as Lynne Huffer calls them in her chapter devoted to the film in *Are the Lips a Grave?* (2013). However, before the emergence of this "us," I would argue that a previous "us" was at stake whose origins are located in the novel, including Despentes and her two fictional characters Nadine and Manu with and through whom she reflects on the positions assigned to women by society. Refusing to assume the role of passive objects, the protagonists become the agents of their own lives and rebel against men and anyone who opposes them in the most radical way possible: murder.

In this article, I will show how the identities of these two "us" are not only connected but intertwined, and how a return to the novel is crucial to better understand the motivations of the directors and to reflect on the sexual and violent scenes depicted throughout a film which suffered from a great deal of unfair criticism and treatment. On top of being condemned to exist outside of normal circulation, because of its rating "interdit au moins de 18 ans" [forbidden to anyone under eighteen], *Baise-moi* has been the object of misogynist attacks that dismiss the potential feminist agency deriving from the film: "c'est un film informe, chaotique, incontrôlé, un **enregistrement primal** de flashes, sans doute inspiré par une **pulsion de désespérance**, mais révélateur d'**une totale incapacité à cadrer**, aligner deux plans,

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as Karen Lancaume.

projeter quoique ce soit d'autre qu'une déclaration d'intentions" (Camy and Montagne 219, my emphasis). Taken from Jean-Luc Douin's article in the July 15<sup>th</sup> 2000 issue of *Le Monde*, these comments violently dismiss the directors' capacity to have deliberately chosen a B-movie aesthetic for their film. The words "primal", "pulsion" and "incapacité" deny any form of consciousness on the part of Desportes and Trinh Thi and therefore condemn the film without even trying to analyze to what extent its chaotic qualities can mediate what the directors are trying to show. In this model, the weaknesses of the film cannot be deliberate but result from the weaknesses of the directors, both female, both outcast<sup>2</sup>.

The first reason to propose an interartial approach instead of considering the *Baise-moi* film as independent from the novel is that both works share the same intentionality. In an article published in *Libération* on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, Karen Bach explained: "Le porno, c'est des mecs qui jouissent sur la gueule des filles, la femme qui en prend plein la tronche. *Baise-moi*, c'est le contraire." Suggesting that *Baise-moi* is the opposite means that women are in this case the ones who have the power to beat and shoot men. In the novel, Manu expresses a similar idea when Fatima, one of the protagonists' hosts, tries to understand what led them to commit all their crimes: "c'est toujours au premier qui dégomme l'autre. Sauf que là on est passées du bon côté du gun. La différence est considérable" (176). Given the similitude between the two statements, I argue that *Baise-moi* represents the cinematic actualization of what Manu states as a rule in the novel. Indeed, Virginie Desportes and Coralie Trinh Thi place themselves on the right side of the camera and in addressing the impact of violent and pornographic images and deviating from the way they are usually received, ask their audience to critically rethink its relation to images, violence and desire.

Moreover, I argue that the fact that the process of the film's creation itself corresponds in this instance to what the characters are trying to achieve in the diegesis derives from Desportes' own frustration in the face of literature's lack of cinematic effect. The film intends to compensate for the lack of equivalence between the violence of the protagonists' actions and their literary translation. That

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<sup>2</sup> It is Virginie Desportes' first film, and Coralie Trin Thi comes from the porn industry. Later, I will discuss more extensively the importance of their collaboration and how it impacted the reception of the film.

is why, rather than analyzing the film according to its faithfulness to the original novel, it is far more interesting to see how *Baise-moi* uses the violence depicted in the novel and inscribes it in the form of the film itself (Louar 90). Robert Stam also defends the idea that "adaptation should be faithful not so much to the source text but rather to the essence of the medium of expression" (546). Stam also refers to Gérard Genette's concept of hypertext (549). Defined as a text that transforms and elaborates a hypotext, a film adaptation should be considered as such.

### ***BAISE-MOI: A PROTOCINEMATIC NOVEL***

As a novel, *Baise-moi* represents a specific kind of hypotext given its "protocinematic" qualities. In "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" (2000), Robert Stam considers a work of art as protocinematic when it uses certain techniques reminiscent of a film. Though this concept has been admittedly abused, Stam defends its relevance when an author specifically focuses on altering and challenging the modes of perception (556). In *Baise-moi*, the successive references to movies as well as the structure of the narrative, at time similar to a film script, constitute the main argument supporting this analysis and further invite an interartial approach in the study of its filmic adaptation.

### **From life as cinema to cinema as a way of life**

Starting from the first sentence, the affiliation between the novel *Baise-moi* and cinema is made obvious, with Nadine watching a pornographic film. Moreover, rather than merely acknowledging the protagonist's taste for porn, the scene shows Nadine acting as a film critic. Through a detached and clinical gaze, Nadine comments on the talent of the female performer who succeeds in making the viewer forget her belly, cellulite, and pimples that, as a porn expert, the protagonist identifies behind the make-up (6). The final one-word

sentence of this passage in reaction to the porn actress, "Impressionnée", emphasizes Nadine's specific attention to the cinematic qualities of the porn she is watching. The distance she maintains as a viewer is further evidenced by her use of the VHS player, allowing her to play, pause, and forward the way she wants.

When her roommate steps in as she watches her film, Nadine observes her with a similar critical gaze. Her detailed and sharp description of Séverine, "[e]lle se traque le corps avec une vigilance guerrière, déterminée à se contraindre le poil et la viande aux normes saisonnières, coûte que coûte" (8) could easily be compared to the performer's "tour de force" in hiding "son ventre, ses vergetures et sa sale gueule" (6). Both women try to fit a particular model of femininity of which Nadine is perfectly aware and critical. Whether in the porn film or in reality, a similar sense of seeing is presented to the reader. The characters are described in detail, with their performer attributes. As a consequence, the reader is led to see the similarities between the obvious cinematic aspects of porn and the cinematic aspects of reality itself. Nadine's distance from the world makes her into the editor of reality as well as of her porn.

This comparison between reality and cinema is further used by Desportes throughout the novel in the scenes when the two protagonists commit murders. Seeing life as cinema represents an important step in the protagonists' murderous journey since their references to cinema initially illustrate their progressive exclusion from the world, the annihilation of their feelings and empathy. After strangling Séverine, Nadine realizes that "c'est donc vrai, le truc de la langue qui dépasse un peu. Et le truc des yeux révulsés aussi" (64). This observation shows that rather than considering her actions unbelievable, Nadine's first reaction is to establish the similarities between what she did and what she probably has seen in some movies or TV shows.

Interestingly, in Manu's case, the opposite seems to happen, though it is still related to cinema. Once she shoots Moustaf, she notices that "[c]'est moins spectacle qu'au cinéma" (72). Even after seeing his head explode, she again observes that "[c]'est pas pareil qu'au cinéma" (72). The repetition of this same feeling not only underlines the difference between cinema and reality but also a certain disappointment. But what seems to bother Manu is not remorse at

having killed someone, or a sudden return to reality. On the contrary, she is disappointed because what she did does not match the thrill or the aesthetic of a filmed murder.

Despite the differences between their modes of observation, Manu and Nadine, in comparing reality to cinema, both take their actions as the starting point of the comparison, thus suggesting that their respective murders are primarily inscribed in reality. The similarities or lack thereof to cinema are raised after the crime. The cinematic aspects of reality are therefore beyond their control. They are the witnesses of their presence or absence. However, the cinematic qualities of Manu's second murder seem more convincing: "D'un point de vue strictement visuel, c'est plus probant que la première fois. Plus de couleurs. Et puis elle est moins novice, elle en profite mieux" (75). In directly connecting her enjoyment of this second crime to the experience she gained after the first one, Manu realizes that there is a way to improve the cinematic quality of her actions. More than being a mere spectator, she can become the agent, in other words the movie director, of her own crimes. If seeing life as cinema did not work for her, using cinema as a way to live her life seems more promising, allowing her to live according to her own terms.

### **Issues of Translation: When Reality Lacks of Cinematic Effects**

This shift from life as cinema to cinema as a way of life constitutes one of the driving forces of Nadine and Manu's murderous journey. This desire for cinematic effects represents the protagonists' desire to take control of their narratives and their own images and to challenge the reality in which they live. According to Marie-Hélène Bourcier, *Baise-moi*, whose direct translation would be *Fuck me*<sup>3</sup>, works as a reappropriation from a masculinist dominant culture by feminists who are "pro sexe et pros du sexe" (28). *Fuck me* can therefore also be read as: *Fuck off!* However, because this desire for the cinematographic is never entirely satisfied, there is an omnipresent risk that these feminists' narratives or their feelings can never fully be

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<sup>3</sup> Both the novel and the film's title were oddly translated in English as *Rape me*.

expressed.

One of the main frustrations comes from the protagonists' inability to find the perfect catchphrase that would give their actions the impact it deserves. For example, Manu complains, "[j]e suis vraiment qu'une clocharde. Dans les films, les mecs ont toujours des répliques définitives au moment de shooter" (103). Finding "la bonne réplique au bon moment" (121) is crucial for Manu because she is aware that what she and Nadine are doing is itself crucial and unusual. She admits that she does not believe in content without form, thus confirming the hypothesis of a will to aesthetically direct the violence of her actions: in other words, cinema as a way of life. The use of catchphrases, the choice of victims, and the way they kill them are all part of Nadine and Manu's self-representation that specifically intends to challenge the usual paradigm: men as oppressors and women as victims. They propose instead a model in which women, through the combination of sex and violence, become the abject subjects of their own objectification (Louar 86). Nadine and Manu do not reject *per se* the assimilation of women/object but rather use it as a starting point for their criticism of dominant society. They both represent objects of desire who become subjects of abjection. Nadine's fascination with pornography illustrates well the thin line on which they evolve between object/abject, between conventional/transgressive sex. In looking at a picture in which a woman "fait ce qui ne se fait pas avec un plaisir évident", Nadine is "impressionnée et respectueuse comme devant une icône"<sup>4</sup> (139). Being turned on by what should turn her off, Nadine has the ability to understand the power of abjection, of the image or the word "qui t'allume le ventre" (139).

Far from just being superficially barbaric, the murders are part of a symbolic economy, which takes into account the pleasures of the protagonists but also the shock of their audience. The scene depicting Nadine's murder of a child articulates awareness of this potential reception and its importance in the passage to transgression:

Nadine pense aux journaux à l'hôtel, et aux assassins d'enfants. Elle pense aux gros titres et aux commentaires de comptoir quand un enfant est tué. L'effet que ça fait aux gens. Même elle, elle aurait du mal à faire ça. S'exclure du monde, passer le cap. Etre ce qu'on a de pire. Mettre un gouffre entre elle et le reste du monde. Marquer le

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<sup>4</sup> Let's notice the use of the same adjective "impressionnée" to qualify a porn actress.

coup. Ils veulent quelque chose pour la première page, elle peut faire ça pour eux. (158)

Thinking that the audience is actually driven by desire to the abject, Nadine embodies the role of an entertainer who performs a sacrifice to confront the rest of the world with its perverse desire.

However, the issue with cinema or any artistic form relies on the fact that the audience might neither interpret nor understand what the artist intended to show. The movie that Nadine and Manu were creating in their mind was not received the same way in the press. Most of the articles about their story fail, according to Manu, to understand the real impact and meaning of their actions. In referring to the work of journalists she fumes: "Que de la merde. C'est pas sur eux qu'y faut compter pour avoir une belle légende. [...] Putain, ils respectent rien, ces gens, ils cherchent jamais à comprendre!" (193). The disconnect between the press's narrative and the protagonists' intended one resides in the lack of cinematic spectacle that the murders have. Indeed, it is possible to imagine press articles recounting the murders as mere facts without being able to understand the aesthetic process imagined by the protagonists. Manu and Nadine's cinematic vision of their actions does not translate well in reality.

Beyond the issue of the catchphrase, of the performance, there is the lack of effect reality has compared to the power of images: it is an issue of medium. When the two protagonists kill their first victim at the ATM machine, Nadine remarks on how fast it goes. Later, this first observation leads to a certain frustration as "Nadine se surprend à regretter que cette image ne passe pas au ralenti et à remarquer que c'est une réflexion qu'elle a volée à Manu" (159). Both characters would like to have control over the events, slowing down the whole action in order to properly enjoy the show. Slow motion is unfortunately the prerogative of cinema. The superiority of the film medium resides also in the possibilities of manipulating the image. For example, the comment "ça fait mauvais trucage" (120) about the visual aspect of the Walkman seller's murder, demonstrates that reality can sometimes look less convincing than cinema itself. In a film, the special effect could have been arranged and have more impact on the protagonists and their supposed audience.



## The Novel's Limits of Expression and the Desire for Cinema

The attraction to cinematic effects is not specific to Manu and Nadine. Rather than remaining within the limits of diegesis, the tendency to organize events through a camera lens also concerns Virginie Desportes' own literary style. The protocinematic aspect of the novel is also noticeable in its own form. Going back to the first chapter, Nadine's use of the VHS player could suggest that the rapid succession of the porn scenes depicted one after the other is a result of Nadine forwarding the VHS in order to find the scenes that she enjoys. What we could call the soundtrack of the novel constitutes another great proof of the protocinematic aspect of *Baise-moi*. In "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" (2000), Robert Stam establishes a major distinction between novels and films in terms of "tracks of expression." According to him, a novel only has one track of expression, the written word, whereas a film has at least five of them: "moving photographic image, phonetic sound, music, noises, and written materials" (547). For example, he explains the advantage of using music in order to emphasize an emotion in a film. If it is true that, as a novel, *Baise-moi* cannot superpose image and music, there is nonetheless a meaningful juxtaposition of the lyrics of the songs Nadine listens to and the events she experiences throughout the text<sup>5</sup>. Written in italics and largely in English, the lyrics already stand out from the rest of the text. But they also contrast with the rather critical and descriptive tone of the novel because they express what Nadine actually feels inside herself. It is through this "inner voice" that the reader witnesses the protagonist's growing anger. The lyrics, "I am tired of always doing as I'm told [...] you pushed too hard now watch me snap" (11), "I'm screaming inside, but there's no one to hear me" (33), and "you can't bring me down" (61), for instance, announce Nadine's rebellion that will lead to Séverine's murder.

Robert Stam also considers the modulation of points of view in

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<sup>5</sup> In "Version femmes plurielles: relire *Baise-moi* de Virginie Desportes" (2009), Nadia Louar underlines the importance of the lyrics in the structure of the novel and their reminiscence of cinematography but her intention is mainly to criticize Bruce Benderson who, in his English translation of *Baise-moi*, did not include these lyrics.

novels as particularly cinematic. Multiple focalizations in a novel can evoke for a filmmaker the multiple perspectives in a film (554). Stam uses the example of Hitchcock's films where points of view move between major and minor characters as well. Though *Baise-moi* only modulates points of view between the two main characters, the fact that in the first section, the novel alternates chapters about Nadine's experience and point of view with chapters about Manu's story, reveals the author's wish to create a textual dynamic that decenters the narrative approach. Desportes seems mostly interested in interrogating the impressions her protagonists have of the world that surrounds them. Nadine and Manu's narrative function is, like two cameras, to integrate what is around them, analyze and then transcribe it according to their subjectivity<sup>6</sup>. This function that they share is justified in the plot by the same sense of distance and exclusion from reality that they experience: reality seen as an outside from which they are excluded, explains why they compare it to cinema.

If the form of the novel matches the intradiegetic desire for cinematic effects, it is reasonable to wonder to what extent Nadine and Manu's frustration with reality's lack of effect compared to cinema could correspond to Desportes' own impression. Indeed, though unique and particularly aggressive, her literary style does not match, in my opinion, the violence of the actions committed by her characters. Just as it is impossible for Nadine and Manu to fully experience and analyze the intensity of their actions, the readers are not as affected as they might be if the novel were a film. Nadia Louar recounts in "Version femmes plurielles: relire *Baise-moi* de Virginie Desportes" (2009), that the major critics focused on the social and cultural values developed in the text rather than on its potentially subversive literary aspects. In responding with this kind of emotional distance, the audience and the critics might be characterized by Desportes in the manner that Manu reproaches journalists responding to her crimes: "Ils cherchent jamais à comprendre" (193). However, I would argue that, instead of making such a complaint, Desportes decided to answer with a filmic adaptation, in collaboration with Coralie Trinh Thi,

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<sup>6</sup> Nadine's role as an observer is particularly emphasized in chapter 3 as she enters the bar: "Le long de l'interminable bar comptoir s'échoue une horde d'habités hétéroclite. Kaléidoscope d'histoires, lumières artificielles et brouhaha de conversation en chassé-croisé [...] Nadine est encore en plein brouillard de raide, ça la rend perspicace et sensible aux détails" (20). Manu's ability can be seen on chapter 6: "Elle observe la salle et l'émotion trouve en elle un endroit intact pour y pleuvoir de la boue" (37)

which would compensate the relative lack of equivalence between the violence of the protagonists' actions and their literary translation.

## **RECONCILING FORM WITH CONTENT THROUGH FILMIC ADAPTATION**

In *The Violence of Modernity* (2006), Debarati Sanyal describes *Baise-moi* as a "revenge of content over form" in the sense that Desportes's hypernaturalistic novel "refuses the aesthetic comfort of distance and embeds the narrative in the concrete realities of the body's vulnerability, desire, and death." (167). Form, Sanyal argues, separates life from art and therefore maintains the reader in a position of comfort, as witness of "the spectacle of perversity without the embodied experience of violence" (169). The behavior of the architect, who compares Nadine to a character in the narrative, represents such an attempt to undermine the violence of the real thanks to cultural legacy. While agreeing with Sanyal's reading of the architect's murder as a way for the protagonists to oppose his supposed cultural domination with the vulnerable materiality of his own body, "brute matter" (170), I consider this revenge of content over form not as a final term claiming content's superiority over form but as the initial and necessary step to restore the importance of content alongside form. More than just rejecting "the hypocrisy of aesthetic conventions that soar above or sterilize the messiness of the real", I argue that Desportes and Trinh Thi developed their own specific filmic aesthetic which, in enabling the reconciliation of form with content, successfully challenges the experience of the viewer who is asked to critically rethink the role of representation and image in the production of violence.

### **The Filmic Adaptation as a Direct Response to the Novel's Lack of Expressivity**

One of the most significant examples of the way the film directly attempts and succeeds in overcoming the limits of reality and

literature, is the scene of the murdered woman at the ATM machine.

In the novel, both Nadine and Manu regret that the killing happened too quickly. The film responds to such an "inconvenience" in having recourse to a specific editing technique. At first, the film only shows the gun pointed toward the woman. Only Manu's heavy breathing can be heard, thus increasing the scene's tension. In the next shot, the protagonists are alone by the ATM machine. The viewer knows the murder has happened as Nadine says, "putain ça fait bizarre". While one would think that the film will spare the viewer the visual effect of the crime, the next shot very graphically depicts the murder: a large quantity of blood explodes from the woman's head. Once back to the protagonists by the ATM machine, Nadine notes, "comme ça va vite en fait". This observation could also be that of the viewer who only witnessed the horror of the murder for a few seconds. However, the similarities of experience between the characters and the viewer end there, since a second shot of the killing is shown on screen, this time in slow-motion with the body falling to the ground. Even further, after another shot at the ATM machine, there is a third shot with Nadine and Manu both laughing. In such a scene, cinema succeeds in translating, through the cross-cutting of images, the extreme violence of the murder and its potentially traumatic effects. This trauma is also suggested in Francis' murder scene, with shots of Nadine watching her friend's body alternating with images of the actual killing, with the red of blood contrasting with the white car on which it is spilled. The insistence on these particular images demonstrates the attention Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi pay to the dialectics between what is happening and what is felt.

The relation between reality and its interpretation is also visible in the sex scenes. Even though the characters do not directly complain about their sexual activity's lack of cinematography, Nadine enjoys pornography because of its transgressive potential. Aware of the performativity of sex, Nadine, as a result, considers herself a performer: "Quand elle va travailler, elle a toujours la même tenue, toujours le même parfum, toujours le même rouge à lèvres. Comme si elle avait réfléchi à quel costume endosser et ne voulait plus en entendre parler" (47). When she and Manu meet two men at a bar and invite them to their hotel, she remembers the pornographic photos of the magazines she bought at the convenience store earlier (107). Nadine's constant preoccupation with pornographic imagery is not

however fully expressed in the novel. Again the film proposes a better alternative. In the same scene in the film, the sex is graphic and accompanied with a music composed of lustful moaning reminiscent of pornographic movies. The experience of Nadine becomes the experience of the audience. However, the dynamics at stake are not the same as those in pornographic films. In those, Marie-Hélène Bourcier explains, the main concern is to look real (44). Even though there are clear codes of representation from porn films, *Baise-moi*'s goal is not to look real. On the contrary, there is an undeniable intention to reveal "une organisation de la représentation et non la 'réalité du sexe'" (Bourcier 46). The importance given to realism against reality in *Baise-moi* has also been noted by Wencke Mühleisen. Using Hall Foster's concept in *The Return of the Real* (1996), she connects it to the term "new realism" which, according to her, intends "to mediate and grasp aspects of reality that at the same time affect this reality: to move the world both emotionally and politically based on a persuasive, performative reality effect" (122). The organization of the representation of sex and/or violence in the film is a reworking of reality in order to shock and subvert the viewer's expectation.

### **Adaptation as a Reenactment of the Novel's Plot: when Shooting with a Gun Becomes Shooting with a Camera**

The performative reality effect of new realism is important since it establishes a direct relationship between reality as perceived and organized by the filmmaker and the experience of the viewer. Mühleisen considers this relationship as an emotional contract. In *Baise-moi*, such a contract plays out on two distinct though somewhat similar levels: the one established between the viewer and the directors makes one between the viewer and the characters possible. As a reader, it is impossible to sign an emotional contract with Nadine and Manu. As a viewer, however, in directly translating Nadine and Manu's own realism, the director attenuates if not cancels the distance one may feel with the characters. This effect is particularly strong because of the thin line that separates the dyad Nadine/Manu from that of Virginie/Coralie. Indeed, looking at the context of the film

adaptation already suggests a sort of reenactment on the part of Virginie and Coralie of what happened in the novel. Right after having met, Nadine recognizes in Manu a porn star that she had seen in a film. Surprised, Manu confirms and asks if it is her boyfriend who watches these sorts of films. In saying that she is the one who watches them, Nadine creates a specific bond with Manu who admits, "un point pour toi" (89). The two women become aware of their similarities. They are both pro-sex women who don't fit the standards of the dominant culture. The same could be said of Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi. Like Nadine, Virginie had been a sex worker and Coralie, like Manu, a porn star. They therefore share a similar vision of sex and its representation, since they are both insiders of the sex industry. Coralie also declared in a TV interview for "Tout le Monde en Parle," that before meeting Virginie, she had read *Baise-moi* four times and had become a huge fan of her work. From this statement, it is possible to imagine that the meeting between Virginie and Coralie, if it did not determine the creation of the film, highly influenced the way it has been made. Virginie wrote her novel alone yet needed a partner in crime, like Nadine needed Manu, to exploit and fully express herself and her vision of life. The striking parallel between the filmmakers Virginie/Coralie and the characters Nadine/Manu surely explains why the film appears so conflictual with its audience. The contract established with the viewer is not a peaceful one. Virginie and Coralie are targeting and shooting at the audience in the same way that Nadine and Manu target and shoot their victims in the narrative.

As a consequence, it is not surprising that the directors clearly favored the visual aspect of the scenes rather than the narrative. The way the rape scene is introduced constitutes a significant example of the importance given to the scene's impact over its narrative coherence. While Manu and Karla are drinking beers on the dock, a car noise is heard, and suddenly three men are looking down at the two girls, smiling and ready to assault or rape them. The mechanics of the scene are extremely simple and direct; they avoid the whole discussion and the escalation leading to the rape in the novel. The rapid succession of violent and sexual scenes, with no time for the viewer to take a breath and recover, participates in the will to annihilate the voyeuristic, desiring gaze.

Even more direct confrontational relations between the film directors and the viewer can be seen later in the film. The scene where Nadine

and Manu are invited to a hotel room by a man first appears conventional for a sex scene. The problem arises when the man says that he wants to have protected sex. A turning point in the scene, the request is followed by Manu complaining about the man's inability to maintain an erection. However, she gives the impression that she is willing to please him. The camera films her getting down on her knees but, instead of following her, it remains focused on the man's face. While the audience is invited to identify itself with the man, suddenly one hears Manu choking, then vomiting. The man's surprise and subsequent disgust parallel that of the viewer. The process of identification does not stop there. At the end of the scene, when the man is beaten to death by the protagonists, the camera is in a low-angle shot, thus giving the viewer the impression of directly being kicked. Nadine and Manu are above him, dominating him as well as the audience. The following scene plays on a similar dynamic, with Nadine manipulating her gun in the bathroom. She points the gun at the camera, therefore marking the viewer a target. The threat that Nadine and Manu represent in the narrative is combined with the threat they represent to the viewer.

Finally, the scene that takes place at the sex club constitutes the apotheosis of this confrontational relation. Laurent Joffrin's reaction illustrates well the issues that such a scene may raise. Journalist at *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Joffrin can be considered, with his article "Pornographie, Violence, La Liberté de Dire Non", as one of the most fervent critics of *Baise-moi*. In *Queer Zones*, Marie-Hélène Bourcier identifies in Joffrin's criticism of the film a particular unease when it comes to the sex club scene and, specifically, the moment when the man who insulted Manu is asked to grunt like a pig on all fours before having a gun inserted in his ass, which in the end will shoot and kill him. What shocks Joffrin, and men in general according to Bourcier, is the transgression of the sex/gender frontier, illustrated by two women fucking a man who assumes a position of passivity (30). The symbolic reversal of the roles again illustrates the fact that Manu and Nadine are now sitting on the right side of the gun and Virginie and Coralie on the right side of the camera.

This last scene is all the more crucial since, in an interview for the talk show "Tout le Monde en Parle", Despentes and Trinh Thi revealed that it was shot in order to replace the scene of Nadine's murder of a child in the novel. It is interesting to note that, to what could be

considered the most controversial scene in the novel, was substituted an equally shocking scene in the film, though completely different in its content. Both scenes are used to "marquer le coup," to show what it is to "être ce qu'on a de pire" (159). Despite the criticisms of the film's superficiality, I find the sex club scene more in line with the message Nadine and Manu try to convey. In focusing on the reversal of conventional sexuality and voyeuristic apparatuses, Desportes and Trinh Thi show that their film, more than being simply aware of the effects it creates, also proposes a true reflection on the power of images. Lisa Downing's article underlines *Baise-moi's* ability to question "the constructedness of the convention of characterization and on the kinds of subjectivity that given generic models presuppose" (54). Representing each character as an archetype in the film does not constitute an error on the part of the filmmaker but rather successfully reveals that these characters are constructed and intended to move an audience. In *Baise-moi's* case, the intention is clearly the subversion of viewer expectations.

Given the goals that Desportes and Trinh Thi set for their film, it is reasonable to contest any analysis that reduces *Baise-moi* to nothing more than a failure. Defending the film by appealing to freedom of expression is not enough to do justice to such a film. *Baise-moi* invites its audience to revise its prejudices to women and sexuality exactly where it is assumed that women have no agency. In *King Kong Théorie*, Desportes wonders about pornography: "qui est la victime? Les femmes, qui perdent toute dignité du moment qu'on les voit sucer une bite? Ou les hommes, trop faibles et inaptes à maîtriser leur envie de voir du sexe, et de comprendre qu'il s'agit uniquement d'une représentation?" (99). In the context of her film, the answer seems fairly clear. Women, both within the narrative and as filmmakers, are not victims. They use sex as a starting point of their attack on the heteronormative male's desire. This does not mean that they only target men. In interiorizing and playing by the rules of the dominant masculinist culture, women such as Séverine, Karla, or even the elegant bourgeois woman of the ATM machine, are considered enemies. Their actions, through society's hostile reaction and the police pursuit that Nadine and Manu face, show how they change their status from victims of the system to public enemies number one and two. The fact that the murders are condemned by society is not



surprising, but the intensity of Nadine's arrest in the film suggests that the protagonists' desire to become abject subjects who assault men directly, has been realized. In this last scene, Nadine is on the floor surrounded by many police officers who yell at her: "Salope, bouge pas", "Elle est où ta salope de copine?" I suggest that the insult "salope" in this context demonstrates how Nadine and Manu, as women, are reduced to sluts because they actually represent predatory figures of femininity. Their sexual behavior is what ultimately reveals their most abject side.

I propose one last parallel between this intradiegetic situation and the condemnation of *Baise-moi* to an X rating, the reduction of the film to pornography. The refusal to analyze how Despentès and Trinh Thi question the dominant model and the reduction of the social and political impact of their work shows how accurate their reading of Manu and Nadine's abjected situation was. It is not surprising that the silencing of dissonant women's voices goes beyond fiction. But what is remarkable in *Baise-moi* is the awareness of where the points of tension are, and of how the filmic adaptation, as an interartial strategy, could most effectively translate the passage from object to abject: this is Despentès' main feminist argument. Because of its ability to disturb and question the common narratives on which society relies, *Baise-moi* can be viewed as a successful film; not according to the critics' standards, but according at least to the message it intends to convey, its own standards, that Manu perfectly summarizes as such: "c'est comme quand le film était bon, ça laisse un peu sur le carreau juste après..." (118).

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