

# Gender, genre and sadistic female pleasure in "Baise-moi"

by Judith Franco

Over the past 15 years a growing number of films construct female characters as the agents of violence as they seek justice or revenge. Deborah Jermyn argues that a substantive new generic development, in the form of the female 'psychopath', has taken place in Hollywood's psychological thrillers since the late 80s. While acknowledging these films to be essentially reactionary texts, Jermyn illustrates how the 'bitches from hell' can be read as offering progressive or oppositional possibilities for female spectators.

According to Kirsten Marthe Lentz, action films such as *Thelma & Louise*, *Terminator 2 : Judgement Day*, *Blue Steel* and *VI Warshawski* which feature fearless and independent heroines who take up weapons in the name of justice produce the potential for a specifically feminist popular pleasure. Hilary Radner diagnoses Hollywood's new generation of 'psychofemmes' – defined in a broad sense as women who counter the violence of men with a lunatic rationality – as symptomatic for a general anxiety about the state of the heterosexual couple in contemporary culture. In the 90s the linking of lesbianism and violence is foregrounded in art films such as *Heavenly Creatures*, *Butterfly Kiss*, *La Cérémonie*, *Fun and Sister my Sister*.

Despite moments of transgression and oppositional pleasures in the above mentioned films, the female protagonists' potential for violence is ultimately contained within plot scenarios that demonize them, destroy them or punish them. Kathryn Bigelow's cop thriller *Blue Steel*, the most explicit mainstream flirtation with female acquisition of power, is a case in point. The heroine's rebellious phallic roleplaying which offers the female spectator a shortlived pleasurable fantasy of active aggression is coded as evil by aligning her with the monstrous and is ultimately exorcized as she is absorbed into patriarchal culture : family and the law.



I propose to take a closer look at the sexual and textual politics of Virginie Despentes' and Coralie Trinh Thi's film *Baise-moi*, a text that pushes the alliance between women and

violence to the limit or over the limit according to the anxious reactions of critics and censors. This controversial revenge narrative can be placed in the textual lineage of the action genre (road/buddy film) and the rape-revenge drama. *Baise-moi* rezones the feminine into territories traditionally occupied by the masculine combined with an implicit critique/condemnation of patriarchy thus offering the potential of vicarious empowerment for female viewers by engaging them in an energetic spectacle of violence and redemption while providing distance/detachment and mastery through irony, reflexivity and intertextuality.

### **The Roadmovie and Otherness**

The road movie which emerged in the 50s as an amalgam of the western, the gangster film and film noir, is a quintessentially American and inherently masculine genre. The action-oriented linear road narrative is constituted by the hero's search for a secular moral code and a renewed belief in self, and by extension, in the nation (Roberts, 1997). The precursors to the road film set in motion its basic gender pattern : the woman as either a passive accomplice to the man or a threat to him, part of the road that lures him to his downfall (Laderman, 1996, 45). Lately however the once-masculinist road story has become a vehicle for the representation of 'Otherness' along the lines of class, race, sexuality or gender. Alternative and queer road films such as *My Own Private Idaho*, *Leaving Normal*, *The Living End*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Boys on the Side* subvert the presumptions of the road genre and the privileges of its universal hero by centering on homosexual, transsexual, black and female protagonists.

Given the conflation of 'woman' with space (the woman's body and the road/the landscape are interchangeable, sites each man must travel/conquer) rather than the subject of narrative, and given the identification of heterosexuality qua conception with the very prototype of narrative progression and resolution in classical cinema, the road movie/female buddy film contains a radical potential in its conception of desire and subjectivity. The road movie protagonist, after all, is a body moving through space and time – functioning 'along a line of desire' – with subjectivity necessarily and fundamentally a spatial achievement or as Manohla Dargis puts it : 'In contrast to Bonnie and Clyde, *Thelma and Louise*'s crime isn't murder, it's subjectivity'.

Yet, Shari Roberts argues that (American) feminine road films such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Leaving Normal* and *Boys on the Side* while providing a critique of dominant ideology by bringing concerns associated with women and feminism into the public discourse, demonstrate that inserting female protagonists into a male-oriented genre neither subverts nor subsumes its masculinist tendencies. Whereas male road movie heroes succeed in fleeing feminine civilization on their journey, the female protagonists' quest of escaping from real men and the abuses of patriarchy, is continually undermined by the narrative through nostalgic references to the nuclear family, sexist interpellations and a desperate rather than a heroic ending. Whereas *Thelma & Louise* and other American feminine road narratives

privilege the psychological, emotional process of self-discovery in a predominantly melodramatic mode, *Baise-moi* attempts to coopt the road movie's masculinist ideals and therein lies part of the controversy.

Rather than presenting a reactive flight from the effects of patriarchy, *Baise-moi* engages in a violent confrontation with patriarchal symbols and representatives. The female protagonists take masculinely codified traits such as directness, aggression, independence and control in their stride thus challenging social prescriptions of femininity in terms of attitude and behaviour. Whereas events act upon *Thelma and Louise*, the female protagonists in *Baise-moi* initiate violence in a serial, ritualistic and climactic way. This implies that the spectacle of violence is foregrounded at the expense of motivation and outcome. Having killed a female victim who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, the heroines in *Baise-moi* eliminate almost every male that crosses their path, using fire arms as one of the most overdetermined signifiers of masculinity. Occasionally the women react to blatant sexism. When a passerby asks Nadine 'How would you like to feel my balls slapping your ass ?' he is executed on the spot by Manu. Mostly however the women initiate sexual/criminal activities. During their encounters with men, Manu and Nadine are inevitably confronted with cultural constructions of femininity which spark revenge. The salesman who assumes that Nadine wants to buy a pistol for her husband, arguing and demonstrating that 'a Beretta is a very masculine weapon', is shot by Manu who exclaims 'What if her wife is the gunlover ?'. The patronizing bourgeois villa owner who tries to gain Nadine's confidence by claiming 'he can read her like a book' and 'you must have suffered to have come to this' is grabbed in the crotch and shot repeatedly through the head. A man who picks up the two women and who insists on wearing a condom is kicked to death whereas the final massacre in the Libertine sex club - culminating in a cathartic act : the humiliation of the last surviving male who is shot through the rectum while imitating a pig - is triggered by the heroines' indignation vis-à-vis the spectacle itself (women of all ages being penetrated or performing blow-jobs) and the assumption that they will provide sexual services to men by virtue of their presence/ gender.

Although it seems as if the characters act like men, *Baise-moi* complicates this assimilation in its articulation of rebellion against patriarchy and its privileging of female bonds. A lesbian subtext raises its head in *Baise-moi* exceptional subjective scenes which allow for the expression of desire between the two women. Contrasting sharply with the female protagonists nihilistic attitude/state of mind throughout the film is the intimate, erotic hotelscene which shows the women dancing together in their underwear, an image that consolidates their status as a couple and that haunts the devastated Nadine after Manu's death.

*Baise-moi*'s sudden, trivial en-ding is symptomatic for the ideological tension between rebellion and tradition which characterizes the road movie according to David Laderman. Manu, the wildest one, is shot offscreen while fetching a sandwich whereas Nadine fails to kill herself and is caught by an army of police men shouting 'Where is the other bitch ?'. Although Manu lives on in Nadine's memory

(flashbacks accompanied by the voiceover 'let's stay together') the narrative punishes and thus contains the rebellious road couple's ramblings.

Nevertheless, compared to their feminine predecessors *Baise-moi* takes the road movie's rebellious tendency to the limit in terms of a striking absence of positive or nostalgic references to the nuclear family/domestic past and/or heterosexuality. Not only does the texts refuse to provide a moral alibi/psychological explanation for the female protagonists' actions, men are reduced to mere obstacles or challenges along the female quest for vengeance. Even more so than the violence, *Baise-moi*'s repetitive and explicit sex scenes signal an emptying out of heterosexual desire through the performative character of sex acts (both actresses Rafaella Anderson and Karen Bach are porn stars in real life) and the ridiculisation of male sexual pleasure (close-ups of distorted faces accompanied by grunting noises).

Although *Baise-moi* contains many cinematic references (Thelma and Louise, Bonnie and Clyde, Deliverance, Pulp Fiction...), *Butterfly Kiss* appears to be a major, albeit indirect, source of inspiration. In an article entitled 'Pourquoi pas plein écran ?', Virginie Despentes criticizes Michael Winterbottom's film for failing to live up (visually) to the sexual potential of its lesbian couple and concludes that these rebellious heroines deserve another, more pornographic film. In terms of its explicit (defensive) heterosexual screen sex, *Baise-moi* fits into the contemporary French cultural context which produced 'auteures'- writers and/or filmmakers - such as Catherine Breillat and Catherine Millet who owe their controversial reputation to the appropriation/subversion of pornography, a quintessential male genre, for the exploration of female sexuality/sexual autonomy. Although these are not feminist works, Breillat, Millet and Despentes expose and perturb received (patriarchal) notions about heterosexuality (and violence), not in the least by emphasizing/demystifying the sexed masculine body (reduced to a mere instrument in a detached, analytic and/or aggressive discourse) at the expense of the veiled lasting seduction of love.

### **Rape-revenge genre**

In her study on gender in the modern horror film, Carol Clover observes that the rape-revenge genre which emerged in the 70s was enabled by the women's movement and could only have emerged in its context : 'The marriage of rape to revenge was made in movie heaven... Ironically enough, it was a marriage for which the matchmaker was the women's movement, for in terms more or less explicitly feminist, rape became not only a deed deserving of brutal retribution, but a deed that women themselves (not cops, boyfriends, or fathers) undertook to redress. From low-budget "exploitation" products like *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Ms 45*, *The Ladies Club* and *Positive I.D.* to glossy mainstream examples like *Lipstick* and *Extremities*, women take knives and guns to their rapists, or their friends' or sister's rapists, or just any man, on the grounds that all men are party to "rape culture" and hence corporately liable and fair game'. What separates the exploitation picture off from the more respectable, higher budget

Hollywood movie, as Pam Cook and Carol Clover have observed, is that its mechanisms are more overt – cruder and more obvious and, as such, function to reveal rather than conceal the underlying patriarchal codes, exposing in a sense the castration threat that the female representation carries.

This, theoretically, at least opens up a space into which the female spectator may insert herself. *Baise-moi* takes the female-centred perspective, directness and energy of its 'lower' predecessors further by focusing predominantly or entirely on fantasies of empowerment. Although this contemporary revenge narrative is not entirely explanation-free, it does not dwell on the vulnerability/ victimisation of the female protagonists nor does it provide an analysis of masculinity/quotidian patriarchy. Drawing on a tradition of feminist inspired revenge dramas and action films that negotiate male anxieties and female/feminist pleasures in various ways, *Baise-moi* takes the oppression of women as a premise and transforms it into 'a place of rage' thus subverting an important ideological strand in the cultural construction of women and violence which insists upon female moral obligation in matters of life and death.

Although Manu's rape in *Baise-moi* seems to function as narrative catalyst for revenge this cause-effect logic is contradicted by her stoical behaviour during the ordeal and her relativistic remark to the other rape victim : 'We are still alive, right ? If you park in the projects, you empty your car cause someone is going to break in. I leave nothing precious in my cunt for those jerks. It's just a bit of cock'. If anything triggers Manu's rage it is her brother's reproach following the rape ('Bitch, you don't seem too traumatized') not unlike Louise who shoots Thelma's rapist not for what he does, but for what he says ('suck my dick'). However, in comparison to their predecessors, *Baise-moi* is less concerned with providing a moral/narrative alibi for the women's murderous spree, nor do these texts revolve around the conflict between the responsibilities of home/family and the delights of adventures/same-sex friendship. It doesn't take a traumatic event for Manu, and Nadine to hit the road since they are represented from the outset as predestinated yet privileged misfits/outlaws whose criminal behaviour is proportional to the oppressive/inferior female condition established by crosscutting Manu's and Nadine's 'prehistory' in *Baise-moi*. Although each woman's life is different, both he-roines in *Baise-moi* are contained and thwarthed within a patriarchal, capitalist society.

Despite their isolated lives the women share a similar experience of patriarchy that makes them kill. Manu, a young unemployed beurette has to endure verbal and physical abuse by the misogynist male members of the immigrant community. Nadine is reduced to an almost catatonic state by emotional blackmail and her commodity status as a prostitute. Despite their oppression the female protagonists resist victimization from the outset as indicated by their relationship to language. Manu's rebellion erupts in violent speech acts (I don't give a shit about their scummy dicks. Fuck them all, I say) whereas Nadine's aggression finds expression in her threatening silence and her deadly gaze.

In order to safeguard a heroic status for their female rebels, *Baise-moi* projects masochistic scenarios onto other, passive female characters thus inviting a comparison between different types of femininity. By means of montage and a relay of looks, the opening scene of *Baisemoi* establishes a parallel between prostitute Nadine and an ordinary woman in a bar. Both women who are waiting/looking for their boyfriend are financially, sexually and emotionally exploited by males, yet, unlike her blond masochistic alter ego and her nagging flatmate who takes out her frustrations on women, Nadine overcomes passivity/'normal' femininity through aggression. After she has killed her flatmate and witnessed her friend Francis being shot in the street, Nadine wakes up and hits the road. The rape scene which represents the masochistic scenario par excellence also contrasts the stoic behaviour of Manu with the pain and humiliation of her friend. Whereas Manu's rape takes place off-screen (except for some shots of her 'closed' face and 'absent' body which puts off the rapist who comments : 'it's like fucking a zombie') the spectacle of masochism/'normal' femininity is projected/displaced onto the other rape victim whose suffering is foregrounded visually and acoustically (screams, penetration shot, high angle shots of her battered naked body). From the outset, *Baise-moi* disqualifies and eliminates passive/'normal' femininity thus proposing its avenging heroines as the sole point of identification.

Furthermore, *Baise-moi* draws the spectator into the complicity between Manu and Nadine as we witness them approaching/setting up the next victim (knowing exchange of glances, role playing) and enjoy their jouissance/ laughter after the violent eruptions, often shown in slowmotion to heighten the emotional intensity. Our complicity as spectator is particularly confrontational in one scene which builds up the women's interaction with the patronizing villa owner. As he seems to win over Nadine who apparently lets her guard down, looking repentant and promising to let him live, the spectator cannot but feel disappointed at her weakness, only to be relieved/empowered when she turns around in a vengeance and shoots him repeatedly through the head, confirming a moral structure which consists in punishing men who underestimate women.

The visceral complicity in response to the violence is occasionally disrupted by the protagonists' reflexive commentary which blocks identification, yet allows us to share/enjoy the outlaws' ironic distance/mastery. In between their bloody escapades Nadine and Manu mock their own performance and refer implicitly to the way violence is represented in action films (Fuck, we're useless. Where are the witty lines ? We've got the moves, that's something. We're not that bad. I mean, people are dying. The dialogue has to be up to it. We can't write it in advance. You're right, that's totally unethical). The protagonists speculate selfconsciously about their/the film's ending, evoking *Thelma and Louise* (I've thought about taking a jump or burning alive. Self-immolation is pretty pretentious...I want it to end as good as it began. You know with a great punchline. You'll have to push me. I couldn't do it on my own. Don't worry, I'll push you. We'll need to leave the press something. 'They jumped without the bungee'. Those shits will use anything. Yeah, we need to work on communication) and they display a sense of agency/masculine 'coolness' inflected with a feminist awareness which consists in exposing/unsettling the system by throwing back to it what it cannot accept about its own operations.

When the police manhunt is closing in and a pick-up observes 'you're pretty laidback', Nadine wise-cracks 'It's because we lack imagination'. Confronted with their picture in the newspapers Manu's sarcastic comment 'we are just two girls, one taller than the other' refers to the deprivation of women's subjectivity in patriarchy.

Despite *Baise-moi*'s nihilistic and ultimately selfdefeating politics, the film grants the female spectator a pleasurable sadistic fantasy of perfect agency in terms of identification/ empathy with outlaws whose dangerousness is as compelling and absolute as the film's narrative logic.

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