

THE REBELLIOUS BODY AS PARODY: *Baise-moi* BY VIRGINIE DESPENTES

NICOLE FAYARD

Abstract

When her debut novel *Baise-moi* was published in 1993, Virginie Despentes was hailed as the pioneer of a new genre of feminist literature. The boldness of the novel's plot, its angry depiction of female sexual pleasure and gratuitous violence, and its explicit criticism of contemporary Western society have earned this ambiguous work a reputation for subversion. This article argues that the novel's apparent subversiveness and its popular success are the result of Despentes's parodic reworking of the conventions of the noir thriller, and in particular of her critical revisiting of the topos of the *femme fatale*. Reappropriating and challenging traditional canons and representations, *Baise-moi* attacks phallogentrism through the exploration of female pleasure and the intervention of the female body. The text thus becomes highly disturbing and critical of the structures that contain women's autonomy. It also explores ideas that remain central to contemporary feminism with regard to women's sexual identity; remaining taboos about the body; the relationship between women and the sexual industry, and sexual oppression. Helping to release women's bodies from existing representations and to question categories, *Baise-moi* might indeed reclaim a voice for women.

When her debut novel *Baise-moi* was published in 1993, Virginie Despentes was hailed as 'the pioneer of a new genre of feminist literature which has seized the sexual act as its own territory'.¹ Since the 1990s, the novels of Catherine Breillat, Christine Angot, Claire Legendre, Catherine Cusset, Marie Nimier, and Virginie Despentes, amongst others, have introduced a disquieting trend of literature by women writers characterized by violence and an aggressive political agenda.² Writing boldly about female desire, sex, bodies, prostitution, and incest, these innovative writers aim to knock down the pretence of gender equality and revive the national debate on male violence. More shocking still, as Despentes's novels show, it also offers disturbing images of female self-hatred by revealing how women allow themselves to be debased and maltreated.

The boldness of the plot of *Baise-moi*, its angry depiction of female sexual pleasure and gratuitous violence, and its explicit criticism of contemporary Western society have earned this ambiguous novel a reputation for rebellion, not least because it seems hard to classify. It has successively

¹ Alix Sharkey, 'Scandale', *The Observer*, 14 April 2002.

² Sharkey, 'Scandale'.

been labelled ‘pornographie’,³ ‘littérature érotique’,⁴ ‘roman rock’,⁵ ‘trash’⁶ and ‘underground’⁷ literature. At the same time, it has enjoyed considerable success both in France and abroad (by the time it was published, 50,000 copies of the novel had been pre-sold and the text translated into ten languages; 100,000 copies have been sold in total). Altogether, it has been translated into eighteen languages. This success was strengthened by the scandal caused by the cinematographic adaptation of the novel when it was released in France in summer 2000. Following an intense campaign from the extreme right, the State Council withdrew the film’s commercial certificate, which amounted to banning it. This was the first outright ban on a film in France since 1973 and it caused a media storm. Eventually the French government compromised by awarding the film an ‘X’ certificate, a classification usually reserved for pornographic movies. However, although sex in *Baise-moi* is explicitly depicted, the novel does not fit into the category of ‘porn’, whose aim is to represent real sex for its own sake, excluding significant narrative developments. Sex in *Baise-moi* is worked into a meaningful narrative and does not monopolize the plot. On the contrary, it works to support the plot, whose aim is to offer an angry critique of contemporary society. Another generic issue arises from its profound pessimism and sense of determinism. This has led to the suggestion that Despentes’s novel has initiated a different genre of literature in which, according to writer and journalist Jean-Claude Lebrun:

la littérature, pour la première fois, n’est plus capable de proposer grâce à sa polysémie de nouveaux possibles, pour l’être humain comme pour la société. On se trouve finalement devant une sorte de néo-positivisme, on prend les choses telles qu’elles sont, on n’imagine pas de pouvoir les dépasser. L’imaginaire est bloqué, les utopies sont bloquées, les interrogations sur l’intériorité humaine, aussi. Il y a une position presque cynique par rapport au réel. On le prend et on organise son spectacle, un spectacle morne, terne, déprimant.⁸

³ ‘Génération sous X, une nouvelle pornographie’ 2002, http://cyeditions.com/upload/article/generation_sous_X.htm (accessed 15 January 2003); Laurent Joffrin, ‘Pornographie, violence: la liberté de dire NON !’, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1862 (2000); Véronique Desnain, “‘La femelle de l’espèce’: Women in Contemporary French Crime Fiction”, *French Cultural Studies*, 12 (2001), 175–92 (p. 179).

⁴ Jean-Jacques Pauvert, *Anthologie historique des lectures érotiques v, 1985–2000, de l’infini au zéro* (Paris, Stock, 2001); Dalila Kerchouche and Léa Delpont, ‘Les nouveaux univers des libertin(e)s’, *L’Express*, 6 November 2002. See also, on the film version of *Baise-moi*, Ange-Dominique Bouzet, ‘Rescapé du X’, *Libération*, 4 July 2000.

⁵ ‘Le Roman rock, une révolte des formes’, 2002, http://cyeditions.com/upload/article/le_roman_rock.htm (accessed 7 January 2003).

⁶ Fernando Sartorius, ‘Les orgasmes raffinés de “Thérèse et Isabelle”’, *Largeur.com*, 16 November 2000 <http://www.largeur.com/printArt.asp?artID=562> (accessed 10 January 2003).

⁷ Yannick Rolandeau, ‘De la sexualité comme confession égotiste. *Baise-moi*’, 22 April 2002, <http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/cinema/avril2002/baisemoi.html> (accessed 7 January 2003).

⁸ Suzanne Bernard, ‘Déprimisme, une littérature de rupture’, Face à face: Entretien avec Jean-Marie Rouart et Jean-Claude Lebrun, February 1999, <http://www.regards.fr/archives/1999/199902/> (accessed 8 January 2003).

This profound cynicism is one of the main characteristics of the novel, with its focus on social crisis and alienation and its insistence on the isolation and marginalization of its heroines. Its pessimistic ending, in which society regains control of the heroines, further confirms the sense of entrapment. But the novel also takes an ironic distance from these serious themes, through a series of self-conscious, parodic twists. Angst, despair, and violence are organized in a *mise-en-scène* which Desportes describes as 'le rap et le punk appliqué au livre':⁹ she scatters her novel with references and allusions to nihilistic grunge music,¹⁰ B movies, video games, *bande dessinée* and popular literary sub-genres ('roman noir, gothique, gore [...]').¹¹ With its mix of realism and self-reflexivity, *Baise-moi* has many affinities with contemporary neo-noir fiction: indeed, to reject *Baise-moi* as crime fiction is to ignore the evolution and various revisitings of the genre since the 1980s, especially in the cinema, to which Desportes's novel is clearly indebted. I would argue, then, that the novel's apparent radicalism and its popular success are the result of Desportes's reworking of the conventions of the noir thriller. In itself, this exploration of genre is certainly not new. Where Desportes's novel is original, however, is in her critical revisiting of the *femme fatale* topos. Here, there is ground for arguing that, despite its political defeatism, the novel might offer potential for resistance and be read as an expression of female anger and desire for change. This article will therefore examine how Desportes's narrative strategies draw on the atmospheric and generic conventions of the noir thriller to fulfil the genre's role of social critique before, eventually, parodying the conventions of that genre. This will open up a discussion of the potential for rebellion introduced by the role of the female body in the novel.

Baise-moi, Noir and social critique

Depicting the losing battle of women against the violence of men and society, *Baise-moi* begins like a realist novel set in the sleazy French underworld, with its background of bars, drugs, violence, and prostitution. It tells the sordid tale of two women who meet by coincidence on the very day that each has committed a murder. Manu, a young, working-class porn actress, is the victim of an extremely violent gang rape. Nadine, a reject from the white middle class, prostitutes herself to pay for drugs and booze. Manu, on the run after killing two men to avenge the deaths of her friends, abducts Nadine, who has just strangled her nagging room-mate and witnessed the murder of her best friend. From then on

⁹ 'Virginie Desportes, la scandaleuse', *Tempo arts et spectacles*, 5 July 2000, http://www.canoe.qc.ca/TempoLivresArchives/juil5_virginie.html (accessed 7 January 2003).

¹⁰ For example, 'Suicidal Tendencies', 'Neds Atomic Dustbin', 'Mudhoney'.

¹¹ Marion Mazauric, 'La culture populaire censurée', *Libération*, 5 July 2000.

the novel starts to resemble a thriller-cum-road movie suggestive of a bleak and cynical *Thelma and Louise*: the two women become friends and ‘hit the road’. From city to city and hotel to hotel, they embark on a revenge-killing spree which spares no man, woman, or child. Killing first for money and then for pleasure, the duo live in a frenzied world of drink, drugs and sex, and discover companionship before meeting an inevitable downfall, as Manu is shot and Nadine arrested seconds before she manages to commit suicide.

Baise-moi portrays a world ruled by social crisis, alienation, angst, despair, fear, nihilism, and the crossing of boundaries into dark, forbidden zones. These are words which are all traditionally associated with noir, as is, in Lee Horsley’s definition of the genre, the novel’s cast of ‘transgressors and victims, strangers and outcasts, tough women, and sociable psychopaths’.¹² Like noir characters, *Baise-moi*’s heroines are marginalized and suffer from failures of agency and loss of community. They ‘struggle with fatality [...] and feel [their] course to be shaped by society’s injustices, failures, prejudices or pressures [...] the forces controlling the lives of the characters are conceived in terms of the dominant conceptions of social-political determinants’.¹³ The focus on the ill-fated relationship between the protagonist and society, and the consequent noir thriller themes of alienation and entrapment,¹⁴ are immediately recognizable in Manu’s bitter fatalism in the opening pages of the novel: ‘D’ici peu de temps, elle sera trop déchirée pour que cette histoire l’affecte. Elle finit toujours par bien se faire à l’idée qu’il y a une partie de la population sacrifiée; et dommage pour elle, elle est tombée pile dedans’.¹⁵ The phrase ‘trop déchirée pour que cette histoire l’affecte’ has an interesting double meaning. It points to Manu’s drunkenness as a strategy to cope with the news of her best friend’s death in prison; at the same time, it predicts Manu’s rape and her crossing of the boundaries into serial murder. Despair is what leads Manu and Nadine into the forbidden zone. There is no escape from the bleakness (‘le glauque’, p. 28) and the rottenness of the world in which the characters are trapped (pp. 27–28). The protagonists have only a choice of nightmares, but ‘no exit, no options’.¹⁶

Against this background, *Baise-moi* offers a socio-political and feminist critique which is, as often in noir thrillers, potentially transgressive

¹² Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingtoke, Palgrave, 2001), p. 26.

¹³ Horsley, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴ See *Modernism 1890–1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985), p. 8.

¹⁵ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi* (Paris, J’ai Lu, 1999), p. 16. Subsequent references appear in the body of the text.

¹⁶ Todd Erickson, ‘Kill Me Again: Movement becomes Genre’ (1990), in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alan Silver and James Ursini, second edition (New York, Limelight Editions, 1999), p. 319.

insofar as the guilt represented in the noir thriller is both individual and social. According to Horsley:

Noir is 'the voice of violation', acting to expose the inadequacy of conventional cultural, political and also narrative models. It expresses fears and anxieties but also has the potential for critique, for undermining complacency and illusions [...]. The transgressions represented can be a mirror, the damaged self as an image of the society that caused the deformation of the unbalanced mind as a metaphor for society's lunacy.¹⁷

Female violence in *Baise-moi* works both to expose and to violate cultural and social models. The excessive violence wielded by Nadine and Manu as they lose control is symbolic of the violence and brutality of the milieu to which they belong. Thus, 'Manu appartient à la catégorie des opprimés victimes d'un manque d'éducation' (*Baise-moi*, p. 16). In her world, violence against women is a given: after the rape, Manu explains her stoicism as 'c'est rien à côté de ce qu'ils [the rapists] peuvent faire [...] c'est juste des trucs qui arrivent [...] On est jamais que des filles' (pp. 56–57). Gender politics for Manu is a long struggle against the enemy, as the rape scene shows the clear divide between the rapists and their female victims:

Ils sont contents d'être ensemble, ils échangent de bonnes vanes, ils ont une activité commune, un ennemi commun, jusqu'où comptent-ils aller pour se prouver qu'ils sont ensemble? Est-ce qu'ils vont leur [Manu and Karla] ouvrir le ventre ou leur enfoncer un canon de carabine bien profond et les exploser de l'intérieur? (p. 54)

This scene provides a view both of male violence and of a macho street culture in which gender and social class intersect: here, there is a critique of social and political structures as the men too are seen as victims of society. In that respect, Manu's and Nadine's victims are less random than might appear at first: they are all middle-class and characterized either by economic or patriarchal power and morals. Arabs and immigrants are deliberately excluded from the long list of victims (p. 161), suggesting a solidarity or at least identification with traditional victims of social alienation. (I shall come back to this.)

Having established cultural and generic backgrounds for her novels, Despentes then destabilizes them through the principle of role-reversal. This role-reversal is twofold. First, the portrayal of violence perpetrated by women functions as an obvious critique of conventional gender models; second, and more subtly, Manu and Nadine draw attention to their social condition by voluntarily excluding themselves from this society, preferring self-exclusion to social elimination. For Nadine, killing a child and thus crossing yet another barrier enables her to 's'exclure du monde, passer le cap. Être ce qu'on a de pire. Mettre un gouffre entre elle et le reste du monde. Marquer le coup' (pp. 158–59). The novel

¹⁷ *The Noir Thriller*, p. 13.

makes much of the fact that this rebellion is unexpected and finds very little response, because society is not prepared for the breaking of the 'natural' sexual order: Manu and Nadine kill in broad daylight, live in hotels, shop, go to bars, and pick up men without arousing any suspicion in the public. The police, supposedly on their trail, are absent from the novel until the last page; when they appear, they are not looking for the women.

In one sense, this potential for resistance might remain virtual, since transgression is eventually contained: Manu and Nadine are punished for crossing boundaries and questioning the world order. In their determination not to give in to the law of the Father, Manu and Nadine had meticulously planned their suicide. But the novel denies them, unlike Thelma and Louise, this final gesture of self-determination. Arguably, this reaffirms what is in fact the thriller's strongly conservative deep structure, for, set beside this fundamental politics in the text, any other political message that is overtly at variance with the basic generic formula can be only a 'superficial layer'.¹⁸ Whilst their rebellion functions as a celebration of risk-taking and aggression by women, it also represents a male victory over the threat of castration, an assertion of dominance, control and invulnerability. But at the same time, disturbing elements keep breaking through, creating fresh reading possibilities and offering new potential for a radical feminist critique. This is not necessarily a contradiction: although the noir thriller, and especially the post-modern neo-noir, works to express and reproduce dominant ideologies, its polysemic nature allows narratives to accommodate opposing discourses at the same time. As Kate Stables has shown, the neo-noir thriller, 'rather than containing and masking the social contradictions structured into its narrative, is structured to utilize them for widely divergent interpretations of the same text'.¹⁹ Borrowing from the conventions of the noir thriller enables Despentes to cater for various audiences and offer multifarious views of her heroines. It also turns *Baise-moi* into a highly complex and potentially challenging text, since, while recalling the events, atmosphere, characters, and quotations typical of the thriller, it also questions it continuously. Being constantly inside and outside the thriller, the novel challenges traditional canons and becomes a parody of the genre. It is through such parody that the novel becomes cynical and disturbing, particularly in its revisiting of the convention of the *femme fatale* from the 'other' side.²⁰

¹⁸ David Glover, 'The Stuff that Dreams are Made of: Masculinity, Femininity and the Thriller' in *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure*, ed. by Derek Longhurst (London, Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 63–83 (p. 69).

¹⁹ Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the *Femme Fatale* in 90s Cinema', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London, British Film Institute, 1998), pp. 164–82 (p. 166).

²⁰ See Lidia Curti on the reworking of genre by women writers in *Female Stories Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation* (London, Macmillan, 1998), p. 41.

Female renegotiations of the thriller genre: Parodying the femme fatale

Baise-moi self-consciously addresses itself to women readers. Arguably, its references to the specificity of women's experience may be 'concealed' by a narrative strategy which is, as mentioned above, based upon role-reversal. But this role-reversal is far from straightforward. Although Despentes's agency of violence is female, it would be simplistic to argue that the novel creates and normalizes a counter-model of female violence. In *Baise-moi*, the all-pervasive male violence acts both as the mainspring of the narrative and as a brake upon it. It constantly imposes a limit upon movement and access and repeatedly transforms the heroines into victims. In the vicious rape at the beginning, male violence constitutes a violation so devastating that it causes complete personal, behavioural and social disintegration. Towards the close of the book, Manu's murder is reminiscent of the rape scene. Following Manu's death, the text describes Nadine's stunned and mechanical gestures as she burns the body and decides on the next step; but the heterodiegetic narrative is interrupted twice by interpolated fragments from songs by Suicidal Tendencies, entitled 'The Monopoly of Sorrow' and 'Lost Again': 'I went in war with reality. The motherfucker, he was waiting for me. And I lost again' (p. 239).²¹ These interpolations are striking for at least two reasons. First, they are suggestive of interior monologue, insofar as Nadine has been associated throughout the novel with grunge music and frequently listens to Suicidal Tendencies on her headphones. Thus, her musical tastes would seem to echo Manu's defeatist comments in the rape scene. Secondly, coming towards the close of the novel, the interpolations seem to act not only as narratorial, but also possibly as authorial comments on the condition of women. The novel therefore begins and ends on profoundly defeatist notes that seem to conclude against the possibility of change not only for the female protagonists, but also perhaps for women in general. However, although the novel's ending restores the patriarchal world order, throughout the book there have been enough interventions of female agency (beyond the basic level of female violence) to offer transgressive renegotiations of gender roles. These renegotiations are summarized in the stress on pleasure and sexual autonomy as Nadine looks at a pornographic picture: 'Transgression. Elle fait ce qui ne se fait pas avec un plaisir évident. Le trouble vient en grande partie de l'assurance tranquille avec laquelle elle se dévoile' (p. 139).

Kate Stables has discussed the return of the *femme fatale* in 1990s cinema in a context of crisis of masculinity and the marked increase since the 1980s of a culture which abounds with mediated images of sex and proliferating sexual discourses.²² This new *femme fatale* is constructed and constrained

²¹ Quotation from 'Lost Again'.

²² 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice', pp. 166–67.

with a set of codes imported from pornography: ‘While she is fabricated from (and speaks to) a set of current and often conflicting discourses around “woman”, she signals nothing but sex. The 90s *fatale* is a supreme cinematic symptom of what Fredric Jameson refers to as “that reduction to the body everywhere present in the postmodern”’.²³

The postmodern *fatale* protagonist is characterized by a triumphantly active and polymorphous sexuality, freedom of speech and body, and the ability to escape textual suppression and to control the narrative. But, for Stables, the dominant voice remains that of patriarchy.

It is this remaking of the *femme fatale* which seems to be parodied in *Baise-moi*. There is a clear formal relationship between Despentes’s self-conscious narrative and the post-1980s thriller, its sexualized content and its transgressive *femmes fatales*. Since the 1990s, the implied castration threat of the cinema *fatale* has become an overt one, as the films’ scenes of transgressive sex often lead to death. *Baise-moi* makes this link clear in the opening pages of the book. The theme of the *femme fatale* is introduced in a bar scene with ‘une métisse ultra-haute température’, for whom ‘l’appel au sexe se conjugue ici à l’impératif et comprend un voyage pour l’enfer. Elle est fatale, au sens premier du terme. Tout le monde dans le bar connaît des histoires de garçons rendus fous à cause d’elle’ (p. 24). Castration becomes both symbolic and real in the novel as Manu and Nadine declare their scorn for masculinity and men’s sexual games. They display the predatory nature and sexual directness of the new *femme fatale* as they pick up a man in a brasserie and waste no time making their intentions clear:

Manu: Toi, t’as l’air d’un mec qui a l’esprit large; alors moi et ma copine, on va pas tourner autour du pot trop longtemps. On cherche un partenaire compréhensif, on va à l’hôtel, on fornique bien comme il faut et on se quitte. Ça te semble possible ? (p. 201)

The novel insists on the disturbing nature of such behaviour:

Il est un peu décontenancé parce qu’elles sont trop directes. Tant de vice servi sur un plateau, c’est louche. Il choisit de penser que c’est jour de chance. Il est un peu déçu aussi parce que ça aurait été mieux s’il avait dû un peu les baratiner, avoir l’impression de les forcer un peu. Mais il se dit que rien n’est parfait. (p. 201)

Manu’s and Nadine’s scorn for male seduction strategies is explicit through speech: “De toutes façons, plus t’es conne, mieux ça le fait. J’ai mis du temps à le croire [...]”. Nadine soupire, hausse les épaules et répond: “Faudrait se mettre à leur place. C’est pas possible qu’ils voient les choses comme elles sont” (p. 201). Emasculation is first symbolic: in the hotel lift, Manu declares: ‘Putain, c’que ça transpire par cette chaleur, il est tout visqueux, ce gros con’ (p. 202). The man’s potency is put into doubt as

²³ ‘The Postmodern Always Rings Twice’, pp., 179.

Nadine watches 'la main de Manu sur la toile bleue. A travers, on devine la forme du sexe qui a pris du volume. Tout le volume qu'il peut, du moins' (p. 203), and as Manu claims 'tu bandes mou. Ça me fatigue' (p. 205). But Manu's fellatio soon leads to what is effectively castration, as she first vomits all over him, and then decides to kill him because he suggested using a condom. Gender roles are reversed, as the two women, beating him to death, warn him: 'On suit pas des filles qu'on connaît pas comme ça, mec. Ça aussi, fallait que tu le comprennes. Faut se méfier. Parce qu'en l'occurrence tu sais sur qui t'es tombé, mec? Sur des putains de tueuses de connard à capote' (p. 207).

In sex as in death, which here, as in the thriller and the *fatale*, are meshed very closely together, our two characters move beyond the confines of the *femme fatale* role, confirming Stables's analysis of the new *fatale* as protagonist and power agency. In *Baise-moi*, generic constraints are also the source of parodic self-reflexivity, as Manu and Nadine constantly refer to the fictional nature of the plot and to the playfulness usually at work in the thriller's one-liners and sense of repartee. After slaughtering the assistant in a music shop, Manu claims:

- Putain, on a pas le sens de la formule, on a pas la bonne réplique au bon moment.
- On a eu les bons gestes, c'est déjà un début.
- Ouais, mais maintenant que c'est mon tour de piste, je préférerais soigner ça. [...] Merde, on est en plein dans le crucial, faudrait que les dialogues soient à la hauteur. Moi, tu vois, je crois pas au fond sans la forme.
- On va quand même pas préparer des trucs à l'avance ?
- Bien sûr que non, ça serait contraire à toute éthique. (p. 121)

These lines are a slap in the face of action heroes everywhere who spout 'Go ahead, make my day'. In a later scene, Manu and Nadine make a suicide pact which seems to allude to the film *Thelma and Louise*, as both heroines plan to jump off a cliff (p. 210). Parody emerges when Manu expresses concern with their image in the press: 'On a pas que ça à foutre. Faut penser à laisser un mot à l'AFP: "Elles ont sauté sans élastique", pour qu'ils tirent pas n'importe quoi' (p. 211).

Subversive role of the female body

The transgressive behaviour of Despentes's *fatales* far exceeds aggressive sexuality and violence. *Baise-moi* attacks phallocentrism through the exploration of female pleasure and the destabilizing intervention of the female body. Through its attack on traditional representations of the body, the family, relationships, love, and sex, *Baise-moi* reappropriates and challenges the myths which construct Western society. It also explores ideas that remain central to contemporary feminism about women's sexual identity; remaining taboos about the body; the relationship between women and the sexual industry; and sexual oppression. Therefore, in this final

section, I shall explore first the renegotiation of gender and sexual identity, secondly the intervention of the abject female body, and, finally, the ways in which *Baise-moi* challenges female exploitation.

Renegotiation of gender and sexual identity

Freud cited three fundamental taboos: incest, cannibalism, and murder.²⁴ *Baise-moi* problematizes gender identity by questioning the law of the father. One might argue (against Freud, here) that this is achieved by eradicating traditional patriarchal structures and celebrating the breaking of all three taboos. Thus, the family is completely evacuated from the plot through both the concrete and symbolic elimination of fathers: parental figures are both absent and described as inadequate. Fatima's father was put in prison for incest and died there (p. 180), and Manu describes her own father as so emotionally absent that he did not know her name (p. 183). *Baise-moi* performs what is perhaps the ultimate transgression in patriarchal society through its presentation of incest, which is glorified as Fatima claims, 'je crois que c'est moi qui est venue sur lui. Je sais que j'en avais envie, je me souviens que ça m'a manqué longtemps' (p. 182) and Manu exclaims, 'Putain, c'que ça doit être chouette de faire ça avec son père! [...] des petites filles amoureuses de leur papa, ça me fait délirer' (pp. 183–84).

Transgression is further achieved through appropriations of the gaze and the emphasis on female sexual orifices, both strategies, arguably, being suggestive of cannibalism and acting as a metaphor for the breaking of Freudian taboos. With their act of rebellion, Manu and Nadine leave their position of objectification and become subjects by depriving others of their gaze. This strengthens the argument that female violence in *Baise-moi* is not as random as would appear at first: Manu and Nadine kill those whose gaze judges and assigns status, and those who attempt to deprive them of their subjective autonomy and turn them into objects and the Other. Nadine's appropriation of the gaze and of agency seems cannibalistic: she becomes the dominant subject as she dons clothes which are identical to those worn by her more glamorous victims. The 'cannibalistic' assumption of agency is strengthened by the remarkable parallelism in the novel between the condition of Manu and Nadine and Muslim women. Manu's policy of sparing Arabs and *beurs* and the friendship which Manu and Nadine develop with Fatima are no coincidence. All three are in a position of inferiority to men and are continually threatened by male desire and violence. In this context, the linguistic proximity of the French *voile* (veil) and *viol* (rape) is striking. Manu frees herself from restraint after having submitted to rape, the final act of possession. As a *femme*

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1949), p. 17.

violée/voilée, she is free to transgress the rules by taking over the forbidden gaze.

Cannibalism becomes a leitmotiv in the novel with its focus on Manu's mouth, described as a wide-open, red and possibly bloodthirsty orifice (Manu is associated with the colour red, from her clothes and her nail varnish to her aesthetic taste for the blood of her victims). Manu is always thirsty and hungry; she gorges herself with food and then makes herself sick in a bulimic attempt to empty her body in order to put more into it. This bulimia and excess also extend to sexual desire, and the novel makes a recurrent analogy between Manu's mouth and her vagina (for example, p. 204). Always tormented by 'cette inétanchable soif. De foutre, de bière ou de whisky, n'importe quoi pourvu qu'on la soulage' (p. 14), Manu is concerned with 'comblent tous les orifices' (p. 31). The play on (and of) Manu's lips/labia recalls Irigaray's concept of a 'parler-femme'²⁵ analogous to female sexuality—the site of female meaning most excluded from existing systems of representation. Likewise, the leitmotiv of female masturbation which runs through the novel, coupled with the wielding of guns as empowering and dangerous sex toys, is a clear affirmation of the autonomy of female eroticism. Thus, the intervention of female pleasure and the body in *Baise-moi* might allow the irruption of a rebellious femininity.

Intervention of the abject female body

Transgression in *Baise-moi* works as a catalyst for the women's free exploration of their sexual pleasure, which contrasts with the first part of the novel where female pleasure was dominated by male desire and acted out within the phallogocentric rules of 'porn', prostitution, and rape. Despentes's *fatales* are also dangerous in their celebration of the female body, of its fluids and its eroticism. The female body in Despentes is ruled by excess and defies traditional representations. Amongst the thick intertextual layering of the novel, one line borrowed from the lyrics of the grunge band Mudhoney describes the heroines adequately: 'sweet, young things ain't sweet no more' (p. 44). Thus, Manu is characterized by fluidity and lack of control over her body and behaviour. She doesn't mind wallowing in vomit (p. 14), and she 'aime bien tout ce qui dépasse, tout ce qui dérape la fait rigoler' (p. 51). On the opening page of the novel, which shows Nadine masturbating whilst watching a porn video, the body of the porn *fatale* belongs to the grotesque:

Elle transpire abondamment sous le fond de teint [...] La cellulite bouge par paquets en haut de ses cuisses. Elle s'est légèrement bavé sur le menton et on voit bien les boutons sous le maquillage. Une attitude de jeune fille dans un vieux corps flasque. (pp. 5–6)

²⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris, Minuit, 1977).

In the next scene, ‘une voix de femme rugit: “Et maintenant, salope, pisse tout ce que tu sais.” L’urine sort en un joyeux feu d’artifice’ (p. 5). This scene predicts the killing of the architect, after which Manu ‘baisse son fute, s’accroupit au-dessus de la tête de l’architecte et l’arrose de pisse en bougeant son cul pour qu’il en prenne bien sur tout le visage. Les gouttes dorées se mêlent au sang par terre et lui donnent une jolie couleur’ (p. 227). Manu and Nadine’s interest in their victims’ blood parallels their fascination with their own menstrual blood, suggesting further resistance to the containment of femininity. Despentès devotes a whole chapter of her novel to Manu’s periods and her delectation in her own blood, described in great detail. Parodying masturbation, Manu ‘joue avec les mains entre ses jambes. Elle s’est barbouillée de sang jusqu’aux seins. La petite dit: “Ça sent bon dedans, enfin faut aimer”’ (p. 152). Dissent and unruliness are further underlined as Manu recalls her habit of bleeding all over the place as a child in order to annoy her mother, who hated the sight of menstrual blood. By contrast, Manu claims: ‘C’est spectacle, merde, ça fait plaisir à voir’ (p. 153). This scene asks questions about the representation of women in the contrast between Manu, who is depicted as stark naked with high heels, and the reminder that ‘elle laisse des traces ensanglantées partout où elle s’assoit’ (p. 154). It seems to parody the idealized and objectified female body in the high-art nude, in glossy magazines and in adverts on television, which conceive of the nude as a sealed container, a perfected, rationally organized formulation of the female body, not subject to individuality or change. There, the ‘abject’ aspects of the female body are hidden and denied. Here, by contrast, Manu’s feminine and female body challenges the boundaries of representation and draws attention to the powerful threat of the abject—that which is rejected by the social order—particularly liquids and substances produced by the body, such as tears, urine, sexual fluids, faeces, and so on, which are viewed as waste products and a source of repulsion.²⁶ The body in *Baise-moi* is an unruly and grotesque body, an open container and a site of resistance. Foregrounding the materiality of the female body—its drives, pulsations and emanations—piss, blood, and sweat all partake in the debunking both of the idealized female and of the *femme fatale*.²⁷

²⁶ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London, Routledge, 1992); Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982).

²⁷ Since writing this article, I have come across an article by Shirley Jordan who remarks on the leitmotiv of the gushing of blood in the novel. Jordan connects menstrual blood with death, a direct consequence of course of the fatal nature of our heroines. See Shirley Jordan, “‘Dans le mauvais goût pour le mauvais goût’? Pornographie, violence et sexualité féminine dans la fiction de Virginie Despentes”, in *Nowelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix?*, ed. by Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers (Amsterdam—New York, Rodopi, 2002), pp. 121–130 (p. 124).

The challenge to female exploitation. Despentes further disrupts dominant categories by portraying Manu's indifference in the rape scene. Manu's voluntary failure to resist her attackers proves highly disturbing to the rapists, who exclaim: 'J'ai l'impression de baiser un cadavre' and 'elle a même pas pleuré celle-là, regarde-la. Putain, c'est même pas une femme, ça' (p. 55). With Manu, who becomes the Medusa who threatens to 'tout casser, [de] mettre en pièces les bâtis des institutions, [de] faire sauter la loi en l'air, [de] tordre la "vérité" de rire',²⁸ and who '[brise] les codes qui la nient',²⁹ Despentes creates a powerful representation of femininity with which to challenge phallocentrist representations, in particular of prostitution. For instance, there is a tension within Nadine between her pleasure as a prostitute and her rejection of prostitution as a commodification of women.³⁰ Nadine's pleasure in particular is shown to be ambivalent in the juxtaposition of two sentences: 'Désir forcené de saccager quelque chose, quelque chose de sacré. Elle aime bien ce travail' (p. 62). Nadine's awareness, within her pleasure, that she is degrading herself draws attention to the collusion of women with the structures which subordinate them: 'Il y a un orgueil à se mettre aussi bas, un héroïsme dans la déchéance' (p. 62). This complicity is further reflected in the phrase which concludes the scene: 'Tué quelqu'un. Elle a quand même beaucoup de mal à s'habituer à cette idée' in which 'tuer' does not yet refer to any crime Nadine has witnessed or committed (pp. 62–63). Rather, I would suggest that 'tué' is to be interpreted as an affirmation of identity or subjectivity: 'tu es (quelqu'un)' which is immediately negated: Nadine/the prostitute is objectified. In assenting to her exploitation, she renounces her subjectivity. However, this renunciation is not located solely in prostitution but is also extended to other aspects of female exploitation: 'Ça lui va bien comme métier. Surtout quand le moment vient de claquer la thune. Dévaliser un supermarché, y croiser des femmes qui choisissent leurs amants, celles qu'on baise gratuitement. Celles-là comptent leurs sous pour nourrir la famille' (p. 62). By equating the whore with the housewife and women who enjoy so-called sexual freedom, Despentes points to the ambiguity of women's acceptance and resistance to the imposition of norms of femininity (to borrow Sue Thornham's phrase).³¹ Nadine's preference for prostitution because 'ça reste quand même moins pénible que d'aller travailler' (p. 61) also offers a challenging view of prostitution, as it transcends the view of prostitutes as powerless victims of male exploitation. Here, the stress is on personal pleasure, and on female sexual agency. Instead of being

²⁸ Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la méduse', *L'Arc*, 61 (1975), 39–54 (p. 49).

²⁹ Hélène Cixous, 'Le Rire de la méduse', p. 42.

³⁰ The point about pleasure and sexual exploitation is developed further by Shirley Jordan, "'Dans le mauvais goût pour le mauvais goût'", pp. 129–132.

³¹ See Thornham on Beauvoir: *Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies: Stories of Unsettled Relation* (London, Arnold, 2000), p. 35.

merely the object of the sexual and financial transaction that is prostitution, the prostitute in Despentès is both object *and* subject. In *Baise-moi*, prostitution is presented as an economic activity that seems to be freely chosen over more ‘respectable’ activities, ones which may be seen as less degrading but also as economically less profitable. This view is evidenced by Nadine’s scorn for Séverine, her room-mate, who ‘n’est pas une fille facile. Conséquemment, elle se fait très rarement besogner, elle en aurait pourtant grand besoin’ (p. 9). The real prostitute is the woman who deploys so-called feminine wiles to attract the male who will offer her economic security, like Séverine, who ‘sait qu’il faut jouer sur tous les tableaux pour séduire un garçon. Le but ultime étant de devenir la femme de quelqu’un et, avec le mal qu’elle se donne, elle envisage de devenir la femme de quelqu’un de bien’ (p. 10). Thus, once again, *Baise-moi* challenges traditional views by suggesting that sexual prostitution is preferable to economic or marital exploitation because the prostitute is actually naming the thing and has some control over it. Nadine’s agency in her chosen profession is clearly demonstrated by her scorn for, and power over, the men who cannot afford her (p. 48) and those who try to negotiate her fee (pp. 58–60).

Conclusion

The ruptures in the continuity between sex and gender in *Baise-moi* may contain, in Judith Butler’s words, the potential ‘to open up [...] rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder’.³² Once the women in Despentès have taken male power into their own hands, they tend to gravitate towards a manless or emasculated milieu, in the sense that men become instruments of their pleasure and their violence rather than self-motivated individuals. The novel further reveals its transgressive potential by making possible the appropriation by women of values and activities which are traditionally associated with the male in the thriller, from sexual autonomy to the breaking down of distinctions between the private and the public sphere (it is no accident that the heroines have no personal domestic scene, and that the characteristic indoor settings for the novel are hotels, bars, and cars rather than domestic spaces). The narrative displays violence, the ‘superiority’ of materiality over morality, drinking, sex, women as subjects and men who have become the objects in a reversal of the initial theme of prostitution.

Although the heroines suffer from their transgressions through a death that denies them that suicide they had wanted, and whilst order is restored at the end, the brevity of the final episode in which Nadine is caught

³² *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London—New York, Routledge, 2001), p. 312.

strongly suggests that the narrator does not endorse the discourses of patriarchy and wishes to criticize the structures that contain women's autonomy. The reworking of the theme of the *femme fatale* in *Baise-moi* has brought forth a powerful model of female protagonist with which to challenge conventional views of gender and gender roles. Desportes's novel is of course about rebellion, but, perhaps more fundamentally, it is also about the possibility of contemporary women exploring the potentialities of their bodies and sexual autonomy. Virginie Desportes thereby challenges remaining taboos about the female body, sexuality, and violence perpetrated by—as well as against—women. She confronts heterosexual sexual politics, which might explain the controversy that surrounded the publication of her book and especially its film adaptation. Helping to release women's bodies from existing representations and to question categories, *Baise-moi* might indeed reclaim a voice for women.³³

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³³ See Gill Rye's conclusion in *Reading for Change: Interactions between Text and Identity in Contemporary French Women's Writing (Baroque, Cixous, Constant)* (Bern, Peter Lang, 2001), p. 205, that contemporary French women writers '(re)present the possibilities and the conditions of [...] difference'.