Some Problems with Gendered Subjectivity and Representation: Baise Moi and Hard-Core Pornography
Temmuz Süreyya Gürbüz, National University of Ireland Galway, temmuzsr@gmail.com

Abstract
Based on a framework developed by the works of critical theorists Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this article focuses on a reconceptualization of the relationship between representation on screen and the production of sexualities in order to examine the discourse around the film Baise Moi (Despentes and Trinh Thi, 2000). There have been criticisms about the film’s pornographic and violent elements as well as its “bad ending”, arguing that the film results in a reaffirmation of the patriarchal power practices. This article counterargues that such readings remain within the limited territory of seeking an ideal representation of femininity based on the gender/sex binary which Butler’s work has critiqued. The final section of the article aims to demonstrate how Baise Moi conveys a layered audio-visual organization that focuses on the attainability of different sexualities that are not conforming to the idea of universal sexuality through adopting a pornographic aesthetic that provides the means through which the film can overturn gender norms as well as hard-core porn’s idealism.

Keywords: Gender; Genre; Pornography; Sexuality; Representation; French New Extremity; Michel Foucault; Judith Butler

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Introduction

This article aims to bring the theoretical line between the Foucauldian understanding of sexuality and Judith Butler’s questioning of the construction of gendered subjectivity, to the issue of representing sexuality on screen, specifically visual depictions of the acts of sex. Although the works of these theorists have been well established within various fields of critical analysis for decades now, many of the ideas they have brought under scrutiny continue to hold resonance today, as the recent discussions around representability and visibility of sexuality demonstrate.

When sexuality is taken as a modern concept evolved within the structures of power and biopolitics, its representation on screen becomes a subject of how these structures infiltrate the production of screen media and have an effect on what it is that can be visible and representable. Drawing from this line of thought, this article explores the questions of representation in relation to the problematization of the understanding of sexuality as natural and gender as a universality.

In doing so, it puts forward the French film *Baise Moi* (2000) directed by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi and its connection to hard-core pornography as an exemplary cultural production aesthetically engaged in the critique of the representational structures of visibility on
screen. While the first section of the article locates the mainstream discourse around and the reception of *Baise Moi* within the larger Foucauldian theories regarding the relationship between sexuality and power, the second section moves towards the discussions regarding the non-simulated sex scenes in the film.

As a highly discussed film which has been a subject of a large number of case studies along the lines of genre, gender, transgression in cinema and feminist film theory, *Baise Moi* with its portrayal of outcast female figures embarking on a journey of sex and murder, has contributed greatly to the critical arena where cinematic possibilities of subversion are discussed in the last 20 years since its distribution in 2000 followed by a censorship controversy. The film's narrative echoes a road movie narrative: two women hitting the road, committing illegal activities, such as murder and robbery, having a variety of sexual encounters until their journey ends with one of them killed in a hold-up and the other is caught by the authorities. One of the main analyses concerning *Baise Moi* written by Lisa Downing investigates the film in the context of ‘postmodern porn’ that is ‘placed in dialogue with recent deconstructive gender theory’ (Downing 2010, 265). Judith Franco also examines the film's position in the genre world, sees a juxtaposition of road-movie and rape-revenge narrative in *Baise Moi*, and questions whether the film presents a subversive portrayal of “feminine sexuality” (Franco 2004). It has been commonly said that the film carries an extremity (Romney 2004) that seems lead critics and
scholars to place the film within the category of French New Extremity; such as Catherine Briellat's *A Ma Soeur!* (2001) (Nettleback 2003, 65) or *Romance* (1999) (Quandt 2011, 20) and Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* (2002) (Downing 2004, 268). Regarding the capacious coverage of the term ‘extremity’, these interpretations differ from each other according to the theoretical frameworks they adopt. However, they share a commonality: *Baise Moi* is ‘extreme’. In the winter 2020 issue of *CineJ Cinema Journal*, Şirin Fulya Erensoy also argues that the film follows the tradition of French New Extremity which is characterized by the subversion of genre tropes, bodily violence and ‘a pessimistic worldview’ articulated through ‘conservative endings that reaffirm the status quo’ (Erensoy 2020, 65-66). While Erensoy interprets the bad ending of the film as a final, and conservative, conclusion to whether subversion of gender roles can be possible in the world of *Baise Moi*, some of the earlier criticisms of the film regarded the sexually graphic scenes as a reiteration of patriarchal gaze that dominate the porn industry. This article disagrees with the idea that the ending on the narrative level overwrites the critical potential of the visual organization of the film in terms of subverting the politics of visibility. This disagreement will be articulated later through exploring how the conventions of the porn genre was disrupted in the film’s low-budget aesthetics.
One of the directors of the film Virginie Despentes, who also wrote the book with the same title on which the film was based, does not clearly define her film as one of the ‘the New French Extremity's most graphic and confrontational texts’ (Romney 2004). She gives a very simple answer to a question about whether they made the film as a warning: ‘We wanted to make a punk movie. […] We loved the movies from the 80’s [sic] Scorsese, Ferrara, De Palma’s Scarface [De Palma 1983], Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven and so with a tiny, tiny budget, we wanted to shoot the same kind of story: strong friendship, outcasts, graphic violence, sex and a bad ending’ (Despentes 2009). While Despentes criticises the perspective of looking at Baise Moi as an extreme film, film scholar Neil Archer opens up a different discussion surrounding the issue of provocation: ‘If its extremes of real sex and fictional violence provoke, its real concern is where we are supposed to draw a line; not merely in representational terms, but in terms of personal pleasure, consumption and social space’ (Archer 2009, 75). This argument takes the individuality of the state of being provoked into account and shows that the provocation that might be at stake here relies on the spectator's personal relationship with the film's content and his/her social space as much as on the film's own ability to reach to its spectator's position. Considering the film’s promotional strategy as well as the media coverage and categorisations, it is hard to brush off the ‘extremity talk’ that revolves around the film’s perception and analyses. Starting from the film’s promotional language and how its pornographic connotations were
perceived in the mainstream media, next section explores the language of the law that surrounded *Baise Moi*’s reception.

**Language of the Law**

On the DVD cover of the film *Baise Moi* (2000), directed by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, we see the tagline ‘the most extreme thriller you'll ever see legally’. This tagline is of course subject to a discussion around what type of a promotional strategy was followed and it thus requires an analysis of the whole film market within which that strategy was assumed to be working. On the other hand, it also does bring the problem of legality to the spectatorial area of cinema, resonating the very old regulatory function of the law as a censorship mechanism.

Similar to the case with this tagline, the famous popular culture magazine Rolling Stone published a film list, which included *Baise Moi*, called ‘Barely Legal: 30 Nearly Pornographic Mainstream Films’ in 2014 and claimed that those 30 films are as close to porn as a mainstream film can be. Even though this piece does not delve into the depths of genre discussion and what kind of a relationship porn genre has with mainstream cinema, it does underline an important aspect of screening sex: it is related to legality. The term ‘legal’ seems to be used as an attention-getter both on the DVD cover and in the title of the Rolling Stone piece. However, rather than
focusing on its marketing aspect which could lead to a discussion around the ethics of promotional strategies in the cinema industry; I would like to turn to the symbolic meanings of the ‘legal’ which can be found in the background of those strategies. The term itself conveys a sense of boundary, thus *Baise Moi* as a text, is presented by that sense: the term ‘legal’ seems to be the starting point for an exploration of socio-sexual boundaries that *Baise Moi* deconstructs, as this paper argues, resulting in the creation of radical cinematic expressions which can find the ways to transgress the representational politics.

What does it mean to see a film legally? The usage of the term ‘legal’ in the sentence seems to imply that an illegal form of seeing a film is in close contiguity to seeing *Baise Moi*. Supported by the mention of extremity in the film, this illegality is assumed to be reminiscent of pornography. While different parts of the world illegalize the consumption of different sorts of porn, or in lawful terms ‘obscene materials’, according to their cultural, social and moral characteristics, it is not illegal to watch porn in general. This does not hinder the effect of the connotation of the tagline which is that *Baise Moi* includes almost-illegal-to-watch pornographic scenes. Because ‘pornographic’ does not have to be illegal altogether in order for it to carry the idea of illegality. The fact that legal restrictions of what people can and cannot consume have been performed through censorship and prohibition has made it exceedingly easy to surround pornography with illegality.
Recognizing law as a discourse calls attention to how law establishes regulations, thoughts, and behavior and institutes expectations of what is legitimate and illegitimate behavior, what is acceptable and unacceptable, what is criminal and legal, what is rational and irrational, what is natural and unnatural. Therefore, the study of law as a discourse is not limited to specific laws or to the activity of litigation or litigators; rather it is the study of these laws as they operate as symbols for what is legal, honorable, natural, objective and so on. In the sense the symbolization of law is more than its specific language. (Eisenstein 1988, 43)

The literal meaning of the adjective ‘legal’ is ‘relating to the law’ or ‘permitted by the law’. As Zillah R. Eisenstein clarifies above, accepting ‘law’ only as a definition of a governmental practice would be a limited approach if we try to understand what this language actually regulates and shapes in the societal perception of ‘lawfulness’. Acceptable, rational, honourable and natural come across as the terms belonging to a language that is constructed by the law which ‘embodies the relations of patriarchy through the differentiation, by sex, of gender’ (Eisenstein 1988, 51). Eisenstein's account of the symbolization of the law extends the meanings and powers of what is perceived as ‘legal’, and thus, ‘legal’ can be used to define actions that conform to the heteronormative laws of patriarchy – i.e. by ‘legal’, we understand, imposed social norms.

According to the tagline, it is legal to watch Baise Moi: it is acceptable, it is not a violation of the law. However, the tagline also suggests that there are elements in the film that provide an
experience that is similar to an illegal and unacceptable viewing. When it is implied that
conforming to the legal does not require a total exclusion of the extreme, at the same time it is
implied that there exists a tendency to illegality by way of underlining that crossing the border of
the legal is about to happen. The tagline promotes the tendency to be illegal by saying that
watching the film is still within the borders of the legal. This approach to the legal and the law's
construction of borders present a certain awareness of the fact that subversion of the legal is only
possible within the borders of the law. Spectators do not have to commit to the illegal and
unacceptable but they will still have the illegal and unacceptable experience by seeing Baise
Moi. Of course, the goal behind this premise of the tagline is about selling the film by almost
saying that Baise Moi is very close to being a porn movie. The question of whether the film is
along the lines of porn movies will be asked further in this article. But for now, it is important to
establish a basis for understanding what this aforementioned approach refers to in the territory of
representation of sexuality and gender, in order to discover a possible congruence between the
critical approach drawn from the tagline and the critical approach of the film itself.

Representation within the Borders of the Legal

Judith Butler in Gender Trouble takes Foucault's claim ‘power and sexuality are coextensive’
(Butler 1990, 38) further by suggesting that the normative framework of the law positions ‘the
natural sexuality’ as independent from the law itself (as if ‘the natural’ is not produced by its power relations). By this way it asserts that subversion of the sexual norms ‘requires a sexuality that somehow escapes the hegemonic prohibitions on sex’ (Butler 1990, 39). That is to say, according to the law, there cannot exist a subversive sexuality within the terms of its hegemony or it cannot be possible to displace the sexual norms by using the law's own normative discourses. Hence, a subversive displaced sexuality means an escape from power relations or rather a disappearance; meaning that there is no room or a form of existence for subversive sexualities inside of its hegemony. However, for Foucault, this cannot be the case, since sexuality and power coexist, co-appear. In fact, power provokes its subjects to push the boundaries of the law by way of enforcing ‘the natural’. Butler expands on the functions of power and underlines its productive aspect: ‘Power, rather than the law, encompasses both the juridical (prohibitive and regulatory) and the productive (inadvertently generative) functions of differential relations’ (Butler 1990, 39). Therefore, prohibitive and regulatory aspects of power make ‘the productions swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of ’subjects' that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible’ (Butler 1990, 39). If we look at the borders of the social environment of the protagonists in Baise Moi, we see that the
agents of power in the beginning of the film, i.e. Manu’s brother or Nadine’s roommate, provide the initial triggers for them to hit the road in the narrative; thus make their repressions visible, decline the social prohibition they had been tolerating. The ‘low’ lives of the protagonists do not stay within the borders of their ‘low’ territory, they swerve as long as their togetherness on the road continue and ascend. This will be conceptualized more through the textual analysis of Baise Moi in relation to hard-core pornography later in the paper.

Butler questions the understanding of gender as the cultural interpretation of sex. She opens the gender discussion by the problematization of how certain strands of feminism seek a ‘true’ representation of women as if there is a universality attached to the category of women. In fact, the category of women itself is problematic for Butler, since it is not possible for ‘woman’ to refer to a universal identity. Separating gender from its political and cultural intersections results in the development of the misconception that ‘the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination’ (Butler 1990, 39). The idea of this universality that is attached to the whole discussion actually signals the main problem: the fact that the term ‘social construct’ has to convey a meaning of diversity not a universality, due to the differing ways in which it occurs in each social region and accordingly with variety of social conditions, has been neglected in favor of optimizing political strategies. Briefly, Butler suggests that the search for a specifically correct representation of the
category of women constrains its own political struggle, and the category's exclusionary form impairs its own idea of universality. This leads her to the discussion of the difference between sex and gender, since the ways in which the category is developed are not clearly differentiated. Is it sex or gender that distinguishes the persons who can be involved in the category?

According to *Gender Trouble*, sex cannot be distinct from gender, since body is not an exclusive biological attribute but yet another field to which the law seems to apply its regulative and productive functions. It is commonly accepted that gender is a social construction, thus its status as a political appliance for production of sexual norms has been subject to feminist criticisms. On the other hand, a necessary emphasis on sex being gender, or rather being a tool for concealing the constructed nature of ‘the natural’, as Butler clarifies, seems to be overlooked. This is the reason why ‘binary sex’ might still have been seen as a biological result that we do not have control over, whereas gender binary can be seen as an inevitable consequence of the law which should be challenged, for feminism. Since the distinction between sex and gender seems to be at work in favor of the demands of heterosexual norms, the difference between ‘binary sex’ and ‘gender binary’ can be initially seen as a derivative of that distinction.
The assumed differences between female sexuality and male sexuality are all taken here as the results of the productive aspect of the law, meaning that there is nothing natural about them. They are actually intrinsic to the heteronormative oppression of sexuality and thus, ‘female sexuality’ cannot be used without referring to where it is constructed and embedded in, the heteronormative culture. Therefore, seeking a ‘true’ representation of female sexuality in any area of that culture is doomed to reproduce the ideals of the law and thus it can result in ascribing a certain ‘trueness’ to sexuality all together to justify this search. How can we utilize the fluctuating relationship between power and sexuality instead of falling for the belief that ‘the female’ has its core and its ‘true’ representation only outside of power relations, as if we can find ‘a female’ outside of it?

Even though delving into the concept of representation would be of great help to the feminist discussions around the representations of female sexuality, one crucial aspect of this concept will be taken into consideration specifically in order to clarify the way the term ‘representation of female sexuality’ is to be understood. This aspect is the question of how the subject of a particular representation is known, in other words, the problem that occurs when a certain representation is assumed to have a fixed subject. Concerning Stuart Hall's definition of representation as ‘the process by which members of a culture use language [...] to produce meaning’ (Hall 1997, 61) which accordingly ‘carries the important premise that things [...] do not
have in themselves any fixed, final or true meaning’ (Hall 1997, 61), the relationship between the subject and the representation can be taken as an unsteady and ready-to-be-misplaced cultural connection. That is why assuming that a natural ‘female sexuality’ has not found its true representation in culture proves itself to be erroneous. Judith Butler points out in the introduction of *Gender Trouble* that feminist analysis has to be aware of the fact that ‘the domains of political and linguistic “representation” set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject’ (Butler 1990, 4). Power relations construct ‘female sexuality’ as a subject of representation by way of producing the idea that it has a fixated meaning. If the subjects are produced by power in a way that they would be installed within the matrix of the law's representational politics, that means power also produces the subjects that seem to be defying the norms of the law because they are also representable as ‘unacceptable’ and ‘illegal’ in terms of the regulatory language. This is why, for instance, when ‘female sexuality’ seems to be represented in any cultural medium as a threat to the society, reacting to that representation as if it is a ‘misrepresentation of female sexuality’ seems self-defeating. Can there exist an immutable subject that has not yet been represented or has been misrepresented; in the case of ‘female sexuality’? Butler also asks:
What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject? What relations of domination and exclusion are inadvertently sustained when representation becomes the sole focus of politics? (Butler 1990, 9)

We can add another question here, what happens to the sexualities that are excluded by the subjection methods of the law? Could certain cinematic expressions – as in Baise Moi – create this alternative through subversion of the law’s own cultural methods like the fiction of hard-core pornography? Foucault suggests that ‘taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power’ and ‘analyzing power relations through antagonism of strategies’ (Foucault 1982, 780) would help to examine and disclose how power actually works. Resistance against the law's methods of constructing subjection would be possible through analyzing how power produces the antagonist subjects within this culture. Instead of striving to pull the defiant subjects that are represented as abnormal back into the borders of the acceptable subjects of the normative framework, investigating what those subjects offer through their position of antagonism might provide the means through which we can reach to the sexualities that are excluded by that subjection. As Foucault says ‘to find out what our society means by sanity, perhaps we should investigate what is happening in the field of insanity. And what we mean by legality in the field of illegality’ (Foucault 1982, 780).
Annette Kuhn, in her text ‘The Body and Cinema’ talks about why visual representation is a special problem for feminism, looking at the problem of gendered subjectivities in cinema. She puts ‘the notion of the instrumentality of representation’ (Kuhn 1997, 209) under scrutiny: ‘Representation participates in the various relations of power with which we are surrounded and in which we are always in one way or another implicated. Representation can be understood, then, as a form of regulation’ (Kuhn 1997, 204). She proposes different strategies for resistance against the regulatory function of representation, stating that ‘the search for new forms of expression is more productively seen in terms of resistance to the powers of representation than as taking place outside their “field of force”’ (Kuhn 1997, 205). Kuhn's assertion seems to be in close relation with Butler's idea that there is a possibility for ‘subjects’ to be mobilized and expand the borders of what is ‘culturally intelligible’. This is where we finally look back at how the critical approach towards ‘the legal’ that is drawn from Baise Moi’s tagline, is claimed to be an example of this kind of resistance, challenging the borders between legal and illegal without needing to locate itself outside of the legal's ‘field of force’. In fact, the tagline uses a method quite contrary to that need, it specifically states that the illegality can be experienced within the borders of the legal.
Drawing from this trajectory, the rest of article aims to demonstrate how *Baise Moi* demonstrates cinematically the hopeful idea articulated above through a number of theories around subverting the borders of subjectivity: mobilizing the ways of subjectification beyond the binary sex is possible through discordant visibilities. I will discuss how *Baise Moi* manages to produce such a cinematic resistance and visible antagonism developed by formulating its own pornographic language via pushing the borders between art-house and pornography. Therefore, next section focuses on where *Baise Moi* is along the lines of hard-core pornography, exploring the functions of non-simulated sex scenes in the film. I propose that adopting certain aspects of hard-core pornography provides the means through which the film can overturn the gender norms within the structures of the legal. The film does not look to ascribe a feminist subjection to its characters, since it focuses on individuality and attainability of different sexualities that are not conforming to “the representable”. At the same time it shows the possibility of resistance against ‘the representable’ within the power relations that create the hard-core porn's assumptions about universal sexuality.

**The Effect of Non-Simulated Sex and ‘The Visible’**

The fact that the main actors perform actual intercourse in the film and the scenes in which these performances take place adopt porn aesthetics, gives way to look at those scenes as sexually provocative and pornographic by taking them outside of their contexts. This fact seems to
become the main subject for interpretations that concern the representational politics indebted to the general accustomed and restricted visuals of sexuality in cinema, rather than the imaginative possibilities that created the complex context that specifies these non-simulated sex scenes.

Lisa Downing takes a comprehensive approach towards *Baise Moi* with the intention to explore ‘what happens to heterosexual pornographic conventions when they are juxtaposed with other filmic codes, here codes of violence’ (Downing 2010, 80). According to her, *Baise Moi* strives to show a fictional world that represents a society whose construction of sex and gender generates commodification of women; and the male dominance in this society is tried to be projected on the protagonists' performance of sex and violence. In this respect, Manu and Nadine can only be the productions of this society (Downing 2010, 81). Through this reading, Downing states that *Baise Moi* works hard ‘to undermine discourses that map domination/submission onto male/female bodies by appealing to 'natural' sexed and gendered characteristics’ (Downing 2010, 81). There are parts of ‘non-pornographic’ scenes in *Baise Moi* that convince Downing that the film actually achieves to reflect upon the constructed status of gender and sex, thus frustrate the understanding of ‘natural sex’ that seems to be embraced by hard-core porn; and ironically it is the same understanding appears as a precursor of anti-porn feminism. Moreover, she admits that there is a chance to see sex scenes in a more different way than merely as hard-core
pornography. However, the way the film engages with porn and mainstream thrillers like *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne 1987) prevents her from accepting that chance. She states that *Baise Moi* reproduces the reductive assumptions about gender that are deployed by ‘a whole range of male-directed films, in which troublesome women are eventually punished by death or incarceration […] or forced to take their own lives as the only available exit from patriarchal law (as in the disingenuous ending of *Thelma and Louise* [Scott 1991] […]’ (Downing 2010, 82). The non-simulated sex scenes and the narrative arc in *Baise Moi* are the elements that make Downing come to that conclusion. At the end, she seems to be separating sex scenes in the film from other scenes in favour of investigating the film's possible adoption of porn. I would like to explore this separation and Downing's criticism of ‘real’ sex in *Baise Moi* and suggest that the film actually shows that phallocentrism of hard-core porn might provide the means through which preconditioned understanding of sexuality can be overturned.

Downing compares the images of ‘real’ sex and the images of ‘pretend’ violence in *Baise Moi* and asserts that this dichotomy assigns a ‘truth value’ to sexuality whereby emphasizing ‘the surface performativity’ of violence:

> how can we take seriously the critique of normative codes of sex and gender, and the suggestion of alternative ways of apprehending the sexually explicit spectacle, in a film that simultaneously appears to take the “reality” of sex itself so seriously while very evidently playing at violence? (Downing 2010, 83)
She asks this question to point out a conundrum that *Baise Moi* might be carrying and states that there is a deliberate effort to create an exposure of ‘real’ sex in the film which risks upholding the constructed natural sexuality (Downing 2010, 83). She bases her claim on Linda Williams' analysis of the porn genre: ‘Sex, in the sense of a natural, biological and visible “doing what comes naturally,” is the supreme fiction of hard-core pornography; and gender, the social construction of the relations between “the sexes,” is what helps constitute that fiction’ (Williams 1989, 267). Downing applies this analysis directly to *Baise Moi*, asserting that the sex scenes in the film are no different than those in commercial hard-core porn scenes. However, sex in *Baise Moi* is not a singular method of action that happens the same every time, it is shown in relation to, and in a nested way towards, Manu and Nadine's progressive mode of living, meaning that they constantly move and look for performative actions that lead them to the next level of performance. Furthermore, there is a more extensive sense in Williams' analysis of how hard-core pornography creates a fiction about sexuality that is natural, biological and visible. Williams draws attention to the historical development of porn and how the invention of photography and cinema provided the means through which the phallocentric struggle for reaching to the ‘truths’ of sexual pleasure has formed its own utopia (Williams 1989, 48). Williams states: ‘The irony […] is that, while it is possible, in a certain limited and reductive way to “represent” the physical
pleasure of the male by showing erection and ejaculation, this maximum visibility proves elusive
in the parallel confession of female sexual pleasure’ (Williams 1989, 49). This irony points at the
invisibility of the orgasm that is believed to be belonging to the body of the female, and hard-
core pornography has been analyzed as the result of an unending desire ‘to overcome this
problem of invisibility within a regime that is, as Beverly Brown (Brown 1981, 10) has noted, an
“erotic organization of visibility’” (Williams 1989, 49). This organization works for ascribing an
out-of-control naturality to the bodies, however this ascription does not work for the ‘female’
orgasm as it does for that of the ‘male’. Therefore, the representable status of the ‘male’ orgasm
has been imposed on the body of the female, as if ‘orgasm’ refers to a universal paroxysm that
naturally carries a distinction between its beginning and ending. The conclusion is that hard-core
porn's fiction about ‘natural sexuality’ comes from its insistence to universalize pleasure in terms
of phallocentric representations. These representations are often shown in an episodic narrative
arc that is structured as follows; foreplay, oral sex, intercourse and the climax (ejaculation). This
narrative can be the key for criticizing hard-core porn's ‘attempt to capture visually the frenzy of
the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured’
(Williams 1989, 50). The body of the female, therefore, comes out as the source of excessive
pleasures that phallocentric power cannot define and insert into its own narrative of pleasure as
much as it wishes to. This phallocentric point of view can only try to understand the body of the
female in terms of its own masculine pleasure; and again, the definition of its own pleasure is also blended in the creation of sexual norms. The sex scenes in *Baise Moi* do not have this type of narrative, even as an internal episode, and they are only parts of the film's own narrative structure. When they are taken out of this structure, they would not provide enough material to establish the narrative structure that hard-core porn mostly requires to affirm its ‘reality’, thus the film as a whole does not embrace hard-core's depiction of a universalized sexual pleasure.

After putting the history of pornography under scrutiny and explaining that cinema and thus porn create the images that have partaken in the construction of ‘what is visible’, Williams concludes:

we have seen how the intensification and 'frenzy' of the visible begins, in the late nineteenth-century invention of 'machines of the visible,' to create even more peculiar forms of blindness. At the same time, we have found that this very blindness, this inability to make the invisible pleasure of woman manifestly visible and quantifiable, is the hard-core text's most vulnerable point of contradiction and the place where feminists who would resist a monolithic, masculine, hard-core discourse of sexuality can seek the power of resistance (Williams 1989, 57).

The blindness here mainly points at the invisibility of ‘female sexuality’, resonating Luce Irigaray's idea that the vagina ‘represents the horror of nothing to see’ (Irigaray 1997, 250).

Williams adopts a Foucauldian approach to pornography by emphasizing the importance of examining the power relations that give way to the construction of pornography that is based on
binary sex and its depictions of gender. As is stated above, she also cares about how pornography provides resources for a resistance. This approach is similar to Annette Kuhn's idea that the regulatory representations' field of force can be the tool for resistance. Downing's criticism of *Baise Moi* stems from Williams' breakdown of pornography as the fiction of ‘the natural, universal sex’. However, this criticism does not go as far as to suggest that there can exist a pornographic practice that can dislocate ‘the visible’ by way of interpolating the rules of visibility, thus it can underscore the constructed notion of that which has been visible. *Baise Moi* precisely makes this underscoring: the heterosexual intercourse, the activity that is directly or indirectly at the center of porn, is shown explicitly, it is what we know as visible; however it is completely tied with the characters' relation to this visibility and how their pleasure is not disentangled from the culture that can be so shocked while experiencing ‘the visible’ outside of the field of porn. At the same time, *Baise Moi* does not intend to impute an additional meaning to the ways that Manu and Nadine have sex, only showing that they want it. By way of showing how they have sex, the film presents that in Manu and Nadine's world, ‘just wanting it’ can produce something worth seeing as well, despite the fact that the outcome might be speaking the pornographic language. This is the reason why it focuses on the actual intercourse, masturbation or fellatio: Manu and Nadine's conscious sexual activeness makes use of that explicitness that is
claimed to be imaginable only in the territory of the visible, as a way to express the protagonists' individualities and how they connect with one another.

On the other hand, the ‘truth’ of sexual pleasure in hard-core porn is often sought through the genitals and close-ups of the genitals is the common method to discover ‘what is invisible’ in the bodies of both the male and the female. The fact that Baise Moi uses the same method in sex scenes might make it easier to support the initial claim of Downing, that the film reproduces the ‘erotic organization of visibility’ (Brown 1981, 10), in other words, the reductive representational strategies that naturalize sexual pleasure. We can find an alternative suggestion to interpret this porn aesthetic in the film, in Downing's another earlier article in which she investigates the ‘real’ sex in sexually explicit art films including Baise Moi, Romance (Breillat 1999) and Irréversible (Noé 2002) and she presents a more different approach than her previous criticism of Baise Moi: ‘Despite incorporating elements of pornography – close-ups of penetration and of oral sex, accompanied by pulsating music – the film does not admit of the heterosexual pornographic given that such sex is natural or inevitable’ (Downing 2004, 274).

Let’s look at one of those ‘extreme’ scenes in the light of Dawning’s argument.

In a cross-cutting scene, we see both Manu and Nadine having sexual experiences with random strangers in different places. First, we see Nadine entering the room of the receptionist in a hotel...
where they stay and she asks for a drink, then we see Nadine and the man sitting on a table looking at each other. Nadine suddenly stands up and starts kissing the man. Then there is a cut to a shot in which Manu stares at a man in a bar, and before he leaves the bar, she grabs his arm and asks where he is going. After these quick introductions to what is going to happen, we see them both having sexual interactions with the men in a cross-cutting scene. The classical function of a cross-cutting in narration is to connect the two sequences in terms of either similitude or contrast between two of them, depending on the content of the shots. In this scene, we can obviously talk about a similitude between two shots on one hand considering the exposure of body, genitals and facial expression of pleasure, but on the other hand there is a significant difference: Manu is having a sexual intercourse, whereas Nadine is performing masturbation and fellatio. In Manu's shots, we mostly see her body and her face during sex and in Nadine's shots, we mostly see her touching parts of her body and her gaze at the man while he is masturbating. Regarding the depiction of characters' sexual tendencies throughout the film (Manu is always active and dominant, Nadine is generally passive and a voyeur), this sequence is significant because, after the moment they met, it is the only time we do not see them in the same room when engaged in sexual activity. In other words, the film does not exhibit their sexual experiences separately in the film's narration, even when they perform a sexual activity alone and in different places. By this way, this scene adverts and contrasts their different sexualities and
describes how their individualities embark and then interact with the relationship between each other. Therefore, ‘the visibility’ in this scene might be a result of adopting a hard-core porn aesthetic, however more importantly it is that visibility that exposes the sexual difference between the women and emphasizes the connection between them rather than their connection either to those particular sexual partners or the sexual activity itself. Indeed, at the end of the scene, after Manu says ‘thanks’ to the man and goes away, there is a cut to a shot in which they are both in the car driving away, denoting that what happened in those separate places results in bringing them together. We can say this because the ellipsis between the end of the cross-cutting scene and the moment when they are in the car gives way to a juxtaposition of the two scenes. 

*Baise Moi* takes ‘the visible’ of hard-core porn that is supposedly based on the activity of ‘doing what comes naturally’ in Williams’ ironic words, adopting the phallocentric perspective that originates from the oppression of sexuality. This adoption enables the film to portray how sexual differences cause ‘doing what comes personally’ underlining the fluidity of their sexualities; rather than showing ‘the sex we know’ that is based on the idea of a universal sexual drive. Furthermore, at the end of this cross-cutting scene we do not see the process of ejaculations of each man. In the mainstream narrative of hard-core porn, that process takes an important place to show ‘the visibility’ of pleasure at its climactic state. In *Baise Moi*, we see the seminal fluid that
let us know that the men ejaculated but we do not know when and how exactly that happened.

By way of excluding that essential part of hard-core porn, *Baise Moi* does not conform to the mainstream porn narrative. We only see ‘the afters’ of the ejaculations of men which are located in cross-cutting and the film binds these ‘afters’ to each other, highlighting Manu and Nadine's interactions with these ‘afters’, rather than trying to show any kind of depiction of orgasm on screen. Williams in a later article on body genres describes ‘the body spectacle’ in porn genre as a representation site that casts portrayal of orgasm in its most sensational form (Williams 1991, 4). This sensational fiction is what *Baise Moi* discards within its adoption of pornographic organizing on screen. Its close-ups are the methods of interrupting the composite model of that body spectacle by way of switching back and forth between different portrayals of sexualities.

The orgasm in *Baise Moi* is not one, or two, it is *not there* to present the constructed visibility of pleasure indebted to hard-core porn. This absence of the moments of orgasm but the presence of sexual activity can be interpreted as what Downing refers to as ‘the manipulation of the gaze’: plurality of sexuality is what *Baise Moi* predominantly shows whereby excavating the constructed ‘male gaze’ required by hard-core porn from its own pornographic aesthetic and sensational fictionalization of female body.
Alternative readings of non-simulated sex would benefit from delving into why *Baise Moi* does not provide a suggestion for how female sexuality should be represented or dragged into the territory of ‘the representable’. In fact, the film strives to utilize bodily possibilities and does not attach direct subjection of feminist politics to the sexual experiences of its protagonists. With the help of Judith Butler's analysis of how feminist discourse reapply the subjection methods of power if it insists on the existence of a naturally sexed human, I have established in the first part that the feminist struggle for true representation is not productive for emancipation since the subjects are formed to fit in the representational politics of power. In this respect, I claim that *Baise Moi*, with its characters' habits of promiscuity, masturbation, searching for sexual pleasure and finally by individualizing these habits with explicit depictions; does not try to represent a certain subject of feminism that has been already constituted by power relations in society.

Rather, the film simply shows the possible individual reactions to heteronormative culture in which the oppression of sexuality locates sexual habits, like Manu and Nadine's, at the bottom of ‘the hierarchical system of sexual value’ described by Gayle Rubin in her influential text *Thinking Sex*, as an oppressive pyramid deep-seated within social structures (Rubin 1992, 279).

The subversion of the norms prescribed by the hard-core fiction around female sexuality functions on the visual level via the organization of the scenes. This is why the narrative ending
does not necessarily impair the film’s radical aesthetics: the film pushes the borders of “the representable” subjects via activating its critique through pornographic aesthetics while not still keeping its story within the borders of legal. This even boosts the emphasis on individual interpretation rather than a universal narrative and enables us to envision the attainability of different sexualities that do not seek to utilize representational politics of gender. This can be read as a form of resistance against the power that creates the illusion that there exists a natural heterosexual core in everyone and promotes the binary sex to affirm its viability.

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