



## Rethinking Pornography within the Context of the New French Extremity: *The Case of Baise-Moi*

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### Abstract

*Baise-Moi* (Despentes and Trinh Thi, 2000) is the story of two women who, marginalized by society, go on a destructive rampage where they ‘fuck’ and kill men. This study will discuss the anxieties the film has unearthed in relation to the alternative depiction of culturally accepted sexual roles and legitimate application of violent acts, through its subversion of the generic expectations of pornography. Furthermore, despite being progressive in form, challenging classical narrative structures and playing with generic tropes, the film is inherently a pessimistic film, because of its conservative ending that reaffirms the status quo.

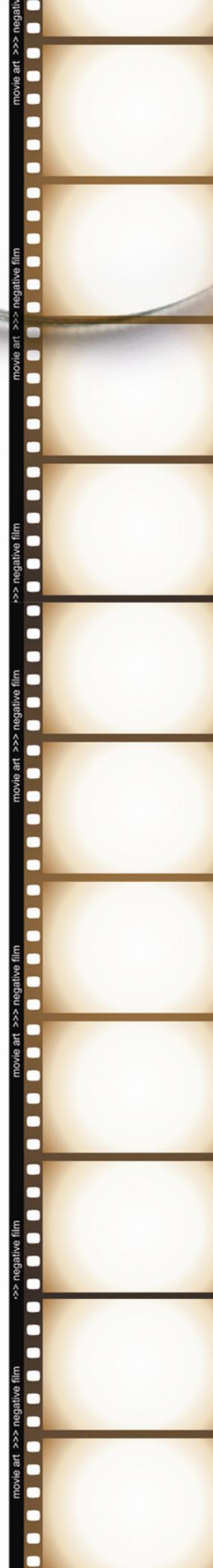
**Keywords:** Gender, sexuality, censorship, screen violence, pornography



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# *Rethinking Pornography within the Context of the New French Extremity: The Case of Baise-Moi*

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## Introduction

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an interesting movement started to take shape in contemporary French cinema<sup>1</sup>. Not all critics define it necessarily as a movement, nor was a manifesto declared, but there was a conscious decision on behalf of rooted directors to start making a certain kind of film. This body of films, formulating what James Quandt has called the “New French Extremity”, was characterized by their combination of graphic sex and violence (Quandt 2004). Despite the fact that these films were disparate in purpose, they had common threads; their directors chose to be willfully transgressive and mixed sex and violence in order to shock their audiences. And shocked were audiences indeed – it has been noted that mass walkouts took place at the screening of Claire Denis’s *Trouble Every Day* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001, as well as Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* in 2002, due to the shock of the cannibalistic nature of the former and seeing Monica Bellucci being raped for 9 minutes, without any cuts in the latter (Palmer 2007: 71). Films categorized under the New French Extremity also include scenes in which a toothbrush is being dipped into a toilet full of feces, a 13-year-old girl being deflowered, and a woman eating out the flesh from her arm.

Quandt argues that the use of “forbidden images, hackneyed from their overuse in the porn industry” (2004: 127) are used in order to reconsider the reality in which we live in and that in fact these images are authentic; full penetration is shown to the audiences<sup>2</sup>, not masked by Hollywood-like gloss and editing, but rather a much more crude, and natural looking approach to it, which makes these films more realistic in terms of what they are portraying. In a way, it seems that these directors are confronting their audiences with uncomfortable truths to see how many taboos they can break and, primarily, to provoke morality and its absolutes.

Directors well-rooted in French cinema have also made films that are considered to be part of this trend. Bruno Dumont, who is known for *La Vie de Jésus* and *L’Humanité*, is a champion of neo-realism and has made profound films about the human condition, the inwardness of moral choice and redemption. For him to hop on this bandwagon suggests a deeper, more permanent concern that is being delivered to audiences. Dumont points, “people are way too set in their ways, and they are asleep. They have to be woken up...” (Quandt 2004: 130) There is clearly the need to change traditional notions of spectatorship in Dumont’s words and the more extreme the depiction, the more jolted spectators are no doubt.

### Characterizing the New French Extremity

Looking at examples of films that have been classified under the New French Extremity, it can be seen that they vary thematically. Some are concerned by the nature of desire (Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis); others explore the ways in which global capitalism alienates us from our bodies (*Dans ma Peau* by Marina de Van, *Demonlover* by Olivier Assayas). Films such as *Irréversible* by Gaspar Noé and *Frontière(s)* (2007) by Xavier Gens reflect social anxieties and realities related to racism and xenophobia, as they paint a bleak picture of contemporary France. The worlds and people they depict are those of the French middle class: a family on a summer vacation in the south of France, a young executive in an office building in the business district of Paris, the threat of right-wing politics on the lives of struggling immigrants, a sexual assault on a woman on her way home from a party. Despite these thematic variations however, what follows in all cases, takes on a violent turn, and the spectator is not spared the details. The immediacy of the depiction of such violent acts creates an affect and a sensory experience that make the spectator question the nature of their convictions.

Despite the variation in themes and in style, the films have one point in common: all films use ‘the body’ as a symbolic site of the larger scale suffering in society. Bodies in the films of the New French Extremity are “assaulted, mutilated, violated, [ ] becom[ing] a war zone, symbolic of the attack that is supposedly performed by the same token on social, cultural and cinematic conventions” (Beugnet 2004: 295-296). Individual bodies are forced to act as social bodies (*Dans*

*Ma Peau*) or are forced into corporate image control (*Demonlover*); bodies are victimized (*Irréversible*) or are represented as destabilizing patriarchy only to be punished once again (*Baise-Moi*, 2000). In this sense, although images are forcing the limits of cinematic representation, the transgressions are visceral. Thematically, the films remain bleak and unable to offer an alternative to the visual deconstruction they offer.

The films' stories are based in the contemporary world – to the point where even adapted screenplays are reconfigured to fit the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and thus the explanation for the erupting violence can be situated in the “horreur sociétale” of “recognizable and contemporary settings” (Austin 2015: 277), as opposed to a supernatural and dark underworld, as is the case with many films engaged with screen violence. As a result, then, the films cannot be separated from their socio-cultural context, begging the questions of where the world is headed and what can be done in the face of such a gloomy outlook. In this sense, then it could be suggested that the films are highly pessimistic, and even, conservative in terms of the possibilities that they present. The filmmakers of the New French Extremity do not communicate by the correct and rules established by dominant Hollywood cinema that have seeped into cinemas all over the world, because they re-examine and question these rules. However, on a search for new representations, the endings that are portrayed in the films do not lead to redemption, or a possibility of change. Thus, rather than

having a political agenda, in terms of actually calling for a specific kind of action, it would be more correct to describe the films as resistant to the dominant forms of representation, as they make room for alternative images that defy the established order, as well as the comfortable spectator of the dominant escapist cinema. And yet, even though they create this space, it is only to return to norms and suggest the impossibility of that escape. Thus, the films do not propose a new way of living, but what they do allow for and encourage are new ways of seeing what is lived, reflecting a contemporary form of desperation.

### Aim of the Study

*Baise-Moi*, a film categorized under the New French Extremity, (Despentes and Trinh Thi, 2000) is the story of two women who, marginalized by society, go on a destructive rampage where they have sex and kill as they please. This paper will examine *Baise-Moi*, in light of the characteristics of the French New Extremity. These characteristics have been designated as: the subversion of generic tropes that has led to a new relationship with the spectator; the use of the body as undergoing sexual violence, and a pessimistic worldview that despite formal and stylistic innovations, reconfirms the status quo and the impossibility for change.

The film has unearthed anxieties in relation to the alternative depiction of culturally accepted sexual roles and legitimate applications of violent acts, through its subversion of the

generic expectations of pornography. Furthermore, the film, despite being progressive in form, challenging classical narrative structures and playing with generic tropes, is inherently a pessimistic film, because of its conservative ending that reaffirms the status quo.

### *Baise-Moi: The Censorship Ordeal*

Manu and Nadine live in the *banlieue* of a city in France. The film begins with scenes depicting the daily lives of these women, who do not know each other yet, but who have similar experiences in terms of their marginalization within their communities, made evident by the use of parallel editing. Manu is first raped, and she then kills her brother, while Nadine has an argument with her roommate and ends up strangling her. The two women cross paths at the train station and begin talking, realizing they have similar attitudes towards life. They decide to hit the road together, as Manu declares their mission to be to “drink a lot and catch guys”. They do more than this however, and murder quite a few people in graphically violent ways. This does not stop them from enjoying themselves as they have sex with men they encounter, drink alcohol, take drugs and dance their way on the road, leaving a trail of dead bodies behind them. Stopping at a car tire vendor, with the hopes of finding coffee and sandwiches, Manu is shot by the shop owner. Nadine, teary-eyed by the death of her friend and thinking back on their journey together, presented through

flashbacks, attempts to kill herself, but is stopped and caught by the police. The film ends on a freeze frame of Nadine being arrested.

The film is based on the novel written by the director, Virginie Despentes, in 1993. It was shot in 6 weeks, on digital video and with no artificial lighting. Upon its release, it was central to much controversy and was even banned in some countries across the world (Saw 2013). It was released in France in June 2000 and was initially given a 16+ rating, which was the norm for a film containing graphic sex or violence. But following intense lobbying by the organization of Promouvoir - a religious organ of the extreme-right - the State Council reclassified the film and gave it an X rating. This meant the film would receive no financial aid, would be heavily taxed and could only be shown in limited theatres. The directors and producer did not accept this agreement, and thus the film was removed from distribution. In defense of the film, a counter-petition was launched by Catherine Breillat and signed by important names in the French intellectual and artistic world. Meanwhile, some independent cinema owners defied the ban, risking a hefty fine in the process. Eventually, the Ministry of Culture re-introduced an 18+ rating and the film was re-released legally in mainstream cinema in August 2001 (Wimmer 2011: 130-131).

Despite all the rallying against the film's X rating, this did not mean that the film itself was liked by all critics. There was a clear distinction made between rallying for freedom of speech and

critically acclaiming a film. Many could not pass beyond the gratuitous sex scenes, labelling them empty shock tactics that had no motivated reason, put in the film simply as a marketing strategy to garner attention. These negative reviews pay attention to the formalistic aspects of the film, refusing to acknowledge the reworking of gender relations within the film. Indeed, Noel Burch believes that the reason there was so much controversy surrounding the film's release was with regards to the gratuitous sex and violence perpetrated by women towards men; using this as a strategic pretext, critics refused to acknowledge the gender relations at work because it "stirs up unspeakable fantasies and fears" (qtd. in Wimmer 2011: 137), in direct contradiction with the dominant paradigms of that specific socio-cultural context.

On screen sex has been under close scrutiny by the authorities since its advent because of its potential to destabilize dominant mores about sex and desire. Onscreen violence too has been subject to censorship throughout its cinematic history. But violent behavior onscreen is accepted when it is wielded by agents of law and order. So what is an issue here is not the violent act itself, but more so the moral implications of who is undertaking that act. It is a question of what kind of moral example is given to spectators rather than the graphic nature of the violence itself. So, in the case of the censorship of *Baise-Moi*, there is a certain understanding of pornography and sexuality that are being restricted and unwanted; a 'dangerous knowledge' that is being censored. Indeed,

both Huntley (1998) and Wimmer (2011) argue that censorship regulations are closely related to consolidating the hegemony of those in power, and not a question of what is reasonable or what reflects the morality of the majority. Taking cue from Angela Carter's work on pornography and the ways in which it is regulated Wimmer states that, the case of *Baise-Moi* in France has more to do with moral and critical disdain than the actual use of pornographic images, challenging more rooted ideals of identity (2011: 131). The film brings an alternative depiction to the grand narrative of culturally accepted sexual roles and legitimate applications of violent acts. Furthermore, Wimmer relates the whole scandal surrounding *Baise-Moi*, to the fact that the French film critical establishment is essentially male, with only a handful of female critics, and that it is only normal for them to reject such a film. In this sense, the ways in which the film approaches gender relations as well as the links it establishes between economic marginalization and sexual violence are occulted in the name of a discussion with regards to the use of images typically belonging to the genre of pornography.

### Shifting Generic Boundaries: Pornography and Rebellious Female Bodies

Pornography as a genre is defined by Linda Williams as “the visual representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers” (30). In pornography, there is always the question of sexual inequality and

subordination, wherein the female body serves as a spectacle for male desire, where it is exposed in all its *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Traditionally, women do not desire in pornography; their pleasures are related and serve that of the masculine. This portrayal is directly related to and represents discursive frameworks active within a socio-historical context. So when these are shattered and made visible, the simplicity contract between the spectator and the film genre is broken and the spectator is forced to be aware of itself as expectations are displaced. Thus, subverting generic conventions has a political agenda as it aims to activate the spectator into thinking about the relationship between issues that remain unquestioned or presented as natural.

*Baise-Moi* has different levels of association with the genre of pornography and the ways in which it subverts its conventions. Before discussing the visual relation, it is important to take note of the connection in terms of the industry itself and how extra-textual information relate to the text and reinforce certain aspects of it. Actresses Karen Bach and Raffaëla Anderson, as Nadine and Manu, are working actresses in the porn industry. Co-director Coralie Trih Thi had also acted in pornographic films, with porn actor Ian Scott also making an appearance in the film, as one of Manu's rapists. The presence of so many individuals active in the porn industry, have led to some critics' convictions of the film's affiliation with porn, and that the use of porn aesthetics and shots typically seen in porn films, was not a method for social commentary, but was very much porn

indeed. However, the directors reject this claim, stating that the film is not made for masturbation, and thus is not porn - the defining distinctions they would very much be in full knowledge of, due to their close ties with the porn industry. The film also problematizes the fact that, these actresses, normally the object of male desire in the pornographic films they star in, here, are situated differently, even though they are performing the same sexual acts. The film teases its male spectator with certain scenes, such as when Nadine goes to meet a client, she is displayed as an object of desire, as the camera travels over her body and the leather get up she is wearing. She is presented as what she is: a prostitute, which, by definition, is supposed to entice excitement visually. As the film develops, this moment becomes a misrepresentation, as Nadine is anything but an object of desire and instead imposes her own on the men she encounters. Thus, the presentation of Nadine and Manu as desiring subjects in the face of powerless male objects, disrupts the expectation created by the familiarity of genre of the desired spectacle for the spectator.

Furthermore, in terms of aesthetics, pornography and what is considered as ‘art’ are supposed to ‘look’ different. The way sex is framed in art is accepted because it is assumed that it serves a higher, intellectual purpose. However, in case of pornography, there is no intellectual purpose, only physical gratification. Here, there is the use of a porn aesthetic, so can it be considered art? Rebecca Huntley responds to this question by suggesting the term “cross-over

text”; texts that attract the censors’ attention the most because they cannot be situated in a clearly defined area, an area that is easily recognizable (1998: 71). Here, *Baise-Moi* uses a porn aesthetic and yet the use of it does not push the story itself into the background, which is the case with pornography. Here, the aim, like in pornography, is not just to engage the body and stimulate desire, but is to engage the mind and say something about these images and how they are culturally coded. The rape scene exemplifies the ways in which pornographic conventions are subverted to render male spectatorship problematic. During Manu’s friend’s rape, the moment of penetration is shown in close-up. In pornography, this moment of penetration is usually the moment of titillation. Here, however, arousal is rendered impossible and contradicts possibility of pleasure. Instead, the function of the penetration shot serves to heighten the sense of reality, as to the horror of the implication of what is happening. With regards to the way the rape scene was shot and the representation of rape in general, referred to in the French *banlieue* as ‘tournantes’ (literally “pass around”), Desportes states; “We didn't invent rape; “I've been raped and one of my actresses has been raped ...It's horrific, so I don't see why I shouldn't treat it that way” (qtd. in Beugnet 2007: 53). The scene is shot with a hand-held camera as bodies are beaten, stripped and penetrated, all given in close-up shots. Manu’s friend’s rape is very traumatic, both visually and aurally. She is a victim and in pain, fighting with all her might against this unauthorized intrusion on her body. But

she fails, and the moment when her rapist penetrates her and possesses her body is clearly shown in a close-up. In contrast, Manu does not open her mouth. The anger in her face can be seen, but she does as she is told; she is told to unzip her pants and to get on all fours. As her rapist penetrates her, she lets him, but her ‘inaction’ is commented on by her rapist, stating he feels like he is “fucking a zombie”, to which Manu replies she can “barely feel” what he has between his legs. Manu’s reaction contradicts the social expectations to rape at large. Through her non-reaction, she not only rejects society’s expectations of victimhood, but she also disrupts the power relation that is established between the person raped and the rapist during the act. The rapist pulls out, his male body humiliated, flaccid, rendering the male spectator sharing that same body uncomfortable and in the open.



Figure 1 and 2: Manu does not react to rape as is socially expected for a victim to: this rejection of victimhood also disrupts the power dynamic between the person conducting the rape and the one being raped.

The female bodies of Manu and Nadine in contrast are represented as strong, with an emphasis on female bonding; this creates expectations as to where that relationship might go. This expectation is not fulfilled, and male spectators are not given what they want to see, that being the female bond turning into a lesbian affair and thus once again subverting generic expectations. The potential is hinted in a scene early on in the film when Manu and Nadine decide to stay together on the road. They are in a hotel room, Nadine in her panties and Manu in a bra, dancing together and having fun. At moments, their dance gets close and sensual, suggesting the possibility of it turning into something more. Later on during their journey, as they are having sex with two men, on two separate beds but in the same room, they occasionally glance at each other, linking them erotically, as if there was a longing for the other woman. But the moment of this does not lead to more and only serves to fortify their allegiance to one another. Furthermore, other moments of bonding come to the fore especially in the calm, non-violent sequences of the film, as they lounge in a hotel room, in the garden of a man they just murdered, comfortable in the presence of one another. The women in the film are presented with a deep psychological stance: something that is pretty much never present in pornography. Here, there is a complex characterization of the characters, with reference to socio-cultural conditions that shape their lives. Hence, the film

employs conventions of pornography in order to comment on the commodification of sexual performance, where spectators are forced to think about the relationship between sex and power.



Figure 3 and 4: Manu and Nadine look over at one another during their sexual encounters, highlighting their female friendship and allegiance.

In her review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, Ginette Vincendeau (2002) points out, this film is important and worth watching because of two points it makes about violence and sex. Firstly, she states that it is an important film because it is a film about women taking power in a non-politically correct manner. The women are subjects, and they show no compromise in the face of assumptions and categorizations, dominating and humiliating desperate men. Men in the film are constantly humiliated and are never given control over these unruly bodies: in their first sexual encounter together, one man proposes they reverse 69; Manu immediately tells him to “fuck off”. Then, another they meet at a casino wants to put on a condom before having sex with Manu, stating that it is stupid of her to have sex without taking any precautions. Manu, under the pretext of giving

him a blow job, makes herself vomit in his lap. In a close-up, his facial expression is seen changing from intense desire to disgust. As she laughs hysterically and he swears at her, she head-butts him, stating they are “killers of condom dicks”. Manu and Nadine beat him to death. As his lifeless and bloody body lies on the ground, they take one last line of cocaine and head out.

The second reason Vicendeau believes the film to be important is because the women in it actually enjoy sex, having fun with it and laughing about it. The women in *Baise-Moi* are women who desire. They desire sex, and they take pleasure in the act of it. Their sexuality is pornographic, in the sense that it is a reversal of the representation of pornography, where the women takes the place of men as the active, aggressive, desiring subject and the male body becomes a prop for their leisurely use. Yet, when freed from heterosexist constraints, why does female sexuality take on such an angry nature? When talking about pornography, almost always male violence towards women has been noted to be a recurrent characteristic of the genre. So, in a sense then, *Baise-Moi* is a reversal of that claim, wherein the women are now the agents of violence. However, the violence does not only come paired with sex. On the contrary, violence is ever present in their lives from the outset, exemplified in their social setting at the beginning of the film. Thus, once Manu and Nadine hit the road, the violence simply becomes an extension of what was already a presence in their lives. Manu and Nadine, seeing no escape from the omnipresence of such violence against

them, decide to take it into their own hands and become the perpetrators of it as opposed to letting it happen to them.

### Rejection of Cultural Norms: Violent Women, Violent Outbursts

Manu and Nadine respond violently to blatant sexism where they are confronted with culturally constructed notions of femininity, which they do not let pass by and respond to in the most violent of ways. As a matter of fact, the narrative justifications of the murders they commit follow this logic from where they initially kill out of necessity (they kill the woman at the ATM machine, because they need money) to something that becomes an assault to culturally constructed notions of femininity and desire. They execute a man on the spot for his sexual aggression where, out of the blue he comes, as Nadine and Manu are walking under the rain, and asks “Do you want to feel my balls against your ass?”. Nadine shrugs and continues walking and Manu shoots him dead. Then Manu kills the arms seller for assuming the gun was for Nadine’s husband, responding to inherent sexism by saying “And what if his wife likes to shoot dickheads?”; this murder is then followed by the murder of a rich man, who tries to reason with them and understand where they are coming from. He says, “You must have suffered so much to have become this violent”. However, he goes one step too far, saying that Nadine is an “open book” for him to read. She grabs his groin and Manu points a gun to his head as they bring him down to the floor. Nadine shoots

him several times. This murder again cries out anger to other classes of society, who have no idea of what they are talking about yet claiming that they have society deciphered. Nadine and Manu afterwards head to a sex club, where they execute everybody as well. Their killing of people who are freely enjoying sexual activities demonstrates their anger towards society at large; as Foucault states, sex is culturally constructed and serves the workings of those in power (Sawicki 1998). Indeed, scenes of the sex club show, women giving men blow jobs and other men watching, and more men having sex with women. Thus, executing a group of people in a sex club is an attack on society's conception of pleasure and the perception on the sex industry at large, including pornography and the ways in which it markets bodies as objects for exploitation. As a matter of fact, the owner of the club approaches Manu and touches her; she pushes him back, which he does not understand, since it is a sex club and the whole reason why people are there is for sexual activity. Manu is angry at the unauthorized touching of her body, and after killing everyone, they humiliate the club owner, forcing him to go on all fours and making him oink like a pig and wiggle his bare behind. They shoot him through his asshole, the screen turning bright red, in a caricaturisation of the violent blood bath that has taken place. This comic book aesthetic introduced suggests that Manu and Nadine are super heroines and takes the film's socio-culturally rooted context into a fantastic atmosphere. This uprooting of context foreshadows the end to come,

wherein there is no possibility for this kind of female agency in this environment, and thus the need to remove an element of realism.



*Figures 5 and 6:* Manu and Nadine go on a killing rampage in a sex club, illustrating their rejection of society's conception of pleasure and the perception on the sex industry at large. They shoot the club owner through his asshole, at which point the screen turns bright red. This comic book aesthetic foreshadows the end to come, and the impossibility of this kind of female agency.

The foreshadowing is not only given aesthetically; earlier dialogue between Manu and Nadine hints at their eventual demise. They are aware that they will not be able to continue in this manner and will be eventually stopped. Despite the doomed streak throughout, the ending is abrupt: Nadine and Manu's agencies come to an end, where control is relinquished to the established order. The film ends with the killing of Manu by a vendor in a car tire store and the arrest of Nadine, right before she tries to kill herself. Manu and Nadine do not get to decide their fate, like they had discussed in previous scenes of the film. Instead, their transgressions are, in the end, contained and they are punished for their 'deviations', killing all the political subversive potential that the film has been building throughout its narrative. Sophie B lot, who analyses the

film in light of female friendship films, argues that the film, despite its progressive representation of the women throughout, by its ending, relinquishes power to the patriarchal status quo and reinforces a male-defined society (2004: 7). Indeed, Manu and Nadine are categorized as transgressive because their behavior do not accord with the expectations of gender and sexuality and thus they need to be repressed, eliminated by social forces. And this is exactly what happens. The final scene of the film is that of Nadine's arrest. The camera gets further and further away from Nadine as the police arrest her (in contrast to the opening shot of the film, which was a close-up of Nadine's face). This suggests that although, at the beginning of the film, identification with the lead female characters was something that was endorsed, by the end, the spectator is asked to abandon it, due to what identification, and similar line of action, can lead to - punishment by the established order. The film ends on a freeze frame of the scene of the arrest. The freeze frame ending paints a strong picture of the way in which control mechanisms will retaliate if you transgress them. As the scene freezes, the audio continues, with the police screaming at Nadine and asking her where her "slut of a friend" is. Whatever is awaiting Nadine is not good, and she will pay for what she and Manu have done. The freeze frame allows the spectator to think about the repercussions of everything that has happened in the film. There is a lot to digest, not only in terms of visual excess, but also in terms of gender politics. The underlining of the last frame in

this way allows for the truth to sink in: there is no place in this society for this kind of behavior.

Unlike the ending of *Thelma and Louise*, where the characters have the choice to decide their own fate (either be arrested or drive off the cliff), here Despentès and Trinh Thi do not even have that much hope to foster in face of such a social atmosphere.



Figures 7 and 8: The freeze frame ending of Nadine's arrest paints a strong picture of the way in which control mechanisms will retaliate if you transgress them.

### Conclusion: Extremity as a Global European Trend

While the proliferation of films manipulating generic tropes of horror and pornography began at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in France, today, films using excess as a visual style, also mixing genres in order to confront spectators have started to appear in other national cinemas<sup>3</sup>. What is important to explore is whether or not these films, like in France, come from similar feelings of malaise or are just a mimicry of a trend that can be commodified. Furthermore, the films of the New French Extremity have also been placed as a continuation of the tradition of

transgression within French art; can a similar classification be made for the Greek Weird Wave or the Austrian Feel Bad cinema?

The Austrian Feel-Bad Cinema has been coined by Denis Lim (2006) in his article for the New York Times. In the article, Lim states that the films represent the conscience of the nation, expressed through a confrontation with the abject and emphasis on negative national-cultural depictions, defying international perceptions of the country as a prosperous and wealthy nation. Directors include Michael Haneke, Ulrich Seidl and Markus Schleinzer, where they have stated that their aims are to hurt and make their spectators think (Lim 2006). On the other hand, Mattias Frey (2016) suggests this trend to be based on institutional frameworks, where he cites the single film school in Austria as influencing aesthetic choices and patterns amongst these directors (who either teach there or are the students of those teachers). Frey also points out to the fact that Austria has a small film industry, suggesting that going extreme is a good way to garner international attention.

As for what has happened in Greek cinema, Eleni Varmazi states:

“...both the political and the economic landscape of Greece since 2008 have been characterized by instability, banking crises and austerity... a small but growing number of young filmmakers began to develop alternative ways of funding their films, turning in particular to European co-production funds, at a time when the Greek membership of the European Union was under considerable threat and the Greeks’ sense of belonging to the European community was being challenged” (2019: 41).

The films are generally characterized by: “a spastic physicality, spasmodic sexuality, sporadic and broken relationships, as well as the merging of different genres” (Varmazi, 2019: 43). The founding film is considered to be *Dogtooth* (2009), directed Yorgos Lanthimos, which uses the family, as will the other films of the Wave, as a symbolic structure to criticize the system, which is “deceptive, disloyal and nonsensical” (Varmazi, 2019: 43). Although the directors deny that there is a conscious effort in their behalves to make such films in terms of a collective effort and response, it cannot be denied that there is reason for “the world's most messed-up country” to make “the world's most messed-up cinema” (Rose 2011).

Indeed, in both cases, the films are responses to developments within the nation and attempts to defy the outward appearance of prosperity (Austrian Feel-Bad Cinema) and to criticize a system that has only brought economic hardships (Greek Weird Wave). Virginie Despentes, although not primarily a filmmaker but a writer, is concerned with the representation of women and defying patriarchal notions of gender within French society and the desire they embody. The film engages with cultural taboos and challenge dominating values with regards to female identity. While this may be the case, the film nonetheless negates its own progressive approaches by its ending, suggesting that change is impossible, and those who dare such a venture will be punished. This is typical of the films of the New French Extremity: despite all of them being progressive in form, they are inherently pessimistic films, because of their conservative endings. The perpetual

violence and the inability to escape that violence is affirmed over and over again, creating a sense of defeatism in the face of social realities. Moments of liberation are undermined by the ending of the films. There is no space for any kind of freedom, which causes *Baise-Moi* by its ending to take a giant step back from the progressive gender politics it had engaged with throughout the film, stating that society needs to punish and repress these transgressions in order to fulfil the ideal image it has of itself.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> French cinema and in general European cinema has had women directors who took on controversial approach to women, sex and pornography through their work which has been thoroughly studied by film scholars previously (see Straayer (1993), Belot (2019)). Other women directors like Isabel Coixet (*The Secret Life of Words*, 2005), Jen and Sylvia Soska (*American Mary*, 2012), Jennifer Kent (*The Nightingale*, 2016) , Coralie Fargeat (*Revenge*, 2017), Natalia Leite (M.F.A.,2017) and Isabella Eklöf (*Holiday*, 2019), are among those women directors whose recent work still create controversy both among critics and scholars. For more on this please see Billson (2019) [Editor's Note].

<sup>2</sup> There are other films from other countries which are part of this trend such as *9 Songs* (2004), *Lie With Me* (2005), *Love* (2015) and most recently *DAU Natasha* (2020). [Editor's Note].

<sup>3</sup> Such examples vary from to *Peeping Tom* (1960) to *Strange Days* (1995) [Editor's Note].