



Some Problems with Gendered Subjectivity and Representation: Baise Moi and Hard-Core Pornography

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Volume 9.2 (2021) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2021.321 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract

Based on a theoretical framework developed by the works of critical theorists Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, this article questions the role of gendered representation in the discourse around the film *Baise Moi* (Despentes and Trinh Thi, 2000). The film has been criticized, due to its engagement with pornography and trash aesthetics as well as its “bad ending”, and associated with a reaffirmation of patriarchal power practices on screen. This article argues that such readings remain within the limited territory of seeking an ideal representation of femininity based on the gender/sex binary which Butler’s early work on gender has critiqued. The first section of the article explores the discourse of “extremity” and “illegality” that surrounds *Baise Moi* by way of situating the concept of “screen representation” within the Foucauldian territory of power. Following this trajectory, the article discusses how *Baise Moi* conveys a layered audio-visual organization and negativity that attest to the attainability of non-conforming sexualities through an ironic adoption of pornography. It is argued that the film’s ironic and referential negative aesthetics exploits and overwrites the narrative – the narrative that provides the means through which the film can overturn gender norms associated with the genres it adopts from, such as hard-core porn’s idealism around female sexuality.

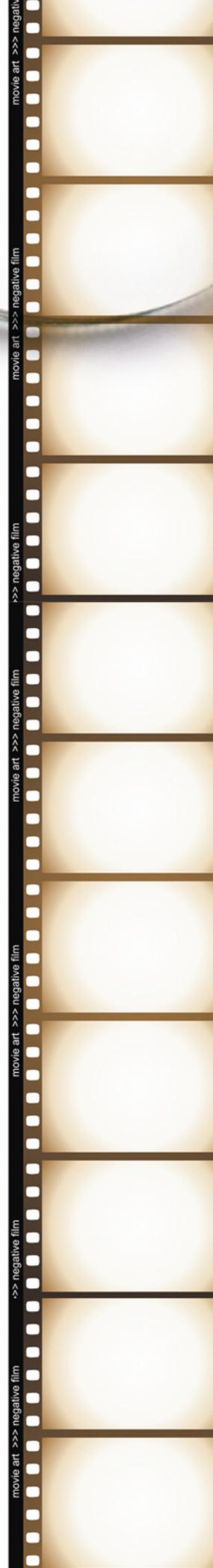
Keywords: Gender; Genre; Pornography; Sexuality; Representation; French New Extremity; Michel Foucault; Judith Butler



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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, such as gender binary and the so-called naturalness of sexuality, continue to hold resonance today. When sexuality is taken as a modern concept evolved through the structures of power and bio-politics, 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 aesthetic engagement that conveys a 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 to lead critics and scholars to place the film within the category of French New Extremity and to compare it with other films associated with this category; 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 common argument: *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 the patriarchal gaze that dominates porn industry. This article counterargues that the visual organization of sex in the film as well as its parodic tone and cinematographic reflexivity overwrite the direct meaning of the “bad ending” found on the narrative level, rather than vice-versa, especially in terms of subverting the politics of visibility. I argue that it is precisely these narrative conventions of genres – i.e. hard-core porn and road movies – that enabled the film’s irony as these conventions were utilized and disrupted simultaneously by the film’s low-budget trash 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, did not necessarily categorize her film as an ‘extreme film’ when critics

called it one of the ‘the New French Extremity’s most graphic and confrontational texts’ (Romney 2004). For instance, Desportes gave a very simple answer to a question about whether they made the film as a feminist warning in an interview in 2009: ‘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’ (Kelly). While Desportes continued giving such ironic responses to the reception of *Baise Moi*’s relationship to ‘extremity’, film scholar Neil Archer opened 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 still hard to brush off the ‘extremity talk’ that revolves around the film. Starting from the film’s tongue-in-cheek 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 initial reception.

Language of the Law

On the DVD cover of the film *Baise Moi* (2000), there is the tagline ‘the most extreme thriller you'll ever see legally’. This tagline can be subject to a discussion around what type of a promotional strategy was followed and might require a look at the film market within which that strategy was assumed to be working. On the other hand, it brings the problem of legality to spectatorship, 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 genre and what kind of a relationship porn genre has with mainstream cinema, it underlines 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 film industry, I would like to turn to the symbolic meanings of the ‘legal’ for these 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, resulting in

the creation of parodic cinematic expressions which transgress the representational politics of legality.

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. The connotation that the tagline allures to is that *Baise Moi* includes almost-illegal-to-watch pornographic scenes. Here, ‘pornographic’ does not have to be illegal altogether in order for it to carry the idea of illegality. The mainstream heterosexual pornography in this formula is constructed as illegal, independent from the factuality of such 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 everywhere.

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 conforming to the legal does not require a total exclusion of the extreme, it is implied that there exists a tendency towards illegality in the audience, 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’, that which produces illegality by way of the law's construction of borders, implies 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*. The goal behind this premise of the tagline seems to be about promoting 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 is directly connected to the discursive sphere around the film, from the tagline to the film's role in the changes in censorship regulations both in France and the UK, the film's ironic appropriation of hard-core pornography signifies a negativity that projects what is lacking within the representational formats of its associated genres. Leila Wimmer and Scott McKenzie investigate the scandalous reception of the film and the rating and censorship issues surrounding its inclusion of pornographic images (McKenzie 2002; Wimmer 2011). McKenzie's focus on the British Board of Film Classification's report on *Baise Moi* and their request for significant cuts unearths the obfuscated moral agendas around what is considered de-facto pornographic by the rating systems (McKenzie 2002: 321-323). As such, how can we situate the negativity ingrained in the ironic employment of hard-core pornography in *Baise Moi* in terms of how it constructs its own subjects in relation to gender? How do the borders of legality provide the means through which the film questions and parodies the gendered representational formats of porn and road-movie? To attempt to answer these questions, I would like to turn to Judith Butler's deconstruction of gender/sex binary as it seems to provide a theoretical trajectory for the seemingly paradoxical aesthetics of *Baise Moi*; aesthetics that points to some sort of an illegal feminism that is sceptical of the representability of gender.

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). Here, 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 narrative, i.e. Manu's brother or Nadine's roommate, provide the initial triggers for them to hit the road and thus enable their repressions to become visible and lead them to transform 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 throughout a road-movie excessiveness. The mobilization of their 'lowness' to a parodic criminality on the narrative level is intensified by the mobilization of the narration itself to an ironic representation of a self-aware genre hybridity. This self-aware genre-appropriation of the film ultimately deals with the representation of sex in road movie or hard-core porn as a culturally constructed concept, hence how sex itself becomes legal, visible and intelligible is being interrogated in this genre-centered paradigm.

Butler questions the understanding of gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, problematizing 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 actually might not be 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 these categories are developed are closely connected to the issue of how representation can be possible. 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 on which the law seems to apply its regulative and productive functions. It is commonly accepted now 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 be 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 without reiterating that the 'true' representation of femaleness, or maleness for that matter, can only be found outside of power relations, as if we can find 'a fe/male' outside of it?

It is important at this point to clarify the way the term 'representation of female sexuality' is understood. The question is how the subject of a particular representation can be 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. As such, assuming that a natural 'female sexuality' has not found its true representation in culture runs the risk of proving itself to be erroneous. Judith Butler points out in the introduction of *Gender Trouble* that feminist analyzing 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 fixed 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 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 the case of *Baise Moi* – create an 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 its 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 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 to 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 could be an example of this kind of veiled resistance, challenging the borders between legal and illegal without needing to locate itself outside the legal's 'field of force'. In fact, the tagline seems to use a method quite contrary to a hypothetical necessity of an ascription of a utopic status beyond the legal, it states that the illegality can be experienced specifically within the borders of the legal.

Drawing from this trajectory, we can situate *Baise Moi* through a number of theories around subverting the borders of subjectivity and argue that antagonism and dissonant visibilities can mobilize the methods of subjection found in 'binary sex'. I discuss below how *Baise Moi* produces a

cinematic resistance and visible antagonism against ‘binary sex’ developed by formulating its own pornographic language via pushing the borders between art-house and pornography. Next section focuses on the scenes where *Baise Moi* borrows from hard-core pornography for irony, 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 point out the problems with the core idealism of ‘binary sex’ and its subjection methods that structure the very same genre. The film does not look to ascribe the gendered subjection, which hard-core porn inherently holds for women, to its characters, since it focuses on individuality and attainability of different sexualities that are not conforming to the representational structures. At the same time, it shows the possibility of constructing swerving subjectivities and connections that push against these power structures which produced hard-core porn's assumptions about a universal sexuality based on ‘binary sex’.

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, seems to have given way to look at those scenes as sexually provocative and pornographic by taking them outside of their contexts. 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). Some of the 'non-pornographic' scenes in *Baise Moi* 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 (ironically it is the same understanding that appears as a precursor of anti-porn feminism). Moreover, Downing does not disagree that there is a chance to view sex scenes in a more constructive light than merely as hard-core pornography. However, the way *Baise Moi* engages with hard-core pornography and post new-Hollywood thrillers, such as *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne 1987), prevents the film from fulfilling that chance according to Downing. She states that *Baise Moi* reproduces the reductive assumptions based on 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* seem to be the main elements that lead Downing to come to that conclusion. At the end, she seems to be separating the sex scenes in the film from other scenes in favour of investigating the film's adoption of pornography. I would like to explore this separation and Downing's criticism of ‘real’ sex in *Baise Moi* and suggest that the film actually disrupts the phallogentrism of hard-core porn.

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 points 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). Linda Williams' analysis of hard-core pornography as a body genre is particularly useful in this trajectory for Downing: ‘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 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 non-linear mode of living based on performance while they constantly move and look for performative actions that construct a self-reflexive narration. By underlining the very performativity of the fiction of hard-core porn and how it relies on performance to construct female sexuality, *Baise Moi* deconstructs female sexuality through constantly pointing at its own performativity in the tone of a mock-documentary.

Furthermore, Williams draws attention to the historical development of the hard-core porn genre and how the invention of photography and cinema provided the means through which the phallogentric 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 male pleasure 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 orgasm that supposedly belongs to the female body, 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 human 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 ‘female body’, 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 phallogentric 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 ‘female body’, therefore, comes out as the source of excessive pleasures that phallogentric power cannot define and insert into its own narrative of pleasure as much as it wishes to. This phallogentric point of view can only try to understand the ‘female body’ 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 deploy this type of narrative, not even as an internal episode, and they are only parts of the film's own narrative structure (i.e. we do not see a ‘complete’ orgasm and the sex scenes have other functions in the overall narrative). When they are taken out of this structure, they would not provide enough material to establish the narrative structure around orgasm 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. It renders sexual explicitness of hard-core pornography secondary to the self-aware relationship between two protagonists.

After putting the history of pornography under scrutiny and explaining that cinema (and accordingly, pornography) 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 counts for the possibility of pornography providing resources for resistance due to its direct engagement with how sexuality can be constructed. 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 as part of its resistance. *Baise Moi* precisely makes this underscoring: the heterosexual intercourse, the activity that is directly or indirectly at the center of hard-core mainstream porn, is shown explicitly, it is what we know as visible; however it is tied with the characters' parodying of this visibility as a source of pleasure and how their pleasure is not disentangled from the culture that can still manage to be utterly shocked while experiencing ‘the visible’ outside of field of porn. At the same time, *Baise Moi* does not intend to impose an additional meaning onto the ways that Manu and Nadine have sex, only showing that they want it in an ironic tone (they mock the men they sexually encounter as well as their own lack of smart lines). By way of showing how they have sex as performance, 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, almost like a mock-porn. This is the reason why it focuses on the actual intercourse, masturbation or fellatio: Manu and Nadine’s self-aware sexual activeness makes use of the explicitness that is claimed to be imaginable only in the territory of the visible, as a way to convey its parody and express the protagonists’ mockery as coping mechanisms as well as how they connect with one another through such parodic transgression.

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 bodily pleasure. 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 Downing’s earlier article in which she investigates the ‘real’ sex in sexually explicit art films including *Baise Moi*, *Romance* (Breillat 1999) and *Irréversible* (Noé 2002). This time, she presents a different approach than her later 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). I would like to look at one of those ‘extreme’ scenes in light of Downing’s argument in the final section below.

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 in close-ups. 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 full-of close-ups 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, 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 dominant, Nadine is rather passive and most importantly 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 through their self-aware

sexual performativity 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 phallogentric perspective that originates from the oppression of sexuality. This adoption enables the film to portray how sexual performativity can function as a homosocial connection point and the sexual differences between the characters underline both the fluidity of their sexualities and their awareness of performative aspects of such sexually visible ascriptions; 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 heterosexual 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, the sex scenes in *Baise Moi* do not

conform to the mainstream porn narrative. We only see ‘the afters’ of the ejaculations of men which are located in the cross-cutting scene through which the film binds these ‘afters’ to each other, highlighting Manu and Nadine's interactions with these ‘afters’, rather than centralizing 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 hard-core 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 the 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 reapplies 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 might not be productive for emancipation since the subjects are formed to fit in the representational politics of power. In this respect, I argued 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 self-parodies 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 ironic 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 the legal. It needs the 'bad ending' to disassociate itself from a utopic project only to push the borders of the genre by dislocating its sexual idealism as failure and absence. This boosts the emphasis on individual interpretation rather than a

climaxed narrative around how female sexuality should look like and enables the viewer 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 visual structures of power that create the illusion that there exists a natural heterosexual core in everyone, promote the binary sex to affirm its viability and produce porn to regulate what can be visible.

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