The grand style of the epoch. Baise-moi – girls better than maenads, darker than furies

Nicole Brenez

For Lionel Soukaz

'I hardly believe that the fair sex is capable of principles'.

Immanuel Kant, Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime[1]

Contrary to a widespread opinion found in the French press at the moment of its release and then of its ‘X’ rating – even in the most well-informed cinema journals[2] – Virginie Despentes’ and Coralli Trinh Thi’s Baise-moi (France 2000) is without doubt a work of formal intelligence and figurative pertinence. Not only is it by no means a sordid, passive film but – like Philippe Grandrieux’s Sombre (France, 1998) – it is on the side of the sublime in its intensity and in its formal emancipation: it embodies the most advanced style of our time. Baise-moi belongs to this grand style that the epoch needs, and which will one day come to represent it – just as Luis Buñuel’s Un chien andalou (France 1928), Marcel Hanoun’s Une histoire simple (France 1958) or Philippe Garrel’s Le Berceau de crystal (France 1975) represent their times, precisely because they dared to criticise contemporary history.

A work’s critical force depends on the way in which it creates a formal dialogue with ideology, and this is where Baise-moi shows some radical health: the film doesn’t even consider ideology a valid interlocutor, shoving it off camera and exploding it whenever there is the slightest sign of it coming back within the shot – while knowing perfectly well, however, that all will ultimately crash against its opaque brutality. When Nadine (Karen Bach), in black underwear and with her gun’s red ray, practises aiming at everything around her, her gestures are pure gesticulation: her poses provoke the unfathomable nothingness of the surrounding violence, which is nothing indeed – in the sense that it is unworthy. But these gesticulations also indicate how violence spreads incurably in the street, the hotel, the self, the off-frame. There is nothing left to oppose to it but that simple, organic beauty able to overcome its condemnation, a bit like Alexander Dovzhenko’s soldier offering his naked torso to the bullets in Arsenal (USSR 1929), finally to be reborn in a loop effect at the end. Except that in Baise-moi, there is no more trace of belief or hope. All that’s needed is the simple execution of a beautiful gesture to send the demeaning world back to its nonentity-status.

Like Ms .45 (Abel Ferrara, US 1981) and A Gun for Jennifer (Todd Morris and Deborah Twiss, US 1996) – and also Ms 6T va crack-er (Jean-François Richet, France 1997) – Baise-moi is structured on an anamorphosis of everyday life. Each of the films begins or ends with an ordinary scene of terror and, thanks to a qualitative leap, this primal scene develops into a fantastical, exacerbated version of itself – the scale of the leap showing the full extent of its intolerableness. At the beginning of Ms .45 the heroine, Thana (Zöd Lund), leaves the office with other female colleagues. In the noisy street a row of horny men hail and solicit them. Thana rushes into the subway and, upon exiting, is raped twice, in a nightmarish transliteration of everyday sexual harassment (also included at the beginning of The Addiction [Abel Ferrara, US 1995]). At the end of A Gun for Jennifer, a young barmaid, plus the two survivors of the bloody ride (one dark-haired and one blonde), are harassed in a bar by a bunch of crude boozers. A new massacre materialises, the image freezes, the film stops. But the two survivors will return to cinema in the guise of Baise-moi’s heroines.

At the start of Baise-moi, a young, anonymous woman goes to fetch her boyfriend in a bar where he is playing billiards. He turns her away; she insists and suggests they have a drink; he insults her; she sits down and will not speak any more. The heroines will take charge of that insult, their violent acts externalising and scripting the intimate suffering of this first, young girl. There is only one true criminal in Baise-moi: the boy with the billiard cue. The substance of these films is the contrary of the Freudian uncanny: monstrous familiarity, that even more terrible dimension of experience which also shapes the works of David Lynch, and other lesser known films such as The Hunting Party (Don Medford, US 1971), a critical Western about conjugal life refigured in terms of a phantasmatic violence that “translates” differently for husband and wife.

As Augustine pondered, unde hoc malum – where does all this evil come from? On that point, Baise-moi is perfectly modest and coherent: the film is not concerned with causes but only with effects – suffering itself. This is not because the film is incapable of dealing with the question, but because it was already brilliantly handled in Sombre. Grandrieux’s masterpiece goes to the limit in describing the death drive, the greedy desire which inhabits human creatures – that insatiable thirst which is the reason why men can’t live together, why they’d rather slaughter someone or bruise themselves than give up their desire. The beast of that film represents a dark force illustrating the incontestable Freudian diagnostic which demonstrates the impossibility of any political utopia.

[1]Their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for...
After Sombre, it seems difficult to go any deeper into this explanation of causes. But particular points can be specified. Claire Denis's Trouve Every Day (France 2001), for instance, underlines the fact that the drive in question comes indiscriminately from both men and women — something already suggested but not developed in the conceptual, allegorical style of Sombre, since its figurative frame (based upon a sole masculine protagonist) could not allow it. Or, as in the case of Baise-moi, one can deal with the victim, not the torturer. Let’s not forget that the actress playing the black ogre’s first prey is Coraïle Trinh Thi.

As to the treatment of the anamorphosis, A Gun for Jennifer chooses completely opposite solutions to Baise-moi. The former proceeds by accumulation of narrative features. Each character carries highly loaded backstories justifying their acts: the bad cop has already raped a little girl; the good cop has already lost a partner; Jesse (the leader of the rebellious women) has been trained by her father, a former Green Beret, whom she killed at fourteen because he was raping her and her little sister … The visual and narrative richness reaches a peak with a structuring effect that even Peckinpah would not have dared: one murder elides another! By contrast, Baise-moi proceeds via suppression, a revalidated minimalism: the girls don’t tell anyone about their lives, they refuse to speak, they are not chased, they have no goal, no future, no ideal, they only have one question: “How to die beautifully?” (which they won’t, since one dies by surprise and the other not at all).

Baise-moi cultivates simplicity: from the most violent murders which are probably the most straightforward and indifferent, to the point of sheer reactivity – three bullets answering quick as a flash to the passer-by who hails the girls (“Don’t you want to feel my balls beating against your ass?”). The narrative justification of the murders seems to disappear progressively, but it actually becomes more and more political: first, killing for money (the woman at the cash dispenser), then to answer sexual aggression (the passer-by), to annihilate sexual fantasies of degradation (the casino gambler), to refute a cliché (the arms seller guilty of making the assumption that the gun was for some husband), and finally to decimate a libertarian group, since what the film is deeply about is a certain conception of pleasure (to which I shall return).

In other words, Baise-moi has one essential enemy, argumentation: no more time for explanations, “only violence helps where violence rules.” Sombre's opening shows how the urge to possess a female body can take penetration to the point of murder. In Baise-moi, denying a boy the right to tell his fantasy (the foursome scene, when Nadine sends her partner away) is a word for word answer, a confirmation by a feminine reverse shot, that indeed some utterances of desire, even those expressed in a frivolous and would-be complicitous register, are not worth hearing any more (“What would be nice, girls, is you two making us a little 69”). The heroines of Baise-moi reject everything, the least restraint, the least order or suggestion, the faintest trace of a will different from theirs — no matter whether they have to renounce life and even tragedy (“to immolate oneself is a bit too concealed”). They work to destroy everything, in the pure negativity of the irrevocable. As Nietzsche wrote in a 1887 note on “European Nihilism”:

Nihilism as a symptom that the underprivileged have no comfort left; that they destroy in order to be destroyed; that without morality they no longer have any reason to “resign themselves”. [4]

So, what is left?

Irony. The only possible form of expression, which naturally backfires on itself (Manu: “Fuck, we don’t even have a sense of the genre, we don’t say the good lines at the right moment”). There remains everything that needs to be suppressed, which means inventing the art in gestures of destruction (Nadine: “We’ve got fine gestures, that’s a start”). Like Jesse says in A Gun for Jennifer; “Let’s do it in style”.

There are only two places where a man pays for the right to ‘exped himself: public toilets and women. Charles Baudelaire, My heart laid bare [5]

Where does this act of gesture come from? It comes from pornography, conceived as a reservoir of corporeal know-how (the acrobatics of Manu [Rafaelia Anderson], the sexual frankness of the girls). And from a network of droll references, to Showgirls (Paul Verhoeven, US 1995), Ms .45, Carne (Gaspar Noé, France 1991), Scarface (Brian De Palma, US 1983) … The list can be extended to include other films which develop a female rape-revenge scenario, such as Rape Squad (Bob Kelljan, US 1974), I spilt on your grave (Mai Zarchi, US 1978), aka Day of the woman, I hate Your guts and Rape and revenge of Jennifer Hill, Alley Cat (Edward Victor, US 1982), Steel and Lace (Ernest D. Farino, US 1990) and Handgun.[Tony Garnett, UK 1983), the realistic version of Ms .45. In that constellation, Handgun has the principal virtue of developing, with much attention and subtlety, the portrait of the male antagonist – this time a Texan buck – probably constituting the origin of A Gun for Jennifer, as it already sketches a scene of sodomy with a revoler (the feminine counterpart of that gestural climax can be seen in Abel Ferrara’s Cat Chaser [US 1989], when Kelly McGillis is raped with a gun).

The bodies and movements in Baise-moi come from further back still: consciously or not, these gestures and attitudes are elements taken from ancient archetypes, the Amazons, the Maenads, the Furies. On the ground of that eminent figurative material, A Gun for Jennifer and Baise-moi share something essential, but proceed in opposite ways.

A Gun for Jennifer makes its figurative legacy explicit and claims it: the protagonists are strippers in the nightclub they own; like the Bacchantes they dance, drink, go into a trance; like the Amazons they gather in a tribal way and train deep in the forest. They have a precise objective (to castrate rapists); they provoke political power, in the shape of the heroines of A Gun for Jennifer [Ernest D. Farino, UK 1983], and finally to decimate a libertine group, since what the film is deeply about is a certain conception of pleasure (to which I shall return).

But these Maenads are much stronger, for they worship nobody – they have no god. The only trace of an alliance is the proposition made to Nadine by the ludicrous intellectual: “I’d make many other pacts with you”. That very proposition is followed straight away by a cold execution expressing the height of contempt, a device borrowed from Ms .45. The Bacchic climate and the strange necessity of the final appointment with nature root itself. The little body of a Bacchante demands some ancient ritual; and if Nadine tries to die jumping into a Vosges lake, it is somehow guided by a distant reminiscence of Vosges, that is presumably because something in the film instinctively remembers Dionysus’ status as the god of vegetation. If Manu’s corpse is burnt with leaves, it is because The Bacchic climate and the strange necessity of the final appointment with nature root itself.
In a more radical way, the girls of *Baise-moi* forsake any kind of political gathering or project, renouncing the Amazonian model. Here again, the film achieves an important critical breakthrough, for this myth is conventionally used to eliminate any vague desire for female independence. Each version of the legend finds the three Amazon queens defeated by a much stronger warrior: Penthesilea by Achilles, Antiope by Theseus, the virgin Hippodamia by Pelops. The legend of the Amazons, figures of rebellion doomed to death (their practical organisation is barely described), enables, in fact, a way of confining and discrediting the hypothesis of a matriarchal form of social order. [8] Unlike the group in *A Gun for Jennifer* constituted as a paramilitary commando unit, *Baise-moi*’s girls slip away from any such association; even their meeting with a criminal family which incites them to steal affords no result.

In opposition to the protagonists of *A Gun for Jennifer*, perpetually dishevelled and howling – in this, respecting the Maenadic iconography to the letter (women boiling with desire, drunkenness and rage) – the girls in *Baise-moi* remain rather sleepy (laborious waking-up at the criminal family’s place; the girl who shelters them saying: “You can’t let yourself die that way, doing nothing, it can’t be”, to which Manu replies: “Yes, it can”); they are bored to death (at the Biarritz hotel, Nadine: “Don’t you find it strange nothing’s going on?”); they don’t drink sacred wine but absolutely anything (coke in the “Jack”); they don’t sacrifice to any cult or show any solidarity but are deeply selfish (Nadine kills her roommate for a bit of grass; they don’t get excited when faced with events, and they kill in cold blood. Of course, they constantly get drunk, live in music, dance and enjoy, but once more, in a radical way. They have replaced divine possession (the mania) by disenchanted irony. And this is again a critical solution, since these characters escape for once the association of wrath with madness, breaking the common link between feminine anger and pathology, which all their models foster – *A Gun for Jennifer, Ms. 45* and the others, with the exception of *Handgun*, which offers a rational lesson as an alternative solution (the heroine is a history teacher). Nothing possesses these women, they are not mad or hysterical (Manu, after being raped: “I’ve left nothing precious in my pussy”) and they look reality in the face (Manu at the woman who is also about to be raped: “You’re French enough to get the RMI?”).[9]

The reality targeted here can be summed up thanks to the words of Maud Maurin, transsexual and prostitute and European deputy of the Italian Radical Party, whose statement was recorded by Lionel Soukaz in his video diary of April 1991, during a demonstration against an abortion bill: “Whatever their number, women are definitely a sexual minority”. This may be exactly the point that makes *Baise-moi* provisionally inadmissible: rebellion stands without extenuating figurative circumstances, it is perfectly self-sufficient, with the serene lucidity (treated as burlesque apathy) of those who don’t believe in anything anymore.

In Greek mythology, the most fundamental figures of vengeance are the Furies, mothers of life, guardians of ancient laws and bearers of Chthonian powers against the “new gods” (such as Dionysus and Apollo): ruthless goddesses who, as Walter Otto wrote (commenting on Aeschylus’ *The Eumenides*), “know only the facts”.[10] Just like them, the girls of *Baise-moi* are “night women” who act mercilessly. As in tragedy, they will kill their own brother rather than enduring his lack of respect (Manu to her brother whom she is going to shoot: “Fuck, you don’t even ask how I was”). But their law doesn’t consist in guarding the power of fecundity. It deals with something darker still, more confused and enigmatic: pleasure itself.

*He’s come! It’s a boy!* – *an executioner in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Salò* (Italy 1975)

If we were to establish the history of connections between the avant-garde and pornography, we would be in less danger of underestimating *Baise-moi*. This history includes (among others) *L’age d’or* (Buñuel, Spain 1930), *Un chant d’amour* (Jean Genet, France 1950), *Flesh of Morning* (Stan Brakhage, US 1956), *Flaming Creatures* (Jack Smith, US 1963), *Behind the Green Door* (Jim and Arte Michell, US 1972), *Amours collectives* (Jean-Pierre Bouyxou, France 1976), *Le regard* (Marcel Hanoun, France 1977), *Un film porno* (Maurice Lemalite, France 1978), *Ixe* (Lionel Soukaz, France 1980), *Love Stinks* (Wilhelm et Birgit Hein, Austria 1982), and *Le troisième œil* (André Almuré, France 1989). Of course, in each instance these works question the very notion of pornography. This is nothing like a history of the obscenity and the intolerable, of the kind that belongs to Vincent, François, Paul and the others (anyone, all the time, *passim*).[11] For *Baise-moi*, like *A Gun for Jennifer*, fights less with relationships of domination between men and women than with a political problem: the confiscation of the ideology of pleasure as a value.

Why, at the end of the film, do the girls kill all the clients from a libertine group: men, women and transvestites, whoa priori could be regarded as objective allies on the grounds of their transgressive sexual behaviours? It is a bit like, in *Handgun*, listening to a eulogy of sensual liberation and sexual fantasy from the Texan fascist who uses that discourse to rape the heroine, meanwhile threatening her with a weapon. It is necessary to get rid of those men in *Baise-moi* precisely because they are clients, and because pleasure is not an argument: with gunshots, the film makes the distinction between consumerist pleasure (the libertine group, like the hypocritical fascist) and real pleasure. It is for once the association of wrath with madness, breaking the common link between feminine anger and pathology, which all their models foster – *A Gun for Jennifer, Ms. 45* and the others, with the exception of *Handgun*, which offers a rational lesson as an alternative solution (the heroine is a history teacher). Nothing possesses these women, they are not mad or hysterical (Manu, after being raped: “I’ve left nothing precious in my pussy”) and they look reality in the face (Manu at the woman who is also about to be raped: “You’re French enough to get the RMI?”).[9]

The only affirmative scene concerning the issue of real pleasure takes place in the kitchen of the Biarritz hotel: Nadine and the night watchman, at a distance and facing each other, instinctively in harmony, masturbate one for the other, being in a way the guarantor for each others’ desire and each others’ pleasure. Then the film can finally, tranquilly celebrate, in two shots, the phallus, like in some old, rustic Dionysian feast. Is that enough? No, but this is where things stand at present.

What is unbearable is the conversion of pleasure into a supreme capitalistic argument. We still don’t know very clearly what to set against this except anger and destruction, insofar as the individual conditions of access to pleasure – so perilous in themselves (cf. *Sombre*) – can definitely not become solutions, or values, or even contradictory forces, for fear of distorting immediately their wild, socially irretrievable and anti-economical aspects.

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Is it serious, really, to assert that such a small, modest film – aggressive, irresponsible, desperate, concerned only with the body – is a matter of the sublime, even the sublime of formal emancipation, when that notion is traditionally associated with magnificent temples and noble symphonies? One, indeed, can contest such a terminology – not because it would be improper, but because it would be below what is at work here. It is necessary to recall the words of Theodor Adorno, even though he despised cinema – *A Gun for Jennifer, Ms. 45* and the others, with the exception of *Handgun*, which offers a rational lesson as an alternative solution (the heroine is a history teacher). Nothing possesses these women, they are not mad or hysterical (Manu, after being raped: “I’ve left nothing precious in my pussy”) and they look reality in the face (Manu at the woman who is also about to be raped: “You’re French enough to get the RMI?”).[9]

Translated by Aïcha Bahcelioglu, with assistance from Adrian Martin. The author thanks Maria Klonaris, Adrian Martin, Raphaël Millet, Jean-Pierre Moussaron, Mark Peranson and Katerina Thomadaki.

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In Greek mythology, maenads (/ˈmiːnædz/; Ancient Greek: µαινάδες [maiˈnades]) were the female followers of Dionysus and the most significant members of the Thiasus, the god's retinue. Their name literally translates as "raving ones". Maenads were known as Bassarids, Bacchae /ˈbækiː/, or Bacchantes /ˈbækənts, bəˈkænts,-ˈkɑːnts/ in Roman mythology after the penchant of the equivalent Roman god, Bacchus, to wear a bassaris or fox skin. Chahut Maenad is a young Alternian troll living in Outglut during the time period of Hiveswap and Hiveswap Friendsim. Chahut was first revealed during the Hiveswap Troll Call event alongside Nihkee Moolah on November 29, 2017. Chahut later went on to be featured in Hiveswap Friendship Simulator: Volume Nine alongside Azdaja Knelax. She appears to be a subjuggulator, much like The Grand Highblood and bears a striking resemblance to him. Her bullet points were "2 weeks from exile", "single and ready to Baise-moi – girls better than maenads, darker than furies. Nicole Brenez. Baise-moi belongs to this grand style that the epoch needs, and which will one day come to represent it – just as Luis Buñuel's Un chien andalou (France 1928), Marcel Hanoun's Une histoire simple (France 1958) or Philippe Garrel's Le Berceau de crystal (France 1975) represent their times, precisely because they dared to criticise contemporary history. A work's critical force depends on the way in which it creates a formal dialogue with ideology, and this is where Baise-moi shows some radical health: the film doesn't even consider ideology a valid interlocutor, shoving it off camera and explodi

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Nicole Brenez works as Professor of Cinema at Université Paris 3 Sorbonne nouvelle, and programs experimental cinema for the Cinémathèque française. Her many writings include a book on Abel Ferrara (French and English editions) and a collection of essays, De la figure en général et du corps en particulier(Brussels: De Boeck, 1998).