

The Violence of Women: On *Baise-moi* by Virginie Despentes

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Theorizing the violence of women is not an obvious thing to do. In a review of one of the rare books that addresses the question (*De la violence et des femmes*),¹ a journalist from *Le Monde* evokes the “courage” required to take on a subject so “disturbing,” even “iconoclastic.”² Accordingly, the authors included in this collection (historians, anthropologists) are quick to underscore the “somber and demanding character of this subject for those who work on it.”

It is certainly not neutral or anodyne to take up the feminine from its truly darkest side. Beyond the ancient myths (Astarte, Medea, the Maenads, etc.), it must be admitted there is rarely occasion to evoke the criminal fury of women except in cases of mental illness. The famous Papin sisters, for instance—the basis for Jean Genet’s play, *The Maids*—who massacred their employer and her daughter, smashed their heads in, ripped them to shreds, and tore their eyes from their sockets. The same sort of destructive orgy is described in *Baise-moi*, the sulfurous novel by Virginie Despentes, whose own cinematographic adaptation of the book has caused much ink to be spilled. Rather than enucleating their victims, Despentes’s couple of female killers eviscerate them, smash their faces, and defile a cadaver with their urine. It is mainly the book, published in 1999,³ that we will attempt to examine here.

¹ Cécile Dauphin and Arlette Farge, eds., *De la violence et des femmes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999).

² Antoine de Baecque, “La violence au féminin,” *Le Monde*, October 31, 1997, x.

³ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: Grove Press, 1999). All citations refer to this edition except in the rare cases where the Benderson translation has problematized Juranville’s citation of the original text. In those cases the parenthetical

What might be called a traditionally feminist position would affirm that there is no feminine *nature*, refusing the ideology of the gentleness of the eternal feminine, and that feminism should not recoil in the face of women's violence, even when it is characterized by such exceptional barbarism. Envisaging this excess in relation to the system of masculine domination, as a reaction to the universal chauvinistic repression, is what Virginie Despentes herself does when, in the context of the scandal in that her film provoked, she affirms: "It is time for women to become the executioners, and with the most extreme violence."⁴ A position that consists in proclaiming, at the limit, if that women have acquired the same rights as men, this would include the "real rampages" that these two killers uphold. Which they do in the name of an "ethics"⁵: an ethics of "got to take it to the limit,"⁶ the duty to "make blood flow, floods of it"⁷ because "this killing's a public service."⁸

The methodical massacres committed by Virginie Despentes's two "heroines," Manu and Nadine, could certainly be justified as a response to the abject episode of gang rape at the beginning of the novel, whose victim is Manu. Accordingly, in their final murder, the dead body of the architect, which "spreads out like a garbage bag torn by mistake,"⁹ undoubtedly recalls the swollen and bloodied bodies of the two raped girls, their vaginas battered, treated as "garbage," "le[ft] for the bums and the dogs."¹⁰ But we probably shouldn't treat this as a question of an eye for an eye, nor pursue the argument that it's a consequence, at the same time implacable and legitimate, of women's revenge. Rape certainly has a particular status at the heart of the generalized violence in which this story unfolds. But it also has a rationality that goes beyond any culturalism, the principle of empirical causality to which feminist claims are too often reduced. As a result, strict feminism emerges as an unexpected variant on the discourse of positive

citations will refer to the general location in the Benderson text to which Juranville is pointing. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.

⁴ Cited in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, May 24-30, 2001, 14.

⁵ Ibid, 119.

⁶ Ibid, 158.

⁷ Ibid, 112.

⁸ Ibid, 143.

⁹ Ibid, 224.

¹⁰ Ibid, 51.

science, by virtue, in this instance, of the mode of linear causality that arises from an external trauma (violence inflicted on women). This empirico-historical logic spares women. (But what is the function of this protection? Does it not deprive them at once of their intrinsic violence and of a portion of their subjectivity?). Psychoanalysis in its structural dimension raises an objection to such empiricism. That the symbolic order is incarnated in a patriarchal system is a given that we won't contest here. But to privilege the repressive side of the symbolic is to envisage it primarily in imaginary terms: it is to reduce it to the omnipotence of the phallus, a fascination to which we know that men as much as women fall victim. We will try therefore, in the narrow limits of this argument, to grasp the connections between the sociohistorical and the structural in a manner that may shed light on the new figure of the fatalities that define the feminine.

We will not enter into the epistemological justifications required to treat characters in a novel as though they were living subjects. The legitimacy of this present argument, we claim, resides in what is exemplary about this text. This exemplarity derives mainly from the fact that it is a literary work: the unique qualities of its writing, its structural economy, and the percussive sobriety of its dialogue, in short, its distillation of tragic fiction: the story of two girls that "is a like a road heading straight into a wall."¹¹

Even if *Baise-moi* can't be reduced to a "case," the novel's account of two female murderers calls for an analysis in terms of mental illness. It is interesting, in fact, to start from a comparison with the Papin sisters, which suggests itself in various respects. The story revolves around a couple of young women, approximately the same age, inseparable, fused together by a "group" effect with homosexual overtones. "That's what comes to mind when you see them. They never touch, but they keep an eye on each other, look for each other every moment... They're always staying near each other... They say things together... You can feel that they're in cahoots. Like an animal with two heads..."¹² If they're not sisters, it's as if they were: "They don't sleep together. Not doing that is the best way they've found to convince themselves that they're sisters."¹³

¹¹ Ibid, 36.

¹² Ibid, 182.

¹³ Ibid, 185.

The criminal act is lived as real jouissance of the orgasmic type whose aftermath is a feeling of being “a little floored...”¹⁴ a phrase which could be aligned with Christine Papin’s “What a mess!” uttered as she emerged from her dazed state, once the massacre was complete.

On the one hand, at stake is a unique and exceptional act, and on the other, the crime is caught up in a repetitive series. The first murder, executed separately by each of the girls, only just opens up the space of inquiry into a “real subversion,” “real divergence”¹⁵ that becomes for the two girls, now partners, a true drug *à la* butcher’s shop (“[I] only have one desire, which is... To do it again,”¹⁶ “this infernal cadence demands it”¹⁷).

Whereas the crime of the Papin sisters focuses on significant feminine characters, the series of murders in *Baise-moi* concern largely undifferentiated characters (preferentially men, but also women and even a child). These crimes are without any real motives, or rather their motives fluctuate over time: vengeance at first, and of course rape, which calls for a particular analysis, and then on to an ungraspable mixture of reasons for killing in which material objectives, and pure, fleeing whims dissipate in favor of the sole pleasure of killing. Should this perhaps be called, as the newspapers wrote about the “horrible infamy” of the Papin sisters, a “motiveless” crime? It could always be, however, that such a crime entails motives that that escape common rationality, and that obey a necessity which complicates the subject’s adaption to the world, the interest and the satisfactions that she could derive from it, carrying her, beyond the pleasure principle, into the psychic zones where the Freudian *Id* reigns, where the excess of madness takes root. Indeed, the realization of the desire to murder is, for Lacan, central to the paranoid configuration. If this obviously applies to the Papin sisters,¹⁸ what about Manu and Nadine, the two killers in *Baise-Moi*? How can we apprehend this fatal mode of the feminine which emerges in an unprecedented light, in a specific historical context?

To grasp what these characters offer that’s new must be connected to the historical crisis in which this “furor” takes place. With the Papin

¹⁴ Ibid, 117.

¹⁵ Ibid, 98.

¹⁶ Ibid, 117.

¹⁷ Ibid, 134.

¹⁸ Even though, strictly speaking, it seems that we may charge alone Christine Papin, as a function of her own psychic issues, with the initiative of the murderous act.

sisters, we were in a traditional society dominated by bourgeois values (Le Mans, mid-20th century). With Manu and Nadine, we are caught up in the fracture of postmodern society, a society in full mutation—hyperrational, hyperabstract—dominated by the economy and the power of media, refracted in a specific imaginary (that of cinema and video), to which we will return. The importance of this context is such that *Baise-moi* might be included in contemporary research on what has been called the “psychopathology of the *banlieues*.”¹⁹ All of Virginie Despentes’ works bathe in such a universe of affective and social misery, such an omnipresence of violence, it is as though the burden of the apocalyptic event that is every act of murder was thereby amortized. Of course, not all violence in the contemporary world is of this nature. But we are led to interrogate the new modes of a social “normalization” of violence in modern — or postmodern — subjectivity, notably its *psychotic* dimension. It is in this sense that the term “psychosis” poses a problem and should be reevaluated in today’s nosography, designated as institutionalized psychosis, in some sense. (Lacan wasn’t far from suggesting as much in 1953, when he evoked “modern man”²⁰).

The tottering of symbolic frameworks has certainly become commonplace: the loss of bearings, the weakening of the social link, the privatization of existence, individualism, frenzied subjectivism ... so many clichés that don’t necessarily evoke, like the sociologist Alain Ehrenberg says, the “snivelling [sic] about the good old days,”²¹ but that oblige us to think about a psychoanalytic clinic of the social, taken in its radical and innovative nature. “The future is female”: this publicity slogan from 2011, which Michel Houellebecq included in his book *The Elementary Particles*,²² prophesizes the dominance of the feminine. How does Virginie Despentes’ novel help to identify the elements of an approach to this question?

¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rassial, ed., *Y a-t-il une psychopathologie des banlieues?* (Toulouse: Érès, 1998).

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 233.

²¹ Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. Enrico Caouette et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 7.

²² Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, trans. Frank Wynne (New York: Vintage, 2001), 144.

It seems that the feminine logic introduced by Lacan, viewed from the perspective of his famous enigmatic formula, sometimes overused, “there is no sexual relation,” offers a new angle of attack in this debate. Today, the symbolic order is blamed for being *traditional*, in that it is founded on the fantasy of the complementarity of the sexes. (If fantasy, for Lacan, is the inner lining of common reality.) At stake is the aspect of the symbolic order organized by phallic law, but in as much as it is characterized by the omnipotent imaginary of the phallus. Today, however, a crack is introduced in this system—in brief, the redistribution of sexual identifications, even the contestation of sexual difference. We could form the hypothesis that such a crisis of the symbolic gives the lie to such phallic exaltation, liberates the extreme point of a deadly rivalry that now unfolds in “sexual indifference,” beyond or just short of fantasy.²³ The destabilization of the symbolic framework causes a resurgence in the real of a violence that traditional social systems, with their heavily ritualized organization, function to channel. The “disorder” that Desportes’s two killers claim as their own bears witness to the impasse of this phallic tension at its height, translating into pure violence, with a sacrificial dimension. Would these new witches only be fatal because they are themselves captives of another fatality that hangs over them, a fatality incarnated by the archaic divinity at whose altar they offer their sacrifices? It is this sinuous trajectory of a feminine fatality that we would like to outline here in order to grasp something of a destiny, which Freud said, for each of us, would take the form of a woman.

It seems that this relative novelty of *physical* feminine violence pertains to cultural discourse (cinema, literature), but that it is also, in the strict sense, a sociological reality. Freud wrote that “The suppression of women’s aggressiveness... is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially.”²⁴ The emergence of armed female gangs, terrorist groups, mafia, and so on, all of these phenomena, although marginal, have a sociological status, but again have nothing to do, once again, with the outrage of the Bacchantes, Maenads or other Furies, unleashed upon a well-

²³ On this theme, see Alain Juranville, *La philosophie comme savoir de l'existence*, vol. 3, *L'inconscient* (Paris: PUF, 2000).

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter *S.E.*), ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), Vol, 22, 116.

organized social scene. If the symbolic mutations of our posthistorical era offer conditions that favor the outbreak of a feminine violence, isn't such violence inscribed *en pointillés* within women, as an extreme form of their structural madness? "All women are mad," wrote Lacan.²⁵

Let us thus put forth the hypothesis that the Virginie Despentes's fiction makes visible an actualization of the destiny of feminine madness that Lacan deduced from the woman's relative independence with respect to phallic organization, her place of fundamental contestation of this order, her position of exception. The structural dimension that a psychoanalytic perspective introduces concerns the dissymmetry of the sexes, which Lacan brings to the fore with his logic of sexuation. This logic offers us points of reference to address the avatars of the construction of femininity: phallic lack, shared by both sexes, must accommodate itself to the fact that there is no feminine signifier in the unconscious. The correlate is that the subjective position of the feminine is marked by a "supplementary" jouissance.²⁶

The notion of excess jouissance, "other" than phallic jouissance, makes it logically possible to apprehend the extremes of psychic life, where, according to Lou Andreas-Salomé, "the criminal and the saint" come together.²⁷ The "feminine type," in contrast to what, for men, melancholically echoes "the sighs of the Madonna or the cries of the fairy,"²⁸ can only be grasped, subjectively, for women, in terms of what Michel de Certeau dubs "places to lose oneself." Indeed, these positions of ex-centricity bear witness to the commonalities between mystical jouissance and the jouissance of crime, in that both derive from the same psychic source. But the two destinies that they reserve for a subject are, naturally, at the antipodes of one another.²⁹ The moment of crime situates the subject in the same *no man's*

²⁵ Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. Rosalind Krauss et al., ed. Joan Copjec (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 40.

²⁶ Lacan develops these theses in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998).

²⁷ Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Lettre ouverte à Freud* (Paris: Lieu commun, 1983), 20.

²⁸ Gérard de Nerval, "El Desdichado," in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Guillaume et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 1: 3.

²⁹ We have attempted to approach the theme of the mystical in its relationship to mourning and sublimation, at the extreme opposite of criminal acting out: Anne Juranville, "Extase mystique et conversion," in *Psychologie clinique*, No. 1 (Winter 2000), and *Figures de la possession* (Paris: PUF, 2001).

*land*³⁰ of jouissance beyond limits as does mystical ecstasy—in the coincidence of a self-dispossession with a possession by God or by the Devil. Ecstasy, in the instant of murder, thrusts into a trance state: “Without thinking of anything. Concentrated, careful... When she fucks, sometimes, she gets the feeling of having come out of herself, to have forgotten herself for an instant... When she comes back to herself, she’s in the middle of strangling Séverine.”³¹ Here, however, desubjectification no longer summons the divine Other, but rather the satanic Other which is the real, super-egoic face of the Other—the superego, which Lacan says is the “hatred of God.”

Woman, therefore, doesn’t exist. If *W*oman exists — with the capital *W* of Lacan’s writing —, it is only in psychosis: gentle madness or pathological psychosis. How does Virginie Despentes’s fiction stage the way in which feminine madness seeks to make *W*oman exist?

Let us suggest first how the dynamics of the psychopathology of the social body can be crossed with the individual psychopathology of a couple of two murderous women by focusing on the transition from perversion to psychosis. The apparent ineffectiveness of neuroticization confirms Alain Ehrenberg’s analysis, according to which the social norm is no longer founded on neurotic conflict (culpability, inhibition, etc., in favor of narcissistic disorders). This subversion of an aspect of the *symbolic* would correspond to a rise in power of the structurally perverse character of reality and of the new *imaginary* that it upholds. The fragility and the poverty of this imaginary would facilitate a resurgence of the *real*, an eruption of unbound libidinal intensities, as Freud might say, which are the crude fact of violence. A violence that can be seen in a mediated form in many cultural productions, and that explodes in both individual and collective acting out.

The semblant of inscription in perversion

In order to situate feminine violence within the context of the perverse doubling of social reality in which the “heroines” of *Baise-Moi* move, we will first isolate two characteristic elements of this new imaginary: that of

³⁰ In English in the original (Trans.)

³¹ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 64.

pornography and of cinema; and, analogically, we will attempt to cast into relief some of the traits that characterize the (fragile) perverse organization of these two girls.

Peep-shows and porn films, videos or magazines form the backdrop of each of Virginie Despentes's published works, and it is around them that all the central characters revolve: in *Baise-Moi* Nadine is a prostitute and Manu used to be a porn actress; in *Les chiennes savantes*,³² Louise is a dancer in a peep-show; in *Pretty Things (Les jolies choses)*,³³ Claudine, also doubled in her twin sister, has acted in a porn film and makes a living off her looks, etc. Pornography, etymologically the "writing of prostitution," is thus both the theme and the literary genre whereby this author defines herself. As if her worldview necessarily passed through this prism.

How does pornography constitute itself as one of the modalities of the postmodern imaginary? The hyperabstract universalism of reality is one of the aspects of a symbolic that is reduced to the death drive within it, to the mechanical aspect of its pure functionality. The dislocation of the world by effacing or blurring borders and differences — the order of the same to the detriment of alterity — is inseparable from a will to extensionality, laying things out for all to see, according to a linearity not of metonymic desire but of *counting*. Dismantling the mechanical cogwheels of phenomena reduced to their status as objects, to their *platitude* as objects and to the slightness of their being as objects is, strictly speaking, a perverse enterprise, what Lacan calls "the Other reduced to object *a*."³⁴ It is in this sense that we can say along with the novelist Alina Reyes that abstract economy is what defines a "society of pornography."³⁵

If this "obscenity" is, according to her, "primarily that of market ideology," couldn't we say that it is simply the cynical assumption of the being-object to which the subject aspires to reduce itself, as far as possible, to point of getting lost in this objectality, even rendering it absolute? Whence the project of *exhibition* which effectively takes up where neurotic *inhibition* stops: to show, to expose, to display in broad daylight to produce the

³² Despentes, *Les chiennes savantes* (Paris: J'ai lu, 1997).

³³ Despentes, *Pretty Things*, trans. Emma Ramadan (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2018).

³⁴ Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, 131.

³⁵ Alina Reyès, "Le sexe entre repression et regression," *Le Monde*, December 5, 2000.

hyperrealism of cultural discourses on violence and the sexual. Is pornography any different when a woman takes charge of it in her writing? To show all her nudity, to say everything about her sexual practices: this is Catherine Millet's recent gambit,³⁶ which remains a special case because of the radicality of her position. Alina Reyes, for her part, asserts that "women are the ones with a genius for pornography" in the sense that it is they who have known how to "liberate themselves from limits imposed by the law." There is no doubt that beyond the most obvious interpretation of this formulation, the analysis of feminine pornography would help to better discern certain unrecognized declensions of the logic of the feminine, especially in its deathly dimension.³⁷ At the least, pornography presents itself as an overdetermined phenomenon. But before turning to this point—to offer, in our fashion, praise of pornography—we should first highlight the negative side of another figure of the social imaginary, which also overflows the two characters of *Baise-Moi*.

This is the figure of audiovisual media (cinema, television, video...) whose function is also decisive in the novel. We will set aside, for the moment, Virginie Despentes's cinematographic writing style, which would deserve a linguistic analysis, to speak only of what denotes the perverse dimension of the phenomenon within the narrative universe. We could cite the multiple cinematographic references that punctuate her spectacles of explosion (noise, carnage). "It's less spectacular than in the movies," is the commentary on the first murder.³⁸ This disappointment tends to lessen with more hands-on experience: "this is more convincing than the last time. More colors [...] she's getting more out of it"³⁹; "It makes a bad special effect, the blood spraying out behind him"⁴⁰; "Nadine catches herself wishing the image could happen in slow motion"⁴¹; "Shades of red"⁴²; "Too bad I don't know

³⁶ Catherine Millet, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*, trans. Adriana Hunter (London: Serpent's Tail, 2002).

³⁷ Alina Reyes's novel, *Lilith* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999), its literary qualities aside, is especially interesting here.

³⁸ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 66.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴² *Ibid.*

how to aim; in the throat would've looked cooler"⁴³; "That unbelievable explosion. Scene changes. Intact eyes hanging over a massacre of a face [...] The hair undone and stained, the legs askew [...] the jawline turning into gruel..."⁴⁴; etc. At stake here is a kind of split, assumed as such: "She disconnects the part that observes and comments."⁴⁵

The novel is an illustration of some of Kristeva's analyses, in which cinema "arrogates to itself a universe of fantasy."⁴⁶ For Kristeva, cinema has a privileged space within sadomasochistic fantasy, as a manifestation of what spectacle represses, authorized perversion, a demystification and banalization of evil,⁴⁷ contributing to—in an often-used phrase—the "breakdown of the imaginary" that marks our era. A breakdown that can be radicalized to the point where the imaginary is destroyed, where fantasy is pulverized. Such derealization, which would correspond to a veritable hallucination, abolishing the gaze (the gaze as the object of the drive, which Lacan calls the scopical object), is not produced in the novel. Nonetheless, at the moment when criminal acting out shatters the symbolic, the two killers are captured within a sort of apotheosis, within a surrealization of the visible. The flipside of the world (the world of filth, the real of flesh in fragments) appears in the form of a spectacle, in a monstrous continuity with the spectacle of the world. It is as if the "aesthetic" jouissance of murder betrayed a topological passage from reality to fiction ("I see you on the floor, your ugly face in pieces, I see your guts flying into the air"⁴⁸).

The perverse treatment of reality is based on disavowal. In the social world, this disavowal closes off a gap opened by the invisible, a void beyond the specular. Here, the flipside of the world, the real, crashes upon the imaginary; the experience of the void is no less emptied out, but only to establish subjects in a monstrous order stripped of affect. Not the slightest emotion—this minimum of vertigo—, no "stirrings of the soul" (the two women claim to have "souls of tempered steel"): only "stirrings of the body," as it were, faced with the display of flesh in fragments.

⁴³ Ibid, 68.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 116-117.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 58.

⁴⁶ Julia Kristeva. *Le révolte intime* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 2000), 109.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 126.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 75.

Let's return to sexed bodies to analyze this perverse organization which is the context of criminal madness.

Pornography is the prototype of this model of a real impinging on the empirical reality of the sexual. Sex is thus cynically assumed in its character as a product on the marketplace in a society that revolves around payment, exchange, and service. The subject is reduced to the being of her drive that inscribes itself within the obsessional logic of *counting*: the activism of making passes corresponds to the multiplicity of sexual acts, as an orgy that upholds the law of the indefinite series, in an "indifference to the use one makes of bodies," which Catherine Millet describes in her book.⁴⁹

Sexual activity is limited to the pure functioning of the partial drive that ignores sexual difference: to see oneself seeing, in a movement of recursion proper to the trajectory of the drive. This minimizes the anxiety of an encounter with the other and his seduction strategies or other complex relational games.⁵⁰ The short circuit of the drive closes the gap within desire and fills up the lack with the brutality and immediacy of satisfaction. This perverse dimension is thus equivocal and interesting for this very reason. Never abandoning the position of the pure object of the drive, of the object *a*, the pervert opens a space of lack in the other, her partner, even as she offers to fill this space up. As Lacan theorizes, the pervert makes himself the object of the other's *jouissance*, the other whom he posits as non-lacking, even as he constitutes himself as non-lacking. This protective measure against depression is, in this respect, "successful." It is successful insofar as the function of the defensive split of the ego due to a mechanism of disavowal simultaneously confirms the existence of lack, which makes it possible to ensure the inscription of the subject in the world.

In the case of our two "heroines," Nadine and Manu, who might be diagnosed as perverts, this construction is extremely fragile.

The filling up of lack in *Baise-Moi*, in fact, acquires a completely invasive character. Sex, and by extension alcohol, bursting images, violent sounds ("The car radio bawls"⁵¹, permanently and immediately available, reveal the addictive side of the relation to lack. As a fetish, the object of the

⁴⁹ Catherine Millet, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* See chapter 1: "Numbers"

⁵⁰ Given her context that is strictly singular, Millet expertly theorizes this avoidance of the other.

⁵¹ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 229.

drive functions like a drug that calls for uninterrupted fulfillment. The subject becomes nothing but a body focalized on undifferentiated holes, to be filled up, indiscriminately, with alcohol, amphetamines or semen. Manu describes herself as “cocksucker,” Nadine cannot separate herself from her Walkman, “Cut the tunes out of her ears — no way.”⁵² All objects are consumed in a brutal and compulsive manner: “orifice filled” Manu remarks, “stuff[ing] as much chocolate as she can into her mouth.”⁵³ Psychoanalytic literature has amply developed the notion of addiction as a perversion, a form of “contemporary madness,”⁵⁴ as well as the depths of its melancholic cruelty.⁵⁵

Such depression, with a melancholic basis, needs further clarification in order to underscore the necessity of the road that the two girls discovered—or rather the “road to nowhere” that takes the form of a maniacal orgy of murder.

Sadomasochism—which is not the drive, Lacan recalls—is inherent to the subjective position of the pervert. Passage through being-object necessarily opens toward an element of jouissance in cruelty. Nadine, in her work as a prostitute, tied to a chair, likes to be made to do “real degrading stuff... that felt good.”⁵⁶ While it may define the perverse mode of enjoyment for both of the sexes, masochism, as we often like to say, does not characterize femininity as such. In the case of these two girls, masochism seems to have a status that goes beyond the satisfaction gained from making oneself the object of the partner’s jouissance. It is equally in the service of a depressive state, where the perverse function tends to fail. At the very heart of depression lies a vertiginous vacuity which touches the kernel of being: “a disturbance that occurred at the inmost juncture of the subject’s sense of life” in Lacan’s words.⁵⁷ Depression is ordeal of ex-sistence in the mode of melancholic dereliction: the certainty of being “dropped by the Other.”

Nadine is characterized by a masochistic suffering: at the beginning of the novel she is totally submissive to the man in her life, fascinated by

⁵² Ibid, 31.

⁵³ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁴ Daniel Sibony, *Perversions. Dialogues sur des folies “actuelles”* (Paris: Seuil 2000).

⁵⁵ Jacques Hassoun, *La cruauté mélancolique* (Paris: Aubier, 1995).

⁵⁶ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 97

⁵⁷ Jacques Lacan, “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” in *Écrits*, 456.

him, “But she’ll wait as long as it takes and put up with what she has to”⁵⁸; “She’s even helped him weave his web by speaking his language and supporting what he was saying.”⁵⁹ Such suffering derives from a narcissistic imaginary deficiency linked to phallic rivalry, with the virile exaltation that comes along with it. But imaginary lack implies self-hatred, a horror of the feminine that primarily targets the mother (“stupid” and “depressive” a “stupid bitch,” “beaten up by her man” when he is drunk), the mother who is stigmatized as obscene, abject: “Even if you liked goats, you wouldn’t want to slip it to her...”⁶⁰ This denarcissization of the girls, in its radicality, stops short of the ego’s depression, to touch a limit point of the irreversible desacralization of the feminine *via* the maternal.

The episode where Manu and one of her friends is raped can perhaps be seen as a trigger. This scene, which is truly unbearable, elicits only a few comments from Manu: “It’s just that things happen when you’re a girl” and “I can’t keep assholes from getting into my pussy, so I haven’t left anything valuable there...”⁶¹ Perhaps this reveals the failure of a perverse organization. It is as though rape, as an extreme form of humanization, shattered the mask which conditions the montage of desire, in pornography as well. Pornography is where the girl, reduced to the little nothing that is the object *a*, comes to be defined, precisely, by this vacuity itself, as the cause of the other’s desire. It is also where she still arouses, albeit expeditiously, admiring homages from men. Feminine masquerade — which fetishizes the feminine body — functions *a minima* in stereotypical sex scenes: Louise, for instance, a peep-show performer in *Les chiennes savantes*, discovers her erotic appeal through her profession. Her performance sustains an opening toward something beyond what is put on display: precisely that which is “precious,” at the basis of the sexual, it’s this void that bears witness to a subjectivity.

Rape literally abolishes this erotic dimension of sexuality. It reduces the subject to her sex, which is no longer inscribed in a universe of signifiers but is only a hole in the real. The ordeal of rape is thus liable to activate a delusional hyperrealism in which the imaginary of reality and the real are superimposed once again: like in cinema where, as we will see, the two killers

⁵⁸ Ibid, 22

⁵⁹ Ibid, 42

⁶⁰ Ibid, 178

⁶¹ Ibid, 52

come alive at the height of their criminal act. The imaginary has lost the ability to capture disappointment, anxiety, and even horror or dereliction... in order to restore them to the symbolic order. Reality acquires a hyperrealistic function which is nothing but the flipside of the function of derealization which characterizes the hallucinatory.

The imaginary vacuity of sex transferred to the real is femininity reduced to a bag of garbage: indeed, sex now has “nothing precious” about it. For women, the “nothing to see” has a particular status, because, as we just recalled, this imaginary nothing is what opens the relation to the other; and because, more importantly, for women, it characterizes a “becoming object” that is structural. Murder as a passage to the act seems to respond precisely to such a radical failure in the transmission of femininity. It marks the impossible confrontation with lack: the “nothing” is thus caught up in the logic of melancholy, and the manic pole then becomes no more than a fallacious triumph over this nothing.

Despite the importance of the rape episode, men are not the interlocutors in relation to whom things will play out. They are certainly rivals, enemies, or partners, but reduced to something inessential: sexual instruments, means to an end. The father, who is evoked exactly once, is an “asshole” like the rapists, “a son of a bitch,” impotent even to contain the depression thanks to the perverse construction.⁶² Rape does not provoke hatred against men but reinforces self-hatred: “It’s just that things happen...when you’re a girl” i.e. waste, garbage.⁶³ It reinforces one’s immersion in the black hole of existence, justifies the culture of brutal hatred, and favors the turn, not to suicide, but to what is its other face, murder.

The abrupt swerve into acting out causes a change of register. It is no longer a question of fulfilling the other, because the problematic of lack as such is annulled, which is precisely what characterizes the position of the psychotic. After she “had exploded that woman to pieces against that wall...”, Nadine thinks: “As good as fucking. Unless it is that she likes to fuck as if it’s a massacre.”⁶⁴ And yet, between “fucking” and “massacre” there

⁶² Ibid, 178.

⁶³ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 125-126.

is rupture. This rupture is marked by a maximum “coalescence”⁶⁵ of phallic jouissance with the “Other jouissance.” It gives rise to an unleashing of the drive that marks the failure of that which the perverse maneuver made it possible to organize on the basis of the void of the object. This explosive process whereby the drive is unbound, whereby the links in the signifying chain are swept away, exposes the deathly foundation of the sexual, the death drive in its purest form.

The swerve into serial murder and the fatal figures of the feminine

The first crime is committed by Nadine alone: it is set in motion “even before she knows what she is doing,”⁶⁶ merely by the offensive presence of Séverine, the young woman who shares her apartment – Séverine, who commits the major mistake of existing: “she’s idiotic, unbelievably pretentious, brazenly narcissistic and nauseatingly banal no matter what she says.”⁶⁷

Her “inept,” “yappy” femininity is opposed, in Nadine’s eyes, to the ambiguous figure of the “immolated femme fatale.” This “femme fatale, in the original sense of the word,”⁶⁸ is embodied, on the one hand, by a splendid woman of color, beaten to death and drunk with fury: her lover is “stupefied by so much suffering and terrified by the outburst of rage. She was possessed, trying to drive out the evil by riddling her own stomach with blows, hunched, screaming, burning alive inside.”⁶⁹ On the other hand, it is embodied by the character Fatima, with her “beautiful shell” (165), her “princess-like” allure, her “natural elegance,”⁷⁰ the royalty of her silence. Nadine, enamored, “sympathizes with those boys who fall madly in love with a girl just because of her eyes.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ For more on “the coalescence of two jouissances” see p. cf. Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, 84. On the other hand jouissance of the mystic marks its separation from the two jouissances.

⁶⁶ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 58.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

The theme of this fascinating femininity is clarified by a recurrent episode that shows Nadine's relationship to photos of a blonde woman with a waxed vagina in a porn magazine: "luxuriously available ... Her mound twinkling like the entrance to a brothel.... She does what isn't supposed to be done, with such obvious pleasure.... Nadine studies her for a long time, impressed and respectful, as if before an icon" (138). "Impressed" — the term is repeated — Nadine occupies the voyeuristic position of the aroused man in peep shows and porn films. It isn't her boyfriends, it's her — she explains to Manu — who is "into it"⁷²: like a man, she "masturbates ... while she looks at the photos" of the blonde.⁷³ This self-sufficient idol promises a jouissance that overflows what is limited about her own practices. She embodies Woman, in her full jouissance, she who makes one believe in absolute satisfaction, she who lacks nothing, the divine made woman.⁷⁴ For the girl, this is of course the mother as real Other, which Daniel Sibony calls the "Other-woman," fantasized as "uncastratable."⁷⁵

Beyond an interpretation which would point to the masculine pole of the hysterical duality, this insistent episode of fascinated absorption in the "Other woman" appears to punctuate, in a decisive fashion, the trajectory which drives the duo to the point of slaughter. The goal, beyond the "blandness" of sex (to use Georges Bataille's phrase), is to attain "the jouissance that should be,"⁷⁶ that absolute jouissance to which woman would have the secret: woman in her relationship to God—which, obviously, should be confused with woman identified with God. In this straining toward an absolute object beyond human finitude, there is always a melancholic element. Precisely within the horizon of such exceptional jouissance, once again, paradoxically, mystics and criminals intersect in their opposing attitudes that both instantiate how "all women are mad." Of course, each does this according to strictly opposite constructions with respect to the

⁷² Ibid, 88.

⁷³ Ibid, 137.

⁷⁴ See Lacan, "Guiding Remarks for a Convention on Female Sexuality," in *Écrits*: "Perhaps this conceptualization simply means that everything can be attributed to a woman insofar as she represents the absolute Other in the phallogocentric dialectic" (616).

⁷⁵ Daniel Sibony, "De l'entre-deux-femmes," in *La baine du désir* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 2008).

⁷⁶ Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, 59. Cf. the translator's note on the same page for a detailed discussion of how Lacan is using this phrase.

problematic of mourning — which is also to say with respect to the occupation of the empty place of the object, which every girl occupies on a structural level. When, as it does here, the perverse demonstration fails — which, in the mystical attitude as well, makes it possible to dialecticize the nothing — the only remaining option is criminal violence.

In mysticism, the attempt to make oneself nothing is a slow asceticism whose radicality was thematized by Rhenish mystics: it is the condition for a welcoming of the divine, in which ecstasy does not correspond to an effraction of being, but a genesis. Ecstasy, in the *instant* of plenitude, is the site of a conversion: the passage from the corporeal to the psychic, which can be analyzed as the process of sublimation par excellence. It is, then, an act of metaphorization *in statu nascendi*, the condition for the advent of speech: here we see one of the dimensions of the feminine as “fabulous” in the sense of *fabula*, the fable, speech.

With crime, one is positioned at the opposite extreme. In crime, there is also a deflagration of *jouissance*, a blaze of being in the instant of crime, along with effects of desubjectivization. But acting out follows a movement of conversion that is radically inverse to that of mystical *jouissance*: not a psychic event, but temporary psychic destruction, in an orgasm of hatred. A demetaphorization that can be understood as an incorporation of the absolute Object, according to a manic identification with a deified Woman. The dimension of the feminine that is outside the symbolic thus emerges in its satanic aspect, a fatality already inscribed in promised *jouissances*, those which are accorded by the beautiful woman of color: “Everything about her shouts sex, but it’s a ride to hell.”⁷⁷ The commentaries and formulas whereby Manu and Nadine punctuate each spectacle of slaughter can be read as a veritable mockery of speech. In opposition to unforeseeable speech, which opens a symbolic space for desire and life, the implacable sentence that comment on each murder resonates as the fulfillment of an evil fate. The duo incarnates the black femininity of the witch, the super-egoic figure of Fate par excellence.

Criminal violence as passage to the act is therefore a radical anti-mourning. Outside time, outside memory, outside sense, it bears witness to a rupture in the fabric of the symbolic. It is the *event* — more than the *act* — of the deconstruction of fantasy. But with all that this nevertheless implies

⁷⁷ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 23.

about psychic elaboration. Crime does not bear witness to any “naturalism” of the instincts⁷⁸: it is the submission of the subject to the imperative of jouissance from an “obscene and ferocious” superego. It is this superego, in its real guise of the maternal Thing, which possesses the two girls in the manic instant of slaughter. The Thing as the Other woman with whom each girl, behind the comedy of the sex she plays in with men, delivers, in fact, the true combat of phallic rivalry.

This problematic of the ravaging phallic rivalry with the Other woman is explicit in Virginie Despentes’ novelistic universe. Its outcome is always carnage, the butchering of bodies, as the conclusion of orgiastic outbursts [*déchaînements*]: a woman chopping the body of the other – or her own body – to pieces (“ripped-up flesh... stomach, smeared with blood, that she hacked to pieces with a joyous, delivering rage”⁷⁹).

The unfurling of possessive rage is often triggered by a problematic of abandonment, of which the story of Medea remains the paradigm. Medea, who attacks the bodies of her husband and her children after Jason leaves her for the king of Corinth’s daughter. In another of Despentes’ novels, *Les chiennes savantes*, the “quietly crazy” figure of Laura, evanescent but timid, demonstrates this imaginary rivalry with the hallucinated, idealized double that is the Other woman. This “slim and self-effacing” young woman will turn out to be the murderer of three strippers whom she suspected were rivals for her man. The barbarity of their murder would be the envy of the Papin sisters: “Throats and faces very clean, skinned. Bits of bone, an eye ripped from its socket, a hanging, red lip. One’s severed tongue hanging from the mouth of the other.”⁸⁰ This triple murder—the object of the novel’s police investigation—is redoubled in the story by plot twists involving merciless conflicts between two clans led by brutal women, one of whom is called the Mother-Queen.

In scenes of abandonment by a man who prefers other women, the murderer, again, does not take aim primarily at the man. Her fury is entirely directed at the one whom she perceives through the delusional lens of Woman. In this ordeal of being dropped, what is solicited from the subject

⁷⁸ Lacan, “A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology,” in *Écrits*, 102-122.

⁷⁹ Despentes, *Mordre au travers* (Paris: Éditions Libro, 1999), 40.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

is the question of her ex-sistence for the primordial Other, such that, if their specular encounter cannot be mediated, the only outcome is destruction. Hence the variant, where it is not the body of the Other woman, but her own body, which, in a movement of involution, becomes for the girl the place of maximal violence. An illustration can be found in the novella titled *Salé grosse truie*,⁸¹ which describes an ugly woman's relentless butchering of her own body after she is abandoned by her husband for another woman who embodies, in her eyes, the summum of seduction. The narcissistic wound of being irremediably cast off by the Other—by a man who is only a relay—reinforces for the subject her certainty of being “nothing” next to a hated, idolized rival, who remains untouched by lack. As if the quasi-delusional mode of the girl's vision of the maternal Other were the extreme point and the collapse of the fantasmatic mode in which the phallic omnipotence of the man has been envisaged.

In *Baise-moi*, the “final solution” for this phallic rivalry organizes itself on the manic side. Brimming with tension, an orgiastic intoxication in a semi-trance state – this is how the slaughter the girls expertly carry out is experienced: “We make a great team”⁸²; “The little one's right, they're quite a team.”⁸³ As if, in a movement of communicating vessels which assures the maniacal triumph of the ego, the two girls were trying to skip over the melancholic position by reducing their victims to the status of real waste.

Beyond the pure and simple destruction of the body, they take aim specifically at the face (“face beaten to a pulp,” “facial carnage”) and thus shatter the humanity of the victims. (Remember the analyses of Levinas, for whom the face bears witness to the impossible, the unattainable in the other.⁸⁴) The other is no more than a cadaver, detritus (“an unfortunately torn bag of garbage...”), humanity degree zero, faced with a phallic couple of two girls joined at the hip, who are “Invincible,”⁸⁵ and who, in the time of the criminal gesture, occupy the position of pagan idols offering up their human sacrifices. Unless the duo remain themselves the sacrificial waste of

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 162.

⁸³ Ibid, 159.

⁸⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini* (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1971), 171.

⁸⁵ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 162.

the insatiable idol with whom they identified in the solitary instant of murder.

In effect, even if they are the agent of sacrifice, the two girls are no less the instrument of the maternal superego. Femmes *fatales* certainly, but in the sense of the woman of color, fuming with rage — which is to say destined, like their victims, to pursue their blind rush unto a deadly explosion.

To produce an idol, to maintain an illusion which could become a delusional certitude of the maternal Other's non-lack, this psychic construction is undoubtedly consistent with the fact that the real mother is supremely lacking in herself, depressive — “idiotic,” to use the two girls' term. A woman from whom absolutely nothing can be expected. It is in this navel of narcissistic deficiency, transmitted from mother to daughter, that we can locate the knotting and the repetition of a position that turns the girl into the mother's sacrificial instrument, embodying the figure of the superego. As *Baise-moi* demonstrates. Unless the girl, occupying in her turn the place of the mother, makes herself an idol, demanding for herself the sacrifice of children, according to a properly demoniacal logic. This alternative is suggested by another of Virginie Despentes's texts, an atrocious story about infanticide, entitled *À terme*. In it, a woman gives birth alone in a hotel, severs her new-born son's genitals with her teeth, batters him, dismembers him, and throws him in a plastic bag. The novella concludes with these words: “Spread out, she thinks of her mother again. She feels good, like she is overflowing with love. Mama...”⁸⁶

The property of idols is to remain impassive, to be affected by nothing (which also explains the impulse to destroy the face, which symbolizes the failure of every effort to reach the other). This goes hand-in-hand with the indefinite character of those sacrifices demanded by the primary figure of the superego, whose “greediness”⁸⁷ is insatiable. *Baise-moi* shows, in an exemplary way, an articulation between this question of the archaic superego with its sacrificial dimension and the structural modality of the ravaging transmission of the feminine (this “fact of ravage that is, for

⁸⁶ Virginie Despentes, “À terme,” in *Mordre au travers*, 62-63.

⁸⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Television*, 28.

women, largely, the relationship to her mother,⁸⁸ according to Lacan). Consequently, the fatalities of the feminine would perhaps affect women as much as men, or indeed, women above all.

*Translated from French by Ashley Byczkowski,
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⁸⁸ Jacques Lacan, "L'étourdit," *Scilicet* 4 (1973), 21. Marie-Magdeleine Lessana has written other wonderful reflections on and approaches to this "ravaging." Cf. *Entre mère et fille: un ravage* (Paris: Hachette Littérature, 2002).