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**QUEER TOPOGRAPHIES IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH CINEMA:
THE FILMS OF
CÉLINE SCIAMMA, VIRGINIE DESPENTES, AND ÉMILIE JOUVET**

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Abstract

Queer Topographies in Contemporary French Cinema: The Films of Céline Sciamma, Virginie Despentes, and Emilie Juvet

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Until the 1980s, the history of French cinema was for the most part written without the work of women filmmakers. Despite a recent surge of interest, the works that focus on the films of women filmmakers remain few. This project therefore seeks to replace women at the center of French film production by focusing on the films of three directors with very diverse backgrounds. Close readings of the films of Céline Sciamma, Virginie Despentes, and Emilie Juvet, as well as the consideration of changing modes of film production will shed light onto the existence of a queer space within French film production. This project will therefore pave the way for the study of French films through an original lens, which will disrupt the history of French cinema as well as the very ways in which queer films have been examined. Instead of focusing on the thematic content of the films, this work will demonstrate that their queerness lies in their aesthetics and modes of production. In other words, this project opens up a new space for French film studies, at the center of which is queer.

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Introduction: Situating French Queer Films Directed by Women

When I was in 10th grade, my high school participated in “*Lycéens au cinéma*”, a program designed by the National Center of Cinematography and The Moving Image (CNC) and the Ministry of National Education to help high school students discover internationally renowned films (*CNC.fr*). That year, we went to the local movie theater on three different occasions to see Nanni Moretti’s *Caro Diario* (1993), Terry Gilliam’s *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), and André Techiné’s *Wild Reeds* (1994). Although there were cinema enthusiasts in my family who had already introduced me to the works of acclaimed directors such as Hitchcock, Scorsese or Renoir, these screenings allowed me to view two films in their original versions – which was unheard of at my small local movie theater – as well as they made me discover an auteur who was to become one of my favorite directors.

My experience is certainly not unique. As “*Lycéens au cinéma*” has grown and now proposes educational support for the screenings – in the form of dossiers written by critics or historians – it has become one of the pillars of the government’s desire to develop artistic education and, I am convinced, has contributed to inspire many high school students to study film. In addition, the longevity of the program testifies of the strong ties between the French government and the film industry. Indeed, while promoting cinematic education, the CNC is also the entity that is at the heart of what is referred to as “the French cultural exception”, which for cinema manifests as a set of

taxes that the CNC then redistributes to help make French films. The goal is therefore to privilege local production and fight against the hegemony of Hollywood.¹

However, the investment of the CNC into French cinema production should not hide some of the issues that have been accompanying its intervention. When looking at the list of films currently offered in “*Lycéens au cinéma*”, the quasi absence of women directors is astounding. Only seven women appear on the list of 122 films that the schools can choose from. This is all the more surprising that the program does not only offer French films, but films from all over the world by directors such as Asghar Farhadi or Bong Joon-Ho. It is not limited to contemporary films either, which should increase the chances of seeing women directors. While it may be acceptable to admit that the films directed by men are far more numerous than those directed by women, and that it should partially explain the gap, the size of this gap however, is difficult to understand on the part of an institution that advocates fighting against hegemony. My project, while to a certain degree inspired by my experience with “*Lycéens au cinéma*” seeks to be part of an effort to reevaluate the place of films directed by women in France. While for decades the history of French cinema was written without them, I will make women the only object of my project on French queer contemporary cinema.

It is an understatement to say that scholarship on French film directed by women is scarce. Agnès Varda might be the only notable exception to a general neglect. While film studies saw the recent rise of publications about women filmmaking, it should not

¹ For more information about the CNC, see CNC.fr and Laurent Creton’s *L’économie du cinéma en 50 fiches*.

mask the fact that the raising interest for the subject was not steady and uneventful. Indeed, even though feminist thought was center stage (while a source of conflict) in the French socio-political context at the end of the 1960s, Ginette Vincendeau has noted that two decades later, the state of affairs was less than glorious. She states: “1986, which sees a sudden interest in French feminism in Britain and in the USA is marked, in France, by a noticeable regression in feminist discourse” (“Women As Auteur-E-S-”, 157). A year later, after the Creteil's ninth Women's Film Festival, Vincendau's assessment was even more bitter, as she deplored Chantal Akerman's statement that the notion of women's cinema was outdated (“Women's Cinema”, 4). In addition, in spite of the increasing number of films directed by women in France, Vincendeau also still noted that while feminism was alive and well in areas of the world where French theory had been used at its service, its influence kept declining in France, including in relation to film studies.

In 2001 Carrie Tarr and Brigitte Rollet's published *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s*, which is an exhaustive overview of films directed by women in that time period. Just as Vincendeau was noting the healthy state of production at the same time as the lack of recognition that women filmmakers suffered from, Tarr and Rollet chose the 1980s and 1990s because they marked a turning point in the amount of films directed by women in France. In the introduction the authors also establish the stakes of women filmmaking and contextualize its development. The book is immensely valuable because the authors list all feature-length and medium-length films directed by women between 1980 and 1999, as well as

they categorize the most important ones by themes and genres before delving into their short analysis. Its precision therefore rebalances the past neglect of all French women filmmakers. To some extent this is also the goal that my project seeks to achieve, as I am exclusively considering women filmmakers in my exploration of French queer cinema.

My project is more directly indebted to Sandy Flitterman-Lewis' *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French*, published in 1996, a work that revisits the films of Germaine Dulac, Marie Epstein and Agnès Varda in order to replace them at the center of French cinematic production. Flitterman-Lewis' project is ambitious first and foremost because it is the first one to propose a corrective study of French cinema based on women directors. As the author states in the introduction, the book seeks to achieve three aims:

“To discuss the careers of three women filmmakers, and in so doing to make available, or reevaluate, their work; to situate this work within a historical, economic, and aesthetic context; and to locate, through detailed analyses of specific texts, the theoretical issues surrounding the representation of women and the cinematic apparatus”. (26)

Flitterman-Lewis does not fail to deliver. First, the juxtaposition of Dulac, Epstein, and Varda is informed by a precise contextualization within the history of French cinema, namely the avant-garde, poetic realism, and the *Nouvelle Vague*. The author devotes one chapter of contextualization to each of the three directors. The unequal fame that Dulac, Epstein and Varda enjoyed makes the project even stronger, as the reevaluation of their work serves a rewriting of the history of French cinema at large, but it also redirects the

attention of the reader and viewer to the films themselves and not to their reception. By using directors from different time periods, Flitterman-Lewis demonstrates that close readings of films are what allow her to reevaluate them in their historical context. She considers the films as texts in order to bring out their discursive power. Then, the confrontation of her readings with psychoanalytic and semiotic film theories and scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Christian Metz or Raymond Bellour helps her establish the existence of “female” viewing positions and authorship, or what she calls “an alternative cinematic practice”, which places women’s desires at its center (2). Far from being an essentializing piece, *To Desire Differently* on the contrary manages to enunciate the specificity of each director in relation to their movement, but also within the history of French cinema, while at the same time asserting their feminist stance, a feminism that is anchored in the cinematic apparatus itself and not simply feminist themes. While my project does not entirely focus on feminist practice, it nevertheless holds an important place for all three directors, because they overwhelmingly represent women, but also and more importantly, because the ways in which women are represented is new. Similarly to Flitterman-Lewis’ approach, a large part of this work will therefore be devoted to close readings, which will reveal how framing (for Sciamma and Desportes), the use of sound (for the latter), and the integration of performance (for Jovet) participate in the feminist discourses of the films.

My interest in the cinematic apparatus took root at the same time as this project, six years ago, as for the first time I was sitting in a screen theory class in which I found

myself watching films and studying concepts that I had never encountered before. During a discussion about duration in Deleuze's *Cinema 2* our professor suggested we watch a supplementary film, which could help us grasp the concept of time. I did not catch the name of the film at the time, but my classmate's reaction to the suggestion was so intense that it piqued my curiosity. "Oh no! It's so long! I mean...It's great but it's so long!" she exclaimed. Class went on and concluded without that screening, but the idea of watching that title-less film stayed with me. The following summer I thought about the film again and with the help of Deleuze's book as well as my partial memory of a name - ...man - I found the film: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. The 201 minutes of running time certainly felt long and great at the same time, but most importantly watching the film introduced me to Chantal Akerman's oeuvre, as well as it showed me what a feminist film could look like.

Beyond the length of the film, I could sense that the duration of segments coupled with the meticulous organization of space and time were serving the content of the film. Ivone Margulies' *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, which is a lengthy and dense plunge into Akerman's oeuvre, helped me understand what the effects of extended duration onto the film space could be. While the book is not entirely devoted to *Jeanne Dielman*, the film unsurprisingly occupies a large space, and Margulies focuses on what she calls "hyperrealism". She states:

The historical grounding of this sort of heroine is represented at its best in Akerman's fusion of a minimalist hyperrealist sensibility with an acute awareness

of 70's micropolitics, and of feminism in particular. And it is this awareness of the singularity of a woman's everydayness that forms the backbone of Akerman's corporeal cinema, a cinema whose split concern with referentiality and cinematic materiality can be examined in the context of other contemporaneous practices.

(41)

The seeming opposition between “referentiality” and “materiality” still stands out decades after her first film. Akerman's insistence on the need for the spectator to feel time and confront space influenced my viewing of many of her films – fiction and non-fiction alike – including her last one *No Home Movie* (2015), about which Akerman declared: “This is the story of a loss. The loss of the mother. My mother. But also the story of meeting the mother. So... This is not a film that rushes. It requires a little patience and a little abandon” (Thisisachannelicreat).² These words, pronounced at the Locarno film festival in the summer of 2015, resonate now not because they were delivered during Akerman's last public appearance, but because patience and abandon are required for almost all of Akerman's film, and a great number of her films are about meetings and losses. What distinguishes Akerman's films however, is how referentiality and materiality both express meetings and losses. In films as remote from each other as *I, You, He, She* and *South*, the ways in which the framing and editing – that is to say the manipulation of time and space – provoke in the viewer a physical experience that found

² “C'est l'histoire d'une perte. D'une perte de la mère. Mais aussi d'une rencontre avec la mère. Ma mère. Alors... ça ne se bouscule pas comme film. Ça demande un peu de patience et un peu d'abandon”. My translation.

an echo in what was portrayed on screen. As confusing as some of the films felt immediately after I watched them, I now consider this confusion to be the driving force of Akerman's films as well as the driving force that led me to choose films of which the form and not simply the content participate in their queerness.

Despite being drawn to Akerman's work, I have deliberately kept her films outside of this project. First, many scholars are now revisiting the work of renowned filmmakers. Such is the case for Geneviève Sellier's *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* published in 2008 and Richard Neupert's *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* published in 2009 as well as for Tami Williams' *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations* published in 2014, which all partially aim at reevaluating the time period that they consider, and especially the place of women filmmakers in them. While I contemplated having a chapter about Akerman's films to this study, I first decided not to because Chantal Akerman is arguably one of the women filmmakers – alongside Claire Denis and Agnès Varda – whose work has been studied extensively, especially in relation to time and space. On second thought however, I realized that studying her films in relation to queer was valuable work, which I will undertake when I turn this dissertation into a book. Akerman is therefore an absent presence in this project, and will come back as the most important woman director of queer films.

Akerman's work also has the particularity of being multimedial, which I indirectly consider here, as all three directors of this project were not originally trained as

filmmakers.³ Multimediality is crucial for any study of contemporary film, at the turning point between celluloid and digital. The oldest film that I have selected is Desportes' *Baise-moi* (2000), a film that certainly shows the traces of the time period it belongs to. In my consideration of the specificity of my director's medium – which is even more pertinent in Jouvét's work than in Desportes' – Isabelle McNeill's *Memory and the Moving image: French Film in the Digital Era*'s proved to be invaluable because it links different media to the concept of memory. It is a plunge into the thematic and formal relations between film and memory in the context of France. More specifically, as its title indicates, McNeill's book not only considers film, but also contemporary forms of moving image, with studies of Marker's CD-Rom *Immemory* (1998), Varda's art installation *L'Île et Elle* (2006), and Godard's collection of videos *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988-1997) as well as the work of less well-known film makers such as Yamina Benguigui. The first chapter of the book is devoted to a theorization of memory, which helps the reader understand the stakes of her initiative in a country marked by 'colonial nostalgia' (9). The author uses Bergson, Ricoeur and Derrida among others, before moving to a more specific consideration of memory in relation to different form of digital images. From the beginning, McNeill notes the different relations that different media maintain with memory, noting the distinction between watching a film in a theater versus watching a DVD or VHS over and over at home. In addition, McNeills gets into a

³ Sciamma was trained as a screenwriter, Desportes was not formally trained as a writer but was a writer before she became a filmmaker on accident, and Émilie Jouvét has a background in photography.

scientific explanation about the indexicality of the analog image vs. the digital one. In so doing, she clearly establishes the specificity of the digital image. In the third and fourth chapter McNeill more specifically tackles the question of remembering colonization and its consequences. Her study therefore concerns both the ideological implications of memory and its relation to the film media.

While my project is different from McNeill's it shares its situation at and after the turn to digital images. This has several implications regarding the status of the directors. First, Desportes' first film *Baise-moi* (2000), which was shot with two small digital cameras, offers a very grainy image, much similar to *Festen* (1998) about which McNeill says that it brings realism "by drawing attention to the presence of the recording equipment itself" (38). This self-reflective element is crucial in understanding Desportes' manipulation of film genres through her mastery of the image. In a sense it is through her manipulation of images from other films that Desportes invents her own discourse. For Sciamma, the revisitation of memory also operates via the rewriting of one specific genre: the banlieue film.⁴ Sciamma twists the center-periphery binary in place in those films – the most emblematic of which remains *La Haine* (1995) – thanks to her mise-en-scène of monuments and buildings from the banlieue. In so doing not only is she revisiting the genre, but she operates a critique of the national space in which the film are anchored. Rather than considering that Sciamma resolves the visual conflict between the center and the periphery of Paris, I would argue that she further complicates it by creating

⁴ While the label "banlieue film" is contested and problematic, I use it here mostly for thematic reasons. I problematize the label in the chapter.

a third one, an in-between marked by visual, sexual, and gender uncertainty. While McNeill focuses on Haneke's *Caché* (2005) as dramatizing "the resistance to confronting the past and its resulting ethnic and class tensions in terms of the interweaving spheres of city space and filmic images" (150), I contend that Sciamma's films interweaves the space of the *banlieue* with filmic images in order to update a new genre and at the same time as the treatment of gender and sexuality in that space. Finally, Émilie Juvet's films' relation to memory are the follow-up of Desportes' oeuvre. While the latter joined the mainstream with her most recent film *Bye Bye Blondie* (2012), using a star such as Emmanuelle Béart and toning down the sex and violence, the former has been making films and videos in which nothing has to be censored specifically because she is making films from the margins, from a space that has yet to be defined in French cinema, from a queer space in which memory has not yet been written. I therefore modestly suggest that I am undertaking the beginning of this project.

Before explaining what I mean by "queer topographies" I need to clarify that while this project is located at a very specific point in the history of French cinema, my main goal will not be to explore how the filmmakers' work fits into the history of French cinema at large, with its cultural and economical specificities. Other scholars such as Alan Williams or Susan Hayward have done so in *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* and *French National Cinema*, and their work is still relevant today. I will allude to certain French specificities related to funding but these references will

serve my argument about queerness and will not be linked to any commentary on the place of the films that I have selected within the larger history of French film production.

Queer is a concept that is still fairly new in France in general, and in relation to French film in particular.⁵ Because of the tension between the universalizing ideals of the French republic and the specific identities generated by queer subcultures, the emergence of queer theory in France was delayed until the translation of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 2005. The number of French scholars who clearly engage with queer theory is still currently limited. Sam Bourcier was the first to import queer studies in France as early as 1996 when he founded "Le Zoo", an organization whose aim was to introduce France to queer studies "via the translation and publication of Judith Butler and Paul Preciado's work" ("Entretien avec Marie-Hélène Bourcier", 5).⁶ *Q Comme Queer: Les Séminaires Q Du Zoo: 1996-1997*, the transcription of all the interventions that took place during the seminars that "Le Zoo" organized in 1997 is arguably the first original work in France around queer. Bourcier went on with his trilogy *Queer zones* in 2001, 2005 and 2011, in which he deconstructs sex and gender while taking into account the specificity of French republicanism and its universalist ideals. The part of Bourcier's work that was most appealing to me was his study of low culture and especially post-porn. I will rely heavily on his intervention in the field in my third chapter because Bourcier is the first theorist who has confronted French films to queer studies.

⁵ For a history of the use of "queer" in the French context, see Bruno Perreau's chapter "The Many Meanings of Queer" in *Queer Theory: The French Response*

⁶ "à travers la traduction et la publication des travaux de Judith Butler et Beatriz Preciado". My translation.

Leaving aside the hostile context in which queer studies attempt to exist in France, 'queer' as a concept is also difficult to grasp because of its intrinsic blurriness. The term has meant and continues to mean different things, which I must address here in order to unveil its specific signification in my project. First, 'queer' has been used as an umbrella term for LGBT. The reclaiming of what was a pejorative term until the 1980s promised to pave the way for an active appropriation against straight sexual and gender identities. Unfortunately, although convenient, this use does away with the specificity of each of these identities and therefore loses the potential disruptive power of 'queer'. As a practice however, queer has permitted to unveil the constructed-ness of gender and sexuality, and has led to the multiplication of labels that constantly get redefined. At its core, Butler's performativity has played a crucial role in challenging essentialist identity politics, however numerous they may be. Applied to film however, the polysemy of 'queer' is equally ambivalent. As Alexander Doty notes, queer was first used in the 1990s to refer to films whose concerns were white middle-class gay men, even when they seemingly addressed difficult topics such as AIDS (*Oxford Guide*, 148). According to Doty, the main critique of this use was that it labeled as 'queer' films and videos that did not "challenge or transgress established straight or gay and lesbian understandings of gender and sexuality" (149). For my project, I therefore sought to ensure that that criterion was met.

However, queerness can be found at different levels. Most obviously, it can be found in the themes of films that deal for instance with trans characters, or women who

endorse masculine traits. This blurring of boundaries between masculinity and femininity fits into the definition of queer as it challenges the binary that straight, gay and lesbian abide by. Such is the case for the films of Céline Sciamma, Virginie Despentes and Émilie Juvet, which focus on women, teenage girls, children, the unemployed, lesbians, trans men, etc. At a deeper level however, queerness emerges when the viewer engages with close readings of the film texts that unveil how the apparatus can challenge the depiction of binaries such as center/ periphery, man/ woman/ subject/ object (of the gaze), etc. As a result, it becomes clear that queerness can be located outside of queer-themed films, wherever identity categories are destabilized. My project is located in this movement, as far from considering the romantic relations between the characters, it considers how the film text proposes a blurring of boundaries between film genres, which *serve* the queer sexual and gender identity of the characters. In other words, the text becomes the first tool expressing queerness, while the queerness of the characters becomes only contingent.

Research on ‘queer’ in French films is still only emerging. Until very recently, the overwhelming majority of studies had been devoted to either films directed by women – as I mentioned previously – or to LGBTQIA-themed films, which is easily explainable, as Darren Waldron does, by the integration of those films into mainstream French cinema in the middle of the 1990s (3). As a result, the 1990s and 2000s saw a surge in the documentation of those films. Although not focused on specifically on LGBTQIA themes, Phil Powrie’s *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of*

Masculinity (1997) is one of the first monographs that analyses masculinity on French screen. Powrie specifically focuses on three genres: the “nostalgia film”, the “polar” and the “comic film”, which according to him are exemplary in their depiction of frustrated masculinity. Martine Beugnet’s *Marginalité sexualité contrôle dans le cinéma français contemporain* (2001), places itself along the same lines insofar as the author also noted a shift in representation in French cinema, but this time in relation to the “other” in the French cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, whether this “otherness” is racial or gender and sexuality-based. Before analyzing closely films by Beineix, Blier, Carax, Godard and Denis, Beugnet establishes the tensions between those – directors and critiques – concerned with formal beauty on the one hand, and others, such as Susan Hayward, who see this postmodern trend and devoid of meaning. For Beugnet and Hayward there is a need to consider films in their specific socio-historico-political context, as well as to engage in their ideological discourse (26). Beugnet is however not as acerbic as Hayward in her criticism of postmodernism. She proposes, unlike Hayward, close readings of texts that unveil the systems of representation in place and therefore reconcile form and content without neglecting to remind the reader of the political context in which the films came out. My approach will be similar to Beugnet’s insofar as I will rely on close readings that will be the basis of my illustration of queerness in the films of Sciamma, Desportes and Jouvét. I will also consider these films in relation to their predecessors, namely the banlieue film for Sciamma, punk and rape-revenge for Desportes, and (post-) porn for Desportes and Jouvét. Overall, my project will shed light onto what French

queer film can look like, which is an endeavor that is original but certainly follows in Beugnet's footsteps in her consideration of a wide "other".

I finally want to give credit to Nick Rees-Roberts' *French Queer Cinema*, as it is the first overview of was the first overview that considers both queer films and videos in the context of the French production of films.⁷ Early on the author announces that the book is "a political reading of French cinema" (2), which leads him to unpack the key terms of the title. For the first one Rees-Roberts go back to the late 1990s, which he perceives as "an era of great socio-political change for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities" (2) and ends with a commentary on how French Republicanism is intrinsically in conflict with the needs of specific communities. As for queer, the author specifies that rather than being taken as a synonym for LGBT (which is a common use of the term in France), queer means "an attempt to translate the Anglo-American mode of political and academic critique to a contemporary French cultural setting" (4-5). This is certainly the meaning that I intend in this project, as my readings of the films will rely on queer theory by authors such as Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam or Sam Bourcier. According to Rees-Roberts, Bourcier's concept of "active visibility" provided a "starting point for a working definition of queer in the French context" with the concept of "active visibility", a concept that refers to the sexual identity of the directors who produce images outside the straight mainstream (5-6). Even though the

⁷ I have consciously chosen to leave aside Florian Grandena and Claire Johnston's *Cinematic Queerness: Gay and Lesbian Hypervisibility in Contemporary Francophone Feature Films* because their use of "queerness" is a synonym for gay and lesbian, which refers to a binary system that I am rejecting in this work.

notion was dismissed by Darren Waldron because of its essentializing force, Rees-Roberts notes its usefulness in that it allows to unveil different forms of image production (6), some institutionalized such as auteur film production (which Bourcier abhors) on the one hand, and other outside of mainstream cinema, such as pornography and DIY video, a form that I will approach in the second and third chapters of my work.

My choice to gather Céline Sciamma, Virginie Despentes, and Émilie Juvet may at first seem surprising because of their diverse backgrounds. Céline Sciamma graduated from the Fémis in the screenwriting section, making her the only classically trained director of the project, whereas Virginie Despentes became a filmmaker by chance, after being asked to direct her first feature *Baise-moi* (2000) – the adaptation of her first novel – because no one else was able to. Finally, Émilie Juvet's training and background is in photography. She is a graduate of the Beaux Arts and the École Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie, and switched to filmmaking to direct *One Night Stand* (2011) because she wanted to watch a French lesbian porn film but could not find one. While I do not wish to consider biographical details for my analyses of the films, the diversity of these directors' backgrounds informs their filmmaking styles and discourses. It also informs the status of queer cinema in France, at a time when the means of production of films have never been so diverse and when the cinema is no longer the only place to view films. I will thus address the singularities of their trajectories not for biographical purposes but because their consequences are visible on screen and participate in the definition of French queer feminist filmmaking.

I have chosen the term “topographies” for two reasons. First, it expresses my desire to delimit the space of queer filmmaking by women in France. Its plural form refers to the multiplicity of practices and their traces onto the map of queer films that I am beginning to draw. The space that queer films – and their directors – occupy in French filmmaking is restricted, and yet, I am hoping that my work will unveil the diversity of queer work currently available. The term “topographies” also allows me to access the question of space, which will be the focus of this work, although it is to be treated differently in each chapter. First, in Sciamma’s films I will be considering the national space, that is to say national monuments as well as buildings from the *banlieue*, which have become iconic because of the history of urban development in France or because of the film genre associated with them. In the chapter about Jouvét’s films, space will be that of the production of post-porn based on performance, which does not correspond to the mainstream space of production of French films. Finally the chapter about Desportes’ films – which is chapter 2 – will operate the transition between the space in and of the film (in Sciamma) and the space of filmmaking, as Desportes is both a meticulous *metteuse en scène* like Sciamma, and a filmmaker inspired by performance like Jouvét. In sum, the films of Sciamma, Desportes, and Jouvét all utilize space to convey queerness: whether that space is that of national identity, the space that the women characters occupy on screen, or the space that women artists occupy with their work. In so doing, these directors reclaim spaces that were originally reserved for men,

but they do so unconventionally, by reframing national monuments, twisting filmic conventions, and appropriating alternative spaces of film production.

The first chapter focuses on the three films of Céline Sciamma, perhaps the most well known of the three directors that figure in this work. This placement is explained by Sciamma's prominent position in the French filmmaking world of the past eleven years. In addition to directing *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011), and *Girlhood* (2014), she has co-written Claude Barras' animated film *My Life as a Zucchini* (2016) and André Téchiné's *Quand on a 17 ans* (2016). In this chapter I will consider how Sciamma's mise-en-scène, and especially her framing of buildings and monuments from the banlieue participate in her blurring of the boundaries between center and periphery and in so doing redefine the banlieue film genre. Instead of focusing on plot and character relations to illustrate the films' queerness, I will rely on close readings of space in key scenes of the trilogy.

In the second chapter, I will consider Virginie Despentes' punk style as the basis of her rewriting of two key genres, namely rape-revenge and porn. My reading of punk will be both informed by Despentes' personal preference for this musical genre, but most importantly by her DIY aesthetic, which even though it was not adopted by choice but by constraint, still enabled her to offer a rough style which visually and consequently discursively challenged the modes of representation that rape-revenge and porn traditionally offer. Via close readings that will include both sound and image, I intend to demonstrate how the combination of image and sound in *Baise-moi* (2000) establishes the

basis of Desportes' filmmaking, which in turn leads her to post-pornography in *Mutantes* (2009), and the distortion of linearity in *Bye Bye Blondie* (2012).

I finish my project with Émilie Juvet's *One Night Stand* (2011), *Too Much Pussy* (2012), *Much More Pussy* (2012), and *My Body, My Rules* (2017), as well as some of her short films available online on *Vimeo*, *YouTube*, or *Dailymotion*. This chapter is different from the other two in that I do not limit my analysis to the films themselves, but I also consider the modes of production and consumption, which depart from mainstream cinema. Indeed for Juvet DIY filmmaking entails the use of minimal and basic equipment as well as a distribution outside of the theater circuit but in film festivals all over the world. By considering these three diverse directors side by side in their representation of queer in contemporary French cinema, my endeavor is to shed light onto the dynamism of French production, and the richness of queer French films directed by women in particular. In so doing, I also hope to participate in the rethinking of French cinema.

Chapter 1: Between the Axes: The Peripheral Trajectories of Sciamma's Queer Bodies

“Je ne pense pas qu'on arrivera jamais à trouver de la poésie dans ces grands ensembles qu'on appelait les HLM, et qu'on appelle maintenant les “cités”.⁸

Eric Rohmer

Introduction:

Céline Sciamma graduated from the screenwriting section of the Fémis – the French state film school – in 2005. She worked under the mentoring of filmmaker Xavier Beauvois and presented the screenplay for *Water Lilies* (2007) for her end-of-studies project. Even though her training had been in screenwriting, producers convinced her to direct the film herself, which she did only one year after her graduation (Torghoslo). The film was presented at the 2007 Cannes film festival in the program *Un Certain Regard* where it received positive reviews, as well as after its general release in August of the same year. Stéphane Delorme for *Les Cahiers du cinema* and Jean-Marc Lalanne for *Les Inrocks* both noted the director's mastery and attention to detail as well as the actors' performances. In a short review of the film for *Positif*, Yann Tobin called it “a very promising success”,⁹ while in the next issue of the magazine, Fabien Baumann devoted a longer article to it, praising Sciamma's *mise-en-scène* and reasserting her promising future (557-8).

⁸ “I don't think that we will ever be able to find poetry in these housing projects that we used to call *HLM*, and that we now call *cités*”.

⁹ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Although at times unfavorable, comments on the mise-en-scène were recurrent enough to draw attention to it. In his review, Stéphane Delorme writes: “The mise-en-scène does not look much, but moves forward by means of eroticized inserts and suppressions of off-screen space” (33). While I disagree with Delorme on the use of off-screen space, I concur with his noting of it being seemingly simple, a comment that Charles Tesson also made in his pedagogical dossier for *Tomboy* (2011), Sciamma’s second film (9). In his longer review of *Water Lilies* for *Positif*, Fabien Baumann developed his reflection on the mise-en-scène around the idea of absence:

Céline Sciamma organizes her mise-en-scène by subtractions. We are in the suburb, something like Pontoise, neither rich nor poor. There is no school, so it is probably summertime. There are no parents either in the locker rooms where the teenagers dress and undress, on the esplanades and in the alleys, in the apartments and the empty houses where they meet. (42)

Baumann’s attention to space overlooks *how* the mise-en-scène gets rid of the parents. Indeed, while the time of the film is vague from beginning to end, Sciamma’s precise organization of space allows the viewer to conceive of the parents’ absence. If thus as Jacques Morice noted in his review for *Télérama*, Sciamma’s mise-en-scène is “didactic” it must lead us to inquire about what Sciamma is trying to achieve (“*Naissance des pieuvres*”). Unlike Morice who saw in her didacticism a way for the director to “take refuge”, I propose to consider it as the basis of a filmmaking that queers space.

Reviews of *Tomboy* (2011) and *Girlhood* (2014) confirmed the crucial role of the mise-en-scène. Both Thierry Méranger from *Les Cahiers du cinéma* and Dominique Martinez from *Positif* recognized Sciamma's filming precision in establishing the children's relations in *Tomboy* (33; 37). On the other hand, the mixed reviews that *Girlhood* received were also due to the mise-en-scène, which Vincent Malausa from *Les Cahiers* called "heavy" and "as vain as the worst World Cinema" (46). However, Jean-Christophe Ferrari from *Positif* considered it graceful and precise (23). In spite of their conflicting views, the critics' quasi-systematic mentioning of the mise-en-scène must turn our attention to the ways in which the spaces of the three films can be in dialogue.

First, the space of the suburb can be considered the spatial element that ties the films together. Shot in Cergy-Pontoise, Vaires-sur-Marne and Bagnole, *Water Lilies*, *Tomboy* and *Girlhood* all take place in the Île-de-France region. However that is not to say that all three settings are similar. That of the *cit  de la Noue* in Bagnole where *Girlhood* was filmed, seems to be the only one that corresponds to the setting of *banlieue* films, made of low and high-rises ("Girlhood"). On the other hand, Cergy-Pontoise and Vaires-sur-Marne offer a very different architecture, with smaller buildings surrounded by nature. They can therefore be understood as suburbs in the more general sense of the term, which the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defines as: "the area immediately outside a town or city" ("Suburb").

In spite of the location of *Girlhood* as well as her characters being women of color struggling for emancipation, a trait that Carole Milleliri has noted in "Le Cin ma de

banlieue: un genre instable” about the *banlieue* film genre (7), Sciamma herself rejected the label “*banlieue* film”, invoking both what the film was about, and how she made it. In an interview with journalists from Enlargeyourparis.com, she explained:

When I said that it was not a *banlieue* film, I was speaking in terms of filmic criteria. *Banlieue* films have specific subjects and *mise-en-scène*. It is associated with a certain style: often masculine, virile, it is like an urban western with a documentary aspect linked to social issues. This is where my film departs from them” (*Enlargeyourparis*, “Bande de filles: “Pas un film de banlieue mais depuis la banlieue”).¹⁰

According to its director *Girlhood* is about friendship, love, and coming of age, and therefore does not fit into the preoccupation of the *banlieue* film (Cadenas). While it is not my goal here to confirm or infirm Sciamma’s rejection of her third film’s categorization, I nevertheless wish to consider her arguments, as they involve the questions of style and *mise-en-scène* as well as her awareness of the implications of her “urban” setting.

A closer look at the spaces depicted not only in *Girlhood* but also in Sciamma’s other two films confirms the director’s attachment to the inside/outside dichotomy that

¹⁰ My translation. “Quand je disais que ce n’était pas un film de banlieue, je le disais par rapport à des critères de cinéma. Le film de banlieue renvoie à des sujets, des partis-pris de mise en scène. Il possède ses assignations stylistiques : souvent masculin, viril, il s’apparente à un western urbain avec une immersion documentaire souvent liée à des faits de société. C’est là où mon film se détache” in French.

lies at the heart of *banlieue* films.¹¹ However, in addition to being based on the opposition between the *banlieue* and Paris in *Girlhood*, her problematic is also the relation between the inside spaces of apartment and houses, and the outside world, which Sciamma represents thanks to a recurrent staging of front doors. The representation of doors being opened and the problematization of characters moving – sometimes with difficulty – from one side to the other lies at the heart of the trilogy. As an object that can be an auxiliary or an obstacle to the characters' movements, the door complicates the characters' relations to inside and outside spaces. Gaston Bachelard noted the ambiguity of the door in *The Poetics of Space* when he stated: "The door schematizes two strong possibilities, which sharply classify two types of daydream. At times it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others, it is open, that is to say, wide open" (222). While this possibility for the door to be open or closed has opposite consequences onto the space in which it is situated, the use of the door in film is all the more crucial because of the potential play on what is screened and what is not. The closed door screens the space behind it, making it inaccessible for the camera, whereas the open door allows the same space to be visible on screen. As a result, its simple turning movement coupled with the presence of the camera can modify the pro-filmic space completely. By playing with the camera position throughout her films, Sciamma incorporates it fully into the representation of the unstable space that the door delimits.

¹¹ For more information on the center-periphery dichotomy, see Carrie Tarr's *Reframing difference: Beur and banlieue filmmaking in France* and Will Higbee's "Screening the 'other' Paris: cinematic representations of the French urban periphery in *La Haine* and *Ma 6-T Va Crack-er*".

Water Lilies, *Tomboy* and *Girlhood* also form a trilogy because they deal with non-adult characters. In the review mentioned above Jacques Morice noted that *Water Lilies* was part of the long French tradition of films about adolescence, and acknowledged that Sciamma had renewed the genre. In numerous interviews, she insisted that her first film was not just another teen movie, nor a gay or coming out movie because it ends where others begin, with a “coming out,” and that it was more open on the subject of a teenage girl who falls for another one (Torghoslo). She justified the choice of the theme by arguing that as a twenty-seven-year-old, she felt that she was close, and yet far enough from the characters to be able to tell her/their story (Lalanne). She also explained: “It’s a genre that kind of contains everything: you have the chronicle, you can go into naturalism, but it’s also about transforming physically, so it’s kind of a fantastical genre” (Etheart). After *Tomboy* (2011) and *Girlhood* (2014), two films whose main characters grapple with their gender identity, Sciamma considered her films as a trilogy, and expressed her desire to stop her exploration of teenage years (*Ibid.*). However André Téchiné, who also noted that she had renewed the genre of teen film, asked her to co-write the screenplay for his most recent film *Quand on a 17 ans* (2016), to which she agreed.

Téchiné’s influence on Sciamma is notable as he was one of the first directors to represent queer teenage characters in *Les Roseaux sauvages* (1992). Sciamma’s and Téchiné’s seemingly opposed aesthetics – he describes his style as baroque while Sciamma is simpler – have led me to inquire how the expression of queerness could have

changed between a film labeled as part of New Queer Cinema in the 1990s and others made over twenty years later (Baronnet). The first common characteristic to *Wild Reeds*, *The Witnesses*, and Sciamma's films – which are all queer coming-of-age stories – is that they are all anchored in a context that goes far beyond the characters' local environment. In using the Algerian War or the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic as contextual time periods, Téchiné has shown interest in linking his characters' journeys to issues concerning French nation-state. In so doing, these films have become as much about the larger issue and questions related to French national identity as they are about a particular set of characters.

The impact of *Tomboy* onto French society certainly illustrates the link between film plot and larger societal issues, in this case that of gender studies. The film was selected to be part of the educational program *École et Cinéma* – coordinated by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the National Center of Cinematography and the Moving Image, as well as the organization *Les enfants de cinéma* – which proposes screenings to primary school children (“École et cinéma”). In November 2013, a petition against the film started on the Internet activism platform CitizenGo. Sébastien LM, who created the petition, stated: “school is not and should not be a place where the students are exposed to the ideology of gender. We ask for the immediate interruption of the screening of the film *Tomboy* in schools” (LM).¹² The film benefitted from the

¹² “L'école n'est pas et ne doit pas être un lieu de diffusion de l'idéologie du genre auprès des élèves. Nous demandons la cessation immédiate de toute projection du film *Tomboy* dans les écoles”. My translation

support of the *Société des Réalistes de Films*, an organization created in 1968 by film directors such as Jacques Rivette or Robert Bresson, with the intent of “defending artistic and moral freedom, as well as the professional and economic interests of cinematic creation and participate in the production of new structures for cinema”.¹³ On December 23 2013, after 46.000 students of 4th, 5th, and 6th grades had already seen the film, directors from the *Société des Réalistes de Films* (SRF) published a press release asking the Ministries of Education and Culture to put an end to the polemic, arguing that creative and educational freedoms should not be hindered (Doiezie; “Communiqué”). To this day *Tomboy* remains on the list of films for *École et Cinéma* (“Dossier”).

Girlhood more directly raises societal questions related to Marieme, Lady, Fily and Adiatou’s gender and blackness. In an interview at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, Sciamma herself noted that her look into a group of black French teenage girls was new and modern in French cinema (*Vimeo*, “Entretien”). While the obstacle that their gender and race represent echoes those seen in other films, Sciamma’s approach to raising issues is where the novelty of her films lies. In the same interview as the one in which she recognizes the innovative aspect of her project, Sciamma talked about her choice of a Cinemascope. She explained: “it is a format suitable for filming groups, but also spaces, circulation in space, architecture, the *banlieue*” (Quinzaine). Her openly admitted engagement with space coupled with her precise mise-en-scène allows her to visually link

¹³ "Défendre les libertés artistiques, morales et les intérêts professionnels et économiques de la création cinématographique et de participer à l'élaboration de nouvelles structures du cinéma". My translation

her characters to their environment. Moreover because of the choice of the *banlieue* for all three films, it is impossible not to relate the characters' queerness to questions having to do with the space of the nation-state. While *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy* may at first glance not seem to have much to do with that space, a closer look reveals that Sciamma's first film is actually the one that begins the reflection as well as foresees the *banlieue* problems raised in *Girlhood*.

My goal in this chapter will be to demonstrate how the organization of the films' space directly destabilizes the inside/outside dichotomy, or in other words how Sciamma queers the space in the film. I will consider both the general settings, namely the *banlieues* of Cergy-Pontoise, Vaires, and Bagnolet, as well as the spatial divisions within those places that the staging of doors operates. While most of the articles devoted to Sciamma's work have been devoted to the fluidity that accompanies adolescence or gender identity, a few have delved into a precise analysis of space. In "Schizoid Femininities and Interstitial Spaces: Childhood and Gender in Céline Sciamma's *Tomboy* and P.J. Hogan's *Peter Pan*" Robbie Duschinsky notes how "the film dramatizes the transitory inhabitation of an interstice within gender and age which mobilises gender norms precisely in order to reach for valuable opportunities and protection from exclusion" (6). Even though the spatial terminology alludes to the door – the object that links the two spaces on which the masculine and the feminine are based on in the film – Duschinsky limits his mentioning of specific places to Laure's blue bedroom and the father's car. I will therefore pick up the exploration of space where Duschinsky left off by

focusing on the element that not only creates the dichotomy at the heart of all three films, but also that participates in the queering of the space thanks to Sciamma's mise-en-scène.

The first section of this chapter will be devoted to mapping out the setting of each of the films as well as the implications of the inclusion of iconic monuments and places such as the Axe majeur, the Grande Arche of La Défense, or the subway station Châtelet. I will then move on to a close analysis of the role of the door including by considering its protean aspect. Indeed, while many front doors appear in all three films, Sciamma assigns the same ambivalent role to other objects including the camera. I will thus demonstrate how the use of the filmic apparatus destabilizes the inside/outside dichotomy established by the presence of iconic monuments and buildings. Finally, I will turn to what I have called disjunctive spaces, by which I mean that they operate outside the inside/outside dichotomy and allow the characters to not abide by the codes that they are trying to escape.

I. Organizational dichotomies

Even though all three films take place in the *banlieue* not all are concerned with its relation – and by extension that of its inhabitants' – to the capital. Only *Girlhood* clearly establishes the gap between where Marieme, Lady, Adiatou and Fily are from (Bagnolet, a city just East of Paris) and the city center, more specifically Les Halles – where they go shopping – and Châtelet – the subway station located in the very center of the capital. The girls' adventures in the city are far from uneventful. The store's sales assistant in Les Halles follows Marieme because she takes her for a thief, and the girls get

into an altercation with another group on the opposite platform in the nearby subway station. When in the city center, the girls are outsiders. However, that is not to say that the film presents them as victims. On the contrary, the girls respond to the salesperson's shadowing of Marieme by confronting and humiliating her, and they yell back at the girls on the subway platform before pulling out knives in the attempt to intimidate them. The film thus establishes the center/periphery dichotomy not as what determines the girls' fate, but as the setting that these four young black suburbanites know how to navigate in their quest for emancipation.

In addition to their rapid visit into the city center early in the film, the girls' mobility and their ability to occupy any given space is further represented during the scene at the mini golf, which include Parisian monuments such as the Eiffel Tower and the Bourse de commerce. The scene takes place after Lady has lost a fistfight against a girl from another *banlieue*, whom Marieme's brother will refer to as 'Vigneux chick'. In the context of the aftermath of the loss, Adiatou's and Fily's successes do not go unnoticed. First, Adiatou brags that she has completed the 'Eiffel Tower' hole in two strokes, dedicates it to Lady to comfort her, and celebrates by dancing by the Tower.



fig.1. Adiatou celebrating after completing the hole

The medium shot of Adiatou and the Eiffel Tower displays their equal heights. In addition, Adiatou's defiant and dance-like direct address to it shows her awareness of her achievement. Her overcoming of one of the symbol of Paris and France – two places from which she and her friends are systematically excluded – is a collective victory.

Fily's following ace on the 'Bourse' one is more complex as in addition to demonstrating her mastery of the space, it is also a victory against Adiatou, who was accusing her of cheating.



fig.2. Long shot of Fily's celebration

The long shot of Fily's celebratory jump contrasts with the shot of Adiatou, suggesting that her joy is directed against her friend. However, even though Fily's body rises above Adiatou's, the shot size also allows for a composition that tells a story once again having to do with space. Fily has just aced the hole by playing by Adiatou's rules, which consisted in going through the tunnel in the middle of the monument, as opposed to around it, as Fily planned. After a brief argument, Fily complied, aced the hole, which led to Adiatou crying. Adiatou's competitive attitude explains her being so upset. However, in addition to a simple loss, Fily's mastery of the space, especially her ability to conquer the monument by going through its center adds insult to injury. It is only thanks to the

long shot isolating the monument from Adiatou, Lady, Marieme and Fily that the film reiterates the collective aspect of the victory. Even though Adiatou is sad because she has lost against her friend, her reaction does not take anything away from Sciamma's representation of the girls' control of the space. The scene not only restores the sense of power that the group lost after Lady's lost fight against the 'Vigneux chick', but it is also the first step toward reconquering their lost grounds.¹⁴ Marieme's subsequent victory against the same 'chick' will be the apotheosis of the girls' power, a power even celebrated by Marieme's oppressive brother Djibril.

In addition to places and monuments that represent Paris' city center, the action of *Girlhood* takes place in La Défense, the business district located in the periphery North West of Paris. The area is recognizable in the film thanks to shots of two iconic developments both completed in the 1980s: the shopping mall 'Les 4 Temps', which opened in 1981 and was renovated from 2004 to 2007, and the Grande Arche, inaugurated in 1989. The use of La Défense as the setting of two scenes attests Sciamma's commitment to the representation of the center-periphery dichotomy. In this regard La Défense holds a special status as both a peripheral location, and one that is closely tied to the history of Paris and the nation-state. In *La Grande Arche sur l'Axe historique de Paris* Erik Reitzel recalls the context of the international competition initiated by President Mitterrand, which ended with the construction of the Grande Arche.

¹⁴ Vigneux is another banlieue situated South of Paris. The mention by Marieme's brother of the girl's hometown testifies of how much he and the girls value their territory. The girl is not known by her name but by where she is from, and as such, she is known as an enemy.

President Mitterrand wanted a building that would be both a monument for Paris, a place that tourists could visit, but also a building capable of including several public entities such as the Ministries of Environment, Urbanism and Housing, or the *Carrefour international de la communication*, which would help Paris open up internationally (26).

The Grande Arche was not the only building in La Défense that was related to the greater history of the country. As early as 1958, the inauguration of the Center of New Industries and Technologies as well as the creation of the *Établissement public pour l'aménagement de la Défense* demonstrated the commitment of the state to turn the former empty land into a business and cultural hub (Dottelonde, 8). Moreover according to Dottelonde, the development of La Défense had to be understood in relation to that of the Axe historique, the way going from the Louvre and ending at the business district. He states:

One can understand nothing about La Défense without its relation to the desire that has crossed the ages to trace here, West of Paris, a 'prestigious way', which will be 'royal', 'imperial', then 'triumphal' depending on the era, but which will always have to do with France, its ambition for power, its influence. (Dottelonde, 21)

The inclusion of La Défense in Sciamma's film is telling because of what it symbolizes for girls who are used to being excluded from the space of the nation-state. After the mini golf excursion where they showed their mastery of monuments that were substitutes for the real ones, here they find freedom at the foot of a monument that is located, as is their

home, outside the city limits, but that symbolizes the greatness of their country. Moreover, while the location of the Arche at the Western extremity of the Axe ties it to the history of the place itself, its shape guarantees the continuation of the Axe on the other side, thus allowing its evolution to remain timeless. For the girls, it could mean that the only place where they find solace is condemned to also be the one that symbolizes their exclusion. For the existence of a 'royal way' implies that of 'lowly' ones that do not pass by the city center, ones that Marieme, her mother and her friends are used to taking.

In spite of its potential ambivalent symbolism, La Défense participates in telling the story of the girls' coveted mobility. It is where Marieme's mother works as a janitor in an office building and where the girls go do some shopping or engage in dancing contests with their friends. As a place of both work and leisure, it proves to be essential to the survival of women. Indeed, in the office building where Marieme's mother works, on the escalators inside the mall, and on the parvis in front of the Arche, the characters that appear on screen are all female. Even though it is foolish and risky, Marieme's rejection of the job offer at La Défense in the first of the two scenes shot at that location appears as a refusal to follow in her mother's footsteps and accept what she perceives as debasement. The subsequent scene at La Défense will finish to establish this 'other' peripheral place as one of freedom.

When we first see the long shot of Marieme by 'Les 4 Temps' at night, we expect her to go shopping. Instead, she is joining her mother at her work for a first trial shift. Marieme is far from pleased at the idea of spending the summer there as a janitor and

upon discussing the details about the job with her mother's boss, she threatens her by forcing her to tell her mother that she is no longer needed. The scene – which also ends the second chapter of the film – ends with a tracking shot from inside the building overlooking the other skyscrapers of the business district. At this point in the film Marieme has just committed an act that initiates her ascension to emancipation and power. It will be followed by two more – her fistfight and victory against 'the chick from Vigneux' and the night she will spend with Ismaël – before returning to La Défense for a scene drastically happier than the first one.

The first shot of the second scene is a medium close-up on some girls' faces. As the camera tracks to the left, only a viewer familiar with the stairs in front of the Grande Arche can recognize the place. As the fourth chapter of the film begins, ParaOne's extradiegetic music covers all other sounds even though the girls seem to be talking to each other. While the music helps smooth the transition between the third and fourth parts of the film, the dislocation of the characters remains striking because of the change in architecture, which the viewer can discover when the film cuts to an extreme long shot of the girls by the Grande Arche.



fig.3. Extreme long shot of the Grande Arche and Les 4 Temps

This shot of the group renders the gigantism of the monument. However, the Arche's shape offers a perspective to the characters, unlike the shots in Marieme's *cité*. Contrary to the apartment buildings in Bagnole, the Grande Arche does not block the sky completely. It is possible to go through or around it, unlike the apartment buildings.

In Bagnole, the few extreme long shots of Marieme completely or almost completely block the perspective. The most striking one takes place in front of Marieme's building as she is coming back from her first overnight escapade with her friends.



fig.4. Extreme long shot of Marieme by her apartment building

Unlike in the shot at La Défense, Marieme is alone and isolated in the bottom right hand corner of the frame. In addition, the building fills up almost the entire frame whereas the Arche, because of its shape, allows the sky to be visible in the background. Even though the Grande Arche and Marieme's apartment building are both located in the *banlieue*, it is clear that the difference in the mise-en-scène of both spaces connotes their opposite statuses. While the *cité* de la Noue in Bagnole is mostly composed of rent-controlled housing, La Défense, located at the end of the Axe historique, gathers office buildings of some of the most successful multinational corporations. Marieme's refusal to work with

her mother during the summer demonstrates that there she has a power that she does not have at home, in the overwhelming apartment building ruled by her brother.

La Défense's visibility in *Girlhood* was foreshadowed in Sciamma's first film *Water Lilies*. Even though the film never enters Paris' city limits, the presence of the Axe majeur in a central scene testifies of Sciamma's concern with the space of the nation-state both because of the history of the Axe and its architecture. The Axe majeur, of which the construction began in the 1980s, is a monument whose creation has partially relied on public funds. Moreover, the investment of politicians both at the local and national levels tied the Axe to its immediate environment as well as the French history of national development.¹⁵ It is located in Cergy, a commune that is part of the urban agglomeration of Cergy-Pontoise, located twenty-eight kilometers North-West of Paris. Cergy-Pontoise, used to have the status of *ville nouvelle* until 2002 (INA). These *villes nouvelles* were created in the 1960s to organize the growth of large agglomerations such as Paris, Lille or Lyon ("La politique des villes nouvelles"). In addition to preventing anarchical growth, they were also a way to dislocate power from the center (Paris) to other cities in the provinces. Cergy is therefore a symbol of the expansion of France beyond its capital.

The scene that takes place at the Axe majeur, specifically at the Twelve Columns, the fourth station of the Axe - is central to the film for two reasons. It splits the film into two parts each organizing the spaces of the characters differently in order to convey the evolution of their relationships. Secondly, it is Sciamma's first attempt to include the

¹⁵ For a history of the genesis of the Axe, see Claude Molard's book *La Saga de l'Axe majeur: Dani Karavan à Cergy-Pontoise*

space of the nation-state into her oeuvre. It should therefore be read in relation to the setting of the other films in the trilogy.

The Axe majeur is a 3.2 kilometer axis that begins in a neighborhood called les-Hauts-de-Saint-Christophe and continues toward Paris. It is interspersed with twelve monuments called stations, which represent the passage of time. On the one hand, as the architect Michel Jaouën noted, the location of the Axe in the meander of the Oise river gives the impression that it splits the space (28). On the other hand, in *La Saga de l'Axe majeur: Dani Karavan à Cergy-Pontoise*, Claude Mollard notes: "In the work of Dani Karavan, the line does not cut, it links. It gives birth to an axis that leads the public to participate. The line is not a border, it is a call to going toward the other" (24). The direction of the Axe toward Paris reinforces its linking power. Not only does the Axe allow a view of La Défense, but its potential continuation would also lead to the Île des impressionnistes intersecting on its way with the Axe historique, the axis going from Le Louvre to La Défense. Claude Mollard went as far as asserting that this geographical particularity helped Karavan's oeuvre reach the 'axe majeur' of French history. In situating her characters on the Axe majeur, Sciamma places them at the intersection of two histories: one that began in Paris to expand outside of it, and the other going the reverse route.

Both because of its narrative centrality and its architecture the scene at the Axe majeur stands out as the organizing monument of *Water Lilies*. In addition, given Sciamma's commitment to the organization of the space of the nation-state in her

following films, looking back at the Axe makes apparent its connection to the other iconic places and monuments of Sciamma's trilogy. Moreover, beyond Sciamma's oeuvre it is also possible to link the Axe back to Rohmer's *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (1987), also shot in Cergy-Pontoise. Even though the Axe was at the beginning of its construction at the time of the shooting of the film, its use betrays Rohmer's interest in urban development, which he expressed through writing and film, as Marion Schmid explored in her essay "Between 'Classicism and Modernity: Éric Rohmer on Urban Change'". Schmid notes that Rohmer saw the *villes nouvelles* as "places of alienation and dislocation emblematic of late modernity" (346). The dislocating aspect of Cergy-Pontoise echoes Sciamma's comments in the interview for *Film Catcher* on how the setting for *Water Lilies* does not give indications that it is a suburb of Paris but on the contrary that it could be anywhere. It thus seems that by the time Sciamma directed her film, the dislocation had been accomplished, against Karavan's desire to link the Axe majeur to Paris and the history of France. Indeed, there is no mention of Paris in the entire film, contrary to *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, through the character's comments on the view. It is only through familiarity with the Axe majeur and further research that one can understand its tie to the nation-state. Paradoxically though, this imagined connection between the center and the periphery haunts all three films and makes itself the core of the trilogy.

Unlike *Water Lilies* and *Girlhood*, Sciamma's second film *Tomboy* takes place in Vaires-sur-Marne, a small town east of Paris, in the department of Seine-et Marne, which

does not seem to have any architectural or urbanistic particularities, and which is also much smaller than the other two communes. (“*Tomboy*”; “*Vaires sur Marne*”). While the apartment complexes seem almost as large as the one in Bagnolet, the bordering wood, the lake, and the improvised soccer field make the children’s environment more welcoming than in *Girlhood* and *Water Lilies*. Another difference between *Tomboy* and Sciamma’s other two films lies in the kindly presence of adults throughout the films. In an interview for xSciamma justified the presence of the parents by her desire to portray “a family where there is tenderness” (Zastaph). Unlike in *Water Lilies*, in which Sciamma stages the parents’ absence, or *Girlhood*, in which Marieme’s mother rare apparition are oppressive, Laure/Mickaël’s family is nurturing. In spite of the flaws that Sciamma assigned to the adult characters – in the *CinéZooms* interview she claims that the father is “lunar” and the mother not completely available because she is pregnant – the bond between all family members is undeniable. In addition, in spite of having just moved into their new apartment, several rooms such as the parents’ bedroom and the living room serve as cozy gathering places. The simple middle-class environment in which Laure/Mickaël lives seems to be the perfect setting for a child’s upbringing. Yet it is specifically because of this mundane environment that Laure/Mickaël’s lie will come as a large disturbance in the family’s installation in their new home and neighborhood. As a white middle-class child, Laure is what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls a “child queered by innocence”, that is to say a child that, according to adults, needs protection (Stockton, 30). Instead, the mother is the one who gives her child the key to the house so that she/he

can go as she/he pleases. She is therefore indirectly the one who allows Laure to become Mickaël.

After finding out about the lie, the mother even claims that she is not upset by the fact that Laure plays boy, but that she needs to stop lying because: “school is in two weeks so we don’t have a choice now, we have to tell the truth”. The mother’s compliance to the public institution of school contrasts with Laure’s willingness to keep being Mickaël, as she attempts to explain the absence of his name from the classes lists. In “*TransFrance*” Todd Reeser noted the mother’s attitude and argued:

The character of the mother may be taken as a sign of the influence of the nation state that oversees the correspondence between Laure’s sex and gender. Or, conversely, the nation state may be seen as signifying the character’s own sexual binarism, which suggests that the very concept of binarism depends on national symbolic power for credibility. (5)

Either of these interpretations confirms Reeser’s introductory comments about the nation state where he asserts: “the nation state recurs in much recent trans discourse as problem or as obstacle to be overcome” (4). While the temporality of *Tomboy* prevents Laure/Mickaël’s school from being visible, its incursion through the mother’s discourse nevertheless acts as regulatory. In replacing the architecture representing the nation state by a reminder expressed by the proxy/mother, the film maintains the inside/outside dichotomy at play in all three films at the same time as the possibility for the characters to navigate it. In other words thanks to the mother’s mention of school, the film sustains

the binary that makes the emergence of queerness possible, a queerness specifically anchored in the organization of space.

Although the presence of nature contrasts with what is shown in *Water Lilies* and in *Girlhood*, in *Tomboy* it constitutes the overwhelming majority of the ‘outside’ part of the dichotomy, which makes the split between Laure and Mickaël possible. Inside, the child is Laure, who plays with her sister – who is very girly – whereas outside he is Mickaël, who plays soccer with boys. The parents allow their child – at least until the mother finds out about the lie- to wear clothes and engage in activities that are coded masculine. However, for them there is no ambiguity about Laure’s gender identity, as the mother’s reaction at the end of the film testifies.

The dichotomy that lies at the heart of the film does not concern the place where Laure/Mickaël lives and its relation to the capital but it occurs within the space of the suburb. The only time the characters leave the city limits is to go swimming at the neighboring outdoor activity center. The rest of the film takes place between Laure/Mickaël’s apartment building, the wood, and the nearby asphalt soccer field. Instead of being places where the child can grow up in the best possible conditions, they become the setting of Laure/Mickaël’s isolation, an isolation due to the inside/outside dichotomy in which he/she has locked her/himself up. As soon as the child arrives to the family’s new building with her/his father, the background gives the impression that it is trapping her/him.



fig.5. Extreme long shot of Laure/Mickaël arriving with her/his father

The choice of shot size isolates both characters even though the building never appears in their entirety. Moreover, the presence of grass and trees right by the buildings, while it attenuates the overwhelming presence of concrete, participates in the saturation of the image.

Throughout the film, the wood becomes more and more overwhelming. While the first few shots there encompass both Mickaël and Jeanne, whom he just met, later on multiple shots show him alone especially toward the end of the film, after her mother has told Rayan's mother the truth and after the news has spread to all of his friends.



fig.6. Long shot of Mickaël in the woods fig.7. Extreme long shot of Mickaël

The mise-en-scène deliberately isolates Mickaël either by hiding or framing him. In both cases however, the image is completely saturated with trees. Very little light gets through

but the combination of shade and leaves makes the image difficult to decipher. The consequences for the child in it is ambivalent. On the one hand, Mickaël is experiencing the separation from what turned him into a girl in his mother's eyes. The contrast between the immobile piece of clothing on one of the fallen branches with Mickaël moving through the wood finishes to separate them. On the other hand however, Mickaël has become so difficult to identify in the middle of the woods that in the second image, his immobility makes him merge with the tree against which he is sitting. The subsequent symbolic rape will definitely transform the outside space of the wood into what the apartment was until the lie was uncovered: a prison for Laure/Mickaël's female body. At the end of the film, Laure is Laure both inside and outside.

II. What is between inside and outside?

The dichotomies in place in all three films imprison the characters. In spite of Marie's ability to enter Floriane's space, the latter remains out of her reach at the end of the film. For Marieme, most of the film consists in managing to enter or leave places and yet, at the end, her newly acquired seeming independence leads her to flee. Finally, Laure/Mickaël's double identity proves to be a dead end that gives way to the reassertion of his female gender. In the rest of the chapter instead of leaving aside these dichotomies, I would like to dissect them even further in order to understand the possibilities to undo them.

If all three films are organized around the inside/outside dichotomy, how do they – if they do at all – stage the passage from one to the other? Indeed, if from a narrative

point of view they are all concerned about the ability of the characters to move through space, are they committed to representing the moments when characters are crossing the limits between inside and outside? The answer is yes for all three films, as the striking number of scenes taking place at doors confirms. However, each film represents the door differently to reflect its own narrative. In *Water Lilies*, as Floriane and François are respectively manipulating Marie and Anne, they have to enter their personal space before pushing them away. Marie's bedroom, Floriane's house and Anne's apartment are therefore the three private spaces that the characters have to enter and leave. No less than eight scenes take place in these three spaces, and their interspersions throughout the film mirrors the evolution of the characters' relations.

In the first half of the film, Floriane and Marie are becoming more intimate. The result on screen is their presence at each other's home, while Anne, growing jealous of their friendship, hesitates to let Marie in. However for each of these spaces instead of showing the crucial moment when one character crosses the threshold, the film cuts to a shot of the two in the same space. While in each scene the continuity of the action is evident, the spatio-temporal gap that takes the characters from one side of the threshold to the other draws attention to the action that is specifically absent from the scene. In addition, the replacement of the threshold-crossing moment by a cut dislocates movement from within the frame to the film itself while at the same time mirroring the dislocation of the characters. The cut thus becomes a site of movement both in time and space, a visual spatio-temporal threshold between inside and outside, before crossing and after crossing.

In the second half, the film shows the characters crossing the same three thresholds. However, the characters entering Marie, Floriane and Anne's spaces are not the ones that the viewer would have expected in the first half of the film. Indeed, while François enters both Floriane's house and Anne's apartment, Anne enters Marie's bedroom, signifying that they are closer than ever while their respective interests in François and Floriane have been annihilated. While the use of space in the film is clearly divided, two central scenes form the turning point of both the narrative and division between inside and outside. The first one is the scene that takes place at the Axe majeur. The first shot of the scene is an extreme long shot in which Floriane and Marie are walking toward the Twelve Columns, the fourth station of the Axe.



fig.8. Floriane and Marie walking down the Axe majeur

The camera is static, behind them as they are walking on the Axe toward the Twelve Columns. According to Claude Mollard, author of *La saga de l'Axe Majeur: Dani Karavan à Cergy-Pontoise*, the Twelve Columns form a “viewfinder with multiple lenses” (Mollard, 126). Mollard explains:

When you enter the virtual cube formed by the Twelve Columns, you find yourself with multiple views of the landscape, much like in what could be called a

“viewing box”. The front view, with your back turned on the Belvedere Tower, cuts the landscape into three slices of space, caught between the four column lines, which tighten the closer you get to the “viewfinder” until you enter it. (Mollard, 126)¹⁶

The comparison of the columns to a viewfinder is particularly compelling because of the use that Sciamma makes of it in the next shot. Instead of showing the moment when Marie and Floriane reach the viewfinder, Sciamma cuts to a high-angle shot of the two girls sitting down on the other side of the columns, at the foot of the stairs that begin the descent toward the vegetation.



fig.9. Floriane and Marie sitting at the foot of the *Twelve Columns*

The camera is now facing the characters, but all are all still located on the axis. However the low-angle shot from the bottom of the stairs does away with the “viewfinder with multiple lenses”. Instead, part of the columns appears in the background while the characters are now looking at something off-screen.

¹⁶ “En pénétrant dans le cube virtuel des Douzes colonnes, on se trouve en face d’une multiplicité de visées sur le paysage, comme dans ce qui pourrait être une « boîte de vision ». La vision de face, quand on a le dos tourné à la Tour belvédère, découpe dans le paysage trois tranches d’espaces, prises entre les quatre lignes de colonnes, qui se resserrent au fur et à mesure que l’on se rapproche du « viseur » jusqu’à pénétrer en son sein ». My translation

By eliding the moment when the protagonists reach the Twelve Columns, Sciamma draws attention to it. Indeed, the haunting presence of the columns in the background ties the shots together at the same time as it signals to the viewer the spatio-temporal gap that allowed the characters to move from one side to the other. By positioning the columns in the background in both shot and having the characters head toward it first and then sit in front of it, Sciamma turns the columns/viewfinder into a door, a threshold. Furthermore, the absent presence of the threshold crossing moment also draws attention to the film itself in that in order for the columns as a threshold to be absent, something else has to appear on screen. In this case, the cut becomes a spatio-temporal threshold that replaces the visual one, thus dislocating movement from within the frame to the film itself.

When the film cuts, the shot is from Marie and Floriane's point of view. In other words the camera itself has now become the viewfinder through which Marie and Floriane look.

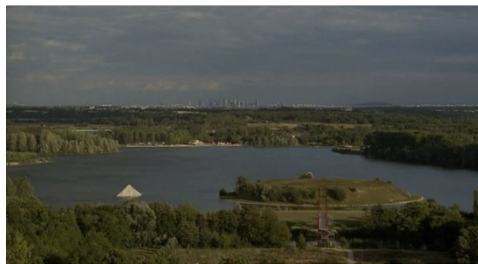


fig.10. Point-of-view shot from the stairs

Because of the position of the characters, the multiple lenses that the Twelve Columns could offer are no longer available. However, this high-angle shot is also the widest shot

of the film and offers a panoramic view of the continuation of the axis as well as the pond in which it stops, the vegetation behind, and finally the skyline of La Défense.

With this point of view, the camera lets us and the characters see the possible convergence of the Axe majeur with the Axe historique. The simultaneous growths of both axes as well as the completion of the Grande Arche and the Twelve Columns in 1989, the year of the bicentenary of the French Revolution, testify of their connection to the history of France. In the case of Cergy, Claude Mollard insisted that the Axe is a connector, and that the choice of Dani Karavan was closely tied to this connecting aspect. He explains: “In Denis Karavan’s oeuvre, the line does not cut, it links. It gives birth to an axis, which brings about the public’s participation. The line is not a border, it is an invitation to go toward the other” (24). The extreme long shot of the second part of the Axe, the vegetation, and the skyline is possible because the camera has endorsed both of the roles of the Twelve Columns as it is now a door and a viewfinder both for the characters and the viewer. While Marie and Floriane are in the same space looking toward infinity, the viewer has joined the axis and become part of that space too.

The film then cuts back to a low-angle shot of Marie and Floriane sitting on the stairs but this time the camera is not static, it tracks from right to left.



fig.11. Tracking shot of Marie and Floriane talking on the stairs

The movement of the camera does not follow a straight line, but forms the arc of a circle at the center of which Floriane and Marie are sitting. In other words, it is located on the panoramic view that the two teenage girls have from where they are located. In tracking from right to left the camera shows the width of the image – for the viewer – and view – for the characters. Moreover, the few seconds during which the camera pauses when it is in line with the characters and the central columns allow a visual reformation of the axis itself. In other words time is at the service of space while keeping Floriane and Marie at the center. Finally, the placement of the camera facing the characters and the columns behind them allows a series of shot-reverse shot, which keeps Floriane and Marie's spatial integrity intact. This is the case for the last time in the film. Marie and Floriane have grown closer and yet, soon after their moment at the Axe majeur, the film will definitely split them apart thanks to the placement of the camera.

This scene is reminiscent of the moment in Rohmer's *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* when Blanche shows her apartment to her new friend Léa. The apartment is located by the first station of the Axe: the Tour Belvédère. As Blanche asks her friends if she likes it – to which she replies that it is very pretty – she walks to her bedroom on the other side of the apartment to show Léa the view onto the pond. One section of the Axe is visible, but it ends at a road and the rest of the view is mostly composed of nature before the eyes meet the towers of La Défense, which Blanche mentions, as well as the Eiffel Tower.

After watching *Water Lilies* the ‘absence’ of the Twelve Columns from *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* is striking. Indeed the section on which Marie and Floriane walk before reaching the Twelve columns is located after the ‘road that cuts the Axe’ in Rohmer’s film. In other words Sciamma’s film picks up where Rohmer had to leave because the rest of the Axe remained to be built. However, what *Water Lilies* shows of the Axe is neither its straight continuation nor that of *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*. Instead I suggest that *Water Lilies* is an adaptation of Rohmer’s film, made possible by the construction of the Twelve Columns. In “Queer Filiations: Adaptations in the films of François Ozon” Fiona Handyside’s goal is to “demonstrate that adaptation offers the possibility of imagining new relationalities and affective encounters beyond the heteronormative reproduction of the nation state” (53). In establishing that “adaptation can thus be read as potentially queer, as it repeats but does not replicate” (56) Handyman turns to the filiation between Ozon’s *5x2* and *Le temps qui reste*, and Rohmer’s films. If Handyman’s argument is pertinent regarding Ozon, it is even more so regarding the queer filiation between *Water Lilies* and *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* in which, to use Handyman’s words “he reveals the way in which heterosexuality, far from being a natural given, is a constantly recreated identity dictated by the rules of social interaction, and thus acts to make us aware of the forces of normalization that regulate social conformity” (58). I would add that Rohmer’s aversion for *villes nouvelles* such as Cergy could only lead to a queer adaptation, in which the nation state – in the form of references to Paris –

has completely disappeared. In Sciamma's version of the Axe, the setting of Cergy has turned into a center in and of itself, and is making queer relationships possible.

After their return from the Axe majeur, the film focuses on Marie and Floriane spending time together until they go back to Marie's house, where the camera marks the beginning of their separation. As Marie is about to open the glass door from the backyard and go inside, Floriane's acousmatic voice saying: "wait" is heard immediately before she enters the frame. Marie turns around to talk to Floriane.



fig.12. Marie and at her bedroom door



fig.13. Marie and Floriane at the door

The door is on the left side of the screen, behind Marie. The medium shot allows the viewer to conceive of the space around the two characters, but unlike previously, the position of the camera has changed. For the first and last time of the film, it is now in the backyard, in the space between the glass door and the fence.

When the film cuts to a medium close-up of the two characters and when Marie leaves the frame, the viewer knows that she is crossing the threshold of the bedroom and not simply leaving the frame.



fig.14. Marie and Floriane talking



fig.15. Floriane alone

However, the inside/outside division of the space is constructed thanks to the previous shot that showed the open door, and not through current framing. When the film cuts to a close-up of Marie's face, the girl has crossed the bedroom threshold as the reflections on the glass indicate that she is behind it.



fig.16. Marie looking outside her bedroom

The shot establishes that Marie is in her bedroom while the camera is alongside Marie on the other side of the door. In other words the camera is filming the separation between the two characters. Moreover, the direction of Marie's gaze is unequivocal. She is staring at Floriane on the other side.

The film then cuts to a reverse shot of Floriane who is opening the breached fence and about to leave the transitional space in the same way as Anne and Marie at the beginning of the film.



fig.17. Floriane leaving the yard

In this shot however, the camera position is difficult to determine as the bedroom door no longer appears in the frame. It seems to be in the backyard, as no frame or reflections are visible. It is possible to imagine that it is outside, in a position that corresponds to that of Marie and Floriane when they were talking. When the film cuts to a close-up of Marie's face, the camera is still outside, showing the teenage girl kissing the glass.



fig.18. Marie kissing the glass

The camera, now located between the characters, serves the same purpose as a door. It is capable of opening the space on each side, while potentially blocking communication

between the two. In that sense the spaces in and of the film have become conflated. From then on, Marie and Floriane will grow apart, as the camera has taken over the power of the door.

The divisive power of the door is very much at the center of *Tomboy*, as it is the only object that separates Laure from Mickaël. As a result, its potential opening becomes a source of anxiety for the child as well as for the viewer, who finds out about the lie fifteen minutes into the film. Charles Tesson noted the crucial role of the door in his pedagogical dossier for the film when he recalled the three scenes that gradually built up the suspense until the mother opened the door and found out about the lie (10). The first sign of the porosity of the door occurs when Lisa comes to pick up Mickaël and knocks on the door. Laure/Mickaël rushes to the door, looks through the peephole but instead of opening the door right away, she/he tells Lisa that she/he will be right out. The role of the door is ambiguous as it both separates the two spaces, but also allows looking and speaking through. Through the use of the peephole, the door itself becomes a camera that Laure/Mickaël uses to capture the space on the other side. What the viewer gets is thus the image of an image being made, the depiction of a space within the film equated to the space of filmmaking, in other words a queer space at the basis of which is the door.

The film then cuts to a shot of Lisa waiting in the staircase one floor below. Laure/Mickaël arrives, sits down next to her and tells her that she cannot go in because his/her mother is sleeping. The scene ends without any contact between Lisa and the inside of the apartment. In the second scene at the front door on the other hand, Lisa

comes back to fetch Mickaël but this time the child is absent and Jeanne opens the door without looking through the spyhole. When the door opens, the camera is behind Jeanne and Lisa is on the other side of the threshold. After Lisa asks if Mickaël is there, the film cuts to a medium shot of Jeanne's face answering her. This shot is the first of a series of four shot/reverse shots in which the door disappears completely. The camera is positioned between the characters, in other words, it has taken the place of the door. It can then alternatively focus on the two girls' faces, thus emphasizing that they are standing in two separated spaces. While in the first scene the camera was filming a door-camera, here it has replaced the door. As a result the viewer no longer has an image of an image being made within the film but, similarly to *Water Lilies*, the conflation of the spatio-temporality of the door with that of the film. In the following shot, the door reappears in the foreground as Jeanne closes it. The camera is therefore on Lisa's side and stresses her exclusion from the apartment. However, even though Lisa does not enter the space, her words have, and will have consequences for Laure/Mickaël.

The film then cuts to a medium close-up of Jeanne who has just closed the door. The little girl leans on the door, still flabbergasted by what just happened. This shot is similar to the one of Laure/Mickaël after he/she told Lisa that she/he would be right out in that the two characters visually rely on a clear-cut separation between outside and inside by leaning on the door. However, the choice of a medium shot for Laure/Mickaël and that of medium close-up for Jeanne creates different effects. While Jeanne's reaction is placed at the center of the frame, there is little room for the background, especially the

door. Even though the lock and the clench are visible, the division of the space is less expressed through the framing than through the cut that made Sciamma's camera moved from being the door to back to filming it. In spite of the door being closed again, the camera itself has mirrored the break between inside and outside by replacing the door while Jeanne was finding out about Mickaël. With Sciamma's camera back inside the apartment, Jeanne is stuck between two porous camera-doors.

The final collapse of the separation between inside and outside occurs toward the end of the film when Rayan, the boy that Laure/Mickaël just beat up, comes to the apartment with his mother. When the scene begins, the camera is in the children's bedroom. Upon hearing someone talking to their mother, Laure/Mickaël and Jeanne go to hallway, where their mother is holding the door, looking outside. Contrary to the other "front door scenes", the camera is no longer placed behind the character that answers the door but in front of the parents' bedroom, which almost exactly corresponds to the children's point of view. At that point we can hear a female voice say "Well when he came home he looked like this. He said he got into a fight in the woods". It is only through this acousmatic voice that we understand that Laure/Mickaël's secret is about to be discovered. Moreover, when Rayan himself says "yes, it's him. It's Mickaël", his voice is also acousmatic as the film shows a medium close-up of Laure/Mickaël's mother.

The next seven shots of the scene alternate between the points of views of the mother looking at Laure/Mickaël, the children looking at their mother, and

Laure/Mickaël looking at Rayan and his mother. The camera never crosses the threshold to get Rayan and his mother's point of view. Instead, its position acts as a separation between all the characters. By filming the apartment door separating the two families but also by being a door separating mother and children, the camera-door embodies both functions at once. The last shot before the mother closes the door finally reunites the characters in a medium long shot similar to the one in which we first saw her holding the door. By going back to standing in front of the parents' bedroom and recording the mother close the door, the camera both draws attention to the closing of the door and signals the recentering of the action onto the hallway. This choice is significant as the mother has chosen to take care of the lie first with her child. In other words she has not yet betrayed her child's real name by sharing it with Rayan and his mother, who were both standing outside. At that point in the film the door is thus still separating the two spaces. However, it will no longer serve that purpose the following time Laure/Mickaël leaves the apartment with his/her mother to tell his/her friends the truth.

In his dossier Charles Tesson noted the inversion of the *mise-en-scène* between this scene and the bath scene from the beginning during which the viewer finds out that Mickaël is Laure (9-10). In the bathroom scene the mother was the one identifying the child's gender via the name pronounced from another room. For the viewer, the discovery was therefore auditory, before a shot of the child's naked body confirmed its conformity to the female name. In this scene, on the other hand, the mother is the spectator – and the one who finds out about the lie – as Rayan pronounces the name

‘Mickaël’ (10). She has thus taken over the role of the viewer. Moreover, given her subsequent argument about school being about to start, it derives that from this scene one, the gender split between Laure and Mickaël and between inside and outside will be reversed. If the mother is, as she claims, fine with Laure playing boy, we can infer that it is only tolerable to her inside the apartment. In this regard the opening of the door has destabilized the dichotomy at place in the film.

In *Girlhood*, the inside/outside dichotomy is double as it concerns both Paris versus the *banlieue*, and Marieme’s life inside in her home governed by her abusive brother, and outside. In this film too Sciamma stages multiple front doors, among which are that of Marieme’s apartment building, that of her boyfriend’s, her own once she runs away from home, the hotel room where she goes with her friends twice in the film, and finally the door to the Paris apartment where she goes to deal drugs. Unlike in *Tomboy*, what is striking about Marieme’s relation to front doors is that she has the ability to open only very few of them. Throughout the film she has to use the intercom both times she visit her boyfriend Ismaël, but also and more surprisingly to enter her own home at the beginning and at the end of the film. Even though she has the key to the apartment – acousmatic key noises can be heard after Marieme enters – the building itself represents Marieme’s restricted mobility.

The film ends with a scene in which Marieme decides not to enter her building. She is coming home after she has had a violent argument with Abu, her new boss. She is about to arrive at the main door; the camera is facing her. A long shot of Marieme

captures the door that signifies her return to captivity. However this shot is the brightest of all the ones in the exterior hallway. The opening behind her takes up almost half of the screen and makes the background clearly visible, whereas the pillars have almost disappeared. The co-dependence of the building door and the hallway becomes more apparent in the rest of the scene. Instead of one shot showing Marieme using the intercom as in the opening scene, the final scene comprises two.

Unlike at the beginning of the film, the camera is static, on the left side of the door and waiting for Marieme to arrive. This choice, in broad daylight and offering a clear view of the background has the merit of offering the view of what Marieme is leaving behind. After Marieme has dialed the code, the film cuts to a medium close-up on her face. The camera is now on Marieme's right side. In spite of not getting a word from Marieme, her sister unlocks the door and the camera pans to Marieme's hand grabbing it. Because the shot is a medium close-up, first we can only see clearly Marieme's face, one pillar, and part of the intercom, and secondly Marieme's arm and part of the door. At that moment all background has been effaced.

Even though Marieme rings the intercom, upon her sister's response, she does not say anything. Her sister unlocks the door for her but Marieme is unable to go in. The film then cuts back to Marieme's face, and then back on her hand, before finally cutting to a medium long shot of Marieme letting go of the door. A medium long shot allows the viewer to perceive a little more of the background. The light looks different, as there is more contrast in the image. The representation of the opening of the hotel room door

mirrors Marieme's evolution from a rather solitary young woman to an almost-leader of a girl gang.

The hotel room door also reflects the evolution of Marieme's status in her gang. The first time the girls go to the hotel occurs soon after they meet. The camera first is static, in the hallway and the girls are walking toward it. The film then cuts to a medium close-up on Lady – identifiable only through her clothes – unlocking the door with a card and opening it. The second time on the other hand, the scene is set up in the same way with the camera 'waiting' in the hallway, but when the film cuts, Marieme is the one who unlocks the door. While the switch can easily be explained by the fact that the second time Marieme arrives to the room alone – the other girls are already in the room – the striking similarity between both 'door-opening' shots draws attention to the differences within them.



fig.19. Lady unlocking the door

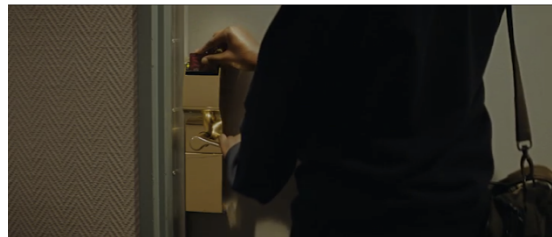


fig.20. Marieme unlocking the door

In these two scenes the only difference is the person opening the door. Marieme has turned into someone who makes decisions for herself since she is there to tell her friends that she is going to work for Abou. From then on Marieme will have a key to her own apartment.

Marieme shares her apartment with Monica, a prostitute who also works for Abou. Once again the film shows them at their front door twice. Both times it is Marieme who unlocks the door. At that point Marieme's physical appearance has changed. Her hair is short, she binds her chest, and 'hangs out' with the men who work under Abou's supervision. The moments at the door confirm Marieme's endorsement of the masculine role not only because she has the key, but also by opposition to Monica, who is very feminine, and who complains that Marieme is not unlocking the door quickly enough. Marieme – who has also just carried Monica on her back responds: "well, you can look in your useless purse". In saying these words, Marieme is not only equating a feminine prop to uselessness, but she is also distancing herself from it, as she does not have a useless purse and therefore can unlock the door. At that stage opening the door is equated to being a man.

On the other hand, when Marieme deals drugs for Abou, she wears a bright red dress, high heels and a blonde wig, and she no longer binds her chest. The first time that the film shows Marieme going to an apartment to deal drugs, we follow her from the hallway, into the apartment and until she leaves. As she gets to the door she has to ring the doorbell and wait for someone to open the door for her. The contrast between this scene and the following ones in which Marieme unlocks the door to the apartment she shares with Monica reminds us that she has not gained complete autonomy. Even though Marieme gradually has access to her own space, her dependence on Abou prevents her from being free. As her final altercation with him and the final scene of the film will

show, Marieme's salvation actually cannot be related to a door, as it cannot occur in the dichotomous space that the *cité* has to offer.

III. Spaces that lie outside the inside/outside dichotomy.

The spatial dichotomies that the film establishes and the recurrence of doors should not occult the existence of spaces that blur the separation between inside and outside. In *Tomboy* and *Girlhood*, the exterior hallway at the foot of Laure/Mickaël and Marieme's buildings is a space that at times shelters but that also has the potential to betray the characters. In *Girlhood*, the abundance of scenes that take place in that space complicate the film's representation of Marieme's mobility. It appears thrice in the film. At the very beginning, the exterior hallway appears as Marieme is going home. The stairs that lead to it is clear; Marieme can go. The camera follows her until she meets her future boyfriend Ismaël, talks to him for a few seconds, and keeps walking to the building entrance. Several cuts alternate shots from behind or the front of Marieme, but the largest shot is a medium shot allowing both Ismaël and Marieme to be in the frame. The other shots, which are medium close-ups, prevent any other elements from the setting from entering the frame. Marieme is part of a restricted world that the camera keeps under control.

After Lady's loss against the 'Vigneux chick' however, the hallway and the stairs become the site that divides boys and girls, and even separates Lady from the rest of her group. As the girls are arriving at the stairs already seen in the first scene, they are blocked from accessing the hallway by a group of boys who make fun of them. When the film cuts lady is leading the group around the corner of the building. The camera is in

front of them. When Lady turns around to push away Marieme, the group and the camera stop before Lady walks back toward the corner of the building and disappears to the right, by a pillar.



fig.21. Lady walking away from the group

The presence of all four girls in the exterior hallway is not explainable through the narrative but through the use of space. Indeed it is the only time in the film that a character other than Marieme appears by the entrance door – of which the position is possible to locate thanks to the last scene of the film. The paradoxical overcoming of the boys' obstacle followed by the split of the groups confers to the space an ambivalent function turns this space of spatial transition into an emotional one. The last scene of the film will complete the transition.

After Marieme has decided not to enter her building, she starts walking back toward the camera, and as she walks past it, it pans to follow her reaching the same corner of the building as the one in the scene with Lady.

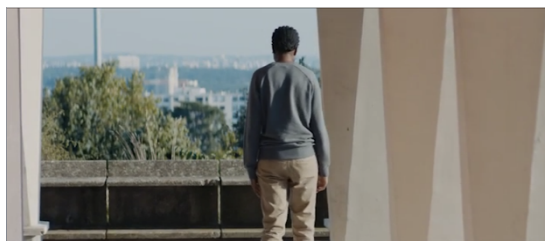


fig.22. Marieme walking away from the camera

Contrary to the shot of Lady leaving the exterior hallway, the background is clear. The deep focus allows Marieme to be part of the background located beyond the limits of her building whereas Lady, because of a shallow focus, only appeared within these same limits. In flattening the perspective, the deep focus grants Marieme mobility. In addition, the angle makes the pillars appear as a wall whereas the left side of the frame is open. The camera then tracks to focus on Marieme crying and leaning against one of the pillar.

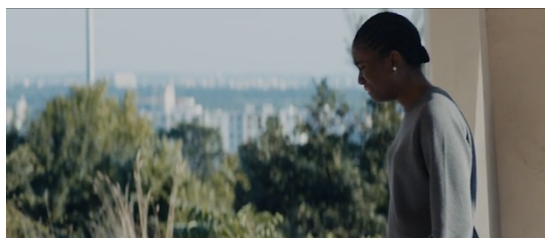


fig.23. Marieme crying against a pillar

She is facing the left side of the screen, which is the opposite side of the one Lady picked. Incidentally, she is facing a completely open space before the camera keeps tracking forward until it only shows the blurry background and leaves Marieme out of the frame. Suddenly she reappears for a few seconds before disappearing again on the left side.

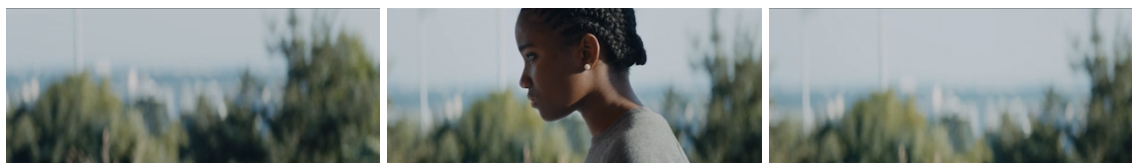


fig.24. Last moments of the film

For the first time the frame is filled with trees. Moreover, when Marieme reappears in the foreground, she appears free from any enclosing architectural element. The only frame around her is that of the camera. Finally, her movement is in the direction of the staircase that she has used to access the hallway the first time. Her direction is thus opposite to the one we have seen during the entire film. Marieme is no longer walking toward home but away from it.

By superimposing a close-up of Marieme onto a blurry background far away from her *banlieue*, Sciamma makes the very space in which Marieme is trapped disappear. By letting Marieme reenter and leave the frame again, the now static camera allows her to escape not only her *cité* but also the film altogether. With this final shot, Sciamma enunciates the limits of the *banlieue* film, which while it attempts to represent the struggle to live outside the center, actually imprisons its characters in the inside/outside dichotomy. By visually making the dichotomy disappear, Sciamma fully frees Marieme.

In *Tomboy* the exterior hallway is not around Laure/Mickaël's building but between his/hers and Lisa's. Its architecture is similar to the hallway in *Girlhood*, delimiting a space neither outside nor inside, bordered by pillars, which can either open up the space or close it off completely depending on the camera position. In the scene

after Lisa has put some make up on her friend's face to make him look like a girl, the exterior hallway becomes an ambiguous space sheltering what Charles Tesson calls the "paradox of faking being a girl after faking being a boy" (13). The dual location serves the child's dual gender identity. It is the only space where the character is endorsing traits labeled as masculine and feminine. Upon arriving home, Laure is reluctant to go see her mother even though the latter likes the make-up that her daughter is wearing. In other words Laure is not worried about being scolded for trying on make-up but rather she is uneasy because the make-up leads others to identify her as a girl.

Similarly to Laure/Mickaël's double gender identity the hallway is a space that appears both outside and inside. Inside Laure's apartment it is a space that carries a lot of tension. Indeed in addition to being adjacent to the front door – of which the opening is a source of suspense – it connects almost all the rooms of the apartment, making discretion rather difficult. In spite of being a crossing point that the characters should only take to go from one point to another, it is the setting of numerous key moments of the film. In addition to the three scenes focused on the opening of the door, two other ones take place in the hallway. The first one occurs after Mickaël has soiled his shorts while attempting to pee like a boy. The scene begins with a shot of the empty hallway and the parents' bedroom door half open in the background. When Laure/Mickaël comes home, she/he does not want her/his father to see him, so she/he stops by the wall opposite to the front door in order to spy into his parents' bedroom. When, her/his father enters the frame Laure/Mickaël is unable to keep walking without stopping to greet him. He/she chooses

to lean on what is behind him: a closet door. Contrary to all other doors in the film, these doors remain closed. With her *mise-en-scène*, Sciamma is granting the child the privilege of being out of it.

In the last scene in the interior hallway, the closet doors reappear to help the child. After her/his mother has asked her/him to put on a dress before going to her/his friends' house to apologize, Laure/Mickaël appears in the hallway. As the mother attempts to force her/him out of the apartment, the child resists by grabbing the closet wall by her/him. If we consider the two closet walls appearing on each side as framing devices within the frame, then Laure/Mickaël is hanging on to what makes her/him appear on screen. It is through Sciamma's *mise-en-scène* of the hallway space – whose function is undefined and yet is not simply a crossing point but rather a space where resistance to identification occurs – that Laure/Mickaël can exist on screen.

The hallway is not the only space within the apartment, which makes the representation of Laure/Mickaël's queerness possible. The mirrors in the bathroom and bedroom allow the child to see his/her other self.¹⁷ The first scene in which the mirror appears is the bath scene, although it is barely visible in the frame even though the child glances at him/herself after stepping out of the bath. Throughout the film however, the mirror becomes an integral part of the bathroom scenes. The first time that Laure/Mickaël uses the bathroom mirror occurs after the shot of the family sitting in the living room,

¹⁷ My analysis of the spatio-temporality of the bathroom scenes is indebted to Elizabeth Lee, a student in Dr. Gopalan's seminar "Women Behind the Camera", who wrote a short paper on the first scene.

where the lighting suggests that it is night time. The same assumption can therefore be made about the scene in the bathroom, especially because of the darkness of the room coupled with artificial lighting focused on the child's face.



fig.25. Laure/Mickaël in front of the bathroom mirror

The viewer is familiar with the bathroom as it is the second time that Laure/Mickaël has been in it. This time the lighting clearly emphasizes the space between the mirror and the child's body, plunging the rest of the room into darkness, including Laure/Mickaël's back. In addition, because of the mirror, the portion that is lit up appears to be in a different space than the bathroom. In other words, the mirror has the capacity to dislocate the child's body, a characteristic that Sciamma underlines with her *mise-en-scène*.

In addition to the mirror, Lee noted that the cut participates in offering an alternate space.



fig.26. Medium close-up of Laure/Mickël looking in the mirror

In this shot Laure/Mickaël's body almost exclusively appears in the mirror whereas in the previous shot both the body and the reflection were clearly visible. By making the bathroom disappear and the child's body blurred, Sciamma suggests that the reflection is the body that matters. Moreover, because it has been made possible by the cut, it is possible to see the alternate space as only accessible via the temporality of the film. As such, the image of the child's body becomes a queer image.

The second occurrence of the bathroom mirror is strangely similar to the first one, but it is specifically in its resemblance that its uncanniness lies. While we noted that the lighting was probably due to the continuity from the previous shot, this time the insertion of the scene after a soccer scene that takes place in broad daylight casts doubt onto the temporality of the scene. Even though the action performed – the child washes the shorts he just soiled while playing with hi/her friends – confirms the continuity of the scene, the lighting – or lack thereof – is similar to that of the first bathroom scene, implying that it is dark out.



fig.27. Laure/Mickaël in the second scene

The confusing temporality of the scene coupled with the framing that completely does away with the child's body to focus on its reflection evoke the mirror as an alternative time and space. Even though the shot begins by showing the child's shorts in the sink before the camera tilts up to look at the reflection of Laure/Mickaël's face looking down, the last section in which the child is looking at him/herself hints at the idea that the viewer is seeing the body and not its reflection. Only the position of the camera slightly off the mirror axis – so as to avoid its reflection in the mirror - prevents the character's gaze from being directed at it.

The other mirror present in the film is located in Laure/Mickaël's bedroom. The viewer sees it one night that the child gets up to go check something in his/her armoire. He/she opens the door inside of which is a mirror. Later on, as the protagonist is making a fake penis out of play dough, he/she goes back to his/her bedroom to look at his/her reflection in the mirror. At that moment, the child is looking at her/himself into the mirror, but the shot gives the impression that she/he looking in the direction of the camera.



fig.28. Laure/Mickaël checking out his/her fake penis in the mirror

The frame of the door is almost invisible because its color is similar to that of the bedroom walls. As a result, the reflection appears as the child him/herself, which in turn suggests the interchangeability of the mirror and the camera. In sum the reflection of the child's body is looking at a camera-mirror thanks to which the viewer can visualize the reflection as the object itself. This is another example of Sciamma's queer image, and probably the most accomplished one of the film, as the camera-mirror is making possible the representation of a male-looking body. This scene announces one of the happiest moments of the film at the nearby lake, where for the first time Mickaël clearly appears as a boy because of the fake penis in his bathing suit.

Although less obviously present in *Girlhood*, water is artificially inserted via the empty pool that is the only space of freedom that the girls enjoy in their *cit  *. It is remote enough that they can find some peace away from the boys. The space is seen three times throughout the film: immediately before and after Marieme's fight with the 'chick from Vigneux', and before the last scene. The pool is one the few open spaces in the *cit  *. It is not, however, a space *always* associated with freedom. Before the fight and toward the end of the film, Sciamma uses long shots that drown Marieme into the landscape.



fig.29 and 30. Extreme long shots of Marieme at the pool

In the first shot, Marieme is sitting on the edge of the pool whereas in the second one she is sitting in the pool, of which the shape makes it seem like it is going to swallow her.

The only happy scene at the pool takes place after the fight. Adiatou, Fily and Marieme – Lady did not know about the fight – come back triumphantly after Marieme’s win. They splash each other in what is now a pool partially filled by rainwater.



fig.31 Extreme long shots of the pool

The joy showing through the play with water hides the impossibility for the water to be there. Indeed, when the girls departed from the pool, the weather was cloudy but sunny, and got sunnier during the fight. If the scene at the pool took place immediately after the fight, the amount of water in the pool would be lower. It is therefore as if the girls’ joy could only occur in an alternate time and place, as if Sciamma had manipulated time and space to give them the opportunity to be happy. The last shot at the pool indeed confirms that once the pool is empty, it only looks like a trap.

The most obvious presence of water is to be found in Sciamma’s first film. The “Piscine du parvis” in Cergy serves as the setting for the opening and closing scenes of the film as well as two other ones throughout. Rohmer shot a scene of *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* at the same pool, recognizable because of its side tier. In Sciamma’s film

however, the pool is no longer simply the site of casual interactions among friends, but the space where the director fully illustrates her dismantling of spatial binaries. What is displayed is synchronized swimming, which Sciamma did not choose randomly. In several interviews she explained that it is a sport exclusively reserved for girls and young women, in which feminine attributes such as make-up, colorful bathing suits and slicked hair erase the strenuous effort produced under water (Antheaume, “Tout le monde...”).

Sophie Belot’s careful analysis of the scene in which Floriane invites Marie to join the team in the water is insightful in how it shows that Sciamma fully exploits the depth/surface dichotomy that the specificity of the sport allows thanks to a complex interaction of image and sound (176). Belot notes that when the film first shows the girls from under water, image and sound are disconnected because the latter corresponds to the girls’ perception whereas the image is from Marie’s point of view. The discrepancy between image and sound therefore points to the uncertainty of the limits of the pool. Once the girls get their head under water the sound changes and the perspective is both visually and aurally from underneath the surface. At that point Belot argues that the film visually blurs perspectives thanks to the shots underwater, especially the one in which Marie swims across the pool and her body appears at the same level as the girls’. She concludes: “The image conveys the sense of depth formed by the non-distinction between foreground-background. In other words, in the swimming pool, the bodily surface/depth distinction is undermined” (176-177). Paradoxically, the sense of depth appears specifically because of its own blurring. Contrary to the scene at the Axe majeur – which

Belot also analyzes – in this scene the flattening of a space that is specifically based on depth re-centers the focus onto the surface, that is, the limit between the two spaces it is supposed to separate. If the role of the Axe was to show depth, that of the pool is to erase it. In her careful examination of the pool, Belot conferred to the surface the possibility to play on the seen and the unseen (175). Instead of the off-screen space, what hides movement is water. The movements underneath are therefore present but invisible (175). The possibility for water to hide what lies beneath its surface in spite of its transparency makes it a valuable material for the destabilization of the depth/surface dichotomy.

Belot also remarks the resemblance between the role of water and that of the glass door that separates Marie's bedroom from the backyard. She however limits her comments to mentioning how they "facilitate the fluid crossing of boundaries" (176). While I concur with Belot's comparison, I remark however that contrary to the door, which is a hard surface, water is mutable. In other words the separation itself can be distorted and infringe on either of its sides, therefore changing the very space in which it sits. Moreover, in order to fully compare the two, we must return to two iconic shots of the glass door.



fig.32. Anne at Marie's door



fig.33. Floriane at Marie's door

The glass door has the particularity of separating outside and inside at the same time as it visually gives access to one from the other. In these shots even though the characters are on the other side, against the door, they are visible thanks to its transparency. In return, their bodies make the door visible by lying against it. In other words it is because they touch its surface that the door appears. In addition, the framing of the shot, which reveals that the door is open, points to the *mise-en-scène* of the ambivalence of the object.

In the pool scene aforementioned the water functions differently. First, its transparency does not allow Marie to see very well, as Floriane's invitation to join them in the water suggests. Moreover, it is specifically because the surface of the water itself can be distorted, unlike the glass door, that the water loses its transparency. Contrary to the door, the movements of the character do not ineluctably end up against water but they are part of both above and beneath. As such, the pool is a much more suitable space to represent the instability of the inside/outside dichotomy hinted at in the bedroom scenes.

The final aspect of the comparison between the glass door and the water lies in Sciamma's *mise-en-scène*. In the case of the bedroom or I should say the *camera*, the presence of the lamp – only in the case of Anne – and the double framing of the door and the film suggest that we are looking at the image of an image being made. In addition, the transparency of the door makes Floriane's kiss seem like it is against the camera. The space of the film and the space in the film are therefore conflated. In the pool scenes on the other hand, Sciamma does not need to signal her filmmaking practice via the *mise-en-scène* as her literal plunge into the water makes her film – via the combination of image

and sound – *like* the swimmers, able to move the limits between above and beneath, inside and outside. It thus looks and sounds like the pool is the most suitable space for the blurring of boundaries both because of water, but also because of the specificity of synchronized swimming, a sport that emphasizes the spatial dichotomy.

The last shot of the film, a high-angle shot of Marie and Anne floating in the pool, is the final reassertion of the non-distinction between foreground and background mentioned by Belot.

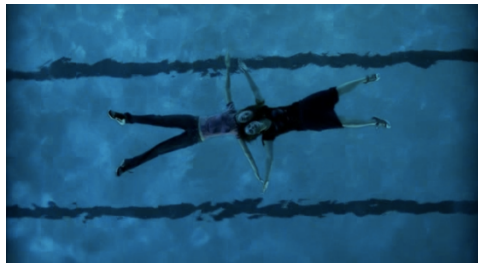


fig.34. Marie and Anne floating in the pool

In this shot, the almost clear appearance of the lines from the tiles at the bottom of the pool coupled with the transparency of the water make it seem that Marie and Anne are framed both by the pool and the camera. For the ending of the film Sciamma chooses to get rid of the water's opacity. However, while it is now possible to see what lies underneath, bodies are no longer half immersed in the water but floating on its surface. In other words the capacity of water to change shape has been annihilated. In this shot, the bodies are therefore against the water, much like Anne and Floriane's lips in the scenes at Marie's bedroom. However here, they are on the same side as the camera. Water has been left behind, as well as Marie and Anne's hope in pursuing their respective love stories.

Conclusion:

While it is impossible to consider any of Sciamma's films without the spatial binaries that they put into place, it is crucial to note their destabilization thanks to the director's precise mise-en-scène. Whether it relies on an object as ambivalent as the door or on a substance as mutable as water, Sciamma's reconfiguration of spatial relations between inside and outside is omnipresent. Even though all of her films may appear at best unresolved and at worst punitive, their commitment to the problematization of their characters' imprisonment via the use of space is where their queerness is most apparent. Sciamma's inclusion of monuments and buildings whose construction is tied to the history of the country urban development appears as more than a mere attempt to anchor the plot into a realistic context. Instead, the high-rises, the Twelve Columns, the Grande Arche, and the anonymous suburb where Laure/Mickaël lives appear as the cause of the queer characters' struggles. By displacing these struggles to undefined sites such as the municipal pool or hallways, Sciamma updates the discourse on the *banlieue* and provides poetry that Rohmer could not see.

Chapter 2: Rough and Loud: Virginie Despentes's Punk Cinema.

Introduction:

Despite the increasing media exposure of her work and her undeniable popularity among French audience, Virginie Despentes' films remain neglected in comparison with her literary production. As the *Rocky Mountain Review* is about to publish the first journal issue entirely devoted to Despentes' work in the spring of 2018, the discrepancy between the depth of the work on her literary production on the one hand and her films on the other, remains flagrant. Given that *Baise-moi* (2000) - co-directed with former porn star Coralie Trinh Thi - and *Bye Bye Blondie* (2012) are both adaptations of her own novels, and that *Mutantes* (2009) was inspired by her pro-sex feminist manifesto *King Kong Théorie* (2006), the academics and media's lower interest for Despentes' films appears surprising to say the least. All the more surprising is the lack of attention to intertextuality in spite of the numerous articles about this aspect of her writing. In this chapter I intend to focus on transtextuality, that is, the citations, reworking, and critiques of other films, songs, performances, or entire genres such as rape-revenge, porn, or punk, which Despentes articulates in her films. Focusing on the transtextual aspect of *Baise-moi*, *Mutantes* and *Bye Bye Blondie* will allow me to unveil both Despentes' third-wave feminist discourse as well as the queer archive that her films help form. By queer archive I do not mean an archive of queer history - even though some of the films' elements are

queer - but rather, one of which the formation is chaotic and nonlinear and which contains elements that are partially hidden.

Virginie Despentes' career as a filmmaker began in 2000 with the release of *Baise-moi*, an adaptation of her own novel published in 1993 about Nadine and Manu, two abused women's sexual and murderous adventures through Northern France. Far from being uneventful, the release of the film triggered a controversy, which to this day remains a landmark in the history of French censorship. After *Baise-moi* was released on June 28 2000 with the rating “unsuitable for children younger than sixteen”, the far-right religious group *Promouvoir* referred to the State Council with the aim of having the film X-rated, which in turn would revoke its screen certificate. On June 30, the Council issued its decision to annul the screen certificate that Minister of Culture Catherine Tasca had granted to *Baise-Moi* (“Section du contentieux”). As a result, the film was removed from the theater circuit. A few days later, Catherine Tasca expressed her intention to reintroduce the “18 and over” rating and the following year, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin issued a decree reintroducing it (“Tasca veut rétablir...”). This new rating allowed *Baise-moi* to be released without being X-classified on August 29, 2001 (“Décret”; “*Baise-moi*”).

Among the critics who saw the film, very few praised it. Pascal Mérigeau for *Le Nouvel Observateur* and Olivier Séguret for *Libération* respectively deplored the film's “stupidity” and “emptiness”. While Olivier Joyard from *Les Cahiers du cinéma* noted the energy of the two actresses and the freshness of the film, he argued that it was not enough

to save it from being “inconsequential”. The film nevertheless gathered support from the public and film professionals. At the time fellow director Catherine Breillat allied with the film’s producer Marin Karmitz were among its few supporters. While the former created a petition aiming at maintaining the screenings of the film, the latter refused to stop showing *Baise-moi* at the MK2 movie theaters in Paris (Hache).¹⁸ Karmitz finally agreed to remove the film from his movie theaters after Catherine Tasca’s statement about the “18 and over” rating. After the release, a heated debate erupted between defenders of the film such as Breillat, and those such as Laurent Joffrin – then chief editor of the French weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* – who saw in it the exhibition of pornographic, violent, and fascistic values. Overall, *Baise-moi* did not leave a positive mark on its viewers, nor did it trigger discussion about the meaning of the violence and sex it displayed. It therefore owes its fame more to the turmoil that it created than to the interpretations of its content. This chapter will help reassert the film's feminist stance in via close-readings of key segments.

After this rather tumultuous beginning, the reception of Desportes’ films career was more peaceful. Her second film *Mutantes* (2009) did not spark as much controversy. It is a non-fiction film tracing the director’s itinerary from the United States West Coast to Barcelona searching for the origin of pro-sex feminism and ending with an exploration of its post-pornographic development in Europe. Even though the reviews of the films are

¹⁸ Marin Karmitz was at the time the CEO of MK2, a distributor (and producer) specialized in art house cinema. *Promouvoir* decided to sue both of them but the court dismissed the case after stating that Promouvoir lacked standing to bring the suit.
http://next.liberation.fr/culture/2001/04/07/proces-baise-moi-l-extreme-droite-deboutee_360553

scarce, they are overwhelmingly positive and include comments about Desportes' pro-sex feminist discourse.¹⁹ However, *Mutantes*' exclusive distribution on DVD and broadcast on French LGBTQ-themed channel Pink TV limited its outreach and influence in France ("Virginie Desportes"); To this day the film benefits from a greater exposure in the US than in Desportes' home country, as it is available in video stores as well as on Kanopy - an on-demand streaming video service for public libraries and educational institutions. My own first encounter with the film was in a Critical Theory course at the University of Texas in which the Professor co-organized a screening of the film with the UT Gender and Sexuality Center. Its use in an academic context in the US therefore contrasts sharply with its unavailability and lack of recognition in France.

Desportes' most recent film, *Bye Bye Blondie* (2012) received more numerous reviews than the other two. Starring Emmanuelle Béart and Béatrice Dalle in the leading roles of Frances and Gloria – two women who meet again twenty years after being lovers in their teenage years – and with an estimated budget of €4,500,000, the film also departed from the small means of *Baise-moi* and *Mutantes* ("*Bye Bye Blondie* (2012)"). Even though similarly to the other films this one retains autobiographical elements such as the context of Desportes' hometown of Nancy and her internment in a mental institution, it departs from them in that it depicts a passionate love story, of which the

¹⁹ Isabelle Regnier for *Le Monde* and Géraldine Sarraïa for *Les Inrockuptibles* both praised the film's personal and revolutionary stance. Damien Simonin for the electronic journal *Lectures* wrote the most meticulous review of the film and contextualized the interventions of Sam Bourcier and Paul Preciado, therefore insisting on the pro-sex feminist aspect of the film and tracing the continuity of Desportes' discourse since her manifesto *King Kong Théorie*, published in 2006.

happy ending led some critics to suggest that Desportes had “calmed down”(Bénéteau; Guichard). The film however did not receive many positive reviews. Even Isabelle Regnier’s positive review in *Le Monde* insists on the weak script and mise-en-scène. Romain Blondeau from *Les Inrocks* praised the film’s “refusal of nostalgia” while noting that the adult characters were ridiculous. Overall, even the positive reviews of the film did not fail to mention its numerous flaws, but never delved into its close analysis. In this chapter, I will focus on what I consider one of its most compelling aspects: its temporality.

The mixed and superficial reviews of the films coupled with the ongoing attention to intertextuality in the novels have led me to inquire about the absence of such attention for *Baise-moi*, *Mutantes* and *Bye Bye Blondie*. In "Un Conte De Fées Punk-Rock Féministe: "Bye Bye Blondie" Michèle Schaal, a specialist of Desportes’ literary work, considered the relation between the novel - and the genre of the fairy tale.²⁰ In addition, in “The rebellious Body as parody: *Baise-moi* by Virginie Desportes” Nicole Fayard drew parallels between the novel, the noir thriller and the topos of the *femme fatale*.²¹ On the other hand, Lisa Downing noted “several layers of intertextuality” between the nightclub scene in *Baise-moi*, John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972) and Quentin

²⁰ In "Virginie Desportes or a French Third Wave of Feminism" Michèle Schaal establishes Desportes' belonging to third-wave feminism. Schaal focuses on Desportes’ literary work. She is the author of the first monograph focusing on the French third-wave, which was just published in September 2017. I will come back to Schaal’s work later on in this chapter.

²¹ See Michèle Schaal’s "Un Conte De Fées Punk-Rock Féministe : "Bye Bye Blondie" De Virginie Desportes." and Nicole Fayard’s “The rebellious Body as parody: *Baise-moi* by Virginie Desportes.”

Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), but only mentioned it in footnotes (*Film and Ethics*, 89). Moreover, Linda Williams' retitling of *Baise-moi* "Thelma and Louise Get Laid" in "Sick Sisters", displayed more mockery than real enthusiasm for an engaging reworking of Scott's film.²² In the second and third sections of the chapter, I will mention Downing and Williams' comments on *Baise-moi* in order to demonstrate that these references to rape-revenge and porn are not only crucial in understanding the film, but also Desportes' filmic oeuvre as a whole and its relation to third-wave feminism and the formation of a queer archive.

In the article aforementioned, Schaal develops her analysis around what she calls "the intertextual nature of Desportes' writings" (49). Downing also uses the term "intertextuality" while Fayard refers to "parodic reworkings" (63). The difference in wording takes its root in the broad definition of intertextuality first formulated by Julia Kristeva in *Semiotikê: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* and *La révolution du langage poétique*, before Gérard Genette's more specific definition in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* in 1982. Genette explains:

I define it, no doubt in a more restrictive sense, as a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another. In its most explicit and literal form, it is the traditional practice of *quoting* (with quotation marks, with or without specific references). (1-2)

²² I will discuss this scene in details later on. Downing, Lisa, and Libby Saxton. *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*.

In my work, I will refer to transtextuality so as to avoid demeaning the complexity of the relation between Desportes' films and other texts, as in *Baise-moi*, *Mutantes* and *Bye Bye Blondie*, the co-presence of texts takes multiple forms, from "the traditional practice of quoting" - which I will refer to as intertextuality - and allusions to and reworkings of genres such as rape-revenge or porn.

While transtextual practice is characteristic of all three films, its ties to the practice of queer archive are far from obvious. First, I need to clarify what I mean by "queer archive". My definition is not clear-cut and derives from the work of several scholars. First, following Mathias Danbolt's intervention in *Lost and Found: Queering the Archive*, I argue that the queer archive is different from the institutional archive of libraries, museums, and monuments. The queer archive is an alternative space, which in the case of Desportes is barely a physical space, as her films are not available at the major film institutions in France.²³ Instead, I consider the films themselves to be the archive, as they are the spaces in which Desportes documents her feminist discourse. Secondly, following Cvetkovich's definition of the queer archive in *An Archive of Feelings*, I argue that Desportes' queer archive is "one that frequently resists the coherence of narrative or that is fragmented and ostensibly arbitrary" (242). In addition, Jack Halberstam's definition of the archive of queer subculture in *In a Queer Time and*

²³ The library of the *Cinémathèque Française* does not own any of Desportes' films, and the National Center of Cinematography and the Moving Image (CNC) - the public institution whose mission is to collect, conserve, inventory, catalog, preserve, and restore films - only owns a silver copy of *Baise-moi* that the public can consult at the Bois d'Arcy location in the Parisian banlieue. http://www.cnc-aff.fr/internet_cnc/Internet/ARemplir/Historique.aspx?Menu=MNU_ACRCHIVES_1

Space and his specific link between punk and queer will be the segue to Desportes' oeuvre; an oeuvre infused by punk music, punk lifestyle, but also punk aesthetic. However, I will depart from Cvetkovich and Halberstam's conception of the queer archive and join Sara Edenheim's critique of their naturalization of history and rejection of chaos in "Lost and Never Found: The Queer Archive of Feelings and Its Historical Propriety". Indeed, I intend to demonstrate that punk is what allows Desportes to disrupt the linearity of her films, which in turn opens up the narrative to transtextual references that may at first seem out of place. In the same vein as Edenheim's embracing of chaos, I am hoping to unveil the ways in which Desportes' transtextual work is part of a punk aesthetic which allows her to create an archive that is not based on a simple compilation of references, but that is centered around the act of writing and rewriting, which opens up the possibility for a constant disruption of linearity that is at odds with the requirements of institutionalized historiography.

Because of its thematic and aesthetic centrality in the three films, and because it is what articulates the transtextuality of Desportes' entire oeuvre, I will devote the first section of this chapter to punk. After illustrating punk intertextuality with specific examples from all three films and after demonstrating the disruptive power of the punk aesthetic, I will turn to the other two genres that Desportes rewrites and comments on in her films: rape-revenge and porn. In so doing I am hoping to fully demonstrate the depth of a discourse that is expressed through a 'cineliteracy' that has until now for the most

part been mocked if not completely ignored.²⁴

I. Punk and Queer

As a music genre, a subculture and a film style, punk is at the heart of *Baise-moi*, *Mutantes* and *Bye Bye Blondie*. Beyond the punk rock songs used intra or extradiegetically in all three films, the characters in *Baise-moi* and *Bye Bye Blondie* embody life in the margins and resistance to the mainstream. Moreover, the grainy aspect of Desportes and TrinhThi's first film fits into the new punk aesthetic that the work of European directors such as Lars Von Trier embodied at the end of the 1990s. In this section, I will offer a detailed analysis of these three aspects of punk in Desportes' films. In addition, I will propose that the non-linearity of the narrative and the self-reflection that the punk aesthetic enables are at the core of the practice of queer archiving, that is, a practice based on the gathering of seemingly disparate or even partially hidden elements.

1. Music/ subculture/ filmmaking

Music is omnipresent in all three of Desportes' films, whether it is intra or extradiegetic. In *Baise-moi*, Nadine has a penchant for loud music, which she listens to in her Walkman or in her apartment, much to the displeasure of her roommate. In addition to Varou Jan's original score, the soundtrack of *Baise-moi* is composed of punk songs such as "Goddam City" by Seven Hate, and "Fight" by X Syndicate. In addition, Patrick

²⁴ The word was first used by Linda Williams in "Sick Sisters" to refer to Desportes' film references. However, unlike Williams, I consider Desportes' 'cineliteracy' to be at the heart of her queer archive of third-wave French feminism.

Eudeline's participation in the film as Francis is also an indirect reference to the French punk rock scene as Eudeline, a friend of Despentès', was a member of Asphalt Jungle, one of the first French punk rock bands in France at the end of the 1970s. In *Bye-Bye Blondie*, Gloria's taste resembles that of Nadine and clashes with that of Frances' husband, whose attempt to listen to Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* remains vain. In *Mutantes*, Despentès interviews Lydia Lunch as well as the leader of the dyke punk band Tribe 8 Lynn Breedlove. The genre that dominates the films is punk/rock, represented by international artists such as Bérurier noir, Lunch or Métal Urbain, even though other genres also appear mostly as extradiegetic. These last three bands/performers also feature in *Bye Bye Blondie*, which is infused with punk and rock music, from France and the US but also the UK with Siouxsie and the Banshees. In an interview about *Bye Bye Blondie* for *Proximus TV* Despentès justified the choice of Béatrice Dalle for the role of Frances by stating that she is the “godmother of punk rock”. On the omnipresence of music in her films and specifically in *Bye Bye Blondie* Despentès explained:

Music is everywhere. There is punk from the 80s, but there is also all the sound from the 2000s with Diamanda Gallas, Lydia Lunch, Babyshambles and it's true that for me making a film is not only about the actors but it is also the opportunity to use a lot of music that I like, which is music that I feel we don't hear much in other films (Proximus).

With these comments Desportes reveals her attention to the soundtrack. Moreover, her desire to make room for what is usually never heard is the first glimpse into her feminist discourse, which necessitates uncovering in order to be fully grasped.

The citation of all these punk and rock songs does not only reflect what the characters or director like to listen to. As Tom Albrecht noted in "Comment y faire face: La parole faite chair de Virginie Desportes" the ties between social revolt and punk are crucial. The songs embody an entire way of life, a subculture that also infuses the films. In an interview with Nathalie Crom for *Télérama* from January 2015 after the publication of the first volume of her latest novel *Vernon Subutex*, Desportes explained what rock music means to her. She stated:

Twenty, thirty years ago, for some of my generation, rock represented a possible way of leading our lives without following the dominant values in our society. It was not about a revolution, nor proposing a politically alternative utopia, but simply about leading lives outside of the system, in the margin, and which were going to make us happy. Because we wouldn't have to do with working full time, with the idea that we had to earn as much money as possible, that we should desire power, etc. Rock was about that. (Crom)

Desportes' comments echo Dick Hebdige's in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* in which he draws a link between the name of British punk bands and the rejection of the mainstream when he states: "The names of the groups (...) and the titles of the songs (...) reflected the tendency toward willful desecration and the voluntary assumption of outcast

status which characterized the whole punk movement” (110). Through their music and lifestyle, Desportes’ characters embody the punk movement and the desire to live in the margin. In *Bye Bye Blondie* Gloria is homeless. Upon their reunion, when Frances asks her if she is proud to be on welfare Gloria replies: “As long as I don’t have to work I’m okay”. She counts on her friends’ generosity after she has been kicked out of her boyfriend’s place and when her friend tells her that she can stay with her, she also adds that she is not allowed to bring anything to her house “not old engines, not old furniture, nothing”. As we see later in the film, Gloria is prone to making art off of reclaimed material, but does not have a fixed job. Unlike Frances, she lives in the margin and is proud of it. In describing the character for an interview with *Proximus TV* (a Belgian digital TV provider), Desportes explains that Gloria “doesn’t make concessions” and “doesn’t leave the milieu that she is familiar with” (Proximus). Nadine, Manu - and even Karla - in *Baise-moi* are aware of their status as well. Even before Manu kills her brother and Nadine her roommate, both women clearly live outside of mainstream society. Nadine is a prostitute whereas Manu does not have a job and lives with her brother. When the latter tells her to go get a job after she has asked him for money she responds: “there are no jobs in France”. Manu’s smile as she replies betrays the pleasure she takes in not having to work even if it means that she is dependent on her brother.

In an interview with Laure Adler on the French radio station France Culture in 2012, Desportes evoked her personal transformation by punk music when she was a teenager, while claiming that Gloria’s story was not exactly hers (Diffraction). The

transformation is tightly related to the emergence of queer resistance, as Jack Halberstam argues *In a Queer Time and Space*:

Punk has always been the stylized and ritualized language of the rejected; queer punk has surfaced in recent years as a potent critique of hetero- and homonormativity, and dyke punk in particular, by bands like Tribe 8 and The Haggard, inspires a reconsideration of the topic of subcultures in relation to queer cultural production and in opposition to notions of gay community. (153)

The presence of Tribe 8 in *Mutantes* is therefore not fortuitous given their prominent role in the performance of dyke punk. As Lynn Breedlove's interview in the film confirms, for the band's lead singer as well as for Despentès dyke punk offers a formidable platform for subversion especially regarding gender and sexuality.

Halberstam and Despentès actually share a personal investment in punk culture, as Halberstam explains:

As a young person, I remember well the experience of finding punk rock in the middle of a typically horrible grammar school experience in England in the 1970s. I plunged into punk rock music, clothing, and rebellion precisely because it gave me a language with which to reject not only the high-cultural texts in the classroom but also the homophobia, gender normativity, and sexism outside it. (155)

Even though Despentès and Halberstam evidently did not grow up in the same environment, their shared experience of punk rock as a means to reject mainstream

culture testifies of both the link between punk and queer. The presence of Halberstam's book *Female Masculinity* in *Mutantes* therefore appears as more than a simple citation. It references their shared experience and queer discourse that transpires in their respective works.

In *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture* Curran Nault traces the history of the ties between punk and queer back to the mid-1970s. He states:

“Punk” was the name chosen for this rowdy new subculture of music, zines, film, performance and art due to its associations with the degraded and the debase – including the queer. (...) At the time “punk” was a synonym for male prostitutes, passive homosexuals and young toughs, granting the term its special, subversive appeal. (11)

It therefore seems like punk encompassed “queer” from its very beginning, and that it was even its origin. As a concrete example of the involvement of queer(s) in the punk movement Nault describes the Jayne County’s appearance in *The Punk Rock Movie* (1978), which he ends up qualifying as “an exemplary traitor to gender intelligibility” (50). While as Nault argues, queer has been erased from punk, (68) it remains that the two share characteristics that go beyond their thematic content. Nault argues: “Like queerness, the mobile, protean nature of punk makes efforts to classify and calcify dubious. To experience punk is perhaps to know it best (10). I argue that Desportes’ films possess these qualities of indeterminacy. Furthermore, I contend that the queer/punk aspect of Desportes’ films is specifically what allows her to cite, refer to, and

rewrite other films and genres. In other words, the transtextuality of her films is rooted in a queer/punk practice.

Finally, punk defines the films' style, of which *Baise-moi* is the most obvious example. While the graininess of the image led Lynne Huffer to concur with Linda Williams in asserting that *Baise-moi* “is hardly high art”, it nevertheless confers to the film a DIY aesthetic characteristic of new punk cinema (161). In the introduction of *New Punk Cinema*, Nicholas Rombes notes that the popularization of digital cameras allowed more films to be made by people who were not familiar with film production (2). At a screening of the film in 2015 during the festival “15^{èmes} Journées Cinématographiques Dionysiennes”, Desportes and Trinh Thi explained that they fortuitously ended up directing the film because they were the only two people who had managed to write its screenplay. They also mentioned the limited budget of the film -5.000.000 francs - which forced them to find a director of photography who would agree to work without artificial light and with two small digital cameras. Having no prior directing experience, Desportes and Trinh Thi simply relied on their friendship as well as Gaspard Noé's advice - especially on the use of natural light - to make the filming work (Callonnec).

In the same presentation of the film Desportes manifested her awareness of her style by stating: “We shot on video, at the time on small cameras. We were not the first ones to do it because *Festen* had already come out, but it was one of the first films made that way”. In his book, Rombes lists *Festen* (1998) alongside Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998) or *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) as the first films of the new punk movement,

marked by its “refusal of the tyrannies of style” and the idea that virtuosity does not matter (7-8). For Desportes and Trinh Thi the same disregard for virtuosity is true not only regarding the way the film was shot, but also the writing of the script, which only took two weeks (Ibid.). About the aesthetics Rombes argues:

New punk aesthetics extend beyond alternatives to linear story-telling, however, and into the very notion of auteur director itself, as the small digital cameras can help, under the right circumstances, to call into question the very concept of the director. Like punk, fuelled by the poetics of anarchy and the loss of control despite its often fascistic iconography, new punk cinema explores the extremes of total control and total freedom. (14)

The shooting of *Baise-moi* perfectly exemplifies this merging of control and freedom, as Trinh Thi and Desportes explained that they both felt like their brains were connected. Even though Desportes was supposed to direct actors and Trinh Thi was the camera operator, they both stepped in and out of their respective role whenever they felt the need to do so. As for the "alternatives to linear story-telling", contrary to Rombes who seems to dismiss their power, I would like to demonstrate that in the case of Desportes' film, they carry the potential for the creation of a queer archive, an archive that gathers disparate references but also arranges them in a manner that neither follows linearity temporally, nor spatially. Punk is specifically what enables the disruption of spatio-temporal linearity, which in turn makes room for Desportes' cineliteracy to express itself while enunciating her queer discourse.

2. Spatially disrupted narrative: self-reflection

While the punk style of *Baise-moi* is immediately visible in the image and is often mentioned as the trademark of Desportes' filmmaking, I would now like to turn to a characteristic of new punk films which Rombes refers to as "a high degree of self-awareness and self-consciousness that is somewhat embarrassed by the theatricality of performance and thus calls attention to the mechanism of performance" (16). Unlike in the films that Rombes cites such as *The Idiots*, in which the self-awareness is visible via obvious trademark stylistic choices such as hand-held camera, in Desportes's films it takes at least two different shapes: one audible and one visible. In other words *Baise-moi*, *Mutantes* and *Bye Bye Blondie* practice self-reflection via segments or moments that do not move the film forward but instead point to the very act of making a film. With these moments, Desportes disrupts the linearity of the narrative.

In *Baise-moi* Nadine and Manu display their awareness of their role as narrators of their escape. After shooting the owner of a gun store Manu exclaims: "Fuck, we don't have a good turn of phrase. We don't have the right answers at the right time" before adding: "those people are going to die. The dialog has to be up to the task". Through these lines the protagonists act as if they were making a film. Later on, Manu becomes aware that the end is near and attempts to find a suitable end to their story. The conversation reveals Manu's perspicacity both as a criminal and a storyteller:

Manu: "I am hesitating between jumping off something or burning alive. But just sacrificing yourself is too arrogant. After our first meeting in the Vosges I vote for

a jump without a cord. It's a miracle that we're still here. I want to end it just as good as it all started. A joke has to have a good point".

Nadine: "You will have to push me before the jump. I'm too afraid. I don't get it".

Manu: "Don't worry, I will push you".

Nadine: "We should write the press a letter too. "They jumped without a cord."

Or else they will just make up something. "

Manu: "Yes, communication is important."

The reference to "jumping off something" is a direct reference to *Thelma and Louise*, in which the two women drive off a cliff. Manu deflects Nadine's reluctance to jump by assuring her that she will push her herself. Just like Thelma and Louise the two women cannot imagine being separated. Moreover, by insisting on the importance of communicating on their suicide they become more than just the protagonists, they become the ones telling their own story. With these recurring comments on storytelling Desportes and Trinh Thi manifest their own awareness of the constructedness of film.

The most compelling example of self-reflective segment does not involve dialogue but the film frame itself. The segment does not serve any other purpose than highlighting the role of the directors. It is a *mise en abyme* that points to the representation and performance of violence. Nadine is in the bathroom of a hotel room, listening to music with headphones plugged into a Discman. Nine cuts allow the viewer to see how Nadine points at different objects. One shot in particular, a medium shot of

Nadine aiming at the bathroom mirror, not only focuses on Nadine's violence, but also reflects the directors' role in its depiction.



fig.35. Shot of Nadine listening to music and pretending to be using her gun

Seemingly simple, this shot actually reveals narrative and narration clues crucial to understand the film. While Nadine is indeed – as we understand later on in the scene – shooting at the bathroom mirror above the sink, she is also – and this is more immediately obvious – shooting at the camera. As a result, the mirror/camera is between Nadine shooting at Despentès and Trinh Thi, and Trinh Thi, and Despentès shooting their film with Nadine in it. Moreover, Nadine's face is hidden behind her weapon, out of which comes a red light that is reminiscent of that of a camera. Her position is thus equated to that of the camera operator. This *mise-en-scène* of and via the gun is directly pointing at the filmmakers, who in return place the gun at the center of the frame. Beyond signifying that Nadine's violence is now out of control, this shot also reminds the viewer of the filmmakers' control over that same violence. By bringing attention to themselves in a scene focused on violence for violence's sake, the filmmakers remind us of their awareness of the violence they display. However given most reactions to the violence of

the film and the rest of the directors' career, it looks like this aspect of *Baise-moi* has been completely overlooked.

Lynne Huffer has drawn a parallel between this scene – and Desportes' practices as a filmmaker – and Valerie Solanas by arguing that they both pursued the same feminist ideals, which derived from the desire for vengeance (from rape for the former and humiliation for the latter) and took root in scum/SCUM. Huffer compares excerpts from Desportes' *King Kong Theory* with some from *SCUM* manifesto before arguing that their common queer feminist commitment revolves around the figure of the “loser in the feminist stakes” (165). More than simple bearers of violence, Huffer sees in Desportes and Solanas women who embody third-wave feminism. She states: “From a certain perspective, the French third-wave Virginie succeeds where the American second-wave Valerie failed. Not only a writer but a film director, Virginie lives a life of scripting, shooting, cutting, montage, and splicing that Valerie could only dream of” (165). The bathroom scene of *Baise-moi* therefore points to much more than the filmmakers. It points to the queer feminist potential of filmmaking of women directors, as well as the transnational continuity between waves of feminism. In *Mutantes*, Desportes explores this link more explicitly but in both film, the exploration is possible thanks to punk aesthetic and its awareness of its own performance.

The frame also serves the *mise en abyme* in *Bye Bye Blondie* although it is used slightly differently in that it does not mirror the directors of the films directly. At the end of the first segment about young Gloria, the film cuts to a shot of a place that the viewer

has never seen before. The logo in the bottom left corner of the frame informs the viewers that they are watching a TV show. Because of the first scene of the film, and in spite of the character in the frame being new, we know that it is Frances' TV show about literature.



fig.36. End of the first past sequence and transition back to the present

At the precise moment when the guest is speaking, the dislocation of the plotline is double. Not only is Despentès switching back to the present, but she is also taking us to a space never seen before, materialized by the logo, which gives away the superimposition of the frame of the TV playing “Lettres à Frances” – the show that Frances hosts – with that of *Bye Bye Blondie*. Overall, the transition between past and present allows several jumps through space. From the space of teenage Gloria we end up in that of adult Frances within which there is the TV broadcast. The conflation of the frame of the TV – in which a man is telling a story – with that of the film creates a *mise en abyme* that sheds light onto the process of narration and the constructedness of TV performance. In addition, the story that the TV show guest is telling is about being in a cab and suddenly hearing a song that violently takes you back twenty-years. Even though the story is not quite that of Gloria as the return of her past is not triggered by a song but

by Frances' visit, the feeling that he describes is the one that Gloria went through upon meeting Frances again. The guest is therefore foreshadowing the imminent reunion of the protagonists and its consequences. In a convoluted way he is telling the story that Desportes tells in her film. By extension this segment draws a double parallel between him and the writer-director, and once again reveals her awareness of her role as a storyteller.

In *Mutantes* storytelling is at its most complex specifically because of the way in which Desportes integrates Shu Lea Cheang's *UKI* into her film. *UKI* is a documentation of a live performance given in Barcelona in 2009, which is considered the sequel to Cheang's *I.K.U.*, and described as a sci-fi porn movie by B. Ruby Rich.²⁵ *Mutantes* both begins and ends with *UKI*, but Cheang's piece is not simply inserted in the film in a similar fashion similar as the other films. Indeed, it is not one of the twenty-one clips from other films (short, feature, trailers, personal archive), which are listed as "archive images" in the credits. Even though *UKI* is listed as such, a closer look reveals the complexity of its insertion. Contrary to other clips taken from films such as *A Gun for Jennifer* (1990) or *Rise above: The Tribe 8 Documentary* (2004), the film does not identify the images taken from *UKI* as they appear on screen. In fact, it is only through the credits "*UKI* Performance Documentation" and one shot explaining what the first images of the film were, that the viewer can identify Shu Lea Cheang's work.

²⁵ A clip of the performance is accessible on Vimeo.com. The caption of the video states: *UKI – A viral performance – live cinema live code. 10 minute documentation of live performance a hangar media lab (Barcelona) open studio day, may 24, 2009. This performance happened in 2000 m studio with 4 tons of E(lectronic)-trash collected in barcelona city in one day.*



fig.37. Title card for *UKI*

The film begins with an image from *UKI*, then alternates between *UKI* and the credits of *Mutantes* until the title card crediting Cheang's work. The following shot is the beginning of the clip from *A Gun for Jennifer*, which is clearly identified from the beginning with a banner indicating: *A Gun for Jennifer* - Todd Morris - 1996.

The end of the film completely blurs the boundaries between *Mutantes* and *UKI* by devoting the last six minutes and forty-five seconds to the latter. Immediately after the “Pelea de perras” a segment focusing on a performance and shot in Barcelona in 2008, images from *UKI* begin again, accompanied by its sound. The credits of Despentès' film get superimposed onto the images until the last six minutes and forty-five seconds of the film, which are exclusively constituted of Shu Lea Cheang's work. The framing of the film by *UKI* is significant not only because it is the work of a prominent queer artist but also because Cheang is famous for her multimedial work, as Tim Stüttgen noted in an interview he did with Shu Lea Cheang included in *Post/porn/politics: Symposium/reader; queer-feminist perspective on the politics of porn performance and sex-work as culture production*. Its inclusion, or more accurately its blending with *Mutantes* is not fortuitous,

as Desportes' own penchant for music, photography, performance, film and theory have all infested the film. However, *UKI* is significant in that it is composed of two parts called "viral performance" and "viral game". While at the beginning *UKI* is just beginning to infect *Mutantes*, at the end it has infected it completely, until it is impossible to discern from one work from the other. The spaces of the two films have become one and the same as *UKI* ends *Mutantes*.

The intermedial aspect of *Mutantes* is both what makes it a punk and a queer film. While the rest of the film is linear in that we follow Desportes going back to the origins of pro-sex feminism and follow its current development in Europe, the merging of *UKI*, by contrast appears sudden, somewhat unexpected, and remains unexplained. Punk is the common denominator between the queer aspect of Cheang's work and the unexpectedness or sporadic way in which it is integrated in the film. In so doing, Desportes recalls her greatest source of inspiration as well as she enables herself to explore different media without being too explicit. As a result, the apparent sudden fusion of works contrasts with the pedagogical rest of the film and becomes what makes it messy, unclear, in other words, queer.

3. Temporally disrupted narratives: false flashbacks

The narration of Desportes' first two films appears to be linear. While *Baise-moi* depicts the fate of Nadine and Manu following the structure of the rape-revenge films, *Mutantes* is a road movie that begins in the United States and end in Spain, as Desportes herself announces in a voiceover at the beginning. *Bye Bye Blondie* however has the

potential to be temporally deceptive. The film begins in the small provincial town of Nancy – Desportes’ own hometown – with Gloria and her friends commenting on the success of Frances Muir, the TV host of a literary show. Soon, the viewer realizes that Gloria used to know Frances, and the story turns into the reunion of the two when Frances shows up at the squat where Gloria and her friends are used to gathering. The film is interspersed with six segments that go back to the 1980s, a time when two punk teenagers named Gloria and Frances begin a tumultuous relationship that ends with Frances dumping Gloria, leaving her helpless, singing and whining on a set of stairs at the end of the sixth “past” segment.

Although the dynamic between the relationship in the 1980s and the one in the present appears similar, their endings differ strikingly. Whereas teenage Gloria ends up alone, the film ends with a happy *ménage-à-trois* including Gloria, Frances, and the latter’s husband, an older gay writer struggling with writer’s block. While Gloria and Frances have finally realized that they cannot live apart, Frances’ husband has managed to overcome his writer’s block and begins dictating in a voiceover the new beginning of the relationship. At first glance, it seems that the film uses the six flashback segments to justify the intensity of the relationship between Gloria and Frances in the present time and every plot summary of the film has adopted this interpretation of the past segments. However, the teleology of this narrative poses two problems. The first one has to do with the happy ending, which seems rather conventional for the two women, who have proved to enjoy conflict throughout the film. The second problem concerns the narration and the

characteristics of the flashbacks themselves. While the similarities are numerous between the past and the present segments, the past ones do not display all the characteristics of the flashback nor do they fulfill all of its functions. As a result, the narrative deviates from its trajectory, in other words it becomes queer.

In *Flashbacks in film: Memory & History*, Maureen Turim's states that the flashback is a segment that represents the past in the middle of the present of the film's narrative (2). While it is undeniable that in *Bye Bye Blondie* the past segments are anterior to the segments depicting the adult story, the connection between the two can only be made thanks to the characters' names. What I am suggesting here is a disjunction between past and present that is more profound than in the classic flashback. Indeed, while as Turim asserts that the flashback "always implies a departure from the continuity assumed by linear narration" the classic flashback never aims to disrupt the continuity of the events presented in the past and the present (189); it only disrupts the linearity of their representation. In *Bye Bye Blondie* on the other hand, the disruption is such that one could read the past and present segments independently. In other words, it is possible to perceive them as parts of two different stories.

The first reason for this possibility lies in the lack of audio-visual elements characteristic of the flashback. Turim notes:

In its classic form, the flashback is introduced when the image in the present dissolves to an image in the past, understood either as a story-being-told or a subjective memory. Dialogue, voice-over, or intertitles that mark anteriority

through language often reinforce the visual cues representing a return to the past.

(1)

In *Bye Bye Blondie* the transitions between the past and present segments are nonexistent. There are no dissolve, dialogue, voice-overs or intertitles suggesting that the narrative is going back to the past. The viewers realize the movement back in time thanks to the *mise-en-scène*. The only exception occurs in the sixth past segment, in which the graininess of the image imitates archive footage, therefore suggesting that the images are authentic and come from Gloria's past. However the overall absence of audio-visual clues at the very least signifies that we are not dealing with “classic” flashbacks.

In addition, the ending of the last past segment suggests that the latter were telling a story of their own. Indeed, the last shot shows Gloria sitting down on some stairs outside, singing "Babylon is Burning" by The Ruts. The shot emphasizes her distress by placing her at the center of the frame and surrounded by darkness. While the viewer understands that it will be difficult for her to overcome the break-up, the abruptness of the subsequent transition into the present also explains the resentment that she displays upon seeing Frances again in Nancy at the beginning of the film. However, it is possible to overlook the link between the past segments and the present one, and treat them independently. Indeed, as the preceding shots had already made Gloria's pain clear to the viewer, Desportes' insistence with the final shot valorizes the failure of the characters' relationship, thereby disrupting the teleology of the film's narrative and creating a first ending in the middle of it. Ending on failure in the middle of the film is, to borrow Jack

Halberstam's formulation, a queer art, a means to give agency outside of success. However, Desportes does not pursue failure further, as the rest of the film leads to a happy ending that reunites the protagonists. In denying Gloria the possibility to keep failing Desportes falls into the need for success, even if it entails a *ménage à trois* that is rather unconventional.

While a superficial look at Desportes' film only enables an acknowledgment of the influence of punk music, a closer one reveals how the punk aesthetic subverts the linearity of the narrative. Beyond the graininess of the image, self-reflection on narration as well as the potentially false flashbacks make the narration significantly more complex. The next two sections of this chapter will explore two genres: rape-revenge and porn, which the films rework via citations and references to other films. The seemingly erratic presence of reworked texts is also due to the punk aesthetic and its tendency to deviate from the norm, the mainstream, and what is logical.

II. Rewriting rape-revenge through image and sound.

Martine Beugnet, Nick Rees-Roberts, Lisa Downing, and Linda Williams have categorized *Baise-moi* in the rape-revenge genre, especially by comparing it to Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991).²⁶ Williams went as far as retitling it *Thelma and Louise Get Laid*, underlining that the main difference between Desportes and Trinh Thi's film and Scott's was its explicitness ("Sick Sisters", 29). In a chapter of Dominique

²⁶ Rees-Roberts, Nick. *French Queer Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. Print. p.134, Downing, Lisa. "Baise-moi or the Ethics of the Desiring Gaze." *Nottingham French Studies*. 45.3 (2006): 52-65. Print. p.53., Beugnet, Martine. *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. Print. p.50

Russel's edited volume *Rape in Art Cinema*, Joanna Bourke also notes that *Baise-moi* is more graphic than *Thelma and Louise*, while bringing the two films together under the umbrella of "female-led road movie". She also underscores that the rape scene is "raw and shot with excruciating realism"(186).

In her thorough study *Rape-revenge Films: A Critical Study*, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas sums up the genre as "a film scenario in which rape cannot be incidental - it must be the core action that provokes revenge" (4). However, while *Baise-moi* fits into the category, Heller-Nicholas actually acknowledges that Despentès' film goes beyond this over-simplistic definition when she asserts:

"The revenge Nadine and Manu seek, of course, is not specifically in regard to the rape shown at the beginning of the film. As Manu makes clear in the killing of her brother when he suggests she enjoyed the rape because she is not "properly" traumatized, the film's depiction of violence against women is much broader and insidious than this one sexually explicit and harrowing assault" (166).

In so doing, Heller-Nicholas goes further than Linda Williams who, in her review of the film argued: "the rape is also a narrative device, motivating the subsequent violent action. It is the survivability as well as the trauma of rape which fuel the rape-revenge film" (2). While for Williams all the violence of the film revolves around the rape and its traumatic consequences, for Heller-Nicholas the violence toward women that the film depicts from beginning to end finds its echo in Nadine and Manu's lasting reaction. Indeed, violence occurs in all kinds of places, from Manu's brother's apartment - as he is suggesting that

she enjoyed the rape - at the gun shop with the pushy salesman, or at the club with the harassing and racist customer.

Heller-Nicholas' interpretation of violence in *Baise-moi* acknowledges what Desportes denounced in her manifesto *King Kong Theory*: the discrepancy between the ability for men and women to express violence. Desportes states:

So three porn actresses and an ex-hooker must be forbidden from shooting a film about rape. Even a low-budget, genre film, even a parody. (...) If women get involved with sex, it must be to steal money from honest men. Sluts. Otherwise, we would obviously have made a film about wide-open prairies with doggies cavorting on them, a film about women dedicated to seducing men. In fact, we wouldn't have made a film at all; we would have stayed in line. (108)

Desportes' sarcasm participates in supporting the idea that women should be able to make films that do not correspond to what men expect from them. In addition, and more interestingly, the passage informs us that she considers rape as the main theme of her film, and that its treatment is parodic. These two elements lie at the heart of the misunderstanding of violence and sex that has surrounded the film ever since its release. Contrary to many, not only Heller-Nicholas perceives *Baise-moi*'s humor, but she goes further in arguing that this is not its strongest aspect. She states:

The strength of *Baise-moi*, however, is not its knowing subversion of rape-revenge traditions, its punk *vérité* aesthetic, or even the remarkable performances of its two lead actresses. Rather, it is about the randomness of both the violent and

pleasurable aspects of these women's lives, and that the film allows its female characters to be irrational, confused and unable to easily fit into the pre-decided role of the female action avenger they so openly mock" (166).

Rather than simply crediting the directors with a mocking tone, Heller Nicholas establishes that they granted themselves the luxury of letting their characters be messy while at the same time displaying their awareness of the rape-revenge scheme. The mockery is therefore double. Despentès and Trinh Thi know what they are doing but pretend that they do not. This mockery has high implications because of the power associated with the representation of violence in general, and rape in particular.

Claire Henry confirms the directors' awareness of the implications of their films in her study of revisionist rape-revenge films in particular by tying *Baise-moi* to European new extremism, a trend that Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall explored in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, (*Revisionist*, 11) and more generally the question of ethics in relation to narrative cinema, which Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton first examined in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*. In this section, I will strive to make apparent, via close readings, the complex reworking of the rape-revenge as well as its powerful expression of Despentès' uncompromising feminist stance.

1. *Deliverance/Pulp Fiction*: sensational reworking

One of the most compelling (and shocking) moments of *Baise-moi* takes place toward the end of the film, in the club that the two women go to after killing the architect. In the last part of the segment, after Nadine and Manu have killed all the clients in the

club, the latter forces her harasser to get down on his hands and knees and squeal like a pig. In so doing, she is reenacting a scene from *Deliverance* (1972), in which a businessman on a trip in the Appalachian wilderness is forced into the same position before being raped by mountain men.

There are however two crucial differences between the scene in Boorman's film and its reenactment in Desportes' film. Boorman is a male director, which according to Desportes allows him to depict violence as he pleases. In addition, both the rapist and the victim are male in his film. As she explains in the excerpt from *King Kong Theory* cited at the beginning, for Desportes this difference is crucial. The club rape scene is one that triggered a lot of negative comments, yet it is not an original idea. In addition, according to Lisa Downing, Quentin Tarantino was also inspired by this scene for the rape of Marcellus in *Pulp Fiction* (1994).²⁷ By referring to it in *Baise-moi* Desportes therefore reminds the viewer of two things. First, she has not invented this type of violence, and yet, male directors who have used it before her have not had to face the same type of criticism. Secondly, this is the second time that a director deliberately chose this specific scene from *Deliverance* and this time, Desportes claims that it is part of a parody. By using this scene, she forces the viewer to see violence, but also to reflect on its effect in each of the films that have used it.

²⁷ I had never noticed the Pulp Fiction citation until I read Lisa Downing's *Ethics and Film* in which she notes "several layers of intertextuality" Downing, L., & Saxton, L. (2010). *Film and ethics: Foreclosed encounters*. London: Routledge. P. 89

In making the claim that the quoting of the rape scene provokes reflection, I disagree with Linda Williams who stated:

None of this [cineliteracy] justifies violent representations on the ground that they are cinematic rather than realistic, but it does at least show that *Baise-moi* knows what game it's playing. Shock is its objective and sensationalism its medium. ("Sick Sisters", 28)

I refute the idea that Desportes and Trinh Thi's goal was solely to shock. Instead I argue that Desportes' goal is to make the viewer reflect on (filmic) violence in relation to women. In addition, Manu's reaction in this scene was not only a response to a sexist comment, but also to a racist one. Asserting that Desportes' goal is to shock does away with what triggered violence in this scene: the customer/victim's racist comment "this is a sex club, not a mosque" to Manu in reference to her North-African origins after she spurned his advances. In including a reaction to racism in the film, Desportes hints at the anti-universalist stance of third-wave feminism and its desire to include diverse and hybrid identities.²⁸

The sensationalism of the scene lies in the saturation of the audio-visual landscape. First, extremely loud non-diegetic music begins as Nadine starts shooting the clients in the club, and ends after she has killed the last one. Then, after Manu has asked

²⁸ In "Troisième vague féministe américaine et jeune féminisme français: une introduction comparative", Michèle Schaal notes that universalism still prevails in much of the French feminist context. This view is shared by Sam Boucier and Paul Preciado. Desportes' intervention is therefore groundbreaking.

her harasser to kneel down and squeal, the scene ends with a freeze-frame of his face spitting blood, and Manu smiling in the background while the film fades to red. The sound of the shot is also amplified and operates the transition to the final sequence of the film.

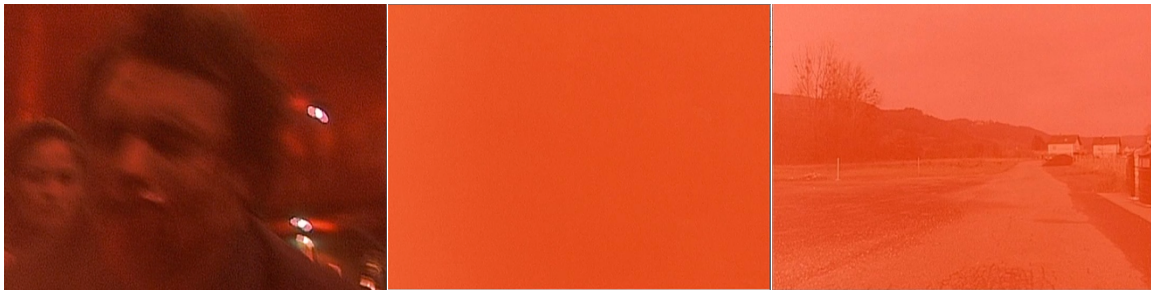


fig.38. End of the scene: freeze frame of the customer's face, red screen, and beginning of the next shot

At that point in the film, violence is staged both visually and aurally. It has contaminated the narrative devices in addition to the diegesis. While the fade to red is an ostentatious exaggeration of violence, the freeze frame prefigures the ending of the film and its reference to *Thelma and Louise* – until then only obvious thematically – as well as *The 400 Blows*. The transtextuality of the film therefore reveals Desportes' awareness of the constructedness of violence in general, and toward women in particular. While simple intertextual references would have only allowed Desportes to appropriate Boorman and Tarantino's ability to depict violence, the reworking of the scene with ostentatious audio-visual additions goes one step further by pointing to, and problematizing its very representation. Regardless of one's stance on the need to depict violence at all, acknowledging the gap between the overwhelmingly repulsed reactions toward *Baise-moi*

on the one hand, and the lack of reaction toward *Pulp Fiction* or *Deliverance* on the other can only lead to supporting Desportes' rejection of this difference of treatment. In order to prove her point, Desportes and Trinh Thi chose to rework a man-directed rape-revenge film in which the protagonists were strong-headed women who died at the end.

2. *Thelma and Louise*: Visual stillness, infinite movement:

The most obvious rape-revenge film that *Baise-moi* reworks is *Thelma and Louise*, especially via the final scene's freeze-frame. The scene immediately follows Manu's death at the gas station and the burning of her body by Nadine. It begins with Nadine walking toward a lake, wanting to commit suicide. The music is diegetic; Nadine is listening to "Ouvre-moi" in her Walkman, the same song as when she met Manu at the beginning of the film. It covers all other sounds until the end of the segment. As Nadine gets close to the lake, she sits down and seizes her gun. The film then begins alternating close-ups of her face, and internal flashbacks of her memories with Manu. As she is about to shoot, and the music becomes louder, the film cuts to a close-up of her face on the ground. The music stops abruptly, interrupted by a deafening noise and indistinct, muffled voices. The film cuts one more time to an image from her past, comes back to a close-up of her face on the ground, before a high-angle medium shot of her body being maintained on the ground by two policemen. The camera then tracks back and reveals five more people around the trio before the film cuts to an extreme long shot of the scene with fourteen people in it. This final shot becomes a freeze frame, but the sound – which has not stopped since the music ended – keeps going.



fig.39. Freeze frame of the arrest by the lake

This last shot is one of the few extreme long shots of the film. It is only possible to identify Nadine thanks to the position of the policemen seen in the previous shot. Moreover, the fixed image is accompanied by various acousmatic sounds whose sources can only be guessed. First, one policeman is asking his colleagues to hurry up while another one is asking a woman to back up. At that moment, the sound of an ambulance becomes louder and a policeman starts shouting at Nadine to stop moving. The other policeman is still telling people not to approach. The policeman talking to Nadine utters the final words of the film. He asks: “Where’s your friend? Where’s the other bitch?” The translation loses the ambiguity of the last sentence, which in French is: “Elle est où ta putain de copine?” The literal translation “your whore of a friend” or “your fucking friend” retains “friend” as the last identifiable word uttered in the film. In addition, its double meaning suggests that the policeman is calling Manu a whore when in fact, of the two Nadine is the prostitute. Immediately after, the film fades to black and the credits start rolling and music starts in the background.

Ending a film with a freeze frame is far from rare. Given the film's link to *Thelma and Louise* and given the fate of the protagonists, it is easy to draw a parallel between the two. However, a closer look at the very last seconds of the film calls for a closer comparison to another famous film ending with a freeze frame: *The 400 Blows*. Since the question of agency is at the center of all three films, I will rely on Richard Neupert's analysis of film endings in *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema* in order to reveal the ways in which *Baise-moi*, in spite of its resemblance to both Scott's and Truffaut's film, departs from them and allows Nadine a final moment of resistance.

In his book Richard Neupert divides films into four categories depending on the openness or closeness of their story and narration. He mentions *Thelma and Louise* alongside *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) as examples of Closed Text films, that is, films in which the story comes to a resolution after which the narration stops (38-39). In Scott's film, because the protagonists have driven off to their deaths, the story is resolved. In addition, Neupert argues:

The films add montages of earlier story events in order as ways to both summarize the lives of their characters and to undercut the bitterness of their sudden freeze-frame deaths. Thus the latter two examples provide descriptive story material that does reinforce narrative closure and thus they belong solidly to Closed Text traditions. (116)

In *Baise-moi* the ending works slightly differently. On the one hand, Nadine is not killed, and there is no reason to believe that the policemen will shoot her. The image of Nadine surrounded by policemen therefore resembles the ending of *The 400 Blows*.

Following Neupert's analysis of Truffaut's film, I argue that *Baise-moi* is an "open story film" in which the narration also attempts to remain open. According to Neupert, "Open Story films involve a narrative discourse that is just as finished as in Closed Text films, but their stories are left partially unresolved and thus significantly incomplete". (75) Nadine and Antoine Doinel have both spent the entire film trying to escape authority and both end up trapped by water. In my opinion the difference between the two situations does not lie so much in the fact that unlike Nadine Antoine is not surrounded yet, but in the narration at the end, both with the framing of the characters and the use of sound. Neupert argues that Truffaut restricts the point of view at the end of the film. He states:

While the narration of *The 400 Blows* occasionally provides us some events or actions denied Antoine, the final decision to limit the audience's perception to what Antoine sees is a strategy that helps close off the omniscient narrative discourse with an expressive containment of the narrative systems. By the end of the film the point of view is restricted to Antoine's actions. The audience knows even less than the fleeing Antoine at this point. (98)

The narration is radically different in *Baise-moi*. Nadine's view is restricted by the policemen and yet, contrary to *The 400 Blows*, the camera moves back to let us see her

surroundings, which is the reverse process of the optical zoom used by Truffaut. Even though the freeze-frame is a strong closure device, the extreme long shot opens up the space and prevents the narration from closing completely. Similarly, the freeze-frame in *Thelma and Louise* is also a wide shot, which allows the viewer to keep an image of the two women that is visually close to the ones they have seen all along, when they were free.

In addition to the wide shot, Desportes's use of sound participates in both leaving the story unresolved and restoring a part of Nadine's agency. The diegetic music coming from Nadine's Walkman stops abruptly when the policeman intervenes. The fact that it does not end the film can be seen as a way for Desportes to deprive it from its closing power. Indeed, the viewer first heard the song when the protagonists met, and its use at end the film would have helped resolve the story, especially after Nadine's suicide. Instead, the policeman's voice and the car siren take over until the end. However, that is not to say that the intervention of the police closes the film. As he asks her where Manu is, Nadine's silence forces him to keep talking until the very last second of the film, during the freeze-frame, much in the style of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. However, while in Hill's film the sound heard during the freeze frame are gunshots killing the protagonists, in *Baise-moi* the policeman's voice remains powerless. Immediately after his last words, the first notes of the closing score begin, leaving no room between the diegetic and the non-diegetic; the narrative voice simply cannot continue, but Nadine's future of silent resistance can still be imagined.

Beyond the story and the narration, these issues of openness and closure also relate to stillness and movement in cinema, in other words to the materiality of the film, which Laura Mulvey problematizes in *Death 24 X a Second*. In *Baise-moi*, the stillness of the last frame is complicated by the freeze frame, of which Mulvey claims:

The freeze frame ending leads in two directions, one that relates primarily to narrative and the other that relates to the materiality of film. First of all, the freeze frame represents the fusion between the death drive in narrative and the abrupt shift from the cinema's illusion of animated movement to its inorganic, inanimate state. This is the site of the metaphor. Secondly, the freeze frame is a series of identical frames repeated in order to create an illusion of stillness to replace the illusion of movement. (81)

The freeze frame thus inverts the relationship between movement and stillness, while still fulfilling its closing role (metaphoric) at the level of the narrative. The movement of the celluloid strip, the defilement of still images, which sets the narrative in motion via a metonymic relation between these images, is still occurring in a freeze frame. The last frame of the film evokes the death of the narrative, the end of the causal link. However, now that these images are identical, their defilement suggests that it could go on forever and that therefore the causal link would never cease. Mulvey then adds examples of two different types of freeze-frame endings that illustrate the two directions explained above. She states:

One leads to the famous freeze frames of the death-drive ending: for instance, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991). The other leads to an uncertain future, a slight hint of an escape, for instance, in the first freeze-frame ending, when the child in Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959) turns to the camera. (81)

Similarly to Neupert, Mulvey makes a distinction between the films that carry death in their narrative and others, which do not have a narrative closing. In the case of *Baise-moi*, the distinction is not as clear, as death was almost present in the last seconds of the film, only to be prevented by the arrival of the police. In other words, while the ending of *Baise-moi* was getting close to that of *Thelma and Louise*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* the narrative choice of the author redirected it toward the “uncertain future” mentioned by Mulvey. It is through the movement of identical still frames depicting Nadine's forced stillness that the viewer gets the potential perpetual repetition of that stillness, a stillness that was imposed onto Nadine even though she had chosen death. The ending of *Baise-moi*, while it approaches death, does not attain it. It also reaches the illusion of stillness through movement, a stillness that eternally traps the protagonist. By refusing her character the fulfillment of the death drive, Desportes visually condemns her to the ceaseless metonymy that will perpetuate her fixity. It is thus only through sound and specifically her choice to remain silent that Nadine can hope to resist, as both at the level of the story and the image she is condemned to an imposed

stillness. In combining the final freeze frame to acousmatic sound Desportes puts her cineliteracy at the service of a feminism that she locates in narration.

Through the reworking of several films that end with a freeze-frame, Desportes reworks some characteristics of the rape-revenge genre as well as she displays a mastery of the film medium. While the references may seem remote from each other, their connection in the film participates in the creation of the queer archive of third-wave feminism. Indeed, by granting the protagonists agency via a reworking of previous films through the film medium, Desportes complicates the interpretation of her film. While this choice resulted in vehement reactions against it as well as its quasi disappearance from the film circuit, those who choose to delve into its precise analysis can find enormous queer feminist potential in it.

3. Representing rape with image and sound

The last scene that participates in the classification of *Baise-moi* as rape-revenge is the (in)famous rape scene, which takes place toward the beginning of the film. It is a scene in which the violence, contrary to other segments, is not amplified either visually or aurally. Manu and her friend Karla arrive at an abandoned garage in the car of three men who have just abducted them. In the first shot, the camera is facing the car and we can hear one of the women screaming. In the following shot, we discover that the screaming woman is Karla being beaten by one of the men. The film then alternates between Karla and Manu being assaulted at the same time, and while Karla screams throughout the scene, her voice becomes acousmatic and gets superimposed onto Manu's calm body.

Although we know the source of the screaming, it is now off-screen and creates two effects, which participate in the anti-parodic aspect of the scene. First, when the source of the screaming is off-screen, it only gives us partial information as to what is happening to the character. Moreover, because Manu's friend is not in the frame, it allows someone else to be, in this case, Manu. In other words, the audio and visual aspects of the women being raped are disjointed.



fig.40. Manu being assaulted while we can hear her friend scream

The acousmatic screaming superimposed onto Manu's expressionless face is specifically what makes Manu's reaction stand out. Later on in the scene, as the man who just raped Karla is now raping her, Manu remains silent. After he reproaches her for not moving at all, and asks her "move your ass", she responds: "What's that between your legs, asshole?" The effect is immediate as he decides to stop and leave. Manu's absence of reaction as well as her repartee, end the rape. Manu's behavior correspond to what Jack Halberstam refers to as "radical passivity", signaling a refusal to be what they have always been, which in the case of Manu is a victim. Halberstam notes:

While many feminists from Simone de Beauvoir to Monique Wittig to Jamaica Kincaid, have cast the project of "becoming woman" as one in which the woman

can only be complicit in a patriarchal order, feminist theorists in general have not turned to masochism and passivity as potential alternatives to liberal formulations of womanhood. (140)

Despentes- who is not a theorist but has enunciated third-wave feminist principles in her manifesto *King Kong Théorie* - offers Manu's passivity as an alternative to the victimhood in which the victim's distress arouses the rapist. By not reacting to being raped, Manu steps out of the role in which her attacker had placed her. The rest of the scene will confirm that Manu is not cut for the role of the passive victim but that of the passive agent.

After the men leave, Karla is furious, crying, and asks Manu why she let them rape them. Manu calmly responds that it could have been worse, and that she should be happy to still be alive. Then she goes to an explanation:

I don't give a shit about their scummy dicks. I've had others. Fuck them all, I say. If you park in the projects, you empty your car 'cause someone's gonna break in. I leave nothing precious in my cunt for those jerks. It's just a bit of cock. We're just girls. It'll be ok now.

Not only is Manu able to stay calm as she is being raped, but she is also capable of reasoning. The scene then ends with Karla screaming "fuck", as the music that will accompany the following scene of Nadine and her client begins.

What sets this scene apart from other violent scenes in the film is the absence of music to enhance violence. The absence of music, coupled with acousmatic sounds and

Manu's silence force the viewer to take the scene literally. Desportes herself acknowledged that the way she treated rape was horrible: "We didn't invent rape. I've been raped and one of my actresses has been raped. It's horrific, so I don't see why I shouldn't treat it that way" (28). While she clearly did not intend to tone down the violence, one should note that she did not attempt to make this scene comical either. Instead, she represented it with the intention to make the viewers question their position. While then this scene is indeed what triggers the women's violence and places the film in the rape-revenge genre, it does not make it part of the parody that Desportes claims to have made. The parody corresponds to the violence that Nadine and Manu perpetrate. The film establishes them as imitators of men, when the latters are the point of origin of violence.

The rape scene therefore sets up a complex relation between the audio and the visual in the on and off-screen spaces. By forcing the viewers to hear what is not visible and see what they cannot hear, Desportes and Trinh Thi make them question image and sound, that is to say, film. While many have overlooked the audio-visual complexity of the scene, it should be noted that its questioning of violence through the contrast that it operates with other violent scenes (in which Nadine and Manu are the perpetrators) is as successful as the risks of such a representation were high.²⁹ Overall, the non-parodic aspect of this scene is comparable to rape in other rape-revenge films. While other

²⁹ To my knowledge, Judith Franco is the only one who has noted the disconnect between sound and image during the rape scene in her article "Gender, Genre and Female Pleasure in the Contemporary Revenge Narrative: *Baise-moi* and *What It Feels Like For A Girl*."

elements of the film participate in the rewriting of the genre, this scene places rape at the origin of the film, therefore anchoring as part of third-wave feminism.

III. Porn

1. Manipulation of image and sound

As I have mentioned in the introduction, *Baise-moi* provoked outraged reaction because of its violence but also because of its explicitness. However, the three most explicit scenes of the film are not copies of pornographic films but a critique of their codes. The first of these scenes takes place early in the film and does not serve a narrative purpose. It is a scene in which Nadine meets with one of her clients. In “What is and is not porn: sex, narrative, and *Baise-moi*”, Jacob Held notes: “The sex in porn is superfluous to the narrative, or rather the narrative is superfluous to the presentation of sex” (*Sex and Storytelling*, 34-35). The encounter between Nadine and her client does not inform the narrative in any way and therefore seems, at first glance, to be the typical sex scene of a pornographic film. However through a manipulation of image and sound Desportes questions the codes of the heterosexual pornographic film.

The scene begins with a medium close-up of the back of Nadine’s client closing the curtains. The non-diegetic music becomes overwhelming after only a few seconds, covering all other sounds except moaning from the two characters as well as dialogue from Gaspard Noé’s film *Seul Contre Tous* (1998) playing on TV. Only viewers who are familiar with Noé’s work can identify the film. Alternatively, the information appears on *Baise-moi*’s IMDb page. As the film also provoked controversy because of its violence,

the reference is far from fortuitous. Beyond the friendship between Noé, Desportes and Trinh Thi, the inclusion, is not a simple citation but a constructed, manipulated inclusion that both questions the depiction of violence in film as well as it restores the female characters' agency.

The second half of the scene, while Nadine and her client are having sex, constitutes the manipulation on Desportes and Trinh Thi's behalf. Nadine's moaning can barely be perceived on her face. The moaning sound therefore suggests that the noises have been added in post synchronization in order to emphasize that Nadine is faking pleasure, similarly to many - if not all - women in pornographic films. In addition, the contrast between these noises and the sound coming out of the TV is striking. However, in spite of expressing opposite feelings, their superimposition points to what they have in common: artificiality. Even though the tone is comical, the presence of *Seul contre tous* confers some gravity to the scene. The same is true for the rest of the film, which beyond its exaggeration of violence via audio-visual effects holds a discourse that is as serious as can be. In sum, thanks to their borrowing of a violent scene from Noé's film and its inclusion into a sex scene, Desportes and Trinh Thi force the viewer to question the representation of women in porn in relation to violence. The inclusion of *Seul contre tous* therefore appears as more than a mere citation but a tool to make apparent problems of representation.

Nadine's position on the bed allows her to watch TV, and point-of-view shots of the TV screen allow the viewer to both watch the film, but also to be placed in Nadine's

position. This choice is not insignificant, as the film establishes a female point of view, which contrasts with all the other previous shots in the scene, especially the close-ups on her body. Whereas Nadine had up to then been treated as “(passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man” – to use Laura Mulvey’s words from her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” – she is now slowly beginning to endorse the active gazing role. Even though the film that Nadine and the viewer are watching is not identified on screen, Desportes made no secret that the clips were taken from Gaspard Noé’s *Seul Contre Tous*.³⁰ The shots visible to the viewer are violent, and depict a man physically assaulting a woman with a gun and calling her names. While the choice of *Seul contre tous* is not surprising, what is uncommon is its use during a sex scene.



fig.41. Successive point-of-view shots of what Nadine is seeing (upside down) on the TV screen

Immediately following the three shots from *Seul contre tous*, the film cuts to a close-up on Nadine’s face, still having sex. Because the previous shots were upside down, and because of her position on the bed, we understand that she is watching the

³⁰ Noé also collaborated on *Baise-moi*. Trinh-Thi and Desportes asked him for advice as his film had triggered inflamed reactions.
<http://www.rue89lyon.fr/2016/03/02/virginie-desportes-portraitiste-de-nos-contemporains-bronce-samedi/>

film. However, the most striking element of the shot lies in the superimposition of sound from Noé's film onto Nadine's face. Even though the words are not translated in the subtitles, they are loud enough for French speakers to understand. A male voice utters "I'm telling you, you're dumb! You're a piece of shit!" These words can be linked back to the man that we have previously seen attack the woman. By making us see Nadine's face at the same time as we hear these two sentences, the film unveils its own *mise-en-scène* of sex and violence, which appears here as a superimposition of the aural facet of the latter onto the visual aspect of the former. In other words, Despentès lays aural violence over the shot of Nadine having sex. The result is that both sex and violence are at that point being imposed onto the female character. The *mise-en-abyme* that the insertion of Noé's film creates is complex. While the insults are diegetic within *Seul contre tous*, once superimposed onto the images of *Baise-moi* they cannot be considered at the same level except if the viewer 'forgets' that Nadine is watching a film. By playing with the limits between two diegetic spaces, the director reinforces the dichotomy between real and fake, which is at the heart of both violent and pornographic films.

Another audio-visual superimposition adds a mocking tone to a scene, which up to now has only been hinting that Nadine's position - both literally and figuratively - was to be used to unveil the attitude of her client, and more generally the strategies employed by pornographic films. As the film cuts to another shot of *Seul contre tous*, Nadine's client announces "I'm gonna make you cum". Nadine is now turning over, and her

movement is reflected by the movement of the camera, allowing us to see part of the TV screen, and part of unclear background.



fig.42. Shot of the yelling man in *Seul Contre Tous*

This superimposition is rather incongruous, especially because of the presence of the violent man on the TV screen. However, the announcement is crucial to the integrity of the scene because its purpose depends on it. Indeed, in spite of his confidence, Nadine's client never actually makes her cum, at least in the scene. As a result, his declaration becomes rather comical and recalls the behavior of male porn stars whose sole goal is to expose their sexual prowess. At another level, it also recalls how mainstream porn films rely on this dynamic even though it is fake. At the end of the scene, one can only assess the client's failure to fulfill his goal and Desportes and Trinh-Thi's success in making fun of porn.

The final three shots of the scene are the utmost confirmation of Desportes' comical tone. The first one is that of a sausage in *Seul contre tous*.

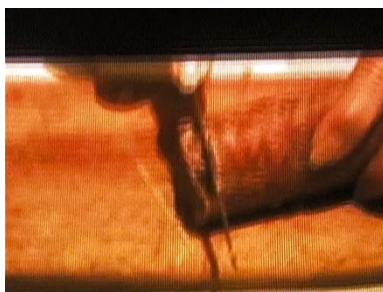


fig.43. Last shot from *Seul Contre Tous*, after the woman has been beaten

For a viewer familiar with the film, this shot will immediately seem out of place. Indeed, in Noé's film, this shot actually occurs before those of the attack of the woman, which both the viewer and Nadine have just watched. The displacement of the 'sausage' shot after the attack testifies of Despentes and Trinh-Thi's manipulation of violent images. Indeed, the shot is completely out of context and therefore cannot be related to the previous one exclusively via the narrative. In the context of this scene, the sausage shot, is more than a citation, it is a reappropriation which evokes violences and serves to restore some of Nadine's agency. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Mulvey notes the apparent contradiction between the representation of woman as fulfilling the male scopophilic instinct on the one hand, and the representation of woman signifying castration on the other. In this shot, the film goes further by making the shot of the sausage stand in for castration itself. In other words, Nadine as well as the viewer are taking pleasure in watching an image of castration on screen. Thanks to this shot, not only is the film establishing a feminine point of view, but it is also making the viewer identify with it.

The last two shots of the scene contrast with each other both visually and auditably. In the first one, Nadine's face is partially hidden by her hair. Moreover, although we can hear moaning noises, it is difficult to determine whether she is actually moaning or if the noises were added in post-synchronization. On the other hand, the last shot is an extreme close-up of the client's open mouth, and the moaning sound that comes out of it can be heard distinctly.



fig.44. Last two shots of the scene

While at first glance this shot seems to emphasize male pleasure, the *mise-en-scène* at place since the very beginning of the scene suggests a more complex reading. Because it is an extreme close-up, the last shot imposes the moaning face to the viewer. However, the point of view is not the same as for the “sausage” shot. In other words, the camera has departed from Nadine's point of view. In addition, the juxtaposition of the last three shots of the scene makes it clear that three different points of view are endorsed. While the sausage shot is Nadine's point of view and the shot of Nadine could be from her client's perspective, the last shot does not go back to Nadine's point of view. In fact, the editing breaks the continuity of the scene as it cuts to the male orgasm without any visual or

aural clue.³¹ By departing from the character's point of view, this abruptly inserted shot is a sign of the film's awareness of the code it is subverting.

Contrary to the sausage shot, which was an ostentatious presentation of Nadine's castrating pulsions toward her client, the final one is a reference to pornographic films. By inserting this shot at the end of the scene, the directors are not emphasizing male pleasure but are pointing to their own point of view. The close-up on the man's face is what the viewer sees when watching a scene in which a client told a prostitute he was going to make her come. The disconnect between what the viewer hears and sees makes apparent the constructedness of the scene. In addition to dialogue, the moaning sound interrupts the non-diegetic music which had been playing since the very beginning of the scene, and which barely let the other voices be heard. In other words, the sound of male orgasm imposes what is diegetic onto what is non-diegetic. That is not to say that the film acknowledges the power of male orgasm. Rather, this moment reveals how the film emphasizes it both visually much in the fashion of pornographic films, in order to ridicule it.

One can note that the shot of the male orgasm itself replaces the "money shot", which according to Linda Williams "assume[d] the narrative function of signaling the climax of a genital event" (*Hard Core*, 93). Instead of showing the ejaculation, the shot focuses on the man's face. Williams acknowledges that such a shot only started being used in the 1970s, with the emergence of hard-core features. Among the different

³¹ The insertion of the sausage shot after the assault had already suggested a play on continuity

functions of the money shot, Williams also sees it as “the most representative instance of phallic power and pleasure” (95). By refusing the money shot, Desportes and Trinh Thi deny the male character the visual proof of their power and pleasure. On the other hand, by substituting the ejaculation shot to that of a moaning mouth, the directors are making apparent their control over the representation of male pleasure in the same way that female pleasure is usually not accounted for but represented via moaning in mainstream pornographic films. By choosing not to represent ejaculation, Desportes and Trinh Thi are also getting rid of the event that proves his activity, in other words his masculinity. In depriving the man from an ejaculation on screen they are suggesting that he could be faking and therefore be equated to the women in pornography. In so doing, Desportes refuses to abide by the rules of representation which presents a fiction as reality. Overall in this scene, the emphasis on diegetic sound and its interruption of the non-diegetic one exaggerate at the same time as it mocks male pleasure. As a result, the film also rejects the possibility of the viewer’s pleasure. What remains in this scene is the possibility for a feminist reading based on the subversion of audio and visual devices, which question mainstream pornography and its male centeredness.

2. The gaze and women’s desire.

I would now like to problematize the gaze after Laura Mulvey’s influential article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. The next two segments that I am going to analyze are notable because they involve sex but they are among the few that do not involve violence alongside sex. While the first segment emphasizes the ways in which the

protagonists look at men, the second one revolves around them looking at each other. They thus both complicate in their own way the notion of the gaze as conceived by Mulvey.

The first segment is alternating between shots following Nadine having sex with a hotel receptionist on the one hand, and Manu having sex with a customer from a bar on the other. The two women are in the middle of their killing spree, and run their encounters. The first two shots set the stage: Nadine is entering the room where the receptionist is taking a break, and Manu enters the bar, looks around and immediately spots a customer that she wants.



fig.45. Nadine entering the kitchen where the receptionist is taking a break and Manu looking at the man she just spotted in her mirror

Even though Nadine is in the background, the act of staring, which comes from her, is placed at the center of the shot. By making the connection between her eyes and the man sitting in at the table in the foreground, the viewer understands the relation between the two characters. By looking at him Nadine is making him her object. On the other hand, the first exchange of looks between Manu and the customer is indirect, through the use of the mirror. Even though the shot focuses on the man's look, the mirror reverses the

dynamic observer/observed. The depth of the shot places the man in the background, Manu's hand in the foreground, and the mirror that she is holding and which allows her to do the looking in the middle. Manu is thus the observer here too. One of the following shots, a medium close-up of her face confirms this effect.



fig.46. Medium close-up of Manu staring directly at the customer

The medium close-up on Manu's face is even more explicit because it occurs after the first exchange of looks via the mirror. In this shot, not only is she establishing him as her object, but she is also making him understand her motives.

During this shot, the song "Goddamn City" by Seven Hate begins only to stop during the last shot of the segment, right before Manu leaves her partner and tells him "merci, ciao". I argue that Desportes and Trinh Thi use auditory and visual strategies to establish their female characters as the ones actively looking. During Nadine's intercourse, three shots focusing on her eyes reinforce this idea.



fig.47. Shots of Nadine's stare during her sexual intercourse with the receptionist

These three shots are an extreme close-up, a medium close-up and a close-up on Nadine's eyes either staring at the man and/or directly at the camera. Added to the first shot of the segment, they give the impression that this entire portion is focused on Nadine's looking. On the other hand, her partner's eyes are framed, only once, in a close-up.

On the other hand, Manu's pleasure-filled face is shown but her eyes are almost closed. Her agency is no longer located in her ability to look but in her ability to speak. Manu is the one who dictates when music starts, and when it ends. More specifically, it starts once she has found a partner, and it ends when she decides to leave. The music stops immediately before she says "merci, ciao" and kisses the man goodbye. Because this is an alternating segment, we are dealing with two different diegetic spaces in addition to the non-diegetic space of music. As a result, when the music gives way to Manu's words, it also gives her the power to end Nadine's sexual encounter. In that sense, the music interruption gives Manu the narrative power to put an end to the encounter and to the segment as a whole.

The other non-violent pornographic scene on which I would like to focus occurs earlier in the film. Manu and Nadine meet two men at a bar and they invite them to their hotel room. Nadine and Manu are each having sex with one man. The scene includes all types of shots, from long shots and extreme close-ups, and relies on a twisting of the pornographic genre based on the gaze. Lisa Downing has analyzed the gaze in this scene in her article “*Baise-moi* or the ethics of the desiring gaze”. After recalling the problem of the feminine gaze first brought up by Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, and after noting the effort of queer theory to “challenge the meanings of this [that between agent and object] binaristic division”, she notes the innovation brought by *Baise-moi*. She uses Jackie Stacey’s argument that “the rigid distinction between either desire or identification, so characteristic of psychoanalytic film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both” (59). The scene in the hotel room with the two men falls into the examples that Downing mentions in order to illustrate the refusal to be either desire or identification. Downing states:

It is my contention that the way in which certain scenes of *Baise-moi* are filmed offers not only a gaze admitting of both desire and identification, but a reciprocal gaze that marginalizes the subject-object masculine one, both at the level of the diegesis, and in the construction of the cinematic spectacle for the viewer. (59)

Downing specifically analyzes this scene to illustrate her point. After carefully detailing how the scene is set up, she remarks that the two women, although having sex with a man, are looking at each other.



fig.48. Nadine looking at Manu and the two women looking at each other during sex



fig.49. Nadine looking at Manu and the latter looking back during the same shot

During the first half of the scene, four shots clearly show them looking at each other. On the other hand, we never see them look at their partner. Downing argues:

In *Baise-moi*, I would suggest, the discrepancy between the emotional closeness and visually-fuelled desire of the female characters for each other on the one hand, and their physical engagement in uniquely heterosexual sex, filmed according to the rules of mainstream pornography (...) on the other opens up a gap through which we might espy an alternative narrative of desire. (86)

This “alternative narrative of desire” thus stems from an organization of the filming space, which allows the viewer to witness the reciprocal looks of the female characters.

The turning point of the scene occurs when the man who was Nadine's partner is kicked out of the room after asking the women to perform a sixty-nine on each other. I concur with Downing in considering Manu's refusal as the awareness of "the voyeuristic fascination offered by scenes of girls together for heterosexual men, not only the character who is promptly dispatched here, but the 'imagined' male viewer too." In other words, through the mere suggestion of their mutual desire expressed by the act of looking, Nadine and Manu both unveil the codes of heterosexual pornographic films and reject them. They create their own desiring system, in which the male is an auxiliary.³²

However, far from ending when one of the men leaves, the act of looking takes on a new dimension, which Downing – although she mentions it - does not insist on in her article. After Nadine kicks the man out of the room, no other words are uttered. That is not to say that the scene ends and that there is no action. Nadine sends her partner to see Manu on the other bed, and he starts kissing her. The scene ends with a shot of Manu looking at them. All these actions are triggered or approved exclusively by looking.



fig.50. Nadine looking at Manu, and Nadine looking at Manu

³² It is also important to note that the choice of Manu's partner, the one who stays until the end of the scene, is not fortuitous. At the time Titof was a porn star famous for acting in both straight and gay porn.



fig.51. Manu suggesting him to go see Nadine, and then looking at them kissing

At the end of the scene, as Downing argues, Nadine and Manu “signal the embryonic possibility of transgressing the codes determining their construction from within”. While these two scenes emphasize the act of looking on the part of the characters, at another level the question also matters for the viewer. As I have shown, Nadine and Manu’s looking at men and each other as they please seems to obliterate the possibility of a satisfied male viewer. However, what happens when the film not only depict protagonists looking but also make the viewer reflect on its own scopophilia? Two crucial segments of *Baise-moi* answer this question by using a complex combination of sound and image which forces the viewers to be aware of their own looking.

The three scenes that I have analyzed here carefully rework the porn genre, by questioning its realness as well as the place that women occupy in it. By subverting its code, Desportes and Trinh-Thi prove their expertise in the genre but also in expressing a feminist discourse that does not deprive women from sexuality. Far from simply spoiling Nadine and Manu with a lot of random sex throughout the film, *Baise-moi* does so while restoring their agency.

Conclusion:

I hope that the close readings of segments and images of the films have shed light onto Desportes' use of other film texts to serve her own feminist discourse. The transtextuality of the films enables Desportes to create a space of agency for her failing characters, but also more generally for a destabilization of the usual codes of representation. Indeed, beyond restoring the agency of women characters by granting them the right to be violent, have sex, and fail, Desportes' intervention is also located at the level of the making of the film itself, in the space that she grants to other filmmakers, artists or directors, and in the ways in which she chooses to rework their works. The result is a hidden network of audio-visual references, a seemingly messy and pointless collection of pornographic and violent images. This is exactly where the queer power of Desportes' work resides: in its disorganized and almost intangible form, in other words outside of the beaten path of representation. Her trajectory as a filmmaker from the margin to the mainstream can only demean the power of her films, which find their strength in their hardly accessible discourse. The next filmmaker that I will consider in my work is still located in this marginal space, of DIY filmmaking that Desportes experiences when she first started.

Chapter 3: Film as Performance: Emilie Jouvét's Film 2.0

Introduction:

In the previous chapter, I have followed the trajectory of Virginie Despentes' filmmaking from a DIY aesthetic to more polished and expensive works. While this evolution mirrors that of her slow entrance into the mainstream media world of France both as a filmmaker and a writer, it occurred at the expense of the complexity of her feminist discourse based on women's empowerment through sex representation that appeared in *Baise-moi*.³³ While there are many connections between the films of Despentes and those of Emilie Jouvét especially regarding the DIY aesthetic and their common interest in pornography, Emilie Jouvét's work remains to this day outside of the mainstream, a position which, I argue, is not simply the result of an exclusion because of the content of her films, but rather stems from a real desire for artistic expression from the margins of digital porn production. The innovative aspect of her work takes place both in front of and behind the camera, with queer bodies and sexualities as well as with alternative modes of production and distribution of her films and videos. In this chapter I propose that Emilie Jouvét's films belong to, to borrow Rosanna Maule's expression, Women's Cinema 2.0, at the center of which is performance.

³³ See Sam Bourcier's critique of *Bye Bye Blondie* in "Bildungs-post-porn: notes sur la provenance du post-porn, un des futurs de Féminisme de la désobéissance sexuelle" as well as in the previous chapter.

Emilie Jouvét's work is nothing less than diverse. Her oeuvre includes five feature films, seventeen short films, and countless photographs, which have been exposed at the AgnèsB Gallery, the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris, the Arles Photography Festival, Tristesse de Luxe Gallery in Berlin, the ArtRebels Gallery in Copenhagen, as well as in San Francisco and Tokyo ("biographie"). As a graduate of the Beaux Arts and the "Ecole Nationale Supérieure de la Photographie" in Arles, Jouvét was working as a photographer before she took on film and video in 2005, when she directed *One Night Stand* (2005), the first French, queer porn lesbian and transgender feature film, which juxtaposes five sexual encounters using very little sound.

In 2011 her second feature film *Too Much Pussy! Feminist Sluts in the Queer X Show* was released at film festivals all over Europe. ("*Too Much Pussy*") It is a sex-positive nonfiction road movie that follows the group of performers that Jouvét created in 2009 on tour across Europe. The uncensored version of the film, *Much More Pussy*, which shows the performers sexual encounters backstage and during the road trip, is also available on DVD although it did not come out in theaters. In 2012, Jouvét directed *Histoire d'Ovidie*, a documentary about French former porn star Ovidie, which aired on Canal +, the channel that also produced it. *Aria* (2016) is a nonfiction film "about queer parents, identity and family constructions" which was shot exclusively with a smartphone and was presented at the 2016 *Biennale de L'image en Mouvement* in Geneva ("*Aria*"). Finally, Jouvét's most recent film *My Body My Rules*, "an experimental film around the image of the body, political nudity and its representations" was completed in September

and has been screened at the art center Point Éphémère in October and at the Cinema MK2 Quai de Seine in Paris in January.³⁴

In addition to using various media, Emilie Juvet stands as a representative of an alternative way of funding films, outside of the French public system, which relies on both the Production and Distribution Support Department at the National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image, and investments from TV channels.³⁵ Juvet did not benefit from any of this system for any of her films for at least one reason: their sexually explicit content, which could have led the films to be X-rated and excluded from the theater circuit

In France an X rating has financial consequences onto the funding of a film because as the website for the Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée explains, it cannot “benefit from any financial support in the form of automatic selective aid” (CNC). Juvet therefore produced *One Night Stand* herself whereas *Too Much Pussy* was co-produced by La Seine TV (a small French company specialized in funding films), Jürgen Brüning Filmproduktion (founded by the German film director and producer who created the Berlin Porn Film Festival in 2006), and herself (via Hysterie Prod, the company that she founded) (“*Too Much Pussy*”; pornfilmfestivalberlin.de). *My Body My*

³⁴ On September 12, Emilie Juvet sent an email to the financial supporters of the film inviting them to an exclusive screening on October 19, 2017. She also announced the second screening via email as well as on Facebook.

³⁵ For more details about the specificity and current stakes of the funding of cinema in France, see Gilles Barret's *Comment Investir Dans Le Cinéma?: Les Financements Alternatifs Dans Le Cinéma Français*. Paris: Harmattan, Alexandre, Olivier. *La Règle De L'exception: Écologie Du Cinéma Français*, Susan Hayward's *French National Cinema*, and Isabelle Vanderschelden's “The French film industry: funding, policies, debates”. *Studies in French Cinema*, 16:2 (2016): 89-94

Rules, has been funded via the European crowdfunding platform Ulule whereas *Aria* is “a co-production of the festival Every Body's Perfect and the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève for the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement 2016, with the support of the Fonds d'Art Contemporain de la Ville (FMAC) and the Fonds d'Art Contemporain du Canton de Genève (FCAC), Faena Art, In Between Art Film and HEAD – Genève” (“Film *My Body, My Rules*”; “*Aria*”). Jouvét therefore gets funding from all sorts of sources, which are never the same sources as for mainstream French films.

I have chosen to place the notion of performance at the center of my analysis of Jouvét's work because it works at three different levels. First, in relation to the arts, “to perform” means “to put on a show, a play, a dance, a concert” (*Performance Studies*, 28). This definition is at the heart of Jouvét's *Too Much Pussy* and *Much More Pussy*, because she follows a group of performers from show to show. As a result, the film viewer witnesses bits and pieces of these performances, which constitute the backbone of the films. Since Jouvét is the one who put the group together, it is possible to assert that the origins of the films was performance (and performers). In addition, performance operates at the level of gender and sexuality, in the sense of “performative”, that is the construction of gender and sexuality through repetition of their performance. Given the presence of subversive sex acts as well as trans characters, Jouvét's films are unarguably unveiling the constructedness, the performative aspect of gender and sexuality. Finally, because of its crowdfunded source, Jouvét's most recent film *My Body, My rules* is tied to the notion of prestation, which is tied to the notion of performance:

The action of paying, in money or service, what is due by law or custom, originally esp. towards a feudal superior; a payment or the performance of a service in settlement of such a debt or duty; a fee, a remuneration. Also: the performance of something promised. (“Prestation”)

While the origin of the term has its roots in Medieval times, in French the word is still commonly used today to refer to the performance of an athlete or artist, or to the completion of a task in exchange for money. In both cases, *prestation* implies a close relationship between the work (and those who make its production possible; from director to performers) and those who witness the performance after having paid for it. In Jouvét’s films it is impossible to omit the involvement of the audience first through the performances that appear in *Too Much Pussy* and *Much More Pussy*, and secondly at the level of production via the use of crowdfunding but also with Jouvét’s call for volunteer performers and crew members.

In this chapter, I will use the connection between the performative and financial aspects of Emilie Jouvét’s work in order to define her artistic practice specifically in *Histoire d’Ovidie*, *One Night Stand*, *Too Much Pussy*, *Much More Pussy*, *Aria*, and *My Body, My Rules*.³⁶ First, I will focus on performance as first defined by Annie Sprinkle in order to analyze the specificity of Emilie Jouvét’s pornography. Then, I will turn to the accessibility of her work, which has helped her both produce and maintain an audience, as small as it may be. All in all I am hoping to help shape the contours of a new space of

³⁶ I have not seen *Aria* and *My Body, My Rules* yet, but I am able to use their trailers as well as other information found online such as the gofundme campaign for *My Body, My Rules*.

artistic production, which in France or elsewhere remains in the shadow while being at the forefront of digital production.

I. Annie Sprinkle's queer children

1. Sex-positive feminism vs. post-porn

Two of the performers who appear in Juvet's films openly claim to have been influenced by Annie Sprinkle. In *Histoire d'Ovidie*, Ovidie, a French former sex worker and porn star who turned to filmmaking names Sprinkle as her main influence and goes as far as stating that if Sprinkle had not existed, she probably would have been a very different porn star/film director. What Ovidie is referring to in her intervention is Sprinkle's sex-positive stance, which the French star defines later on in the film:

Le féminisme pro-sexe c'est jamais que le féminisme tout court en fait, c'est la liberté de disposer de son corps en tant que femme comme on le souhaite. C'est la liberté d'avoir des relations sexuelles avec qui on le souhaite, quand on le souhaite, de devenir mère quand on le souhaite, d'avorter quand on le souhaite, d'être abstinente également quand on le souhaite. En fait c'est tout simplement la liberté de disposer de son corps, faire l'amour comme on le souhaite, accoucher comme on le souhaite, et je dirais que ça va un petit peu au –delà, le féminisme pro-sexe c'est une libération de l'individu. (*Histoire d'Ovidie*)

Pro-sex feminism is feminism, period. It is the freedom to control your own body as a woman however you want, the freedom to have sex with whomever you want, whenever you want, becoming a mother whenever you want, have an

abortion whenever you want, being chaste also whenever you want. Actually it is simply the freedom to control your own body, make love however you want, give birth however you want, and I'd say that it goes a little beyond that. Pro-sex feminism is a liberation of the individual.

Even though the pro-sex or sex-positive feminist movement exists in France under the representation of artists, performers and essayists such as the ones in Jouvett's films, this definition does not explain the ways in which these artists, performers and essayists go about applying it in their work.³⁷ While there is no doubt that Annie Sprinkle is indeed part of the sex positive feminist movement, there is more to Sprinkle's work than the representation of sex acts that value women's pleasure.

In the same vein, Judy Minx, a sex worker and porn actress from France who is the youngest performer in *Too Much Pussy* claims that the *Queer X show* is based on Sprinkle's work. She states:

We have a lot of inspiration from Annie Sprinkle in this show. She says the answer to bad porn is not no porn at all it's to make good porn. It's true if you don't like what there is make your own. Because you can't forbid people to be horny at something that you don't like. But you can say "I don't like this and I want porn that suits my interests and so let's make some.

³⁷ For more about the pro-sex feminist movement in France in relation to performance, see Michèle Schaal's "Troisième Vague Féministe Américaine Et Jeune Féminisme Français: Une Introduction Comparative" and "Bridging Feminist Waves: Wendy Delorme's Insurrections! En Territoire Sexuel".

Similarly to Ovidie, Judy Minx's comments pay tribute to the sex-positive aspect of Sprinkle's work but omit to mention what "good porn" is according to Annie Sprinkle.

On the other hand, Minx explains what kind of porn she dislikes:

Things I've seen 'post-porn' applied to are for example images of horrible violence and then images of sex, or something very artistic very like... something that you can't masturbate to basically. Post-porn is not porn that's why I don't like it. Or maybe some people call post-porn some things that you can masturbate to and I think they should call it porn because that's what it is.

According to Minx, the difference between porn and post-porn is that the former's purpose is to arouse the viewer whereas the latter is supposed to make them reflect on images of sex. This statement is surprising in several respects. First, Minx admits that she has only been exposed to "post-porn" that used violence. Yet, Sprinkle herself claims that her work is post-porn, which then puts into question both Minx's influence as well as her definition of post-porn as being violent. In addition, Minx's assertion that post-porn is not porn is a rather puzzling one because it comes after her admitting that not everyone is aroused by the same type of images. Against Minx's views on her own work in the *Queer X Show* I will assert, using a comparison to Annie Sprinkle's work, that Emilie Juvet's films are "post-porn".

In France, Virginie Despentes, Ovidie, and Wendy Delorme appear as the spearheads of the sex-positive movement as in addition to performing or writing fiction that mirrors their ideas, they have also reflected on pornography, feminism in general and

sex-positive feminism in particular via the publication of essays or the release of films which explore the pro-sex feminist question.³⁸ Indeed, Desportes' *Mutantes* and *King Kong Théorie*, Ovidie's *Porno Manifesto*, and Delorme's *Insurrections en territoire sexuel* all advocate sex as a means of empowerment for women while explaining why sex can be emancipatory. However, while adepts of post-porn are necessarily sex-positive, the reverse is not true. Ovidie's work cannot be labeled post-porn because it lacks at least one characteristic that Sprinkle's and Juvet's work both have: the representation of practices considered unacceptable and/or perverse.

2. Perverse desires

Annie Sprinkle is the artist, performer and scholar who popularized the term post-porn and enunciated its principles in the "Post Porn Modernist Manifesto", which she co-wrote with Veronica Vera, Frank Moores, Candida Royalle and Leigh Gates in 1988. The manifesto was published in Sprinkle's textbook *Post-Porn Modernist* in 1998 and advocates "sex-positivism" as a source of empowerment (*Film Manifestos*, 382). In addition, Sprinkle cites Dutch artist Wink van Kempen as the origin of the term "post-porn". According to Sprinkle van Kempen used the term "to describe a new genre of sexually explicit material that is perhaps more visually experimental, political, humorous, "arty", and eclectic than the rest" (*Post-Porn Modernist*, 160). All these qualifiers apply to Sprinkle's work, which as early as the 1970s triggered as much controversy as it fascinated the audience. The variety of her work – from porn bimbo, massage parlor

³⁸ Wendy Delorme is a university professor in France and appears in almost all of Juvet's films.

whore, promiscuous party girl, porn star, director/producer, and performance artist to political activist, healer and sex educator – has led her to reach a wide audience throughout the years (Ibid.,192). While at the time of *Post-Porn Modernist* Sprinkle was looking back on a 25-year career, she still currently performs and offers workshops alongside her wife Beth Stephens, with whom she founded the ecosexual movement.³⁹

At the beginning of her involvement with post-porn Sprinkle and some of her friends published material that caused them to be arrested. In 1976, *Partner* magazine published photos of her having sex with a woman. The controversy would not have been so heated if the pictures had not shown her partner Jean Silver penetrating her with her footless leg. While on the photos Sprinkle seems to be enjoying herself, the consequences of the publication of these pictures were heavy (*Post-Porn Modernist*, 46). Although Sprinkle attempts to make the incident humorous in her account of it, she also more seriously brings attention to the absurdity and excessiveness of the charges and measures taken against them. Far from misunderstanding the stakes of her arrest, Sprinkle on the contrary takes action by claiming that none of her behaviors should be reprehensible.

While none of Jouvett's films include a penetration with a stump, they do include penetrations with dildos. They also include objects that have been diverted from their original purpose. In one of the acts in *Too Much Pussy* Madison Young, an American porn actress, director, bondage model, writer and sex educator masturbates with a candle after she has poured melted wax on her body. This act is based on BDSM practices

³⁹ For more information about the ecosexual movement, see Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens' website: <https://theecosexuals.ucsc.edu/ecosex/>

(Bondage/Discipline/Sado-Masochism) that Young is used to performing (*Patreon.com*). It is also the first appearance of an object used as a dildo. In his *Manifeste contra-sexuel* Paul Preciado, a Spanish queer theorist and author, asserts that the dildo is the origin of the penis (21). In so doing, he deprives the penis of the centrality that it has been granted in heterosexuality. In addition, he denaturalizes the masculine/penis feminine/lack binary in order to form a sexuality centered on an object that anyone can appropriate and therefore not associated with any gender (23, 33). Preciado also specifies that fingers, tongues, vibrators, cucumbers, carrots, arms, legs, entire bodies, cigars, guns, sticks, money among objects that can serve as dildos (34). By showing penetrations with stumps, candles, dildos, and fingers Sprinkle and Jouvét's performers are therefore deconstructing masculinity and femininity and refusing to abide by the heterosexual code that ended up naturalizing those roles. In that sense their works are subversively queer.

The subversive aspect of Jouvét's performers' sexuality appears early in *Too Much Pussy*, as Wendy Delorme, Ena Lind, Sadie Lune, Judy Minx, Mad Kate and Madison Young take a break from their road trip at what looks like a queer-friendly campsite. Sadie Lune opens the gathering with the motto "Grant me the serenity to accept the sex I cannot have, the courage to have the sex that scares me, and the wisdom to know the difference". Then Judy Minx, Sadie Lune and Mad Kate explain what they do for a living and what their favorite sexual practices are. Minx describes herself as a porn actress and a sub who names "drooling, spitting and saliva as one [her] weirdest and

greatest fetishes”. Sadie Lune identifies as a sex worker and a “perv” while Mad Kate is a performance artist who has also worked as a stripper and in a peep show. She describes herself as an exhibitionist who likes “the honesty of sex work”, anal sex and blood in both her work and relation with other people. Similarly to Sprinkle, these three women reclaim desires and practices that have either been reserved for men or that are not considered acceptable at all. Throughout the film Mad Kate and Delorme’s use of blood, Minx’ urination –what Sprinkle calls a “piss-in” (45) – and the use of used tampons all point to the obscenity of the body. The most striking aspects of this segment lie in the women’s insistence on what they enjoy. Their discourse is focused on the pleasure taken from practices usually considered obscene. Moreover, it is also focused on potential experimentation. While Minx contemplates the idea of being more than a sub one day, Mad Kate insists that the practices that she enjoys also scare her. In this segment, Jouvett reveals her performers’ awareness of the subversive power of their sex practices.

In the 1980s, Annie Sprinkle met Les Nichols with whom she directed and acted in the film *Linda/Les and Annie* (1992) a documentary about Les, a trans man, having intercourse with Annie after his penile reconstructive surgery. Les kept his female genitals, which, to use Sprinkle’s words, made him a “circus freak” (*Post-Porn Modernist*, 128). After making the film *Linda/Les and Annie* (1992), Sprinkle and Nichols decided to participate in a tattoo convention at Coney Island during which they would show Les’ body. They were censored and forced to stop their act. Although they were, as Sprinkle claims, trying to be avant-garde, she also mentions that they got “a lot

of judgmental shit from some members of the FTM community” (129). Even within the queer community Sprinkle was regarded as too original and excessive. While there some trans men appear in *One Night Stand*, Jouvét does not insist on showing their genitalia. In fact, the viewer is only able to identify the gender of a performer when he/she/zie has done so him/her/zirself outside of the film. This is the case for Kaël T. Block, an FTM actor and photograph. By omitting all names and not showing some of the performers’ genitalia, Jouvét deprives the viewer of the possibility to label the sex acts. They are one-night stands with protagonists that the film never genders.

In her article “La post-pornographie comme art féministe: la sexualité explicite de Carolee Schneemann, d’Annie Sprinkle et d’Émilie Jouvét” Julie Lavigne establishes the filiation between these three directors by explaining their relation to pornography and by extension after Sprinkle, the invention of post-porn. In addition to a “pro-sex” posture, which takes the form of numerous sex scenes or performances in the work of Sprinkle and Jouvét, the filiation between the two is most apparent in the representation of non-normative bodies as well as, as Lavigne notes, “the diversity and performativity of sexuality” (69). Not only are women sexually active and sometimes appropriating practices that had previously been reserved to men, but their work also include trans actors and performers. In that regard, Sprinkle and Jouvét’s post-porn work can be labeled “queer” in that it makes visible queer bodies while questioning previous pornographic representations, as Jouvét argues about *One Night Stand*:

This film will allow me to resolve a number of issues I have with contemporary pornography. It's 'queer' because it's a FTM transgender film too. The term 'queer' is representative of the political dimension to this sort of project; it makes visible sexual practices that are usually closeted. I longed to see a French lesbian porn flick, so I made one. (*French Queer Cinema*, 139)

Although this quote appears in Nick Rees-Robert's *French Queer Cinema* in the chapter entitled "The emergence of queer DIY video" it figures in the section about lesbian porn and not in the one about post-porn. The placement is all the more surprising that the post-porn section of the book revolves around Virginie Despentes' *Baise-moi*, as well as Sam Bourcier and Paul Preciado's work, all of which bears a connection with Juvet's work via their reference to Annie Sprinkle.⁴⁰ In his book Rees-Roberts borrows Sam Bourcier's definition of the genre:

The emergence of a post-pornographic movement and aesthetic (post porn) at the end of the twentieth century constitutes a critique of modern Western pornographic reason (seventeenth to twentieth centuries). It can be thought of as a 'reverse discourse', according to Foucault, coming from the margins and from the minorities within dominant pornography: sex workers, prostitutes, gays, lesbians, BDSM (bondage, discipline and sado-masochism), queers, trans people and a host of gender deviant of all sorts. (134)

⁴⁰ Annie Sprinkle makes a significant appearance in Despentes' *Mutantes*, a documentary about pro-sex feminism in which Preciado participated by leading the interviews.

Even though there is no mention of Emilie Jouvét's work in that section of Rees-Roberts' book, the filiation between Desportes and Jouvét is obvious insofar as both of their films propose a discourse outside the mainstream of pornography. Further on, as he is discussing Jouvét's *One Night Stand*, Nick Rees-Roberts argues that Jouvét's conception of "lesbian porn" is close to Bourcier's 'dyke' or 'guerilla' porn. Far from debating the most correct label for *One Night Stand*, I contend that the lack of clear terminology is specifically what makes *One Night Stand* queer. The negotiation of the definition of "lesbian porn" as well as the subdivision of the category that Bourcier enunciates both participate in making visible sexual practices that have up to then been ignored or repressed.

In "The Ethics of Shared Embodiment in Queer, Feminist and Lesbian Pornography" filmmaker and scholar Ingrid Ryberg argues:

Queer, feminist and lesbian porn invites shared embodiment, making use of new media technology while also drawing on aesthetic and political legacies that emphasize community and consciousness-raising. However, sharing spaces, struggles and experiences does not automatically bring about an ethics of shared embodiment. I argue that rather, such ethics is called forth precisely through the legacies of conflict, debate, and disagreement that characterize this film culture.

(269)

While Ryberg's example of shared embodiment stems from *Share*, a film in which bodies literally have to be shared among lovers, hence resulting in conflicts, the same

negotiations occur at the level of all of Jouvét's films in relation to their categorization. The nascent French queer porn culture does not allow for clearly defined characteristics, but the very existence of Jouvét's films is part of a consciousness raising process, which not only sheds light onto queer porn but also encourages the negotiation of definition that is at the heart of the "ethics of the shared embodiment". In other words, the sharing of bodies does not have to be fully explicit and the conflicts do not have to take place in the narrative of the film for the ethics of shared embodiment to come into place. It also arises from experimentation with the ways in which sex is represented.

For Paul Preciado, Annie Sprinkle and other performers of post-porn help unveil the constructed aspect of sex. He states:

In 1990, Annie Sprinkle opened the way by using the term *postpornography* to present the *Public Cervix Announcement*, a performance during which she invited the audience to explore the inside of her vagina with the help of a speculum. Such a representation of sex is a critique of the codes of visibility produced by medicine and by traditional pornography. To the "truth of pornographic sex"—to allude to Foucault's expression—Sprinkle opposes the theatrical and artistic production of multiple sex fictions. (...) The common denominator for this great variety of aesthetic and political strategies (postporn, camp, drag king, BDSM, anarchopunk, cyber, queer-indigenous, etc.) is an epistemological inversion, a radical displacement of the subject of pornographic enunciation: those who had been passive objects of the pornographic and the disciplinary gaze ("women,"

“porn actors and actresses,” “whores,” “fags and dykes,” “perverts,” “crips,” etc.) become subjects of representation, thereby putting in question the (aesthetic and somato-political) codes that make their bodies and sexual practices visible and producing the impression of the natural stability of sexual relations and gender relationships. (272-3)

Preciado confirms here that post-porn is about focusing on those who had up to then been relegated to the role of passive object and turn them into actors of the sexual acts, however perverse those acts may be. Jouvett’s performers all fall into this category as they operate the “critique of the codes of visibility produced by traditional pornography” in the same way as Sprinkle thanks to their staging of acts that question what is usually perceived as normal.

For Tim Stüttgen, a German author, performer, curator and journalist, post-porn allows for a questioning of gender roles as well as the male gaze, which Laura Mulvey first problematized in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. Stüttgen asserts at the beginning of *Post/porn/politics: Symposium/reader: Queer feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex work As Culture Production*:

“A post-pornographic politics starts when the pointless dualisms of bio male (active, powerful, subject) and biofemale (passive, powerless, object) start to melt and open up a field of new possibilities and potentialities. That’s when the availability of sex starts to potentially become a political joy. Every gesture, subject-and-gender-position, sex-practice, erogenous zone, camera-perspective

and value of affect and code can be profaned or appropriated, deconstructed and queered, reworked and genderfucked”. (10)

The “appropriation”, “deconstruction”, “queerization”, “reworking”, and “genderfucking” of all the aspect of representation are at the core of post-porn. That is not to say that these techniques will not arouse the viewer however. But far from Minx’s concerns mentioned earlier, Stüttgen’s intervention focuses on the political power of post-porn and how it is anchored in what the viewer sees and is given to see. Furthermore, Stüttgen sees in post-porn the potential for disruption outside of the realm of representation, and Jouvét illustrates it in *Too Much Pussy*.

3. Performance, performativity, and changing reality

In addition to proposing perverse sex acts, one crucial aspect of Sprinkle and Jouvét’s work is their performativity. It is undeniable that Jouvét’s group is able to perform the *Queer X Show* because Annie Sprinkle did it first in the 1980s. Contrary to other women, such as Candida Royalle, who stuck to films as their main means of representation, Sprinkle was first and foremost a performer who toured the US with shows such as *(Post) Post –Post Modernist*.⁴¹ In *Too Much Pussy* and *Much More Pussy* all performers participate in the *Queer X show* that Jouvét follows across Europe. While some of them occupy more prominent parts than others in the actual body performances, others such as Ena Lind (aka DJ Metzgeri) participate with music.

⁴¹ I am not denying that actors such as Candida Royalle were also performers. I am however considering the specificity of the repetition of a performance in front of an audience and not for a film.

The most obvious tribute to Sprinkle's performances takes place in *Too Much Pussy*, as the group arrives at the campsite where Sadie Lune decides to reenact Sprinkle's 'Public Cervix Announcement' - one of Sprinkle's most famous acts - which was part of her show *Post-Porn Modernist*. Even though Lune does not cite or mention Sprinkle on screen, the influence is obvious. One major difference with Sprinkle's version however, is that unlike Sprinkle who according to Geraldine Harris, "confronts the objectifying gaze of the audience" (43), Lune does not. She does not have to assert herself because of the space in which she is performing. While Sprinkle's performance was groundbreaking and attracted all kinds of people for whom what she did was new, it should be clear for Lune's audience that it is a reenactment and that it therefore does not serve the same purpose. Both however aim for the act to be educational and both use humor. While Sprinkle does so via comments on what is happening as well as puns ("thanks for coming tonight"), Lune uses a banana, which she places in the speculum. An audience member is then invited to take a bite off of the banana. In both cases the audience is completely part of the performance, but in the case of Sadie Lune, the audience can be assumed to be at least queer-friendly if not queer. As a result, even though Lune is treating the audience as though they are attending the act for similar reasons as Sprinkle's audience over twenty years ago - the discovery of the female body - it is fair to assume that they are not objectifying her as much as Sprinkle's audience did because they are aware of the political power of such an act in addition to its provocativeness.

Before she begins her performance, Lune justifies it by arguing that she dislikes the fact that only doctors are aware of what goes on in women's bodies, and that most doctors are men. Her decision to take on the 'Public Cervix Announcement' is therefore a feminist gesture not only because similarly to Sprinkle it places the female body at the center of the stage, but also because it offers a feminist take on the act itself by replacing women at the center of viewership. Finally, Lune's "Public Cervix Announcement" in *Too Much Pussy* is not the only reenactment of Sprinkle's famous act. Buck Angel, and trans man porn star also created one that aimed at encouraging trans men to consult a gynecologist. Through these repetitions of Sprinkle's original "Public Cervix Announcement" appears a new meaning for those who perform it but also those who watch (*YouTube.com*).

The notion of repetition lies at the heart of *One Night Stand*, *Too Much Pussy* and *Much More Pussy*, but at two different levels, which both have to do with performance. At one level, repetition occurs because in *Too Much Pussy* Jouvét follows a group of performers from city to city, and the film proposes a multitude of acts that seem to appear in no particular order. The film therefore repeats the showing of acts from the show. In addition, the film sometimes shows the performers rehearse before a show.⁴² As a result, *Too Much Pussy* is an accumulation of performances. At another level the repetition of sex acts (in all three films) recalls Judith Butler's notion of performativity. According to Butler: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from

⁴² In French "répétition" means both repetition and rehearsal.

which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (179). In the same way that Butler considers the repetition of acts in relation to gender, I would like to consider Jouvét’s repetition of one-night stands in order to reveal the performativity of gender and sexuality. Indeed, I argue that by juxtaposing sexual one-night stands (in *One Night Stand*) and theatrical ones (in *Too Much Pussy*), Jouvét exposes how gender roles are constructed, and offers, to use Butler’s expression, a parody of the notion of an original gender and sexuality (175).

Similarly to what Butler notes in *Gender Trouble*, the acts that *Too Much Pussy* and *One Night Stand* display are never exactly the same. Jouvét shows different acts and does not order them chronologically or thematically. In *One Night Stand* this repetition is more obvious than in *Too Much Pussy* as the structure of the film is specifically the juxtaposition of five different sexual encounters. The repetitions of these one-night stands resemble Judith Butler’s repetitions in “Critically Queer”, which she uses in reference to performative utterances such as “I pronounce you husband and wife”. According to Butler, such utterances “operate as the sanction that performs heterosexualization of the social bond” but also “comes into play precisely as the shaming which “queers” those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction” (18). What I would like to parallel here are the act of repeating “I pronounce you husband and wife” and that of repeating one-night stands (both theatrical

and sexual). In so doing, I am hoping to demonstrate that Jouvet's one-night stands, because they are based on repetition, are performative in the same way as gender.

In "Critically Queer" Butler asserts: "Let us remember that reiterations are never simply replicas of the same. And the "act" by which a name authorizes or de-authorizes a set of social or sexual relations is, of necessity a repetition" (18). In both films, the segments depicting the one-night stands are not the same ones being repeated over and over. It remains nonetheless that the accumulation of segments depicting pieces of the *Queer X Show* and pieces of one-night stands is performative insofar as performativity is a "compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged" ("Critically Queer", 22). It becomes apparent that what Jouvet proposes is not a regulated, normal image/segment of the *Queer X Show* and the one-night stand, specifically because the segments accumulated are not the same. It is equally important to note that while Butler asserted that repetitions were never the same, it was not exactly for the same reason as for the segments in our two films. In the case of the reiteration of the utterance "I pronounce you husband and wife", Butler asserts its repetitions are not repetitions of the same because by the time the second utterance occurs, the first one had already redefined what the utterance meant, and so one and so forth for the subsequent utterances of the same words. In the case of our films however, the visuality of the segments that rework the meaning of the *Queer X Show* and the one-night stand does not

need to be followed by an utterance that sanctions its meaning. The images are self-sufficient. However, it is through the visual accumulation of the segments that the *Queer X Show* and the one-night stand get reworked. In other words, the segments could potentially be played simultaneously as part of an art installation and still carry the same meaning. They would still participate in the reworking of what they are depicting. That is also why their ordering (or lack thereof) does not matter.

The segments' potential emancipation from the linearity of time – as opposed to the binding of the act to the utterance – is crucial in understanding how they “operate as the sanction that performs” the queering of the very definition of what a one-night stand is. At the same time, contrary to the repetition of “I pronounce you husband and wife”, the repetition of segments also serves a second function similar to that of the utterance, which as mentioned above, “comes into play precisely as the shaming which “queers” those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction”. At the same time as it queers the definition of the one-night stand by accumulating examples, it also destabilizes any attempt to establish a normative one as any other representation of a one-night stand would just participate in queering it even further.

The images of the films are nevertheless linked to language, even though there is no voice-off or voiceover introducing them with “this is a one-night stand”. In *One Night Stand* and *Too Much Pussy*, the title serves as a sanctioning agent. The zero article in “*One Night Stand*” (in singular) serves to encompass the multiplicity of examples as if

they were all defining the same abstract concept. In other words “*One Night Stands*” would not have had the same queering potential, as the use of the plural form would have denoted that there is still one definition of which the segments of the film are just illustrations or examples. On the other hand, the full title of *Too Much Pussy* is *Too Much Pussy! Feminist Sluts, a Queer X Show*. This time the use of the indefinite article “a” before “Queer X Show” expresses that the show that the film depicts is one among many *Queer X Shows*. For the viewer this means that there are shows to see in theaters and other venues in addition to watching films about them. In addition, “a *Queer X Show*” can potentially refer to the film itself as a *Queer X Show* based on the repetition of performances. By including the title of the show in the title of the film even though the film is not limited to the show, Jouvét turns the film into a *Queer X Show*, which the editing helps form by repeating acts from the show and scenes from the group’s daily lives. In so doing Jouvét turns daily life into part of the performance.

The mirroring of repetitions within and of the films testifies of their ability to change reality. Tim Stüttgen noted this aspect of post-porn in the introduction to *Post/porn/politics: Symposium/reader: Queer feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex work As Culture Production*. He states:

Post-pornography lays claim to a critical, revolutionary potential within the regime of sexual representation through performative excessiveness. But beware: this assertion is camp, a vulnerable gesture situated between implicit, critical, denaturalizing performance and glamorous affirmation (Brecht/Warhol). This

doesn't mean that it cannot have an effect on reality, though. Actually, post-pornographers know this: It does. (10)

For Stüttgen, the purpose of post-porn is not limited to shock within the realm of the representation of sex. Its outreach is elsewhere, in the lives of those who watch these representations as well as in that of those who perform them. In other words, post-porn performers are changing the reality in which sex acts exist and not just that of their representation. In the same vein, Sam Bourcier argues that post-porn allows to redefine sex acts but also beyond when he argues:

Le régime ontologique de la lesbienne est celui du manque et il reste à décrire. La pornutopie post-porn, quant à elle, joue à la fois sur ce registre privatif et sur un registre créatif, que celui-ci relève de la resignification performative, de la recomposition des forces sexuelles et culturelles, de la prise en compte de la prolifération des identités de genres et des *re-embodiments* pour transformer la baise, les pratiques et les corps sans oublier la filiation bêtement oedipienne. (“Bildungs-Post-Porn”, 44)

The ontological regime of the lesbian is that of lack and it remains to be described. As for the post-porn pornutopia, it operates at the privative level and the creative one, which derives from performative resignification, from the recomposing of sexual and cultural forces, from taking into account the proliferation of gender identities and re-embodiments in order to transform fucking, practices and bodies as well as basic oedipian filiation.

In including what he calls “basic oedipian filiation” Bourcier imagines a complete reconfiguration of our social organization. In “Post-gay, la politique queer débarque!” his critique of the sexual difference that psychoanalysis puts forward is based on “post-porn pornutopia” and its ability to resignify (*Multitudes.com*).

As early as 1993 Linda Williams’s article “A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle” delves into the ways in which Sprinkle becomes the agent of her own desire by using what Judith Butler calls the “subversive repetition” of sex acts, which allows her to change the meaning of the word “whore”, a word, which Sprinkle has always claimed for herself (121). For Williams, the possibility for subversive repetition is located in the performances. She states:

In the whore phase of Annie Sprinkle’s career, these subversive repetitions consist of an ever-widening range of sexual acts, or “perversions,” which broaden the understanding of sexual performance and the range of sexual objects conventionally not regarded as acceptable objects of desire – dwarves, burn victims, transsexuals, persons with AIDS, amputees, etc. – which allow her to explore her desire in new ways. (122)

Linda Williams considers that by repeating the representation of “perverse objects” of desire, which I discussed earlier, Sprinkle participates in turning them into acceptable objects. She is referring to the ability of Sprinkle’s acts to change reality. Indeed, by performing these (sex) acts, Sprinkle is making them performable.

In addition to performing acts on stage in order to change reality, the performers of *Too Much Pussy* engage in performance outside of stage, on the streets. As they are right in the center of Paris, they stage the fake abduction of a fake police officer who was about to arrest them for indecent exposure. After they manage to neutralize the officer, the women taken her/him to an abandoned shop before tying her up and leaving her/him there alone.⁴³ The staging is obvious because the police officer is obviously refraining from laughing, while her fake assailants are openly laughing at the situation. In addition, a viewer who would have seen *One Night Stand* would recognize one of the protagonists dressed as the officer. Finally, the subsequent performance on stage by the officer comes to confirm the staging. The presence of passers-by creates a mini impromptu show, which turns the street into if not a theater, at least a place of performance. In staging the arrest of a fake police officer on a real street, Jovet blurs the boundaries between reality and performance. Moreover, the inversion of the power dynamic between the police and the women unveils the constructedness of power relations, as well as the possibility to change them. She also turns passers-by into audience members and by extension, potential supporters of her work.

At other times in the film however, the performers engage in provocative or illegal activities without setting up a performance (with costumes, props, etc.). Jovet follows Delorme, Lune and Mad Kate walking around Paris half naked. Once again, some passers-by stop to stare at them, thus making them the center of a show, which up

⁴³ The officer has a drawn on mustache and speaks with a low-pitched voice to imitate masculinity.

to then was not a show but a film in the making. In other words it has become one thanks to the relation with passers-by and specifically their look on them. Later on, as they are distributing flyers for their show around the Marais in Paris, they teach Madison Young how to say “I want to give you a blow job” or “come see my pussy” to passers-by. This triggers an exchange with one of the women that Young ends up talking to. As a result, the passer-by becomes one of the performers in the film despite herself. Finally during a stop on the side of the road to take a break from the drive that is taking them to their next performance, the women give Wendy Delorme a dress to celebrate her birthday. She proceeds to take off her underwear, puts the dress on, and decides to run down the road in the direction of someone taking a walk. She then cartwheels her way back to her friends, showing her behind to them, the man in the distance, and the camera. By the end of this segment, the boundaries between the stage and the space of reality have been completely blurred. The performers have shown that they can push the limits of acceptability both on and off stage. As we will see, they can do so thanks to the full participation of the audience at diverse stages of the filmmaking process.

I. Porn in the age of ‘digitalized’ film

The blurriness of the boundaries between the space of the performance and the space of reality is amplified by Jouvett’s modes of production of her films. Indeed, at that level too it becomes hard to distinguish the realm of the film from that of the spectator for three distinct reasons that all have to do with (post) pornography. First, pornography is no longer accessible in France in movie theaters and the Internet has become the main

platform to access these films. As a result, each viewer can access the films easily and without restrictions, sometimes even for free. This mode of consumption has changed the production of porn. Secondly, in the case of the Jovet the lack of distribution is accompanied by a lack of means of production, hence her turn to crowdfunding to finance her films. As a result, the audience becomes part of the filmmaking process. Finally, Jovet has used social media not only to get attention and funding for her films but also to recruit performers. For these people, the line separating those who make the film from those who are in it no longer exists.

1. The Age of Access

After premiering at film festivals or other special events, Jovet's feature films can no longer be viewed in movie theaters. With the exception of *Too Much Pussy*, which is distributed by Solaris, the other ones are not distributed. *Too Much Pussy* is available on *Amazon* whereas *One Night Stand* and *Much More Pussy* are only available (legally) on Jovet's personal website *emiliejovet.com* where it is possible to buy the DVDs. *Aria* and *My Body, My Rules* are not available yet as the director is still touring with both films (*emiliejovet.com*).⁴⁴ After ordering *One Night Stand* or *Much More Pussy* the viewer will receive a DVD burned and wrapped by Jovet herself, much in the DIY style

⁴⁴ I contacted Émilie Jovet in September because I wanted to watch *Aria*. She responded that the only way to see it then was to go to its subsequent screenings in France.

of her films. Only *Too Much Pussy* comes in a professional package. As a result the other two films are slightly more affordable.⁴⁵

Jouvet's short films are all listed on the website as well. Some of them such as *Roof*, *Mademoiselle* or *Party Time* are available there via *YouTube*. Others such as *Entre filles on ne risque rien* are available on *Dailymotion*, the French *YouTube*. In addition, Emilie Jouvet has a *Vimeo* account on which are available two trailers for *Aria*, the making of as well as the trailer for *Too Much Pussy*, the trailer for *My Body, My Rules*, as well as the short film *Party Time Scream Club*. Overall, Jouvet's films are fairly easily accessible, including for someone who lives in the US, as she is willing to send her home made DVDs wherever her customers are. For those who cannot or are not willing to pay for the films, it is possible to find illegal copies of all of them on torrents or streaming website, some of them with Swedish subtitles, which testifies of Jouvet's outreach outside of France.

At the time when Annie Sprinkle made her first films such as *Linda/Les and Annie* (1992) or more recently with Virginie Despentes' *Baise-moi* (2000), such an easy access to film was not an option. The release in theaters could lead to the film's dissemination or, on the contrary, to its failure, followed by the impossibility for the filmmakers to make another one. In the case of Despentes, it is arguable that the scandal that *Baise-moi* caused was enough to help make its director create more works. In any case, the film certainly generated enough interest and won the loyalty of viewers,

⁴⁵ *Too Much Pussy* costs €19.95 whereas *Much More Pussy* and *One Night stand* costs €12.

especially because Desportes kept writing between *Baise-moi* and her next film *Mutantes* (2009). Even though the piracy that the Internet allows can be an obstacle to the artists' growth, it is undeniable that the development of the Internet as well as video hosting sites such as *YouTube* or *Dailymotion* have contributed to spreading material such as Jovet's films, material that otherwise could not have been distributed widely. This alternative mode of disseminating her work is possible thanks to what André Gaudreault names "digital revolution". He states:

While the qualitative difference seen by viewers when they watch a "digitalized" film compared to a celluloid film may be minimal, what has changed profoundly is the way information has been made universally accessible. We have plunged head first into what Jeremy Rifkin calls "the age of access." This *revolution in access* to an exponentially growing mass of images is affecting an ever-increasing multitude of users. This deep undercurrent is making its effects felt on various levels and is influencing the different actors in the virtual world, including mega film distributors such as *YouTube*, *Dailymotion*, and *Vimeo*. (63)

Gaudreault rightly notes that the Internet has allowed artists (and other users) to spread their work widely. This is the case for Jovet who uses the three websites that Gaudreault mentions. Moreover, while the Internet has enabled artists to disseminate their work, technology has made it possible for about everyone to create. Gaudreault states:

As a generic label digital revolution mixes up helter-skelter several kinds of phenomena. First of all, it refers to a technological reality: the increasing speed

with which the digitizing of information, or data, is proceeding. More broadly, it also refers to the widespread digitalization of the dissemination of this data on a global scale, by way of the Internet and the proliferation of screens. Finally, people also apply the label digital revolution to the many consequences of this technological upheaval. Widespread hybridization, media convergence, the constant flow of information (including images), and their material accessibility are some of the more spectacular effects of this process. (44).

The proliferation of screens that Gaudreault refers to not only allows watching photos, films and videos from all over the world, but it also allows underfunded artists to make their work inexpensively. This process by which cinema is now accessible online, and on all kinds of screens of all sizes led Gaudreault to invent the term “digitalized cinema” (38). The accessibility of technology has for instance allowed Jovet to shoot *Aria* with a smartphone, which she justifies not as being a more inexpensive option, but by the fact that she was pregnant at the time of the production (*telerama.fr*). The seeming easiness with which Jovet produces her films coupled with their availability online convey the idea that everyone could do what Jovet does, especially because she is among few directors who make this genre of film. The Internet therefore truly appears as one of the privileged spaces in which post-porn can be visible.

Jovet’s work is located at the crossroads of cinema, video, and contemporary art. *Aria* was a request from the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Geneva (“*Aria*”). In addition, the screenings of her films are rare as they only take place at

special screenings or during film festivals. After the festivals, the films live on thanks to their release on DVD and their TV broadcast, as Jouvét's website attests:

Since 2012 her films feature in the *CJC's (Young Cinema Collective)* catalogue.

Her work is shown on cinema and TV screens (Canal +, Pink TV) and released on

DVD in several countries: Solaris (FR), Fatale Media (US), Nutja Films (SW).

("Biographie")

Too Much Pussy premiered in Bordeaux in April 2010, then was presented at the Frameline San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival before coming back to France at the Paris Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in November 2010 and the Belfort Entrevues Film Festival in the same month (*IMDb.com*). *One Night Stand* was only released at the 2006 Paris Gay and Lesbian Film Festival and *Much More Pussy* has only been available on DVD, a path that *My Body My Rules* will follow after being presented at film festivals ("film *My Body My Rules*"; "biographie").

Because of their content, Jouvét's films would be difficult to distribute outside of the film festival circuit. The Internet therefore appears as the most efficient way to disseminate it. However, in "*One Night Stand* d'Émilie Jouvét, film hybride pour le plaisir des genres" Pascal Génot notes that the specific labeling of *One Night Stand* as a lesbian or queer porn prevents its visibility online. Génot argues that in order to be accessible, the film needs to rely on the support of spaces that Jouvét's targeted audience visits. Génot states:

Non seulement ce film n'est distribué, volontairement et par contrat entre la réalisatrice et les *sex-players*, que dans des espaces "LGBT", mais sa "catégorisation" le rend difficilement identifiable sans la compétence communicationnelle issue culturellement de ces espaces: un consommateur de porno standard, par exemple, connaît bien la sous-catégorie « lesbienne » du genre « porno », mais il ne connaît fort probablement pas la catégorie du « porno lesbien », a fortiori du porno queer, ce qui réduit considérablement ses « chances » de « découvrir » *ONS* en surfant sur l'internet, seul endroit où il pourrait a priori aboutir à ce film ou à l'une de ses scènes. (6)

Not only is the film distributed, voluntarily and by contract between the director and the sex-players only in LGBT spaces, but also its categorization makes it hard to identify without the communication coming out of these spaces: for instance consumers of standard porn knows the "lesbian" sub-category of the "porn" genre very well, but they probably do not know the "lesbian porn" category, especially out of "queer porn", which reduces considerably their "chances" of "discovering" *ONS* by surfing the web, the only space where they could encounter this film or one of its scenes.

For Génot, because of the film's novelty, even the LGBTQ audience needs to be guided to it. While the Internet offers a space that is too wide for the audience to be able to find it, LGBTQ spaces (of which film festivals are one example) offer an exposure that is crucial for its distribution. My personal encounter with the film partly confirms Génot's

argument insofar as even though I was looking for queer French films (in general) all over the Internet, I did not encounter Jouvét's work online but while browsing the DVD collection in the LGBTQ bookstore "Les Mots à la Bouche" in the Marais in Paris, a bookstore that Jouvét recommends on her own website and that is well-known of the LGBTQ community in Paris. The DVD of *Too Much Pussy* is the first film that I encountered, before finding her other works online. In my experience, the physical space of the LGBTQ-specialized bookstore as well as the distribution of the film by Solaris are what allowed me to have access to the film. While the space in which I found *Too Much Pussy* is extremely limited – to Parisians who know the existence of such a specialized bookstore – it also guarantees a space for the distribution of the film outside of the Internet. Finally, the screening of *Aria* at the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement in Geneva confirms the versatility of Jouvét's work. All in all, none of these means of accessing the feature films corresponds to a typical cinematic experience.

2. Crowdfunding / crowdfactoring

In addition to being accessible/ viewable on the Internet, the innovative aspect of Jouvét's work lies in her recent use of the European crowdfunding platform *Uhule* to partly fund her most recent project *My Body My Rules*.⁴⁶ Launched in October 2010, *Uhule* is a French crowdfunding platform that claims to be the most successful European

⁴⁶ Jouvét's company Womart Productions as well as Jurgen Brüning Filmproduktion also participated in the financing.

one of its kind with more than 21,000 successfully financed projects (“Film *My Body My Rules*”). The site prides itself on having a high success rate:

“Our ambition: empower creators and entrepreneurs on a large scale. To do so, we offer a personalized follow-up on all *Ulule* projects, which produce a success rate of 68% (record rate among international mainstream crowdfunding platforms)”.

(Ibid.)

Jouvet’s film is on its way to being one of the successful projects, as it was funded on July 23, 2015 when it met its goal of \$3,297 and reached \$5.549 (Ibid.).

Not only is the Internet used to view the films, but Jouvet is also now using it to fund them, which means that both the production and the access to the films are at the reach of any viewer with an Internet connection (and money). One of the great advantages of such a tool is that fans can directly support their favorite artists. In “The Moral Economy of Crowdfunding and the Transformative Capacity of Fan-Ancing” Suzanne Scott coined the term “fan-ancing” to refer to the financing of films by a faithful if not addicted group of viewers. Scott states:

“Here, I’m deploying the term “fan-ancing” to describe a particular subset of crowdfunded projects that directly solicit production capital from per-existing fan bases of either a medium (comics, in the case of *Womanthology*) or specific media property (in the case of the *Veronica Mars* movie). We can also include in this category crowdfunded projects initiated by a creator or performer with a cult following”. (170)

Even though Jouvét's work was not "cult" before *My Body My Rules* it remains that her project found its audience because of her previous works both in photography and video. In addition, the scarcity of queer post-porn films in France but also in Europe and the US (to a lesser extent) is both what forced Jouvét to resort to crowdfunding and at the same time almost guaranteed a positive and supportive response from the audience. Indeed in the case of Jouvét, this possibility to finance her films via crowdfunding is all the more crucial as she makes queer post-porn films, with a limited audience, and whose funding cannot rely on mainstream production companies. For Suzanne Scott, crowdfunding is a key tool in promoting work that would otherwise remain unfinished. She states: "Similarly, *Kickstarter* (and the crowdfunding movement generally) is often discursively framed as a space to foster marginalized talents and projects that, either by choice or necessity, exist outside of mainstream media industries" (168). It thus looks like crowdfunding is Jouvét's best chance to see her work exist. For *My Body, My Rules*, the attempt was successful.

On March 21, 2017 the director posted an update on *Ulule* and *Facebook* announcing that the editing and the transcription of *My Body, My Rules* in French had started, and that the next steps would be sound design and the translation into English, Spanish, and German ("Film *My Body My Rules*"). The translation of the film into several foreign languages is far from anecdotic. Jouvét's work has been shown all over Europe, and *Too Much Pussy* feature performers from France (Wendy Delorme and Judy Minx) but also Germany (Ena Lind) and the US (Sadie Lune, Madison Young and Mad Kate).

The film itself is a road trip across Europe, from show to show, which testifies of the transnational outreach of queer pro-sex feminism. There is no doubt that the digitalization of cinema and images in general has played a crucial role in helping Jouvét's work exist, both because she could reach out to her audience without resorting to mainstream means of production, but because she herself could discover American performers such as Annie Sprinkle at a time when the transition to digital was occurring. The financial involvement of her "fans" is but part of the globalization of her work initiated in the 1980s by artists such as Sprinkle thanks to film, and continued thanks to "digitalized cinema"

Finally, the involvement of her fans does not stop at the financial aspect. One segment of *Too Much Pussy* is devoted to the sexual encounter between Madison Young and one audience member. With the inclusion of such a segment Jouvét begins to blur the boundaries between the space of the spectator and the performers. Indeed, while the film was up to then not focusing on the spectator of the *Queer X Show* at all, leaving them in the background of the different performances, it now places one spectator in the foreground for the first time by including her in a backstage performance.

For her most recent film *My Body, My Rules*, Jouvét posted an ad on her Facebook page on May 27, 2015 explaining that she needed one more "actress" for the film. The use of quotation marks signals that Jouvét is not looking for a professional actress. In the comments that appear under the post this gets confirmed when Jouvét herself answers: "I am not looking for actresses" to someone who had commented: "too bad I am not an actress". In a similar way, Jouvét looked for a communication assistant

and an intern production assistant. By recruiting “actors” and technicians on a social network, Jovet emphasizes the involvement of the audience in the creation of her work and limits the cost of the film. Without the use of social networks the outreach of Jovet’s pleas would be much more limited. Moreover, *Facebook* is the place where she can disseminate her work and gain more fans, who in turn can finance her films. The interrelation of various Internet platforms is no doubt key in the distribution and subsequently the funding of new films.

3. The specificity of the porn industry

Tim Stüttgen highlights that while according to Paul Preciado, pornography was shown and limited to museums, the public space, and the porn cinema, post-porn has gone beyond those spaces and penetrated almost all spaces of sex and image production such as the Internet, strip clubs and darkrooms. It is also present in art and theory (10). In other words post-porn is everywhere, it is not confined to any specific space but circulates and most importantly, it is accessible from one’s household. However the accessibility of porn did not begin with the arrival of the Internet. Constance Penley notes for instance that with the arrival and development of the VCR in the 1980s and 1990s, “many more people, women included, could consume porn, and many more people could produce it, even those who lacked money, technical training, or a sense of cinema aesthetics” (*Porn Studies*, 321). It therefore seems like what is currently happening to the production of pornographic films has happened in the past. Technological development makes easier both the consumption and production of porn. However, the arrival of the

Internet made some crucial changes having to do with globalization and the impossibility to put limits to what is produced and consumed or how it is so.

In her film *Pornocratie*, Ovidie interviews director-producer Mario Salieri and producer Vincent Gresser at the Venus Berlin 2015. They lament the disappearance of pornographic films studios. Gresser explains that they have been replaced by tube websites that give free access to stolen pornographic videos on the Internet. While the role of the Internet in piracy is also prominent in relation to mainstream cinema, the particularity of the porn industry lies in that the impossibility of viewing pornographic films in movie theaters. As a result, while viewers may still be willing to pay a ticket to go see a film in a theater, they have long been resigned to watching porn on smaller screens, therefore making the transition to the Internet a rather uneventful one.⁴⁷ Gresser explains:

Chez Colmax on a arrêté de faire du DVD en 2008. C'était assez tôt pour le marché mais on sentait déjà que le prix du DVD devenait tellement bas que ça commençait à déprécier le produit en fait. Donc dès ce moment là on s'est tournés à 100% sur la distribution digitale. Ça veut dire Internet, ça veut dire les plateforme de VOD, ça veut dire la télé, ça veut dire les mobiles. Enfin tous ces nouveaux modes de distribution mais sur lesquels on est en concurrence avec gens qu'ont des plateformes de diffusion vidéo gratuites, sans payer de droits d'auteurs, sans payer de licence. (*Pornocratie*)

⁴⁷ In France Canal + is the channel well-known for showing pornographic films since 1985.

At Colmax we stopped making DVDs in 2008. It was rather early for the market, as we were already feeling like the price of DVD was getting so low that it was starting to depreciate the product. So then we turned 100% to digital distribution. It means that the Internet, VOD platforms, TV, cellphones. Well, all these new modes of distribution but on which we are in competition with people who have free platforms of video distribution, who don't pay copyrights, who don't pay for a license.

The financial aspect of the transition from DVD to online distribution is crucial in understanding what Jouvét is doing with her films and videos. The DVD of *Too Much Pussy* (the only one of Jouvét's films distributed by a company) was released in 2010, that is, when the DVD market was already crashing. It is difficult to say whether the turn to DIY DVDs as well as her own website and *Youtube* is due to low sales, no distributor, or simply Jouvét's desire to control everything from beginning to end, but this mode of distribution does allow her to control the production and the distribution of her films. Contrary to a large company such as Colmax, which produces and distributes many films at a time, Jouvét only relies on word of mouth and her personal website to do so. In addition, because the cost of production is low for her film, the price of the DVD as well as the number of sales does not matter as much as for a company whose sole goal is to make good profits. As a result, while Colmax turns to VOD platforms (and even proposes its own on its website) Jouvét relies on the web but solely to sell her films to the few faithful and interested queer viewers (*Colmax*). This mode of distribution however does

not prevent piracy. Indeed, I was able to find Jouvét's *One Night Stand* and *Too Much Pussy* on streaming websites and torrents, on which the films are free. However, knowing that the filmmaker is in charge and receiving money for their work should be an incentive to buy the films from her legally. All in all, the word of mouth is what makes the films exist because it allows Jouvét to find performers, funding and an audience.

Conclusion:

One may assert that the audience is as responsible for the existence of Jouvét's film as Jouvét herself. Aside from holding the camera, which is solely the director's role, the audience is involved in every step of the film: from the conception to the shoot and distribution. This would not be so surprising if the majority of Jouvét's films were not based on performance, which also requires the presence of a spectator in order to exist. What is particularly striking about Jouvét's films is how the involvement of the audience has changed the very way in which the films are made and not simply their content. As the age of access relates to both consumption and production, it has deeply redefined the space of film production, including in a country like France where film production is supervised and supported by the state.

Conclusion

One of the goals of this project was to delimit a space for the analysis of French queer films by women directors beyond thematic contents. In so doing, I wished to participate in the reevaluation of French cinema first by granting women the focus of my research, but also by importing a theoretical approach that is not yet well installed in France. In arguing that the films of Sciamma, Desportes and Juvet were queer because of their relation to space I have been able to look at the space within, of and outside of the films. Whether I was treating Sciamma's framing of the national space and the inside-outside dichotomy, Desportes' reworking of other films in order to form her own film(ic) archive, or Juvet's relation to performance and its consequence onto the relationship between the spectator and the performer, I was always dealing implicitly or not with a space of conception that was beyond the French borders.

Desportes and Juvet, who unlike Sciamma were not trained at the Fémis, are the two directors whose ties with artists, filmmakers, musicians and performers from other countries are the most obvious. In their films they assert their pro-sex stance and reference their source of inspiration mainly from the United States. By adding Sciamma's films to Juvet and Desportes' I am not arguing that their messages are similar, but that they all question seemingly stable discourses around national identity, violence, sex, gender, etc., which come to refresh the French political landscape. Indeed, judging by the effect of the screenings of *Tomboy* for primary school children, the reception, censoring and re-release of *Baise-moi*, and the financial obstacles that Juvet encounters to make

her films, it is easy to understand the country at large is experiencing an intellectual and cultural renewal, which is as deep as it is struggling to settle.

The most recent example of the potential conflict of generations between artists of the generation of Sciamma, Desportes and Jovet and older personalities of the cinema industry is the transnational #MeToo movement on Twitter and more specifically its response in *Le Monde* by a group of 100 French women who denounced what they called “a campaign of denunciations and public accusations of people who were put at the exact same level as sexual abusers without being granted the opportunity to respond or defend themselves” (Collectif).⁴⁸ Indeed, after sexual abuse allegations started to emerge about American film producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017, numerous women began sharing their stories of sexual abuse on Twitter using the hashtag #MeToo. The movement spread throughout the world and reached France, where it became #BalanceTonPorc (Denounce your pig). The group that responded to it, among whom were actress Catherine Deneuve, therefore criticized open denunciations, but also claimed to be defending “the freedom to bother, necessary to sexual freedom” (Ibid.).⁴⁹ While to justify their position the authors of the column asserted that the movement was placing women in the position of victims, other celebrities such as Laëtitia Casta found the movement too violent to be efficient (Clément). Brigitte Bardot went as far as calling those denouncing sexual harassment “ridiculous” before comparing her experience and

⁴⁸ Une campagne de délations et de mises en accusation publiques d’individus qui, sans qu’on leur laisse la possibilité ni de répondre ni de se défendre, ont été mis exactement sur le même plan que des agresseurs sexuels”. My translation

⁴⁹ “La liberté d’importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle.” My translation

the pleasure she took from hearing compliments such as “you have a nice little ass” (Kucinskis). Overall, even though the movement certainly has some supporters in France, its resistance is also alive and well. Even more significant is the place that the anti #MeToo celebrities benefitted from in national newspapers such as *Le Monde* or *Libération*. The fracture between a movement that had started in Hollywood and that did not face any opponents among celebrities there, and its arrival in the French jet set seemed to be deeper than a mere disagreement about the ways to fight against sexual harassment and abuse. Indeed, even though Casta, Deneuve and others admit that it is necessary to fight sexual abuse but that #MeToo is not the way to do it, their delving into an explanation of the “freedom to bother” that would make acceptable certain practices seems at best off-topic and at worst tactless and offensive. Deneuve later on apologized and reiterated the need to fight against sexual abuse. It therefore seemed that those who opposed #MeToo were concerned about proofless accusations, in other words they were concerned about the men whose names could end up on the social networks.

The debate that emerged after the response to #BalanceTonPorc was about whether the different actors’ positions was related to the generation they belonged to. There is no definitive answer to this question as Casta is only 39 years old whereas Bardot is 83. As for the three directors that I have focused on in this work, I have not found any direct evidence of their support of #BalanceTonPorc except on Jovet’s Facebook. On February 8 she relayed an article with the headlines “Hey Americans, if you are tired of Catherine Deneuve, here is a list of very interesting French feminists”.

The list includes Jouvét, Desportes, Ovidie among many others, and the negative reference to Deneuve in the title can only lead us to conclude that they are on the opposite side of the spectrum.

Rather than arguing about the possible generational differences between #MeToo supporters and opponents, I would like to consider an outsider view onto the column published in *Le Monde*. After it was published, various media outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* or the BBC did not fail to mention that the backlash was coming from France. *The Guardian* even felt the need to provide “an insider’s guide to French feminism” after the column was published, as if there was something specifically French about it (Poirier). This is where I believe my study will help map out the state of feminism in France, as the intervention with queerness is new. Contrary to using queer as a synonym for LGBT, using it as a method to destabilize fixed identities can help understand the dynamics that shape discourses in given places but also in places that are in conversation with each other. While I do not see any problem with mentioning that the column published in *Le Monde* corresponds to one discourse within French feminism, making assertions such as “this is an example of what has always distinguished French feminism from the American and British versions: the attitude towards sex and towards men” is outdated. Now is the time to question such certainties and understand that those “versions” are not fixed, and as far as I am concerned, now is the time to give credits to women filmmakers who have always spoken this language.

In my introduction I mentioned that Akerman's films were at the origin of this project. While I am aware that she rejected labels and refused to see her films to be shown at gay film festivals (Murray, 2), I contend that queer is exactly the method that suits the study of Akerman's films, specifically because it points to what is not stable, what espaces definition. If my work is only beginning to open a space for new French queer films directed by women, it will soon open up to new spaces, so that its queerness knows no limits.

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