

Content warning: Graphic depictions of rape, assault

The following is a condensed portion of my thesis research.

As a normalizing, negating act, becoming is a point of arrival. Aligning to ‘become’ with being ‘open’ and ‘productive’ situates becoming as a normalizing category. Subjects who cannot, or refuse to complete the action of ‘becoming’ are thus in opposition to life itself. Whether under the guise of a new and dynamic vital materialism or classical vitalism of matter supplemented by the sublime, there is no characterization of ‘life force’ that removes man from his own inevitable demise. Any recuperating gesture of human life hinges on the notion that there is something inherently affirming to be saved.

I am interested in establishing an aesthetic category that rejects normalization and the affirmation of human vitality. An anti-vitalist aesthetic seeks to destroy rather than recuperate productive life. As a visual modality, the refusal of generative being and spiritual affirmation can be thought of in terms of a turn away from traditional aesthetic philosophy. Removing the ‘essence’ from visual analysis allows us to rethink the systems that determine aesthetic categorization. Using the film *Baise-Moi* (dir. Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi) as a central case study, I situate anti-vitalist aesthetics in the context of sexual violence and the fragmentation of desire in amateur pornography.

We can begin to think of *Baise-Moi*’s pornographic aesthetic through François Laruelle’s concept of non-photography. For Laruelle, the photograph has no relation to resemblance: photographs have more in common with each other than with the objects they depict.¹ The image

¹ Roberts, John, ‘Ideation and Photography: A critique of François Laruelle’s concept of abstraction’, *Photographies*, Vol. 9, Issue 2, 2016, p. 217.

is not constrained by philosophical or exterior conditions. Rather than speak to human universality or greater theoretical modes, photography presents a fractal quality:

‘The photo, also, as representation or knowledge which relates to its objects, possesses a fractal dimension..irreducible to wholes, to 'whole' dimensions or to the classical dimensions of perception and perhaps of philosophical objects.’²

An image is infinite and ever extending (it is impossible to qualify all of its potential information), with any of its parts representing the infinite possibilities of all photography. Non-photography can be applied to any image. This separation of image from ‘wholes’ is useful in an analysis of *Baise-Moi*’s formal properties. Shot in grainy, handheld, low-budget POV, the film’s formal qualities reflect the aesthetics of amateur pornography (this is an intentional choice: the directors and stars each have ties to sex work and the porn industry). The framework of non-photography allows us to analyse the work as a series of abstractions, unburdened from the constraints of the genre’s philosophical connotations. Applying this methodology to *Baise-Moi*, an abstracted pornographic *vision-force* emerges.

Although *Baise-Moi* is not a pornographic work, it utilizes the genre’s handheld and point-of-view camera techniques to establish and parody a sense of visual objectivism. Desportes and Thi employ pornographic aesthetics to present ‘real’ sex and violence (even in the rape scene, actual penetration occurs) in a clinical and disinterested manner, often to the humiliation of the men on screen. Once captured, an image becomes autonomous and does not rely on external factors to establish its context as an image, or its *vision-force*.³ In its establishment of a pornographic *vision-force*, *Baise-Moi* portrays its subjects in a manner dissociated to the point that it subverts its own aesthetic choices. The film’s formal qualities

² Laruelle, François, trans. Mackay, Robin, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, Urbanomic, New York, 2011, p. 75.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

parody their own suppositions: its dissociative treatment of sexuality creates a univocity of vision in which each scene is approached with the same objective wholeness, separated from the ideologies that dominate pornographic form. This is true regardless of content: Manu and Nadine fucking the men they pick up at a hotel is portrayed in the same unceremonious manner as when they shoot them in the next scene, as is the extended shot of their car ride after. Manu and Nadine fuck and kill, but they also smoke, and drink, and eat, and make fun of their surroundings.

Removing ontology from the image, and in the case of *Baise-Moi*, male voyeurism from pornographic aesthetics, results in an image that is separated from a philosophical perception of the World. The disinterest inherent photographic form (a departure from ‘things’ into a unified *vision-force*⁴) manifests throughout *Baise-Moi*. Within the first ten minutes of the film, Manu and her friend (who is unnamed in the film) are kidnapped and raped. The scene is unrelentingly brutal, presenting violence with a cold disinterest that manifests through the pornographic *vision-force*. Manu’s friend is beaten bloody, and the viewer must watch her rapist fuck her, penetrating her as she tries to fight him off. Manu neither resists or accepts her attacker, and he remarks that she is like ‘fucking a zombie.’ She cannot be possessed, as there is nothing to possess, she later says to her friend: ‘I don’t care about their stupid dicks, I have had much more in me. You wouldn’t leave your car behind with valuable stuff in it either. I can’t keep dicks out of my pussy, there’s nothing valuable in there.’ Manu dissociates from the rape completely, dismantling the power of her attacker in that she is never possessed by him. Distancing herself

⁴ *Ibid.*

from ‘their stupid dicks’, Manu’s attitude towards her rape reflects the detached aesthetics of the scene and rejects interiority as a reaction to gendered violence.⁵

Subjects are encouraged to shed their unproductive skins; raped bodies are left with a choice to make something of the raped body, or must abandon it. In choosing to do neither, the film exposes mechanisms of capital and desire that are supposed to remain disguised. Through the ‘third way’ of the anti-vitalist response, the separation between the rapist and the raped body is eliminated. If there is nothing eternal about the self, it cannot be divided or concealed. The self can never be reconciled or find fulfilment in its fragmented desires. Mehdi Kacem defines desire as ‘the propensity of the being (*l’etant*) to appropriation.’⁶ The ‘amateur’ category of film and pornography appropriates the conditions of voyeurism and the ‘unsimulated’, pushing a simulated methodology of encounter. Amateur aesthetics create a mode of desire that is more artificial than its ‘professional’ pornographic counterpart. The porno-ontological creation of the amateur relies on an immobile economy of desire that denies narrative and the articulation of being. Just as fantasy hinges on the fact that ‘there is no sexual relation’⁷, the amateur cannot exist outside of its own premeditation. The amateur represents the idealization of lack: its deficiency is its aesthetic hallmark. Viewing *Baise-Moi* as amateur object manipulates the gaps between subjects and staging in an attempt to present the fractal dimensions of pornographic desire as a unified image. In its failed reconstruction of the real, the amateur object is a manifestation of phantasmic desire. The amateur invokes ‘the gaze by means of which the subject is already present at the act of his/her own conception.’⁸ Its ‘temporal loop’ hinges on

⁵ Huffer, Lynne, *Are the Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, p. 166.

⁶ Kacem, Mehdi Belhaj, *Transgression and Inexistent: A Philosophical Vocabulary*, Bloomsbury, New York, 2014, p. 27.

⁷ Žižek, Slavoj, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Verso, New York, 1997, p. 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

the relationships between actor, director, and audience. However, these relationships can never reach completion. Building the amateur relies on occluding fantasy through the impossibility of desire to ever be truly ‘amateur’, divorced from simulation and premeditation.

The amateur’s failure as an aesthetic category to represent anything but surface-level desire makes it an ideal mode for an anti-vitalist aesthetic. Using the rape scene in *Baise-Moi* as an example, superficiality compliments the lack of interiority displayed by its subjects. Manu’s lack of interiority towards her rape has ‘less to do with...critique of psychoanalysis than it does with the lived, gendered reality of the streetwalker.’⁹ Recycling its own performative strategy to heightened effect, *Baise-Moi* uses amateur pornography as a visual representation of this interior lack. Relying on a medium that denies subjectification, framing rape through the lens of amateur pornography dismantles the necessitation of an interior relation to the act. Writing about the myth of Daphne and Apollo, Catharine Malabou describes Daphne’s transformation into a laurel tree as ‘the formation of an identity that flees itself, that flees the impossibility of fleeing itself. Identity abandoned, dissociated again, identity that does not reflect itself, does not live its own transformation, does not subjectivize its change.’¹⁰ *Baise-Moi*’s amateur qualities serve a similar function. When faced with the impossibility of action, the medium’s inherent lack of interiority provides the sole possibility of escape. The affective flattening of both its subjects (the raped and the rapist) denies any manifestation of selfhood.

There is a starkness that permeates the rape scene, as the shaky POV framing captures none of the signifiers of male pleasure that usually dominate this aesthetic form and the practice of shooting unsimulated penetration. Instead, the denial of pornographic convention gives way to a dissociative objectivity. Shot from above, interspersed with close ups of Manu’s non-reaction,

⁹ Huffer, p. 166.

¹⁰ Malabou, Catherine, tran s. Shread, Carolyn, *The Ontology of the Accident*, Polity, Malden, 2012, p. 11.

the rape scene is clinical in its portrayal of violence. The disinterested *vision-force* dismantles the possession of female bodies that is associated with the pornographic gaze, in tandem with Manu's refusal to be possessed by her attacker. Viewed through the framework of non-photography, the removal of male power from pornographic vision creates an image that is still rooted in the porno-aesthetic, but separated from any intrinsic sense of possession or being. As Manu says, there is nothing of value here. The diminishment of the scene's importance, through both Manu's words and the scene's formal objectivity, secures the act's place as a signifier of violence and simultaneously critiques the perpetrator's control of the act. It may be a scene in which men rape women, however these images allow Despentès and Thi to appropriate power mechanisms rather than reinforcing their place as victims. The rape scene functions as a reminder that despite the numerous crimes committed by its protagonists, their violent acts are a reaction against affirmative being and the notion of an intrinsic human value. There is no inherent humanistic *being*: selfhood in *Baise-Moi* is established through action. Instead of *becoming*, Manu makes herself through her actions, her disinterest and dissociation.