



**CRUEL FLESH:
FILMS OF THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY**

Baise-moi

Baise-moi ('Fuck me') boils down to a killing and (real) sex rampage by two disaffected young women – Manu from a *beur* working-class milieu, Nadine from a slightly more bourgeois background – who come together after Manu's rape and the death of Nadine's best friend; each of them has also just committed a murder, albeit accidentally. Their breakneck journey in stolen cars with sex stopovers is a long suicidal run that inevitably ends in tears. The film has been referred to as a sexually graphic *Thelma & Louise*, especially since Manu's rape is presented as the trigger for their trajectory. *Baise-moi* invites comparisons to other movies. For instance, Nadine watches the dystopian (and similarly controversial) *Seul contre tous* on television while turning a trick in a hotel room, and later plays with her gun in a replica of the Venice bedroom scene in Luc Besson's *Nikita* (1990). The older cinephile may also remember *A Clockwork Orange*: *Baise-moi* displays the same sardonic delight in mindless violence and repeat sex, the same mixture of energy, rage and exhilaration.

Baise-moi comes to the UK with a long pedigree of French polemics. It is the adaptation of an eponymous novel by the (then) 25-year-old porn-shop assistant turned writer Virginie Despentes, the publishing sensation of 1995. Despentes teamed with porn actress Coralie Trinh Thi to shoot the adaptation, starring two other porn actresses, Raffaëla Anderson (Manu) and Karen Bach (Nadine). The Cannes premiere in May 2000 provoked dismay: the digital video image was 'dingy', its erotic power nil, according to the *Libération* (male) reviewer. He asserted: 'I tested it, impossible to have a hard-on,' relegating the film to a new category of 'post-porn'. By contrast, its release in early July 2000 elicited a chorus of support from artists and intellectuals, and there was huge controversy when it was granted an 'X' certificate – a logical classification according to the French X criteria (graphic real sex, sustained violence), but one which, given the tiny number of X cinemas, amounted to censorship. Catherine Breillat launched a petition on 5 July to overturn the rating, signed by other prominent filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard, claiming that to support the film was to 'defend freedom'. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, on the other hand, accused *Baise-moi* of being a fascist film, merely a female sex version of *Rambo*. Eventually *Baise-moi* was quietly re-released in France in September 2001 with an ordinary 18 certificate.

Baise-moi is not a conventionally enjoyable film. Its image is grungy, its litany of violence indiscriminate, its secondary characters confused and confusing. Yet it makes two simple points which mean that it is worth seeing, and which distinguish it from the models it quotes – *Seul contre tous*, *Nikita* – as well as from auteurs' sex movies such as *Intimacy* and *Romance*. One is to do with violence, the other with sex. *Baise-moi* gives power to women; or rather, it is about women taking power, though not, to be sure, in a politically correct manner. Manu and Nadine cut a swathe through men – repulsive or attractive, they don't care. They also kill two women, but one of these murders is accidental (Nadine's roommate), the other instrumental (a woman whose credit card they steal). Neither has the vicious brutality of the male murders which are dwelt upon: the man in the hotel room, the writer, the man in the sex club. Such murders can be read as the women's response, using both sex and violence, to

a generalised climate of male violence against women, as seen at the beginning.

The other point in favour of *Baise-moi* is that the women actually enjoy sex (not just violence), in contrast to contemporary auteur films, including those by female directors, in which sex is, invariably, grim and joyless. It's about girls having fun with sex and being able to laugh about it. One of the English-language release titles of this film, *Rape Me*, in this respect is a shocking travesty of the original French. '*Baise-moi*' may seem stark, but it connotes pleasure and literariness ('*baiser*' also means kiss), contrasting with the more brutal slang du jour ('*niquer*', etc.) used in the film.

Baise-moi is rough and unpleasant but Manu and Nadine have humour, sass and a raw energy that transcends the horror. They are thoroughly bad girls acting out a lurid fantasy of power and impunity (roaming freely through France despite a trail of careless killings). In the passage from book to film, the two women have become noticeably better looking. And so has the violence, which has in one case been excised (the murder of a young boy), and otherwise abbreviated, allegorised and stylised, through rapid cuts, framing and the use of red filters. Personally, I am not complaining.

Ginette Vincendeau, *Sight and Sound*, May 2002

'Fuck, we're useless. Where are the witty lines?' complain Manu (Raffaëla Anderson) and Nadine (Karen Bach) partway through the nihilistic killing spree that occupies most of their waking lives. This could be an in-joke by the film's neophyte directors, aware of their limitations, but it also powerfully conveys the sense that as working-class women at the bottom of the social ladder, Manu and Nadine will never be cool or self-possessed enough to become authentically mythologised.

Narratively, *Baise-moi* runs along broadly similar lines to *Ms.45* (1981) and *Thelma & Louise* (1991), but it's a fair bit more complicated (or confused) in its sexual politics. Although Manu is raped at the start, her response is one of contemptuous indifference: she doesn't fear her rapist, but utterly despises him. While Manu and Nadine go on to murder the vast majority of their sexual partners like tooled-up praying mantises, this isn't a hard-and-fast rule, and neither are their victims invariably male. When they pick up a couple of young men and enthusiastically shag them senseless, they part on entirely amicable terms. However, when another insists on using a condom, they treat it as a personal insult, with fatal consequences.

Shot on a tiny budget, the film is deliberately rough-edged and grungy, as though Manu and Nadine were being stalked by a camcorder-toting accomplice. Indeed, they seem aware of the camera at times, striking poses that crudely mimic the iconography of far glossier exploitation flicks – and there are also nods to the porn backgrounds of both leads and co-director Coralie Trinh Thi in the sex scenes being decidedly unsimulated. If *Baise-moi* ultimately bites off rather more than it's able to chew (source novelist and co-director Virginie Despentes has been much more coherently provocative on paper), it stands up surprisingly well – a sobering reflection of the fact that the dehumanising misogyny against which Manu and Nadine are trying to rebel is just as prevalent today.

Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, May 2013

BAISE-MOI

Directors: Virginie Despentes, Coralie Trinh Thi
©: Pan-Européenne Production, Ciné Valse
Presented by: Toute Première Foix
Presented with the participation of: Canal+
Executive Producer: Dominique Chiron
Producer: Philippe Godeau
Unit Managers: Joseph Martineau, Sylvain Cahen-Delabre, Clauss Gigli, David Caujolle, Sébastien Brun
Production Manager: Baudoin Capet
Production Accountant: Alexandre Mallet-Guy
Production Administrator: Anne Serrié
Location Scout: Jérôme Debusschère
Production Assistants: Béatrice Hureau, Emmanuelle Labonne, Hélène Germain
Assistant Directors: Kétal Guénin, Estelle Chailloux
Casting: Jeanne Biras
Screenplay: Virginie Despentes, Coralie Trinh Thi
Based on the novel by: Virginie Despentes
Directors of Photography: Benoît Chamaillard, Julien Pamart
Special Effects: Guillaume Castagné, Perrine Poirier, Pierre-Paul Jayne, Frédéric Lainé, Christophe Chabenet
Editors: Aïlo Auguste, Francine Lemaître, Véronique Rosa
Art Directors: Irène Galitzine, Paul Fayard, Christophe Mureau, Claude Veysset
Costume Designers: Isabelle Fraysse, Magali Baret
Special Make-up Effects: Charlotte Arguillère
Music Composer/Arranger/Conductor: Varou Jan
Music Co-ordinators: Stan Witold, Small World
Music Production: Pan-Européenne Musique
Sound: Éric Boisteau, Jacques Sans
Sound Mixing: Eric Bonnard
Sound Editor: Fabien Krzyzanowski
Sound Effects: Pascal Chauvin, Pascal Dédeye
Post-synchronization: Fabien Adelin
Stunt Co-ordinator: Jean-Marc Minéo
Dolby Consultant: Serge Artus

Cast

Karen Bach (*Nadine*)
Raffaëla Anderson (*Manu*)
Céline Beugnot (*blonde woman at pool table*)
Adama Niane (*man playing pool*)
Christophe Claudy Landry (*man at counter*)
Tewfik Saad (*barman*)
Delphine McCarty (*the flatmate*)
Ouassini Embarek (*Radouan*)
Patrick-Kodjo Topou (*Wanted*)
Simon Nahoum, Karim Chala (*Wanted's friends*)
Lisa Marshall (*Manu's friend*)
Hacène Beddrouh (*Manu's brother*)
Patrick Eudeline (*Francis Godot*)
Ian Scott (*rape man 1*)
Philippe Houillez (*rape man 2*)
Steven Jhonsson (*rape man 3*)
Gil Stuart (*Nadine's client*)
Alexandre Milord (*receptionist in Francis' hotel*)
Elodie Chérie (*woman at cash point*)
Karim Sabaddehine (*big man*)
Titof (*sweet little boy*)
Jean-Marc Minéo (*gun seller*)
Gabor Rassov (*condom dickhead*)
Marc Barrow (*seaside hotel receptionist*)
Rodolphe Amtrim (*guy in bar*)
Estelle Isaac (*Alice*)
H P G (*Martin*)
Marc Rioufol (*architect*)
Nathalie Dune (*BAP woman 1*)
Dany (*BAP woman 2*)
Sébastien Barrio (*BAP man 1*)
Pascal St James (*BAP man 2*)
Jean-Louis Costes (*the sow in Circle Libertin*)
Sylvain Cahen-Delabre, Jacques Sans, Didier Gardette (*dead men*)

France 2000©
77 mins

CRUEL FLESH: FILMS OF THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY**Carne + La Bouche de Jean-Pierre**

Sun 1 May 11:50; Thu 12 May 20:45 (+ Q&A with Lucile Hadžihalilovic)

Baise-moi

Sun 1 May 18:20; Sat 7 May 20:50

The Ordeal (Calvaire)

Mon 2 May 12:30; Sun 22 May 18:20

Man Bites Dog (C'est arrivé près de chez vous)

Mon 2 May 15:10; Tue 10 May 20:55

Sex and Death, but Make It Arthouse

Tue 3 May 18:10

Trouble Every Day

Tue 3 May 20:30 (+ intro by writer and creative Sophie Monks Kaufman);
Tue 24 May 20:45

Criminal Lovers (Les Amants criminels)

Wed 4 May 20:50; Sat 14 May 12:00

Pola X

Thu 5 May 20:25; Sat 28 May 17:50

Romance (Romance X)

Fri 6 May 18:00 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London);
Tue 17 May 20:45

Philosophical Screens: Romance

Fri 6 May 20:00

In My Skin (Dans ma peau)

Sat 7 May 17:50 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, King's College London);
Thu 19 May 20:40

High Tension (aka Switchblade Romance) (Haute Tension)

Mon 9 May 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by author Alexandra West);
Sat 28 May 12:20

Inside (À l'intérieur)

Sat 14 May 20:50; Thu 26 May 18:20

Them (Ils)

Mon 16 May 20:50; Sun 29 May 18:20

Irreversible (Irréversible) (theatrical version)

Sat 21 May 17:45

Martyrs

Sat 28 May 20:50; Tue 31 May 20:40

Horror à la Française

Free to view on the BFI YouTube channel from 11-31 May

BFI Courses: City Lit at the BFI: New French Extremity

Every Tue from 10-31 May 18:30-20:30

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780