

# The legacy of Baise-moi (2000): body, sensoriality and revenge in female cinema

El legado de Baise-moi (2000): cuerpo, sensorialidad y venganza en el cine femenino

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## Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo investigar las potencialidades discursivas y sensoriales presentes en la estética del cine contemporáneo y relacionarlas con la película Baise-Moi (2000) de Virginie Despentes y Coralie Trinh Thi, una importante pieza del cine de venganza dirigida por mujeres a través de un enfoque que apunta comprender cómo la imagen puede afectar sensorialmente al espectador y expresar discursivamente una crítica a la sociedad y la cultura. Propongo la creación de tres categorías de género a partir del análisis de estas películas: Venganza moral, Venganza violenta y Venganza metafórica. Para ello, propongo un análisis basado en las teorías de la comunicación y el cine de Vivian Sobchack (1992), Mariana Baltar (2019; 2023) y Eloisa Nos-Aldás (2019), entre otros, para discutir cómo podemos pensar las dimensiones sociales y materiales de la imagen a través de las representaciones del cuerpo en la puesta en escena y la materialidad audiovisual. Así, es evidente que el cine fue responsable de crear estereotipos de género y que las películas abordadas en este trabajo son responsables de proporcionar subversiones del género cinematográfico e indicar que las narrativas de venganza creadas por mujeres cineastas pueden proporcionar nuevos imaginarios colectivos en torno a las mujeres en la sociedad. - de una manera muy diferente a la que se rige por el status quo y establecido en la sociedad contemporánea actual.

**Palabras Clave:** telenovelas brasileñas, ficción serializada, comunicación, televisualidades.

## Abstract

The article aims to investigate the discursive and sensorial potentialities present in contemporary films' aesthetics and relate them to the film Baise-Moi (2000) by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi - an important piece of revenge cinema directed by women through an approach that aims to understand how the image can affect the viewer sensorial and discursively express criticism of society and culture. I propose the creation of three genre categories based on analyzing these films: Moral Revenge, Violent Revenge, and Metaphorical Revenge. To this end, I propose an analysis based on the theories of communication and cinema by Vivian Sobchack (1992), Mariana Baltar (2019; 2023), and Eloisa Nos-Aldás (2019), among others, to discuss how we can think about the social and material dimensions of the image through the representations of the body in staging and audiovisual materiality. Thus, it is evident that cinema was responsible for creating gender stereotypes and that the films dealt with in this work are responsible for providing subversions of the cinematographic genre and indicating that the revenge narratives created by female filmmakers can provide new collective imaginaries around women in society - in a very different way from the one governed by the status quo and established in today's contemporary society

**Keywords:** Embodiment, cinema, female, revenge, sensoriality.

## Introducción

Since the premiere of *Baise-Moi* (2000), directed by filmmakers Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, we have observed the birth of a visceral cinema that works with horror and female drama in favor of promoting social criticism and debates about marginalized female experiences. In the French film, two women walk a path through sex and murder in search of Revenge. A narrative path that seeks, through explicit and graphic scenes, to discuss new ways of seeing female protagonism in transgressive films in cinema.

The film had unique relevance at that time, as it materialized feminist discourses that had been produced after the 1990s and fictionally incited by Virginie Despentes in 1993 when writing the literary version of *Baise-Moi*, which was responsible for the basis of the film's script at the beginning of the following decade.

Theoretically, as we observed in the study "*The Cinematic Body*" by Steven Shaviro (2015), these thematic notions of Revenge, where the characters seek portrayal and murder, can promote narratives of ambiguity, mainly by highlighting the representation of the images of the female body. For example, transgressive films from the 1970s and 1980s were marked by stigmas of representation of women's bodies (Shaviro, 2015). Today, in contemporary cinema, the presence of women as protagonists prioritizes new ways of telling these stories and becomes responsible for promoting new weavings of such bodily representations - a context, too, related to studies on the spectator's experience and sensoriality.

At the time of its release, several newspapers reported and described the film as an absurd creation of cinema, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Several people who followed the first sessions reported the explicit and bloody scenes seen. Full stories and other news described the film: "This is a grisly proposition.<sup>1</sup>"; Serial killer-junkie-nymphomaniac version<sup>2</sup>"; and, finally, "The scandalous film that shook the French political class<sup>3</sup>". In addition to the French censorship in some theaters at the time, news like these permeated a collective imagination about the film. Which, curiously, only sought to represent and discuss social values and gender stereotypes around the representations of suffering experienced by female characters in cinema.

There is a narrative similarity, each maintaining its particularities; some contemporary films that propose pertinent debates on gender and Revenge, such as *Revenge* (2018) by Coralie Fargeat, *Promising Young Woman* (2020) by Emerald Fennell, and *Love Lies Bleeding* (2024) by Rose Glass, among others of which will be mentioned. Through these films, we can observe new nuances and contemporary formulations responsible for creating narratives with great discursive strength and sensorial potential to provide debates about the female body and transgression in cinema and the authors' theories that permeate this work.

The images, the performance (staging), the framing, the editing, and all audiovisual matter are responsible for constituting imaginaries and new ways of seeing such realities about the body so that the representation of women, female transgression, and graphic violence can permeate new aesthetic molds. These are mediated by the cinematographic experience and its influence on the materialization of meaning in culture and society.

In a gray area, we know that these films discuss reversals of values around the feminine and are responsible for crossing several social markers. For this reason, it is necessary to adopt an ethical and responsible posture in the face of the representations of violence

1 Empire (2000). Access: <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/baise-moi-review/>.

2 Folha (2000). Access: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrad/fq1808200015.htm>.

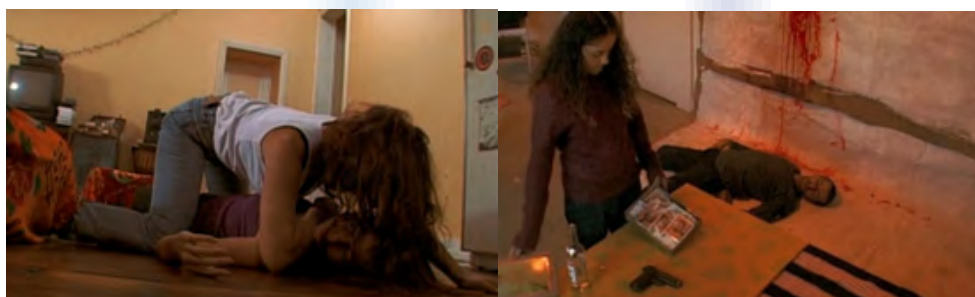
3 Cineman (2000). Access: <https://www.cineman.ch/fr/film/2000/Baisemoi/>.

discussed in the work and understand that the selected films allow us to observe nuances of violence beyond gender stereotypes: they provide new modulations, discourses, and bodily representations.

In this way, we can think about the transgression and violence represented in these films from the perspective of the study *Comunicación transgresora de cambio social* (2019). Eloisa Nos-Aldás understands transgressive communication processes and images as ways of discussing and emphasizing denunciations of social inequalities and proposing debates on overcoming them (Nos-Aldás, 2019). Thus, by portraying themes and images in a marcescent and transgressive way in a purely feminist narrative, it proposes critiques imposed on cultural and social configurations to denounce them and think about new values.

Female revenge films seek to propose various debates that go through moral and metaphorical chains. For Nicole Fayard (2006) and Nadia Louar (2009), we have the view that the search for freedom is the central plan in the story of *Baise-Moi* (2000). Only by allowing ourselves to observe and experience the film from this perspective will we understand the political and social discourses embedded therein through violent images and explicit representations of sex (Louar, 2009). Even so, the film becomes a space of belonging to constitute new imaginaries through what is being represented and through all the gender subversion that tends to provoke the viewer to think about the limits of abuse and Revenge.

**Figura 1. *Baise-Moi* (2000) directed by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi.**



The article "*The Rebellious Body as Parody: Baise-Moi by Virginie Despentes*" by Nicole Fayard (2006) shows how the representations of the film go through dense layers of meaning. Through the thought of Judith Butler (2001), Fayard states that the novel (based on the book) is responsible for "opening [...] rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder" (Butler, 2001, as cited in Fayard, 2006, p. 76). Thus, they use representations of violence to discuss women's autonomy, deny discourses already contaminated by patriarchy, and question representations of female bodies that already exist—stating that women should always be aware of and be solely responsible for the autonomy of their bodies and sexualities.

From this perspective, the author understands that the violent narrative present in *Baise-moi* (1993):

[...] Reveals its transgressive potential by making possible the appropriation by women of values and activities which are traditionally associated with the male in the thriller, from sexual autonomy to the breaking down of distinctions between the private and the public sphere (it is no accident that the heroines have no personal domestic scene, and that the characteristic indoor settings for the novel are hotels, bars, and cars rather than domestic spaces). The narrative displays violence, the 'superiority' of materiality over morality, drinking, sex, women as subjects and men who have become the objects in a reversal of the initial theme of prostitution (Fayard, 2006, p. 760).



Let us say that the perspectives adopted by Eloisa Nos-Aldás, Nicole Fayard (2006), and Nadia Louar (2009) allow us to think about contemporary narratives in specific forms of representation. Thus, the narrative elements around the script, editing, and audiovisual resources become responsible for materializing this rescue of the French film and reinforcing and narratively demodulating something that had already been tried for over two decades.

For this, and through the narrative analysis of the films discussed in this work, we can think of three categories that permeate this debate: *Moral Revenge*, *Violent Revenge*, and *Metaphorical Revenge*.

## 2. They returned: a typology of Revenge in contemporary Revenge

To propose a filmic analysis of contemporary female revenge films, we can separate them into three categories: *Moral Revenge*, *Violent Revenge*, and *Metaphorical Revenge*. The descriptions of these categories become even more apparent when applied later in the analyses discussed in this work. The reflections obtained in this investigation illustrate how women directors work with the revenge genre and promote debates through the weaving of films and representations of women's bodies.

First, *Moral Revenge* comes from an approach to moral panic and gender theories since they can be seen together in the studies of gender violence, as we can see above in Judith Butler's theory (2017a, 2018b).

From this perspective, the films cited here promote a moral confrontation by reconfiguring and evidencing the debates about what is understood about the roles of women and men in contemporary society. Thus, the films deny excessive male violence to give the questioning woman full autonomy over her body. Here, they not only confront gender ideology but also question morality and sexual violence as a method of Revenge and a means of freedom.

*Violent Revenge* aims to use graphic resources, such as those mentioned in *Baise-Moi* (2000), to reinforce women's autonomy in society and avenge sexual or moral violence committed by men and other women who commit gender violence. These are films that use revenge narratives in a feminist approach to reverse values and use the image to highlight the role of suffering inferred from men. Because we are in a delicate discursive zone, this does not mean that there will be no representations of violence against women, but that the directors' feminine approach starts to allow new gender modulations and subvert stereotypes.

For this, these films have an important domain in proposing new ways of seeing the world and other realities. Because cinema, as suggested by Vivian Sobchack (1992), can transform subjects. In his words, [...] the spectator/user may experience an exhilarating liberation from the physical (and moral) gravity of the real world the body inhabits and is marked by" (Sobchack, 1992, p. 301).

Around blood, weapons, and explicit scenes of violence, the spectator walks morally and sensorially to reflect paradoxically on the values imposed by society. "What if it was him, not her?" "... what if I did the same as you did to me."

*Metaphorical Revenge* uses graphic resources and poetics to create ambiguous narrative images and contexts in which Revenge takes place through a distortion of reality. Witches, female sects, women, and monsters are introduced and transmuted to take Revenge for some male violence.

This category proposes discussions through the narratives of drama, horror, and other cinematographic genres to list the debate on Revenge and women's freedom. These genres

are often used as a break in the narrative around the female body, which applies a sense of power and strength to it—as we will observe in films such as *Love Lies Bleeding* (2024) by Rose Glass.

The poetic, performative, and metaphorical images, which generally adopt very different elements from the rest of the film's course, are moments of suspension of the narrative. As Mariana Baltar (2023) discusses, regarding the power of sensoriality and the role of the body, it is performative and audiovisual displacements that bring the viewer to the film more intensely (Baltar, 2023). Why not a woman becoming a giant and taking a cruel killer in her hands like a toy? Wouldn't it be a narrative suspension? Isn't it?

## 2.1. *Moral Revenge* or "I will take revenge right in due time."

*Moral Revenge* is a very particular way of being treated, as it was observed and proposed precisely according to what can be observed in the film *Promising Young Woman* (2020) by Emerald Fennell.

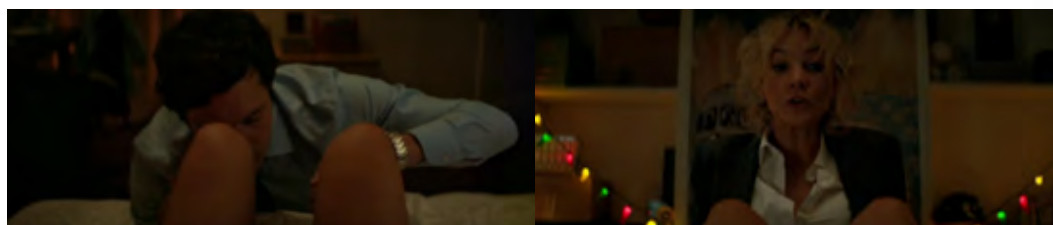
*Moral Revenge* is responsible for placing all the subjects represented in the narrative so that they can review their values. The script written by Fennell is a dish prepared for an impactful experience, essentially sensorial and "pre-conceived" (it is said the images of the body about the other films mentioned here).

The script works on subverting values in the plot itself and in the dialogue, which makes the viewer responsible for assembling the puzzle of an event that is not even portrayed in the film. It is not without foundation that the event/scene that makes the character Cassandra (Carey Mulligan) avenge the death of her best friend after sexual abuse does not even need to be presented in the film.

The scene, which could be more intense, is left to the viewer to imagine while following Cassandra's moral vendettas. One of them, the film's opening scene, already presents how the British director intends to approach the protagonist's Revenge.

Cassie is drunk (apparently) in a bar and is approached by a man in starched clothes who soon offers her a ride and then a brief stop at his own home. The character's *Moral Revenge* lies in making it seem like she is in a helpless and unprotected situation to see how far men are capable of going to abuse a vulnerable woman. When the abuse is about to be committed, she embodies Revenge and changes her gesture and posture to emphatically ask: "Hey, I asked what you are doing?!".

**Figura 2. *Promising Young Woman* (2020), directed by Emerald Fennell.**



Cassie's body and posture, always accompanied by a pop and contemporary soundtrack, bring a narrative suspension to the acts, and the characters' questions sound like a moral response to the viewer in two ways: sensory and ethical. Therefore, it is important to understand films as potentials for individual and collective transformation.

As alluded to by Vivian Sobchack (1992):

A film's continual and autonomous visual production and meaningful organization of its visible images testifies not only to the material objectivity of the world but also to an anonymous, mobile, embodied, and ethically invested subject of worldly space, a subject able to inscribe visual and bodily changes of situation as both open-ended and vitally bound by the existential finitude and bodily limits of its particular vision and historical consciousness (that is, its autobiographical narrative) - (Sobchack, 1992, p. 62).

It is important to note that this is the only film discussed in this work that was nominated for the Oscar for Best Picture and Best Direction, and the moral scale tells us a lot – it is the least explicit of all those mentioned here. However, it has an aesthetic work of gender subversion and representation of Revenge in a morally effective way.

### 3. *Violent Revenge: women, guns and blood*

Like *Baise-Moi* (2000), other films use the narrative of Revenge through violent and graphic images. Films like: *M.F.A.* (2017) by Natalia Leite, *The Nightingale* (2018) by Jennifer Kent, and *American Mary* (2012) by filmmaker sisters Jen Soska and Sylvia Soska. They are examples of the debate of what we can call *Violent Revenge*. They treat the theme of sexual abuse as a trigger for the search for Revenge in an impetuous and visceral way.

In *American Mary* (2012), we observe the life of the character Mary Mason (Katharine Isabelle) being destroyed after a video of her abuse is released to medical students, an approach similar to the script of the movie *Promising Young Woman*. In this case, the directors prefer to infer a different path for the protagonist: She starts to practice clandestine surgeries and perform aesthetic procedures that subvert the standards of beauty established by society and the *status quo*.

Financial problems are also highlighted as a stimulus that goes beyond the difficulties of women staying in university. Through the trauma caused by the man who commits the abuse, she begins to practice Revenge on other people's skin while remaining in search of the aggressor.

The same subversion in cinematic aesthetics stands out in Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (2018). This film recounts the character's (Matilda Lutz) quest for Revenge after suffering physical and sexual abuse and being left for death in a large desert. The character's name already points to a female reinterpretation of the film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) by Meir Zarchi, one of the best-known films directed by a male filmmaker in the female revenge genre.

Here, Fargeat proposes an emphasis on the suffering of man, even though Jen's body is also presented violently through the abuses committed. One of the sequences in the film that emphasizes this idea is when the character after the violence suffered, wakes up in a river and sets out in search of Revenge. She ends up killing one of the abuser's employees and continues to look for the other two men responsible for the violence she experienced.

She finds him in the middle of the desert, and, at that moment, he becomes her prey. With a rifle, the hunt begins, and after being shot in the shoulder, Stan runs, crying, and even drools. Fargeat reverses gender stereotypes and makes the male character show pain and suffering, presenting his gestures in the most intense way possible. It intensifies when Jen breaks a glass, and the man steps. The viewer can experience through its limits the representation of pain: Stan tries, numerous times, to remove a massive shard of glass that is in a pulsating cut on his foot until he is later killed.

**Figura 3. *Revenge* (2018) directed by Coralie Fargeat.**



During the narrative proposed by Fargeat, the viewer confronts his morality in two ways: the violence committed by the woman and the violence committed by the man. Just like an intense scene for a confrontation with the bloody materiality of the film, the viewer sees his ideals contrasted. An effect discussed by the author Martine Beugnet (2007) through *Baise-Moi* (2000) is that it is not pure nihilism. The film has its meaning, and it is evoked with intensity at the beginning of the film with the scene of abuse, just as we saw in Fargeat's film, that is, the narrative "[...] not concerned with causes, but only with effects – suffering itself" (Brenez, 2001 as cited in Beugnet, 2007, p. 53).

In addition to the suffering, the principals are concerned with promoting states of affectation and reflection with the subversions of values since a first action justifies the actions. That would be an idea of thinking about *Violent Revenge* in women's revenge movies. Thus, the filmmakers promote portraying a first action in the narrative that justifies Revenge and permeates new ways of seeing the world and the woman's body through it.

#### **4. Metaphorical Revenge: The body can speak in many ways**

Using graphic resources and breaking the narrative and metaphorical discourse comes from a lineage of films made a specific time ago. We do not need to put female filmmakers, such as Ukrainian filmmaker Andrej Zulawski, at the mercy of male directors. However, we do need to create a counterpoint of work from the *sci-fi* genre and horror in a feminine and feminist remodeling.

In recent years, it is possible to observe a growing wave of films that involve narratives that promote a figurative or "monstrous" approach. Films that use the revenge path aim to debate the genre through metaphorical issues. Like the movies *Carrie* (2013) by Kimberly Peirce and even the most recent film by the French director discussed here, Coralie Fargeat, in *The Substance* (2024).

The films mentioned address the role of women and notions that need to be reviewed in cultural contexts. They are also responsible for gender stereotypes about women in contemporary society, such as the delicate feminine, the woman of the home, the woman of motherhood, and the murderous woman, among other examples.

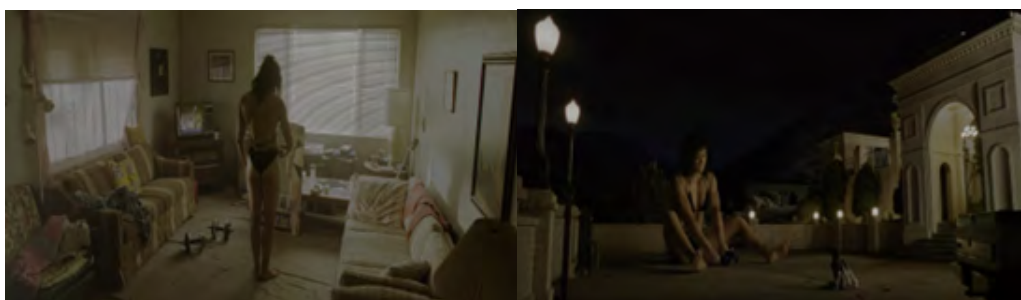
The highlight here is the work on *Love Lies Bleeding* (2024) as an expressive example of narrative. The film portrays the passion of Jackie (Katy O'Brian) and Lou (Kristen Stewart). Jackie, a bodybuilder, commits crimes to protect his beloved and, among several examples of the focus on body images, strengthens the representation of the strong woman, loves, and, at the same time, protects. Among various images and figurative, Jackie transforms (being represented in the image) into a giant being at the end of the film and later kills the character configured as the plot's villain. A break in the narrative strengthens the presence of the body in abject and grotesque aspects, which begins to represent, figuratively, feminine



strength and the power of affection between the characters.

This example, also evident in the other films cited in the analysis, relates to what the author Izabel Fontes said.<sup>4</sup> (2018) alludes to the female body and how its representations constitute new forms and dynamics in which women are inserted into society (Fontes, 2018). Therefore, we observe that the narratives listed in this work directly relate to the contexts in which our culture permeates. The representations of female bodies in the scenarios worked here generate debates and guidelines for thinking about social transformations and new ways of understanding the role of women in our society.

**Figura 4. *Love Lies Bleeding* (2024) directed by Rose Glass.**



Even though these films use metaphorical images and contexts, it is enough to surrender to the senses to understand that these images want to tell us more than just debates about oppression and violence. As Mariana Baltar (2019) alludes to, images of the body have an essential effect on the viewer's close relationship with the film. Its configuration in the image promotes greater intimacy between spectator-image-discourse (Baltar, 2019). In his words, the gesture and the relationship of bodies in the narrative "mobilize an affective effect that promotes a suspensive and potentially disruptive force in the narrative fabric/regime" (Baltar, 2023, p. 5). By relating intensely to the image, we also have a sensorial encounter and the materialization of meanings, as the author Jennifer Baker (2009) also expresses:

That encounter is a conduit of sorts, manifested as specific gestures and behavior styles (film and viewers). I'll consider the active, embodied encounter between film and viewer as a means of grasping the emotional, intellectual, and thematic aspects of any given cinematic experience (Baker, 2009, p.15).

As seen above, these films promote debates about freedom, Revenge, and gender and enable states of affectation in the viewer through metaphorical contact. Sensoriality becomes an essential and determining channel for subjects to establish a more intense connection with the contexts presented in the film and reproduce and disseminate these effects of meanings in society.

As much as filmmakers try to use resources that generate a sense of ambiguity, they can promote different types of interpretation. It is not possible to observe them as a method of reinforcing gender stereotypes but rather as aesthetic alternatives to subvert them, and they constitute critical debates about the body, culture, and the representation of women in cinema in films of this genre.

<sup>4</sup> Moving away from the focus on the author's literature, we can understand this discourse applied to the images of transgressions in cinema.



#### 4. Conclusion: Body stereotypes or new forms of revenge?

The purpose of this exploration will never be to end a debate since we are dealing with female representations as an object in the constant transformation of hermeneutics (interpretation studies) and studies of the senses. The films mentioned here, and the proposed categories aim to enable ways of looking at the films of female filmmakers. Who use revenge narratives to debate gender roles and discuss how women, and all femininities, have always been on the margins of violence in society. We can understand that this investigation also raises the question of why we should not look at Revenge differently.

The legacy of *Baise-Moi* (2000) ends up enabling contemporary filmmakers to create, through the images of cinema, intense and highly pertinent debates about women in society. In the same way, the narratives of Revenge and female subversion are essential for us to think about the sensorial potentials and the movements of the force of the cinematographic image in a place where the filmmakers, portrayed here, fight for a break in paradigms of representation of women in cinema and new nuances of the role of the female body in a sociocultural context.

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