FULGOR

Vol. 1, Issue 3, December 2003

Flinders University Languages Group Online Review
http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/deptlang/fulgor/
ISSN 1446-9219

Self-Constructing Women: Beyond the Shock of *Baise-moi* and *A ma soeur!*

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ABSTRACT

Following the release of the French films *Baise-moi* (2000) by Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, and *A ma soeur!* (2001) by Catherine Breillat, the debate surrounding film pornography and censorship in France has escalated to vertiginous heights. This paper aims to situate the work of these radical female film-makers within the context of a changing cultural and social climate in contemporary France. It draws on the theories espoused by sociologist Henri Mendras, who posits the idea that French society has emerged from its "second revolution" as one that is free of fundamental conflict – a society in which women are better positioned than men to resist stereotype and create dynamism both collectively and personally. The argument revolves around the way in which the controversial films of Despentes and Breillat not only inform and challenge the theories espoused by Mendras, but also subvert conventional cinematic representations of heterosexual sex and female sexuality. These ground-breaking films are therefore invaluable for the questions they raise about the role of sex in the cinema in France and the existing boundaries between eroticism and pornography. More importantly however, they represent a rebellion against a male-dominated cultural reality – or in the words of the film-makers themselves, they are effectively a "declaration of war."

There is nothing like sex to test the solidity of the walls of orderly society. In today's France, the runaway success of Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (2001) is an eloquent example of a female drawing attention to her sexual activity and thoughts in a particularly public and provocative manner. [1] The

films of Catherine Breillat and Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi – *A ma soeur!* (2001) and *Baise-moi* (2000) – are experienced as part of the same phenomenon, raising a swarming buzz of discussiosn about pornography and censorship.

While there can be no doubt that sex has become an increasingly explicit theme in French literature and cinema, it is instructive to reflect on Breillat and her sisters in the context of some of the broader changes affecting French art and society in recent decades. In his much-discussed *La seconde révolution française*, published in 1988, the sociologist Henri Mendras concluded that, despite the revolutionary changes that France had undergone since the Second World War, there were enough shared goals and values for the national community to enjoy a general sense of coherence. In *La France que je vois*, published in 2002, Mendras maintains his optimism about France as a tolerant and diverse, but essentially unified society. Despite the decline of the great structuring institutions of the past, like the church and the army, and the virtual disappearance of social class ideology, individuals today have both the confidence and the capacity to construct happy and fulfilling lives. In the France portrayed by Mendras, the former hierarchical organisations have been displaced by a complex web of networks. [2] Authority no longer flows from traditional structures but, rather, is the subject of constantly renewed negotiation among people fully conscious of their own freedom and equality as well as those of others.

Such analysis seems rather Panglossian in the light of many other studies of contemporary France that are more inclined to turn the spotlight on the climate of uncertainty and anxiety in France, highlighting issues such as violence, anaemic leadership and racial tension, to name only a few. These reservations notwithstanding, two of the conclusions that Mendras reaches are potentially illuminating for understanding the impact of works like *A ma soeur!* and *Baise-moi*. The first is that he sees the situation of women in French society as still unresolved, and hence more open to change than that of men. Having expanded their roles into careers and professional life, without necessarily forsaking their traditional positions as homemakers, wives and mothers, women, by dint of having to navigate the endemic pluralism of their lives, constantly challenge stereotype and create dynamism both collectively and personally.

This links in with Mendras' second important concept, that of a newly intensified individualism, which is resulting in a generalised upward social mobility and an increasing capacity for individuals to choose their values and their modes of life – in short, to determine most aspects of their identity. Many would be sceptical about the validity of such a claim. At the same time, *Romance* (Breillat 1999) and *Baise-moi* do seem to postulate a new level of freedom and power for women. In fact, they go further, generating the idea that women are not only more open to change than men, but can be more effective agents of change. If we combine the insights of the sociologist and the film-makers, we can posit the view that because their unsettled personal and social status leaves them open to more possibilities, French women as individuals may be in a privileged position to make choices about the construction of their own lives; and as a group, they may represent a potent force in the future shaping of society as a whole.

It is not necessary here to rehearse how cinema in France has become such an important set of identity-defining narratives for national culture, [3] nor need we revisit the increasingly transformative role played by women film directors within that cultural space. [4] Taking those realities as given, our purpose is to look beyond the sensationalisation and apparent marginality of works like *Baise-moi* and *A ma soeur!* in order to evaluate how they relate to, or work to subvert or extend, the broad-brush depiction of contemporary France proposed by Mendras.

Cinematographically, the foregrounding of sexuality is nothing new. If Catherine Breillat and Virginie Despentes have caused such an upset, it is because they confront conventional male-structured representations of heterosexual sex, including previously honoured boundaries between eroticism and pornography, and break even the most durable taboos, such as those that forbid the portrayal of real sex on screen. The aggressive rawness represented by these film-makers brings a startlingly uncompromising refusal to be satisfied with what has been historically achieved by feminism, a critique of discrepancies between formal, legal equality and everyday reality, and above all, a will to claim for women the power to set and control the future social agenda.

Their social struggle is well illustrated in the way that the pornography and censorship debate has flared around their work. Despentes and Breillat have both been accused of being pornographic. Admittedly, what constitutes pornography, in common parlance, is not easy to define. Nonetheless, in France, as in many other places, cinematographic pornography has been reasonably clearly defined in law. The X-rating category, created by the state censorship body in 1975, is made on the basis of the presence on screen of certain acts: these include penetration, erection, fellation, ejaculation and incitement to violence. (And the degree to which the male body is used to define the parameters of this law is notable.) According to the legal definition, both *Romance* and *Baise-moi* contain pornographic scenes. The former escaped censorship. The latter, originally released in France, was subsequently subjected to an X-rating – tantamount to a non-release in terms of reaching a public audience or securing any financial return – and then a year later was finally re-released under a new rating for over 18 year olds. This pattern, or variations on it, was repeated in other parts of the world. [5]

While the sex-based scandals around their films have certainly contributed to their marginalisation, it needs to be noted that Breillat and Despentes are by no means equally marginal, as the funding mechanisms of their films show. The production of *Baise-moi* resulted from a cobbled together amalgam of private sources, while *A ma soeur!* benefited from a more standard combination of financial support, including a subsidy from the official French government cinema-funding body, the *Centre National de Cinématographie*.

That Breillat should have been able to exercise more financial leverage is unsurprising, given her long experience within the industry. Despentes and Trinh Thi were very much newcomers. The official support of Breillat can be interpreted as indicating, among other things, the high degree of tolerance that the French cinema industry allows for work that is challenging and subversive – a fact that would support the Mendras thesis of a highly flexible social morality in France. It is also worth mentioning that when *Baise-moi* was caught up in the tangle of its censorship battle, it was Breillat who organised a petition for the film's release, signed by an impressive

array of people from the cinema world, both male and female, and including actors, directors and critics (Breillat 2000b). In other words, if Breillat is not herself exactly a conventional establishment figure, she is at least close enough to the establishment to be able to mobilise its energies and its resources. On the other hand, Virginie Despentes, born in 1969, is quite literally a person who has come from the margins: she is a former punk and sex-worker who won a measure of social recognition with a minor literary prize in 1998. [6] Her co-director, Coralie Trinh Thi, a few years younger, had acted in 27 porn movies before undertaking her first experience as a director.

The film of *Baise-moi* opens on an extended close-up of the face of one of the two female protagonists, Nadine (Rafaëlla Anderson). The aggressively spiked necklace that Nadine is wearing links the opening of the film to the chaotic, murderous climax in which she – wearing the same necklace – and her companion, Manu (Karen Bach), massacre the denizens of a sex-club. Perhaps this opening shot of Nadine's smouldering gaze can be construed as a warning that what we are about to see will be directed and modelled by a point of view that is both female and belligerent.

The introductory section of the film takes the spectator into the mixed-race, socially destitute world of French housing estates. Manu, who has done some porn-film acting, is caught with a friend in a gang-rape. When her brother insists on his right to avenge the rape, and demeans Manu as a slut, she shoots him through the forehead with his own gun, steals his money, and heads into the night. By coincidence, she meets Nadine, who has gone through her own severance from society after killing her over-controlling female flatmate and witnessing the drug-related shooting of her male best friend. Impelled by Manu's desire "to see the sea" – a metaphor for a kind of Rimbaldian splitting of the keel of civilised behaviour – the two women launch into a frenzied adventure as serial rapists and murderers. They use their stolen "man-sized" pistols to rob, command and kill, guided – as in Breton's first surrealist manifesto – only by whim, horniness, and whatever doses of drugs and alcohol they happen to have in their system. Manu is eventually shot dead by a garage-owner, and Nadine, after shooting the killer, makes a funeral pyre for her companion on the banks of a frozen lake in the Vosges. She is finally arrested by the police.

In many ways, *Baise-moi* follows the classic structure of pornographic films, notably in its unrelieved linearity and glaring sex scenes, in which the two rampaging women become serial devourers of males. [7] The trash aesthetic of the film, shot in rough-grained pseudo-documentary video, is also a standard component of cinematographic pornography. There seems to be a visceral blindness to any canonical cinematographic rules of framing or editing. Whether this is a conscious aesthetic choice must remain moot. The film is driven by an energetic feminist determination both to subvert the existing male dominance of explicit sexual imagery and to shift what society defines as pornography from the margins towards the cultural mainstream. Thus, after sex, the women most often liquidate their partner – sometimes in horrifyingly brutal ways – demonstrating time and again that it is their desire, and their desire alone, that must initiate events and govern their outcome. "*Il est temps*," Despentes states, "*pour les femmes de devenir des bourreaux, y compris par la plus extrême violence*." [8]

The film's sex scenes are presented in a way that consistently demeans and ridicules the males. The multiple close-ups of monumental specimens of male organs are pornographic conventions, and it is worth stressing that this is alien to mainstream cinema, where female bodies are readily displayed, but where the portrayal of male genitalia is usually taboo. The objectification of the male body by the heroines is a reversal of conventional fetishism, where the phallus connotes male power and domination. These images thus constitute a deliberate assault on what the film-makers posit as the audience's bourgeois sensibility. They reflect the storyline itself: the two protagonists are carrying out, in the fictional world, what the film-makers are trying to do metaphorically to their audience – that is, to entice them into an experience that will completely undercut expectations and reverse gender power roles. Just as the title reveals itself to be a deadly command rather than an invitation, the film as a whole is designed to destroy the spectator's habitual response patterns and impose a vision of sexuality entirely informed by female desire and imagination.

Significantly, the film is built, not on the elimination of masculine patterns of domination, but on their appropriation, particularly through the inclusion, within the porn-film form, of action-film violence. A bit like in Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), though without the humour and lightness, Nadine and Manu play roles habitually ascribed to men. They no longer simply react to violence: they create it, absorbed in the heady nexus of sex, violence and entertainment, and the fury of immediate self-gratification.

Do Despentes and Trinh Thi succeed in their project? If public attention is a measure of their ability to bring their preoccupations into the mainstream cultural arena, the scandal that their work created needs to be weighed against the numbers of people who actually paid to see the film. In France, those numbers were low – not surprisingly, given the period of X-rating – and in the United States, the film flopped. [9] Interestingly, anecdotal evidence from the MK2 theatre chain in Paris, which maintained screenings through the ban, suggested that much of the audience was made up of 40 year old single males (Faure 2000). If this is the case, Despentes and Trinh Thi may well have succeeded in attracting – albeit in limited numbers – precisely the target audience they were seeking. However, within the film itself, there is a curious scene in which the heroines engage in self-mockery of their dialogue as a reflection of their inability to live up to their roles as stars of violence. Indeed, for all its apparent randomness, the whole story seems to be infused with a predestined futility, as if the enterprise of responding to violence by picking up male tools of oppression – even temporarily – were in some way bound to lead to self-destruction as well as to the destruction of others.

It can be argued that both through their choice of generic form (porn movie + action/road movie) and through the male-inspired characterisation of their female protagonists, Despentes and Trinh Thi end up with an all-embracing nihilism that militates against the goal they appear to have set themselves of reversing gender power roles. Does this nihilism indicate that, when all is said and done, the film-makers found no possible escape from the cultural patriarchy, that even "the most extreme violence" embodied in Nadine and Manu is ultimately condemned to impotence? Or are they simply, as young women film-makers, rediscovering by trial and error that their goals cannot be achieved by mimicking macho forms and narrative structures? It remains to be seen how the subsequent work of Despentes will clarify the itinerary she is constructing for herself.

Although both film-makers began their careers by adapting their own literary works, and there are parallels across their preoccupations, the case of Catherine Breillat differs in a number of respects from that of Virginie Despentes. When Breillat released *Romance* – which secured her breakthrough in French cinema – she had already been in the industry for 20 years. Her previous body of directorial work was slim but she had also accumulated considerable experience as a scriptwriter and had developed a depth of artistic competence and sophistication that is quite absent from the work of Despentes.

While part of the public and critical attention focussed on *Romance* can certainly be ascribed to the explosion of interest in particularly female sexuality in end-of-millennium French society, the film was also taken seriously in a way that *Baise-moi* was not, because of both the psychological complexity of its theme, and its levels of artistic mastery. The film that followed *Romance*, *A ma soeur!* – more complex in its relationships, themes, and cinematographic techniques – confirms that, with Breillat, the spectator is dealing with a true *auteur*. There is a growing opus, the development of a personal vision and the elaboration of an aesthetic system of a quite different order from what we see in *Baise-moi*.

A ma soeur! tells the story of two sisters from a middle-class family, who, during their summer holidays, undergo radically different sexual initiation experiences. The older and prettier one, Elena, who is 15, goes through a more or less predictable romance ritual with a handsome Italian student, Fernando, several years her elder. The young sister, the almost obese and precociously pubescent Anaïs, aged 12, is subject to the brutal attack of a deranged vagabond, who, in a nightmarish sequence at the end of the film, murders Elena with a hatchet, strangles the girls' mother and then rapes Anaïs.

While Breillat is obviously interested in Elena's psychology and the complicated emotional interplay between the sisters, it is Anaïs who is the film's central consciousness and it is her gaze and her itinerary, with considerable autobiographical inspiration, which shape the film. [10] Anaïs is an extraordinarily compelling character: still emerging from childhood, she has the half-naïve characteristics of an incipient adolescent. She experiences the typical adolescent sense of waiting for something – anything – to happen to her. And as she waits, she watches, separated from events in an almost surreal state of inertia. Her ill-formed corpulence, accentuated by her badly chosen clothing and her constant compulsive eating, translate this inner state with poignant ambiguity.

From the beginning, however, Anaïs also reveals herself to be a person of fearless and intelligent perspicacity. She regularly absorbs, with seeming indifference, insults and condescending comments from her beautiful sister and mother, and she articulates with increasing clarity her rejection of the romantic delusions she sees at work in her sister's life. It is this core of unshakeable personal integrity that transforms our perception of Anaïs over the course of the film from the awkward and heavy younger sister figure to a person of intriguing attractiveness, and even of beauty, and that allows her gaze – images of which punctuate the film – to become the spectator's main guide to interpretation of the action.

Three harrowingly explicit sex scenes structure the narrative of *A ma soeur!* The first two concern Elena and Fernando, and the transmutation of romanticised

puppy-love into an equally romanticised sexual initiation. The third is the rape of Anaïs. In the first sequence, Fernando plays the stereotypical Latin lover, declaring eternal love to this under-aged girl whom he is trying to seduce. She, for her part, is glued into the set role of the young beauty, a person curious about sex and keen to experiment, but constrained by her need to do so only in the framework of "real love". Contextual scenes frame this one as a kind of reproduction of the lives of the previous generation: physically and socially, Fernando is a clone of Elena's father, and she herself, despite her teenage altercations with her mother, is simply replicating her mother's attitudes towards love and life. This first sex scene is both extremely long – over twenty minutes – and excruciating. In the end, Elena acquiesces, allowing Fernando to relieve himself in an act of anal sex. She accepts his insistence that this is a "*preuve d'amour*", while preserving her sense of self-dignity by telling herself that it is not the "real thing". From the spectator's viewpoint, this conclusion is a travesty of the whole notion of romance itself, with the male stripped down to his need to ejaculate and the woman a victim of her own gullibility.

With that sequence still present in the mind of the spectator, the second sex scene, where we do witness the "real thing", is condemned to anti-climax. Elena, as before, is oblivious to the presence of her sister in the same room, but there is no joy or triumph for her in this moment of which she has had such great expectations. The scene, pushed towards caricature by Breillat's desire to show the essential selfishness of romance, moves from the grotesque to the farcical. What we see of Elena's subjectivity is uncertain and anxious, and the film-maker stresses the derisory nature of the event by shifting the camera almost completely away from the love-making couple to focus on the distress of the younger sister. Breillat's cinematography here is savagely grating, as she moves the camera from the couple to focus on Anaïs, reducing the lovers' activity to Fernando's sonorous panting and a distant cameo of his feet and ankles jiggling on the bed. The radical and sudden shift of perspective to a female viewpoint exposes the hollowness of the conventions of mainstream cinema sexual representation. In the end, the spectator is drawn to share Anaïs' tears of rage and sorrow.

The problem is that behind the codes of seduction and "trust me" sweet talk, terrible violence is being done, which is none the less destructive and revolting for Elena's embrace of it. As a character, Fernando is little more than an archetypal know-all selfish male, but for Breillat, he is a symptom of something much darker. This is the significance of the ending of the film, prepared by a long, hallucinatory, nocturnal drive on the freeways leading back to Paris. The wrenching power of the murder and rape sequence lies in the fact that Breillat succeeds in convincing the audience that this is in fact not an isolated event, not just an accident, but rather a revelation that the surface order regulating the lives of this trio of women – of women in general – is fragile, and subject at any moment to extreme violence. The parking lot at the edge of the freeway, a designated place of safety and rest in terms of the surface order, is a striking symbol of the false security that Breillat is seeking to warn her spectators against.

Visually, the contrast between Elena's "real thing" and Anaïs' rape is extreme, but between the false beauty of the first, and the ugly reality of the second, Breillat seems almost to prefer the latter, because it is at least a more open, if still disturbing representation of the painful struggle that women, necessarily, must engage in against the male-dominated world in which they live. The relative openness is exemplified in

the settings (which demonstrate again the care with which Breillat works her canvas): the interior of the bedroom is rendered increasingly claustrophobic, while the exterior scene in the woods culminates in Anaïs symbolically removing the gag from her mouth. Elena is a triple victim – of self-delusion, sexual exploitation and murder; and in this, she is following the pattern established by her mother. Anaïs, who from the very beginning is endowed with the gift of seeing through the veils of deceit, is a victim of rape, but tellingly, in the course of the act, she seems to reach the decision to assume it as her experience, and not as something imposed upon her. This does not imply masochism, but rather defiance. Through the gesture, almost involuntary, in which Anaïs places her arms around her aggressor's shoulders in a form of embrace, she is preparing the paradox of her final statement, in which she denies having been raped.

This is an enigmatic moment, and the protagonist's "*Si vous voulez pas me croire, ne me croyez pas*" is addressed as much to the audience as to the policemen who have found her. It is, of course, clear that from any reasonable external viewpoint, Anaïs has in fact been raped, but it is precisely that external viewpoint that the film-maker is challenging in favour of respecting the subjectivity of her female character. It is possible to think that Anaïs is traumatised by shock, but a more plausible interpretation is that she is denying any framework of judgment other than her own, pre-empting any possible outside description of her as a victim. She is, in the most controversial and extreme circumstances, asserting her right to define her own experience. It is the statement of a future fighter, informed by an attitude identical to that of Breillat herself. It is extremely confrontational for the spectator that Anaïs' freedom should come at the expense of the death of her mother and sister; however, Anaïs' affirmation of personal and female power in the face of the most degrading of gender-specific male-inflicted violence constitutes the core of Breillat's message. [11] She has stated that her films are not intended to be mere provocation, but rather represent a rebellion and a war against a male-dominated cultural reality (Armanet & Vallaeys 2000).

Baise-moi and *A ma soeur!* both have an unnerving quality of extreme authorial engagement – a directness that shakes autobiographical convention by situating the writing of self squarely within the zones of the erogenous and the carnal. Both films begin with an intense close-up on the face of its protagonist, a shot that suggests probing questions rather than any position statement. More importantly, they are shots that, in almost flaunting the marginality of the gaze they embody, claim that gaze as authentic and unflinching, one that will not be lowered before the enemy. Anaïs, for example, never takes her eyes off her aggressor. That the enemy appears to be everywhere, in the selfish strutting and spieling of individual males, or in the historically durable and all-pervasive value systems that model and constrain mainstream attitudes and behaviour, does not deflect these women directors from their course. *Baise-moi* cannot qualify as a well-made film, but Despentes herself has a marginal background that confers a sense of legitimacy. [12] Both the censorship issue and the "street cred" authenticity that Despentes embodies have allowed Breillat to use *Baise-moi* as one of her own weapons in her war against patriarchal structures, [13] and especially against the sexual principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which she has described as "abject" (Kaganski 2000). Despentes, too, has shown a readiness to fight, declaring that it delights her to drive people to fury: "*Ça me réjouit*" she says, "*de mettre les gens hors d'eux. Il y a un plaisir à faire chier. Ça fait discuter.*" [14]

Beyond the controversy that it provokes, Breillat's work is helping to direct the debate in France not just about sex in the cinema, but female sexuality more generally, and indeed the nature of sexuality itself and its place in society. In a very real sense, she is a revolutionary, and her work demonstrates that – despite the Mendras vision of a second French revolution already accomplished and of a society now free of fundamental conflict – the fight is far from over. The values that Mendras sees as giving coherence to French society as a whole – the family, interpersonal fidelity, and tolerance – are in no way a given for Breillat. She, like Despentes and Trinh Thi or Catherine Millet, would agree with Mendras about their right to be free and to construct their own worlds, but she would challenge him about the nature and the reliability of the existing building blocks.

At the end of *La France que je vois*, Mendras colourfully compares the "old France" to a cathedral, strong and majestic, but dependent on the integrity of its flying buttresses, and the "new France" to a densely knotted Persian rug, variegated and supple (Mendras 2002:176). It is evident that Breillat considers the flying buttresses unfinished business, but while some of her critics would certainly – in the context of the oriental carpet metaphor – see her as working destructively to unravel the fringe, it is equally possible that she and her like are weaving a whole range of new meaning into the heart and body of French identity.

The research for this study has been conducted as part of an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant project on the politics and practice of French cinema since 1980. I am grateful to Kirsten Newitt for her invaluable research assistance, and to Emily Street for her editorial work. Address for correspondence: Department of French and Italian Studies, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia. E-mail: cnettel@unimelb.edu.au.

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NOTES

[1] See, for example, Etchegoin 2001: 5-8.

[2] This idea is similar to that enunciated by Deleuze and Guattari, in their celebrated discussion of the rhizome-like nature of national and cultural identities (Deleuze & Guattari 1980).

[3] See, for example, Forbes & Kelly (eds) 1995. See also Hayward 1993; Powrie 1997; Powrie (ed.) 1999; Williams 1992.

[4] Nettelbeck 2002: 106-126. See also Tarr & Rollet 2001.

[5] For instance, it was cut in Britain, but released for adult viewing, and banned in Canada. Curiously, in Australia, *Baise-moi* was initially given a free release by the National Censorship Board, and it played for some weeks in theatres in Sydney and Melbourne. An appeal by conservatives led to the Board reversing its decision and banning the film altogether.

[6] The *Prix de Flore*, for her novel, *Les jolies choses*. The *Prix de Flore* is awarded to writers of promising talent – nicknamed "*le prix des branchés*".

[7] On one level, the film even seems to parade a pornographic pedigree. Manu is a porn-film actor, and Nadine is an unashamed consumer. We see Nadine watching pornography on television on at least two occasions.

[8] Cited in Etchegoin 2001: 6.

[9] The Internet Movie Database **(http://www.imdb.com/)** quotes figures of under 40,000 admissions in France, and a cumulative take of under $100,000 in the US market. While these figures may not be entirely reliable, they are indicative. See **http://us.imdb.com/Title?0249380**

[10] Breillat herself also had a beautiful older sister, Marie-Hélène, who sustained a modelling career in France in the 1970s. Bonnaud 2001: 14.

[11] Cf Ginette Vincendeau, who sees in this scene a "suggestion that to be raped is a potentially liberating experience." (Vincendeau 2001: 20).

[12] As Marion Mazauric puts it Despentes is "emblematic" of a generation: "*Que Virginie soit une autodidacte née dans un milieu populaire, qu'elle ait un long passé trempé dans la rébellion punk, tout cela fait qu'elle incarne plus que tout autre cette culture-là.*" Mazauric 2000.

[13] See, for example, Armanet & Vallaeys 2000 and Breillat 2000a.

[14] Cited in Armanet & Vallaeys 2000.