

KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH
TO UNDERGROUND
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Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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7.6. The potential intersections of queer methodologies and punk productions: The Case of *Baise Moi*

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A b s t r a c t

Remembering Jose Esteban Muñoz's famous quote, "often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 10), this paper explores punk productions in terms of queerness, or rather investigate whether it is possible for theories around queer methodologies to intersect with punk politics that are ingrained in certain forms of low-budget aesthetics in cinema. Adopting the punk movement's do-it-yourself discipline, how certain filmmakers' tendency to discard the already defined, almost a ready-made form of filmmaking, will be examined to see what type of political position cinematic punk might refer to, specifically regarding the production and reception of the French film *Baise Moi* (2000).

Keywords: Punk aesthetics, punk cinema, queer theory.

GIRLS
HATE
FLOWERS

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This paper aims at bringing together two distinctively destabilizing methodological discussions on producing (queer) theory and (punk) art, the first of which explores how queer studies has an impact on cultural theory in terms of research techniques. This involves a brief investigation of queer methodologies or whether, such concept as a queer methodology could exist. I use this discussion to present a framework through which the second methodological discussion, which is about punk productions in cinema, can be examined. When punk is researched, there tends to be an element of subjectivity which highlights the lived experience and the participatory aspects of punk productions. Therefore, it seems possible to draw connections between the self-reflexivity of punk productions and the destabilizing effects of queer methodologies in research, considering their arguably shared act of defying exclusionary discourses and mainstream modes of practice. It is also an attempt to demonstrate this parallelism by way of looking at the reception and production of a specific film, Virginie Despentes and Carolin Trépoire's controversial film *Baise Moi* (2000).

1. The possibility of queer methodologies

One of the most practical effects of queer theory in social sciences seems to pertain to research methods, promoting the possibility of new methods that account for personal experience and subjectivity as central as collected data, which contrast certain sections of social sciences and humanities that insist on empirical and quantitative methods. It is also the aim here to draw connections between how queer methods emerged and how they are received within different disciplines, and my own research topic, punk aesthetics in cinema. One of the key resources is the collection, *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Sciences Research*, published in 2011 and edited by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash. As they express in their introduction, they reject putting forward a definition of queer, emphasizing their main purpose as to encourage their contributors to attribute their own meaning to "queer". This way, they give importance to the unclarity of the term, in order to "explore the internal 'boundary policing'" and "to keep current sets of meanings associated with queer in circulation while also allowing room [...] for others that are yet unknown, unasked or unacknowledged" (Browne and Nash, 2011, p. 8-9). As a result, the most visible commonality in the collection is that all authors integrate "queer" into their own research, presenting ideas that do not just illustrate, but also question the usefulness of queer theorizing itself. The authors' subjective experiences with this approach towards academic study become crucial to the collection, bringing the element of subjectivity to the fore.

The second main resource in this investigation is the special volume of *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* on queer methods. This volume is unusual as it also includes poetry and fiction, making an example of the effect of bringing "queer" to the traditional understanding of scholarly publication. The main arguments and questions that this special volume produces about queer methods revolve around one of the practical functions of queer theory, that is, the destabilization of the grounds on which academic research stands on: they ask: are we going to take traditional research methodologies' constructedness for granted? Is not this constructedness of current methodologies a criterion that confirms the validity and quality of research in the first place? By claiming to challenge the tradition and to construct new methods that account for the

subjective experience of the researcher, are we risking the legitimacy of our research? All in all, their questions led me to another question that became central to my own research: would it be possible for a film scholar to account for subjective experience with their research subjects, namely, their corpus of study (in my case, a large list of low-budget independent films from mostly the punk era, that is, the late-1970s and 1980s)? What would it mean to approach film analysis and punk subculture with a queer orientation?

When discussing the politics behind using the term “queer” instead of “gay”, “lesbian” or “bisexual” as a mode of address, Eve Sedgwick points out the performative activity that the term brings along:

A word so fraught as ‘queer’ is – fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement – never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone’s use of ‘queer’ about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else. (...) A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which ‘queer’ can signify only when attached to the first person. One possible corollary: that what it takes – all it takes – to make the description ‘queer’ a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person (1993, p. 9).

Sedgwick’s clarifying explanation of the usefulness of term “queer” emphasizes an impulsive activity of self-subjectification, rather than its possible categorizing effect (hence the term “queering”). An activity gains meaning through the subject who performs it, whereas a category gains meaning through the commonalities shared by the subjects it unifies. In this trajectory, the political side of “queer” stems from its connection to inclusiveness towards subjects that assumed identity formations exclude in society: “queer” is more about the activity of defying exclusionary discourses around identity and less about identification. In the light of this understanding of queering activity as a method of destabilization of established categorizations and techniques of describing others, it might be possible to combine subjectivity and collectivism while exploring the issues of identity, representation and societal participation. A big part of societal participation regards art production as it is the area for both subjective and collective expression. And here we are especially talking about aesthetics and methods that promote participation rather than imposition, highlighting the importance of lived experience rather than distanced studies. Drawing from the queering activity as a method for promoting subjective *and* collective participation, I would like to turn to punk discourse in academia and the cultural impact of punk in cinema through its possible queering aspect in terms of its destabilizing effects. Queer theorist Tavia Nyong’o, for example, has asked whether “[we might] theorize the intersection of punk and queer as an encounter between concepts both lacking in fixed identitarian referent (...)” (2005, p. 20), suggesting a framework where the participatory creative expressions are investigated through the combination of queer theory’s resistance against normalizing effects in popular culture and the anti-sociality

of punk culture. Nyong'o's explorations of this intersection deeply inspired this paper and the following is an attempt to apply this intersectional observation to a punk film.

2. Punk discourse and *Baise Moi*

There are two occasionally overlapping issues that are touched upon in academic discussions that concern punk in terms of its historical and ethical positioning, both of which are related to the discourse around the authenticity of punk aesthetics and the recuperation of punk by mainstream forms of production. These issues highlight the importance of subjectivity in punk research. The first issue is punk being dead, summarized by Jude Davies as “the ‘punk is dead’ debate carried out among interested parties almost since punk’s inception” (1996, p. 4), underlining the longevity of the insistence on a strict definition of punk (the definitions may vary), in debates, academic or otherwise. However, the expansion of punk research from subcultural studies towards different disciplines and subjects – such as musicology, gender studies, film theory, later examinations of the movements such as riot grrrl, hardcore and anarcho-punk and studies that take account of lived experience on a global scale – seems to exceed the historical effectiveness of the debate on whether punk should be considered as a dead subculture. The vague consensus on the outdated-ness of this debate actually reflects the critique of the rigid categories of identity that has been associated with the rise of interdisciplinarity in social studies and cultural theory in general. This point is related to the second issue that has somewhat occupied the discourse: the complex relationship between punk and academia¹⁹¹. The objective distance that is traditionally required for academic research seems to be at the heart of the discussion of whether “punk research” conflicts with the subversion with which we associate the earlier punk movement in the late-1970s, and also with the politics of the aforementioned later movements.

How could this distance, the supposedly objective voice of an authority, be thought as necessary to analyze the effects of punk, a term that is understood through its rejection of the authoritarian methods of producing art and knowledge? This is a question that seems to connect what queer theory has been bringing to cultural studies as I briefly summarized earlier. The answer to the question perhaps could be this mode of criticism's goal of accounting for “lived experience”. Not just because of the subjective accounts, lived experiences and fieldwork of punk scholars who were or have been participants of different circles of punk subculture had a large part in their research, but also because the enriching contribution of the punk artists whose creative works and memories of the past provided knowledge on the complex ways through which the history of punk is being written and thought of. The parallels between how queer methods are examined and how punk is researched are more visible when we think about them in terms of their collective effort to document and create the historicity behind subcultural lives. The DIY ethics behind punk productions bring a certain collectivity to filmmaking as it can be traced in the aesthetics and production of French film *Baise Moi*. Here the argument is that *Baise Moi* has a queering effect in terms of its aesthetics and this is closely related to its low-budget conditions that are designed to provide a participatory sort of spectatorial experience rather than a cinematic professionalism.

¹⁹¹ See these resources for example: Bestley, R. & Ryde, R. (2016); Reddington, H. (2016); Halberstam, J. (2003).

Stacy Thompson, in his book *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business*, analyzes the history of punk from a materialistic perspective and he starts the definition of a punk production, first and foremost, as a commodity: “A “residual”, “emergent” and “unwanted” commodity” (2012, p. 6). This perspective demands looking into the production and consumption conditions of punk, therefore subtly problematizing the critical tendency to associate artistic works through their aesthetics with punk, merely because they seem transgressive in terms of their expression and structures. It does not, then, come as a surprise when Thompson lays out the problems of seeing the film *Fight Club* (1999) as a punk movie by way of analyzing its heteronormative ending and how it obscures its own material means of production. Thompson conceptualizes punk as a form of cultural production whose aesthetics are inseparable from its economics, thus offering a participatory experience.

The low-budget production of *Baise Moi* does not only provide the material conditions that Thompson deems necessary to align an artistic work with punk’s do-it-yourself ethics, but also marks a certain collective effort in the creation of an aesthetic that utilizes aspects of hard-core porn imagery that opens up a complex discussion on authenticity and realism: *Baise Moi*’s filmmakers Virginie Despentes and Carolin Trinh chose not to simulate the sex scenes and casted pornographic film actresses Raffaella Anderson and Karen Bach as the main protagonists. This is also why the film was banned in France initially and then given an X-rated certificate by the Ministry of Culture following a public condemnation in the mainstream newspapers after its entry to Cannes. This controversy, the ban and the rating issues that *Baise Moi* faced seem to reflect the status of punk commodity as an “unwanted” region of the commodification structures. But that is not the only aspect of the film that reflects this, both the filmmakers and actresses had been working in the porn industry while making *Baise Moi*; an industry that produces films whose consumption has always been highly restricted, regulated and at times banned altogether since its inception, depending on the laws around its viewing. Furthermore, the discussion about the pornographic film as a “low art” production has been occupying the discourse around pornography, regarding how it regulates and proliferates different sexualities and sexes through representation. This “low” status of pornographic productions is at the heart of the construction of the defiant politics in *Baise Moi*. There is an internalized notion in the film that “bodily” knowledge and spectacle can be embraced without seeking “high” status of other forms of representational politics of gender and identity, exemplifying a cultural resistance towards the acceptable, common-sense in a way, methods of art-making.

3. Punk aesthetics in cinema

When being asked a question about whether she wanted to make the film as a response to sexism, Virginie Despentes gives the following answer:

We wanted to make a punk movie. (...) We loved the movies from the 80’s [sic] Scorsese, Ferrara, De Palma’s Scarface [De Palma 1983], Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven and so with a tiny, tiny budget, we wanted to shoot the same kind of story: strong friendship, outcasts, graphic violence, sex and a bad ending (Despentes, 2009).

She lays out the most important aspects of the film in this short answer; that their film is intended to be a punk movie, and that they had “a tiny, tiny budget”. The connection between these qualities can be also traced when she talks about the production process in another interview:

It was difficult from the start to the end. People thought we would argue, so nobody wanted us to direct. Then they said Karen and Raffaella wouldn't be able to act, that it was a bad idea to use porn actresses, that it was a bad idea to show real sex, that it was a mistake to shoot it on DV because it wasn't high quality, that it was wrong to use available light because nobody would be able to see anything, and so on and so on (Despentes, 2002).

The film's production comes across in this description, as an activity of going against the norms of production and filmmaking itself, echoing Thompson's reading of punk commodity in relation to how desire is embodied in its process:

Because commodities are the bearers of desire, they can be read as expressions of the forces that shaped and became embodied in them. Punk in general can be grasped as a material exploration of how a specific set of illicit desires repressed within a dominant social order return to haunt it and, in the best cases, blast cracks in its surface. (2012, p. 6)

Choosing to transform her book with the same name and to shoot it with her porn actress friends, using natural lighting and spontaneous camera angles, defending casting pornographic film actresses, Despentes' filmmaking practice can be taken as emblematic of how producing punk is described by Thompson. This filmmaking practice presents a very opposite idea to the film scholar Nicholas Rombes' description of the signatory gesture of new punk cinema: “the relaxing of critique in the face of overriding entertainment apparatus of the cultural industry, has, today, become the signatory gesture of new punk cinema” (Rombes, 2005, p. 85). Rombes asserts that there is a certain self-reflexivity and self-consciousness in new punk cinema that does not necessarily direct its critical eyes towards the mainstream and the dominant culture industry, but it incorporates this self-consciousness into popular and mainstream cinema and points back to itself that way. Stacy Thompson's idea of punk not being independent from its production conditions here can be useful to problematize Rombes' idea that punk film can be perfectly mainstream and safe as long as it carries a political tone and a self-consciousness. When we look at the production process of *Baise Moi*, and that of the other low-budget and “trash” looking films like *Permanent Vacation* (1980) by Jim Jarmusch or *Pepi, Luci, Bom* (1989) by Pedro Almodovar for example, we can see that self-reflexive style of filmmaking does not necessarily come from the perks of getting funded by mainstream production companies as demonstrated by Rombes' notion of punk cinema. Even when *Baise Moi* received some of its low-budget from a relatively big production company Canal+, its production, distribution and screening went through a very tough journey to be able to reach to its audience, full of obstacles such as production codes and censorship. There is

also another interesting point here that all these films I mentioned are the first full-length films by their directors, presenting another pattern in production conditions: “low-budget” can be a means through which filmmakers form their own style and filmmaking methods that end up gaining their artistry from self-reflexivity. What is meant here as self-reflexive style is an activity of particularizing vision; the usage of the grainy, dark, distorted, skewed angles, imagery and coloring in film reflects visual element of the punk movement outside film, designed to attract attention to particular elements, rather than a whole. Regarding one the most known works on punk, Dick Hebdige’s investigation of punk mostly as *a style* in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, the final question I would like to propose then is this: can this style be embodied without an intensified understanding and embedded-ness of the significance of subculture and how that significance emerges?

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