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# “Deux cents mots et un gros marteau.” Virginie Despentes’s Skillful Construction of an Authorial Posture

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## From Writer to Author

*En fait, quand je me suis lancée, je ne comprenais pas vraiment ce que je faisais, mais je savais le faire. Je savais que, dans ma boîte à outils, j’avais deux cents mots, pas plus, mais aussi un gros marteau.* (Crom 4)

The *bricolage*-like depiction, that a Virginie Despentes keen on epigrammatic formulation suggests in this 2015 interview in *Télérama*, epitomizes the skillfully crafted posture of the once-trashed author and censored filmmaker who is now a member of the Goncourt Academy. From *Baise-moi* to *King Kong Theory* to *Vernon Subutex*, Despentes has established herself as a feminist writer committed to denouncing social ills and reactionary politics. The author of more than a dozen works of fiction, three of which have been adapted to the big screen, she has gradually receded from the feminist stance taken in her early writings to engage in a broader critique of glaring societal failures in contemporary France. No longer considered an interloper in the French literary world, Despentes is praised today for her incisive depiction of French society. The first volume of her recent trilogy *Vernon Subutex* has been described as a Balzacian epic<sup>1</sup> and has already won several prizes, among them the Roman-news prize awarded for a work of art reflecting on current events.

Readers and critics in France, as well as feminist and queer academics throughout the world, and who have celebrated her debut novel and filmic adaptation, have responded ambivalently to her versatility.<sup>2</sup> For her readership, her freshly-minted academician status does not align easily with that of the erstwhile literary *enfant terrible*. Despentes, for her part, acknowledges feeling perfectly at one with the succession of “persons that she has been” and claims that she is not closely tied to any of them:

Je suis d’accord avec *toutes les personnes que j’ai été*. Mais je ne suis pas très attachée à mes *identités* successives. J’ai beaucoup changé et j’aime changer. Je ne résiste pas. Il y a des gens qui apprécient leur

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*personnage*, qui ne veulent pas bouger. Moi, j'adore changer de pays, mentalement ou physiquement. (Taddei, my emphasis)

Despentès's grouping together of the words "persons" and "identities" under the literary term "character" in her self-description is remarkable for the way it foregrounds the complex entanglement between the real and fictitious dimensions of her successive incarnations. As such, it aptly carries over to the concept of posture on which I will rely in this article, to discuss the strategies of legitimation and authority that "made" Virginie Despentès Virginie Despentès.

The concept of posture as developed by Pierre Bourdieu and revised by Alain Viala and Jérôme Meizoz has been instrumental in identifying the specific strategies in which an author is "socialised in literary practice" by taking up a position in the literary field (Meizoz 85). Drawing on their own repertoire of literary references, authors choose a posture and engage dialectically with a series of others in order to be recognized and make a name for themselves. Within the well-known relational space conceived by Bourdieu, writers thus negotiate their literary identity. As Liesbeth Korthals Altes specifies, "authors have some leeway for agency and may strategically adopt the tokens of an established writer posture [or] coin an anti-profile" (57). This "mode of self-presentation" or "general way of being a writer" combines the rhetorical (textual) and behavioral (contextual) dimension of authorship (Meizoz 83). As such, Meizoz explains, it "allows [one] to describe the connections between behavior and textual effects in the literary field" (85). The heuristic value of this notion tied in with art sociology is invaluable to elucidate the representational politics at play in the construction of Despentès's authorial posture, a writer whose cultural currency has developed in a complex and fascinating manner.

This essay analyzes the specific ways in which this female French writer and filmmaker has created herself as an author out of a biographical focus on her life as a sex worker and rape survivor. It shows how this self-creation played out in her writing and obliquely regulated the transgressive readings of her works. I focus mainly on *King Kong Theory*,<sup>3</sup> a personal essay written in response to the critical reception of her movie *Baise-moi*. I read this important text as a female *Künstlersroman*, a portrait-of-the-artist genre that traces the development of a woman artist, detailing the struggles endemic to her gender. The female *Bildungsroman* more generally engages with issues of authorial identity, ethos, and authorship. Mary Eagleton,

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in *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, draws attention to the crucial issue of authority in these narratives: “the female author is achieving a sense of her coming-into-being and her validity in what is represented as both a self-authorizing and a wider social acceptance” (2). Thus, because the contemporary modes of cultural valorization have been largely shaped by the mediatization of culture, the ethos conveyed by the author — a term to which I will return — is instrumental in establishing a writer’s authority and value. In the first part of this essay, I analyze the textual and discursive strategies in which Desportes devises an ethos of authenticity that paves her way towards legitimation. The second part revisits the esthetics of abjection that made her infamous and lays bare the intricacies of her modes of self-presentation. I conclude with a few remarks on the responses that the author’s postural evolution has elicited.

### **I. “KING KONG GIRL” or an Ethos of Authenticity**

... *and then I became Virginie Desportes.* (KKT 75)

Becoming and being Desportes signifies performing an identity and assuming a general way of being that conditions how the writer is perceived, perceives herself, and grows into “that self” accordingly. In this sense, “embodying an author function and an authorial figure” partakes of a performative act in which a posture emerges as it is performed (Meizoz 81). The concepts of posture and that of ethos—the discursive expression of a given posture—are foundational to a social configuration in which a writer plays a role without necessarily being fully aware of the literary game.<sup>4</sup> Altes conveniently sums up the key terms of the sociopoetics of Meizoz and Viala and defines posture and ethos as “mental models, conventional paths along which writers classify themselves and in turn are classified by others, with consequences for the interpretation of their works” (55). A writer’s posture may thus evolve in parallel with her career and adjust to her evolving position in the literary field. Yet, it is rare that a writer creates a new posture, or to use Bourdieu’s term, a new *nomos* that “[define[s] for itself the principles of its legitimacy [and] contribute[s] to the questioning of literary and artistic institutions” (61). Rather, there are typical postures that writers can actualize depending on the degree of personal affinities they have with the existing models. In his essay “Modern Posterities of Posture,” Meizoz discusses Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s invention of such an archetypal posture and its influence on a whole line

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of writers from Stendhal to Charles Péguy to Louis-Ferdinand Céline. By presenting himself as the social outcast “giving voice to the humble” (Meizoz 82), Rousseau offered his epigones a repertoire of legitimate modes of “being on the wrong side of the tracks:”

[A] voice came soaring, troublesome and loud, to the effect that it smothered the racket of the entire eighteenth century. . . . and it was a poor kid from Geneva, who had been a vagabond, a beggar, a lackey! (Meizoz 82)

Analogous to the ironic authorial archetypal posture developed by Montaigne who grounded the art of his essays in the illusion of their artlessness, Rousseau positioned himself at odds with the literary establishment of his time (Atwan 110). “Such a posture,” Meizoz writes, “seeks to paradoxically found an author’s dignity and pertinence of expression in his loyalty to humble origins which are diametrically opposed to the lifestyle of the elite” (83).

In the same vein, Despentès has positioned herself as an outcast in the French literary field. With her anti-heroines, pornographic tropes, rape-revenge plots and empowering sexual violence, she has debunked normative conceptions of “women’s literature” and set out a reading of her works as a new genre of feminist literature — one that roils mainstream feminists and appeals to queer studies academics.<sup>5</sup> In the mediatized and instant celebrity culture in which author figures emerge today, Despentès has indeed fared extremely well. Like Rousseau, she has turned her socially modest origins and, in her particular case, experiences of rape and prostitution, into “a constant, legitimising theme” (Meizoz 81). The media ruckus that accompanied the release of her film adaptation of *Baise-moi*, combined with her own self-making image of “ex-hooker,” contributed to the *succès de scandale* that carved her path to authorship.<sup>6</sup> Despentès, like American punk writer and feminist Kathy Acker who is an important influence, “self-consciously identif[ies] with and [writes] from the position of those most thoroughly marginalized by normative culture” (Berry 41).<sup>7</sup> As the memorable opening paragraph of *King Kong Theory* makes clear, and as the last pages of the first volume of *Vernon Subutex* also suggest, Despentès explicitly sides with the “ugly ones” (*KKT* 7) and all the other wretched of the earth (*VS* 1: 395-97).<sup>8</sup>

Outside of France, Despentès’s fame comes mostly from her controversial first novel and its film adaptation. *Baise-moi* has been translated into eighteen languages and has sold one hundred thousand copies to date (Huffer 167). Significantly, more recent English translations of her other works

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have elicited criticism that corroborates her trademark image in France. For instance, the hagiographic presentation of Despentès in the *New York Times Book Review* for the release of *Bye Bye Blondie* in English—marketed together with *King Kong Theory* and *Apocalypse Baby*—attests to the clever devising of a typical authorial posture based on the exploitation of the celebrated social outcast. The close relationship that Jean Paul Sartre established in his famous biography of Jean Genet between the saint and the outlaw is here again deployed by the literary critic to set out a reading of Despentès as the spokeswoman for those whose bodies are vilified and voices silenced:

Despentès has become a kind of cult hero, a patron saint to invisible women: the monstrous and marginalized, the sodden, weary and wildly unemployable, the kind of woman who can scarcely be propped up let alone persuaded to lean in. (Seghal)

The writing and publication of *King Kong Theory* has been crucial in defining an ethos of authenticity that granted the writer credibility and recognition. The sociological concept of ethos draws on Aristotle's elements of rhetoric (*On Rhetoric*). According to Altes, for the Greek philosopher, "a speaker had to convey his ethos through discursive means alone. Other rhetoricians, however, Cicero prominent among them, insisted on the importance of the *prior ethos*, the image an audience already has of the speaker on the basis of [his/her] reputation"—a distinction she deems particularly relevant "in our time of increased mediatization" (5, italics in original). This concept is significant in the case of Despentès, who shot to fame with *Baise-moi* and wrote an undefinable experiential essay in which she expounds the personal disquieting circumstances that led her to become Virginie Despentès.

Her personal affiliation with her marginal and lawless protagonists is one of the constitutive elements of an ethos of authenticity grounded in a being-true-to-oneself paradigm which, for Despentès, carries a primary bodily denotation.<sup>9</sup> Her self is indeed encompassed within a life lived in a female body in all its abjection and vulnerability. As she theorizes in *King Kong Theory*, the female body is pivotal in the process of her subject formation as it becomes the stage of a complex and violent rebellion against neoliberal capitalist patriarchy. In the essay, as well as in her early fiction (*Baise-moi*, *Les Chiennes savantes*, *Mordre au travers*), Despentès contends that in a gendered patriarchal society in which female is a priori the weaker sex and socialized to be vulnerable, the female body is ineludibly reduced to sexualized corporeality and fated to sexual exploitation. Rape, she then infers, is in fact "a well-

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defined political strategy: the bare bones of capitalism, it is the crude bad blunt representation of the exercise of power. Rape is the exclusively male domain” (*KKT* 46-47). Abjection is therefore the female one. Barbara Creed and Ellen E. Berry in, respectively, *Abjection* and *Negative Aesthetics*, are useful here to draw out the implications of the gendered dialectics of Despentés’s openly makeshift theory; on the one hand, “the monstrous masculine constructs all women as abject” (Berry 86), and on the other, “the monstrous-feminine [is] constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology” (Creed 45). In Despentés’s essay, King Kong figures precisely a hybridity that precedes the imposition of binary categories such as male/female, human/animal, black/white, child/adult, etc. The heterotopic island in which the genderless creature lives before being captured allows for an “ultra-powerful, polymorphous sexuality” prohibited by conventional sexualities (*KKT* 107). As glossed by Despentés, the cathartic death of the legendary gorilla both restores law and order and reestablishes gender polarities. The iconic blond marries her Darwinian Hero and reenters modern city life having lost “her own essential power” (*KKT* 107).

Read though the critical prism of authorial posturing and ethos projection, King Kong in *King Kong Theory* stands as a literary foil to the author. In her essay, which Huffer fittingly describes as a “quasi theoretical Bildungsroman” (161), Despentés relates her coming of age as a punk female author who succeeds where King Kong has failed. Not only does she survive sexual violation, she also defeats the socializing forces that attempt to lure her into conformity. In the course of the seven chapters with mostly parodic titles that determine precise horizons of expectation,<sup>10</sup> Despentés is rescued from rape victimization by Camille Paglia’s empowering “get-up-and-brush-off-the-dust” rape theory and turns to Courtney Love’s punk culture to escape forced socialization into conventional womanhood, motherhood and matrimony (*KKT* 38-41, 134-36). In between, she rebuilds herself through prostitution, becomes Virginie Despentés (*KKT* 70), loses *her own essential power* for a while and “consent[s] to be a weaker person” (*KKT* 123). Yet, in the end, she drops the social mask and returns to her true “King Kong Girl” self:

*The monster in me had retained its grip. . . . I am not sweet I am not lovable I am not a middle-class girl. I get hormonal highs that send me into peaks of aggression. If I didn’t come from the world of punk rock, I would be ashamed of what I am. But I do come from the world of*

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punk rock, and I am proud of not fitting in. (*KKT* 124, my emphasis)

The portrait of herself that she limns in her developmental memoir actualizes an ideal of personal freedom that confers legitimacy to her literary enterprise. The author's much-touted interest in her own self-realization indicates that she envisions her experiences through the teleological model of the *Bildungsroman*. As she confidently announces, "being Virginie Despentès is a more interesting business than anything else going on out there" (*KKT* 7). Drawing on the rhetoric of the biography and the *topoi* of the essay form,<sup>11</sup> she identifies her position in the cultural field by placing herself somewhere between cultural dissident and feminist social critic — one aspect of the ethos of her major narrative figures. From that vantage point, she can denounce cultural ideologies of sexuality, advocate for the "gender revolution" (*KKT* 27) and redefine feminist authorship itself over and against male theologies of creativity while fulfilling the culturally legitimate function of the writer as social, political and cultural pundit (Burke 145-50). The ethical stance of the proletarian *littérateur* pioneered by Rousseau's posture and that she adopts allows her "to invest the literary stage with virtuous modesty [that is, no formal education],<sup>12</sup> a mistrust of authorities, and the audacity to confront the powerful with disagreeable truths" (Meizoz 81-82). The synopsis on the back cover of the book published by Grasset et Fasquelle in their "Essais de Sociologie" series epitomizes this exemplary ethos strategy:

*En racontant pour la première fois comment elle est devenue Virginie Despentès, l'auteur de Baise-moi conteste les discours bien-pensants sur le viol, la prostitution, la pornographie. Manifeste pour un nouveau féminisme. (KKT, my emphasis)*

*King Kong Theory* is thus presented (and overwhelmingly received) as a truthful account of real events, which confers an ethical dimension to its author's claims. In that sense, it aligns itself remarkably well with the narrative of education and its social and didactic functions. However, Despentès's version of the genre ironically reverses its ethos of social reformation; chaos is embraced here. She concludes her essay with an incitement to revolt against bourgeois society: "[i]t's not a matter of contrasting women's small advantages with men's small assets, but of sending the whole lot flying" (*KKT* 137). Because the text borrows freely from different genres, its adulterous form lends itself to a transgressive performance in the form of a parodic narrative, which, as Michèle Schaal showed, is an "overt literary politics" in all of Despentès's writings:

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[L]'esthétique 'despentina' accapare des types de narrations dits 'schématiques' afin de subvertir et d'exposer leurs diverses implications. . . . L'écriture de Despentes constitue également *une mise en scène*, une performance ironique . . . : ses romans reproduisent [d]es formes littéraires spécifiques . . . , pour mieux les détourner. Ceci confère à son œuvre entière une dimension autoréflexive qui participe également au démantèlement des lieux communs genrés et littéraires. ("Un Conte..." 49, my emphasis)

The theatrical dimension of her writing is indeed inseparable from her treatment of literary genres and models of identities. Conceiving of both as refractory to fixed definitions, she is free to *brush history against the grain* of the normative gender ideals and the literary canon and indulge in snuff parodies, heterosexual comedies, and clamors of dissenting voices.<sup>13</sup> Generic indeterminacy thus allows Despentes to deftly play the literary game on her own terms and (re)appropriate the cultural space by red-lightning it. In the following section, I will show that this reappropriation is, in fact, founded on an economic and esthetic exploitation of the feminist *topoi* of the abject.

## II. The Esthetics of the Abject Revisited<sup>14</sup>

*J'ai vécu. Pas mal brûlé, beaucoup appris. Sur les relations entre les hommes et les femmes, sur la politique, l'économie, le lancement d'un produit commercial. Je sais aussi qu'écrire est un exutoire, une façon de m'intégrer socialement.*<sup>15</sup> (Médioni)

*Heureusement, avant de commencer, je ne me rendais pas compte du prix qu'allait me coûter l'écriture de ce livre. Mais il fallait que je le fasse. Et même si je ne crois pas à la dimension thérapeutique de l'écriture, ce livre m'a soulagée, délestée.* (Crom 3)

The dialectic of incorporation and expulsion exemplified in these two epigraphic quotes is central to the author's cultural production. It subsumes a cluster of oppositions symptomatic of a process of constant redefinitions of an identity hewn from the experience of rape.<sup>16</sup> At the core of Despentes's identity figures the traumatic encounter with the reality of her vulnerable gender and exploitable female body when she is raped at the age of seventeen:

Since then, this proximity is logged in amongst those indelible things: men's bodies in a closed space, and us shut in with them but

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not the same as them. Never the same as them, with our women's bodies. Never safe, never equal. We belong to the gender of fear, of humiliation. The [O]ther gender.<sup>17</sup> (32)

For the author, rape is “a founding event” (*KKT* 50). It signifies the loss of her physical integrity, an *inaugural loss that lays the foundation of her own being* and the esthetics of abjection of which it partakes.<sup>18</sup> Being a body, having a body and writing the body become intertwined in a literary practice that foregrounds abjection as an embodied response to sexual violence and a feminist praxis predicated on a liberal sexual economy. In one of her pithy statements, the writer sums up this double injunction as “rape creates the best hookers” (45). The verb “fabrique” in the original French highlights the methodically planned manufacturing of gendered products (*KKTF* 49). What *makes* Despentès “a woman who is no longer quite a woman” and “a writer” whose fiction retells the timeless and colorless annihilation of her existence (“[a] white fear—time stopping, no longer existing, already not existing”) is best explained by the concept of the abject championed by Julia Kristeva (*KKT* 49-50).

“[T]he abject”, the philosopher writes in *Powers of Horror*, “is experienced at the peak of its strength when [the subject] finds that the impossible constitutes [her] very being” (5). It is not something “which I name or imagine” (1). ‘It’ *par excellence*, “[t]he abject has only one quality of the object that of being opposed to I” (1):

I always imagined that one day I will be done with *it*. Will have forgotten over the event, emptied *it*, exhausted *it*. Impossible. *It* is a founding event. Of who I am as a writer, and as a woman who is no longer quite a woman. *It* is both that which disfigures me, and that which makes me.<sup>19</sup> (*KKT* 50, my emphasis)

In her essay on disfiguration, French critic Evelyne Grossman (2004) relates the process of figuration to a psychic, social and intellectual normopathy. She describes “the figure” as a gregarious force that weaves the social fabric (9-10).<sup>20</sup> In this light, disfiguration fray it. What is disfigured is threatening; it is spurned as asocial, unintelligible and unassimilable. Despentès’s use of the term denotes a more literal defacement in French but also suggests the image of an abjected social and sexual body. In fact, she reckons that “women who have been raped . . . are [considered] damaged goods, . . . they have been polluted” (*KKT* 45). The language used in her essay to describe her post-rape identity recalls that of Kristeva. As Despentès theorizes, rape divests the body

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of its *docility* — that is, its social and cultural perfectibility as Michel Foucault explains — and, left to its own abject devices, becomes nothing more than flesh. This “fleshization,” however, rather than annihilating personhood, is reclaimed and “dramatized” in her personal essay and fiction, both in the sense of exaggeration (i.e., parody/prostitution) and performance (for an audience/for clients). The comedic turning of the abject against itself finds its epitomic representations in the writer’s depictions of herself as “Wonder Woman spinning around and coming out of it as a superheroine” and “as a mobile Luna Porn Park” (*KKT* 59). The autofictional dimension of *King Kong Theory* authorizes its author to perform Kristeva’s abject script in a way that both parodies and critically engages with her abjection.<sup>21</sup>

In Despentés’s sexual imaginary, the abject is rape, and rape is the abject. It sediments as an unsayable<sup>22</sup> and eviscerates itself as flesh.<sup>23</sup> As she puts it, rape “cuts into the flesh to create the available woman” (*KKT* 45). This open wound, which brands her as a woman<sup>24</sup> and informs her conception of improper and uncontainable bodies, is key to Despentés’s writing. Her esthetics of abjection — to encapsulate in this formulation the writer’s creative approach to “Horror” or the “Real” — pertains to a kind of economic reification that turns the “I am somebody of (no) value” into “I have a body for sale,” and fittingly reinvests the female body with a status as fetishized commodity — something that Karl Marx says “transcends sensuousness” (163). Once desecrated and desacralized, the abject body is excluded, and excludes itself, from the “marriage market”<sup>25</sup> (*KKT* 45) and finds its rightful place on the profane marketplace:

In my case, prostitution was a crucial step in rebuilding myself after the rape. A business of dollar-by-dollar compensation, for what had been taken from me by brute force. *I must have kept intact whatever I could sell to each client.* If I could sell it ten times in a row then it wasn’t something that could be destroyed by use. My sex belonged to me only, it didn’t lose value through being used, and it could be profitable. I was once again in an ultra-feminine position, but this time I was bringing in a profit. (*KKT* 67, my emphasis)

The ambiguous interplay between loss and gain on which Despentés attempts to restore her bodily integrity and sense of self is viscerally linked to the reinvention of herself as a prostitute and a writer. Both identities partake of an emancipatory gesture that capitalizes on the foundational wound in the form of an economic and esthetic exploitation of “whatever” remains “intact”

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and serviceable of the abject body and abject consciousness. As Huffer phrases it, “[i]t is as a whore-writer — the street walker — that Virginie is able to recycle woman as trash into *something other*” (167, my emphasis). Taking up a subject position that commodifies its abjection, the whore-writer “establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss”— to borrow Kristeva’s turn of phrase (16). In terms that remarkably illustrate the author’s perverse posture (the abject is always related to perversion), the philosopher describes the purview of the abject as “an artist who practices [her] art as a business” (15-16). This propitious image underscores the performative dimension of an authorial strategy that links authorship to streetwalking:

I stopped [prostitution] and started like that for a while, and then I became Virginie Despentès. The promotional part of my job as a celebrity author has always struck me as very similar to the act of prostitution. (*KKT* 70)

To Walter Benjamin, the prostitute as the figure of capitalism *par excellence* stands precisely as “the commodity [that] attempts to look itself in the face [and] celebrates its becoming human in the whore” (42). She is, Benjamin writes, “commodity and seller in one” (quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, 184). As Susan Buck-Morss, one of the foremost Benjamin scholars, explains, “as a dialectical image, [the prostitute] synthesizes the form of the commodity and its content” (185). This construal highlights a particular form of exhibition that helps elucidate Despentès’s unapologetic and unredeemable modes of self-presentation and empowerment. The paradoxes of her experiences of rape and prostitution morph into “something other” when she assumes the expression of fetishized commodity and incorporates “this crucial and fundamental trauma — the very definition of femininity” within a narrative of her own (*KKT* 38). Reckoning with the absence of a cultural discourse that articulates her traumatic experience, Despentès devises one “of experience” which, like Montaigne in his essay, sets out to tell her story in a manner commensurate with the exigencies and borders of her abject body:<sup>26</sup>

Prison, illness, abuse, drugs, abandonment, deportation: all traumas have their literature. But this crucial and fundamental trauma — the very definition of femininity, ‘the body that can be taken by force and must remain defenseless’ — was not part of literature. (*KKT* 38)

Her role and function as an author and her embodied female experience then converge when she comes face to face with her abjection (“looks itself in the face”) and subverts, as Nathalie Edwards rightly

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points out, “the rape scripts and the discourse of victimology” (214). By incorporating the abject, but excising the socially and culturally scripted traumatic power that it holds over her, she opens herself and her readers to a more complex and subversive esthetic experience. *King Kong Theory* may thus be best described as a parodic esthetic agenda. What Despentès is staging in this text is a revisiting of Virginia Woolf’s fisherwoman novelist — the iconic image of woman’s imagination unfettered by male domination — as a woman writer in fishnet stockings.

In the aptly titled *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster writes that “for many in contemporary culture truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body. Thus, the body is the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary witnessings against power” (166). In the context of the construction of an authorial posture supported by an ethos of authenticity, Despentès’s esthetics of abjection, based on the commodification of her flesh/text as it is theorized in *King Kong Theory* and fictionalized in her early works, takes on a paradoxical ethical dimension. It initiates a complex negotiation around the materialization of female authorship.<sup>27</sup> However, envisioned through the lens of a sociopoetics that gives center stage to the lived experiential body, this esthetics becomes the cornerstone of a literary strategy that prompts her legitimacy as an author and authority in the contemporary literary field. Her access to authorship is indeed inseparable from her writing against a postmodern esthetics — a prerogative of a white male literary elite — that has too long disbarred material subjectivity and truth altogether. As Huffer keenly observes, “[t]hese post-poststructuralist antiheroines give corporeal forms to the heady proclamations of France’s anti-humanist (male) philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, from the Foucauldian prediction that man will disappear to the Derridean deconstruction of man to the Deuleuzian man’s body without organs” (166).

**“The exquisite precariousness of the world of literature”<sup>28</sup>**

*C’est peut-être un peu plus punk que Balzac.* (Norrito)

In his influential work *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Bourdieu speaks of a specific moment when an author actually becomes one; the moment when “they manage to assert their identity (that is their difference) and get it known and recognized [*se faire un nom*]” (239, italics in

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original). In her account of this particular moment, Despentès's discernment suggests a great understanding of the literary market and a skillful maneuvering of literary conventions:

*Les Jolies choses* a été terrible à écrire, à relire, à publier. En lutte permanente contre l'angoisse. C'était mon troisième livre, mais j'avais conscience que c'était lui qui ferait de moi un écrivain. (Crom 4)

If in the early fiction, her conception of the abject revolved around the unruly sexualized female body, her later work focuses more on the abjection of the social body—the “*éremiste*” body of Gloria in her first social novel (229), *Bye Bye Blondie* (2004), and on those bodies, male and female, forced to live “unlivable lives” as her most recent eponymous trilogy illustrates. As “V. D.”<sup>29</sup> predicted, *Les Jolies choses* (1998) was a watershed in her career and marked a shift in her writing style. The Prix de Flore, which she won for it, elevated her from the position of social and cultural phenomenon to that of author.

This novel signaled the change in the course of the author's career as she moved away from strictly feminist oriented stories to engage with wider universal social issues. Shirley Jordan detects the Balzacian plot of arrivism in *Les Jolies choses* and comments on its author's exemplary progression “from the margins to the center of the publishing world” (24). In the same vein, Lara Cox contrasts *Bye Bye Blondie* to her previous “ultra-violent genre” and remarks that the filmic adaptation of the novel “unexpectedly seemed to curry favor with a generic mainstay of commercialized cinema” (97-98). The most mordant critic comes however from Sam Bourcier, who deplores the heteronormative angle of her filmic adaptation of *Bye Bye Blondie* (2011) and her documentary *Mutantes* (2009):

La réalisatrice de *Baise-Moi* s'est trompée de scénario à moins qu'elle n'ait voulu plaire aux hétéros en leur montrant Béatrice Dalle et Emmanuelle Béart se gamahucher gentiment en lesbiennes. Elle efface 30 ans de culture et de politique de la représentation féministe et lesbienne. (57)

About *Mutantes*, the French sociologist and queer activist's acrimonious criticism exemplifies the resistance of a certain readership to adjust to the new posture or postural discontinuity of the writer:

*Sa posture de romancière à la française* n'y est sans doute pas étrangère. D'une certaine façon, le documentaire de la réalisatrice censurée pour avoir fait *Baise-moi* a censuré à son tour la culture queer et post-

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porn. . . . L'occasion de se souvenir aussi *qu'après tout Baise-moi* sorti en 2000 était un rape and revenge movie raté.<sup>30</sup> (54, my emphasis)

Viala explains that the logic of a literary strategy is determined by the “various postures manifested in it, or continuity within the same posture which becomes the writer’s specific ‘hallmark’” (quoted in Meizoz 83). The mainstreaming turn that the writer took from *Les Jolies choses* onwards may then either be considered as a new posture or the logic evolution of a literary strategy towards consecration. In her interviews, the author challenges her detractors but deftly conforms to her ethos of authenticity:

La coke, pour écrire, ça marche au tout début où tu en prends. Après, ça te fait un autre effet . . . Ensuite, tu te contentes d'en prendre pour faire ta vaisselle . . . Quand tu écris *Baise-moi* à 23 ans et que ça marche, tu te dis que tu pourrais te faire un argent fou. . . . Prendre une attitude dominatrice, jouer la meuf destroy de salon. Faire ce qu'on attend de toi et voir si l'argent rentre . . . *Mais si tu te demandes qui tu es vraiment*, tu fais autre chose. (Taddeï, my emphasis)

Despentès decided to do “something else” and unquestionably succeeded on all fronts. She is now an award-winning author and a member of the prestigious Académie Goncourt. The heuristic value of posture and ethos allows us to understand her trajectory and expose the new reality and social fictions of the literary market. As one of its agents, as Bourdieu famously characterized its participants, Despentès seemed to have learned early that, *après tout*, there is also an “exquisitely precarious” way to be transgressive.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The back cover reads : “Qui est Vernon Subutex? / Une légende urbaine / un ange déchu / un disparu qui ne cesse de ressurgir / le détenteur d'un secret / le dernier témoin d'un monde révolu / *L'ultime visage de notre comédie inhumaine* / Notre fantôme à tous” (my emphasis). See also, in this volume, Maxime Goergen’s article “*Vernon Subutex* et le roman ‘balzacien’” (165-82).

<sup>2</sup> “La punk s’est assagie” is an assessment that is shared by most readers who have followed Despentès’s career (Bénéteau). For some, she has lost her edge, for others, she has perfected her art. In a recent article (June 2017), Anne Fulda summarizes clearly and accurately the prevailing view on Despentès literary (and social) ascension; see “Virginie Despentès, l’écorchée douce.”

<sup>3</sup> For ease of reading, I will cite the essay in its English translation (2010). References made to the French edition will appear as *KKTF* in parenthetical references.

<sup>4</sup> Erving Goffman, whose seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday*

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*Life* was distilled in the Bourdieusian sociology of literature, sheds light on the level of awareness a person experiences when playing her part in normal social situations: “At one extreme, we find that the performer can be fully taken in by [her] own act; [s/he] can be sincerely convinced of reality which [s/he] stages is the real reality. . . . At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by [her] own routine. This possibility is understandable, since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on. Coupled with this, the performer may be moved to guide the conviction of [her] audience as a means to other end. . . . We may call [her] cynical.” (10). One may think for instance of the public presentation of a writer (ethos) whose posture is strictly designed to fit the demands of the literary market and bears no connection with the real person.

<sup>5</sup> There are many critical works on Despentès’s first novel. So, I will limit myself to two critical responses to her work to suggest the ways the author of *Baise-moi* was read. Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, in their *New Pornographies*, claim that her work “engages with the convention of literary culture and holds itself as a sometimes-parodic distance from these conventions, willfully ducking under the bar which separates the literary from the sub-literary, the esthetics from the sub-esthetic” (6-7). For Marie-Hélène/Sam Bourcier, Despentès’s work signaled a post-porn critical moment: “Le post-porn au sens politique et subculturel du terme a trouvé sa définition de départ en France à l’occasion d’une queerisation de *Baise-moi*, le film censuré de Virginie Despentès en 2001. La censure brutale au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et en France, d’un film réalisé par une femme remettant en scène des éléments de son propre viol . . . a constitué un facteur déclencheur et conjoncturel. C’est contre cette censure classique . . . que s’est mobilisée . . . la première association queer française, provoquant ainsi la rencontre entre Virginie Despentès, le féminisme et la perspective queer” (50).

<sup>6</sup> See Azoury; Reynaud; and Rolandeau. See also Bourcier’s note #6 (60).

<sup>7</sup> This description, which applies remarkably well to Despentès’s site of enunciation is, in fact, Ellen E. Berry’s description of Acker’s “negative esthetics” which I adapt here for my purpose (41).

<sup>8</sup> See Éléanore Brassard’s reading of *Baise-moi* in conjunction with Frantz Fanon in this volume (36-58).

<sup>9</sup> The ethos of punk rock is unquestionably linked to that of authenticity. One of the defining elements of punk literature is precisely “the claim to authenticity . . . the idea of authentic experience as the primary site of creative expression” (Sabin 44). Furthermore, it sanctions an asocial “way of being.” As music critic Danielle Banner put it: “The ethos of punk provided a platform on which women could freely and without judgment document their personal experiences of objectification, domestic violence, [and] sexual violence.”

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<sup>10</sup> As always in the cases of translations, some of the parodic elements are lost and some are inescapably added. Ellen E. Berry, for instance, links the title in English, “A Gun for Every Girl” to Valerie Solanas (1967) whereas “Bad Lieutenantes” in French evokes immediately the morally depraved character of Abel Ferrara’s movie whom Desportes claims to emulate as a woman.

<sup>11</sup> “[T]he apparent spontaneity of presentation, the emphasis on rhetorical sophistication, the exaltation of the incomplete, the rejection of a purely deductive logic, the eschewal of heavy-handed profundity, the antipathy toward systematic dogmatism, the treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter, the central importance of play, the insistence on human fallibility, the image of a meandering, exploratory journey” (Pourciau, 2007, 624).

<sup>12</sup> “[J]e n’ai pas de formation universitaire, la théorie ne faisait pas partie de mes pratiques, mais on a été amenées, sur le tas, à formuler quelques concepts expliquant après coup ce qu’on avait cherché à faire en réalisant ce film” (Belin and Arbizu).

<sup>13</sup> Like most critics of *Baise-moi*, I consider that parody is central to the novel and its filmic adaptation. The parodic dimension of her other works in their various manifestations have also been the object of many studies. See Fayard 63-77; Schaal (“Un conte...”) 49-61; and Lynne Huffer 161-76.

<sup>14</sup> Several scholars have discussed how Desportes’s work, especially her early novels, toyed with the abject especially as defined by Julia Kristeva. See namely Fayard 72, 73-74; Jordan 52, 133-34, 136; Louar 88-89, 95; and Schaal (“Virginie Desportes...”) 47.

<sup>15</sup> These are Desportes’s comments after the publications of her first two novels, *Baise-moi* and *Les Chiennes savantes* (Médioni).

<sup>16</sup> I struggled with attaching the word “rape” to the identity of Desportes who explicitly rejects any imposed identity such as victim or survivor, but, as we read in *King Kong Theory*, this experience of violation is foundational to her development as an author and has informed much of her fiction until now (*KKT* 50).

<sup>17</sup> “Cette proximité, depuis, parmi les choses indélébiles: corps d’hommes dans un lieu clos où l’on est enfermées, avec eux, mais pas semblables à eux. Jamais semblables, avec nos corps de femmes. Jamais en sécurité, jamais les mêmes qu’eux. Nous sommes du sexe de la peur, de l’humiliation, le sexe étranger” (*KKTF* 34). I capitalize the ‘o’ of “other” (and I think it should be in the English version) to translate the process of Othering that the French version suggests. Desportes does not mean the “other gender” (l’autre genre) but the gender of the Other.

<sup>18</sup> The part I italicized in this sentence is extracted from a longer quote from Julia Kristeva in her essay: “The abjection of self would be the culminating form

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of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being” (5).

<sup>19</sup> The Freudian notion of “ça” can be heard in the French text: “J’imagine toujours un jour pouvoir un jour en finir avec ça. Liquider l’évènement, le vider, l’épuiser. Impossible. Il est fondateur. De ce que je suis en tant qu’écrivain, en tant que femme qui n’en est plus tout à fait une. C’est en même temps ce qui me défigure, et ce qui me constitue” (*KKTF* 53).

<sup>20</sup> I am paraphrasing the French: “Parce qu’elle participe du lien social, du vivre-ensemble (se reconnaître dans les mêmes formes, les mêmes signes d’appartenance), l’image [la figure] est grégaire par vocation” (Grossman 9-10).

<sup>21</sup> Many critics have underscored the autofictional aspects of this text. See Landry 50-69; Schaal (“Virginie Despentes...”) 49-61; and Fayard 63-77.

<sup>22</sup> “The wounds of a war which must be fought in silence and darkness” (*KKT* 35).

<sup>23</sup> In the aforementioned interview by Henri Belin and Susana Arbizu, the writer describes the retelling of her rape as “une éventration,” “a disembowelment.”

<sup>24</sup> “But at that precise moment I felt female, disgustingly female, in a way I had never felt, and I have never felt since” (*KKT* 44).

<sup>25</sup> “[E]lles sortent spontanément du vivier des épousables” (*KKTF* 49). The word “vivier” suggests a social endogamy that also involves a strictly controlled economy of sexual relations.

<sup>26</sup> I adapt for my purpose Dalia Judovitz’s eloquent formulation in *The Culture of the Body* (19).

<sup>27</sup> The authors of the *New Pornographies* find Despentes’s tangle of criticism and complicity highly problematic. They note that “Despentes’s work, particularly in its use of sexually explicit material, thus forms a typical example of the problems facing the contemporary artist who wants to denounce the hegemony: with the artwork already thoroughly commodified, there is no external vantage point from which such a denunciation might be performed” (Best and Crowley 20).

<sup>28</sup> My translation of: “Ella encadenó empleos precarios — cuando no ilegales—, de estricta supervivencia, antes de aterrizar en esa ‘precariedad exquisita’ que le han garantizado el periodismo, la literatura o incluso el cine tal y como ella lo ha conocido” (Torres).

<sup>29</sup> Her signature on the back cover of the French edition of *King Kong théorie*.

<sup>30</sup> Compare with Bourcier’s previous statements in note #5.

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