

“Mais dégage”!¹ Touch and Gendered Power Dynamics in Virginie Despentes’s Novels

- 1 Gendered violence, in all its forms, is arguably one of the most prominent features of Virginie Despentes’s work. Sexual harassment and abuse, and most notably rape, are recurrent motifs in her narratives. Despentes shared the experience of her own rape in the autobiographical feminist manifesto *King Kong théorie* (2006) and discussed the power of feminist texts to help her deal with the trauma². She famously depicted rape and questioned gendered power dynamics in the text and film versions of *Baise-moi* (1993, 2000). The rape-revenge narrative, in which two women, victims and/or witnesses of the most abject violence, decide to take matters into their own hands and go on a killing spree punctuated by intervals of sex, propelled Despentes to stardom. Gendered dynamics and the power shift operated through the female characters’ appropriation of violence in the text and the film have received sustained critical attention, and *Baise-moi* remains to this day the most commented on of Despentes’s works³.
- 2 This article will look at some of Despentes’s less studied texts which also engage with various forms of gendered violence and harassment against women, namely *Les jolies choses* (1998), *Apocalypse bébé* (2010) and the recent trilogy *Vernon Subutex* (2015-2017)⁴. Drawing on previous criticism that has focused on Despentes’s “proletarian”, as well as queer feminism, this article will complement these studies with a particular focus on touch in the texts⁵. My approach to touch is multi-dimensional; I will first reflect on how gendered power dynamics are portrayed through (the threat of) objectifying and abjectifying touch in depictions of street harassment and rape⁶. I suggest that thinking about touch in Despentes’s work is a way to gain a better understanding of the subjugation of the female body depicted in the narratives, as well as the potential for its subversion. Indeed, focusing on touch is a way of questioning traditional hierarchies and the dominance of sight in feminist and literary studies. Consequently, this article will reflect on how power relations can be destabilised in the texts through the analysis of point of view as well as through the imagining of new modes of haptic contact.

Touch and the body

- 3 Gendered power relations in Despentes’s oeuvre have been the subject of extensive academic scrutiny. Critics have notably discussed what type of feminist message, if any, can be drawn from Despentes’s writing and what kinds of feminist thinking have inspired her work⁷. Michèle Schaal discusses the intersectional perspective of Despentes’s feminism, which focuses on gender as much as on class, and to some extent on race, to show the intertwining of these dimensions in power dynamics⁸. Critics, including Schaal, have noted the influence of both French materialist feminism and American third wave feminism on Despentes’s writing⁹. This oscillation between various feminist analyses of power will be important for my study of touch in the texts of Despentes, starting with the concept of objectification, which is central to materialist feminism, and particularly to Colette Guillaumin’s work. Guillaumin suggests thinking about the subjugation of women in the patriarchal order in terms of “sexage”, which can be defined as the ownership of one part of the population by another, on the same basis

as slavery or serfdom¹⁰. Guillaumin conceives of women as a social class, which is being exploited and collectively appropriated by men as a group; as well as individually appropriated by male figures through the family institution (kinship or marriage)¹¹. *Sexage* implies the objectification of women, who are never conceived as subjects in this relationship, but rather as objects to be used to satisfy the various needs of the male subject (sex, reproduction, care, etc). From this perspective, Guillaumin defines sexual constraint, within which she includes rape, provocation, unrequested flirting (“la drague”), in terms of power over and appropriation of the female body, as: “one of the coercion means employed by the class of men to subjugate and terrify the class of women; at the same time as the expression of their right of ownership over that same class”¹². Hence, threatening to touch the female body or carrying out that threat is central to understanding Guillaumin’s theory of women’s objectification, and as I will argue, to reading Despentès’s depiction of gendered power dynamics.

- 4 The objectification of the female body has traditionally been conceived in relation to the gaze. Indeed, sight, and notably the male gaze, has been an important tool to think critically about gender powered relations. Laura Mulvey is one of the most prominent theorists of the male gaze. She analyses the spectator in classical Hollywood cinema as an active male subject, while women are passive objects to be looked at on screen: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote “to-be-looked-at-ness”¹³. Mulvey’s theory applies primarily to film studies, where the importance of the sense of sight is the most obvious, and to a specific context and genre; however, her reflection can be extended to literature where women’s bodies have also been displayed to the reader’s imagination¹⁴.
- 5 As Irving Goh argues, this predominance of sight over other senses is inherited from a long philosophical tradition “of such classical philosophers as Plato and Aristotle, who have celebrated the operation of sight in the quest toward true knowledge, while denigrating the other senses, such as touch, and this legacy is surely sustained in modern philosophy through Descartes, who declared sight to be *the noblest and most comprehensive of senses* in *Optics*”¹⁵. Several researchers, initially in film studies, and currently in literary criticism, have sought to question this established hierarchy and investigate the importance of touch in film and text. The concept of the *haptic* was initially theorised in visual studies in opposition to the optic regime to describe the strategies displayed in films to *touch* the viewer¹⁶. The haptic is concerned with touch and other sensory experiences that constitute our bodily perception, such as proprioception and kinesthesia. Thinking about touch and the haptic in Despentès’s fictional world is not to say that sight and the gaze are absent in the texts; indeed, as I will discuss in this article, the male gaze is an important part of the objectification of female bodies in the narratives. However, I will argue that the exploration of touch is just as crucial in understanding power relations between genders and their disruption. Looking at touch in literary texts is a way to disrupt hierarchies and to transform our reading. Abbie Garrington offers the following definition of haptic writing in modernist literature: “In referring to *haptic writing* I indicate either writing that describes haptic sense experiences (tactile, kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, or more likely, a combination of these), or that manipulates its own narrative strategies in such a way as to prompt a haptic response from the reader”¹⁷. She also suggests that haptic reading and criticism are ways of engaging with this writing. It is my contention that a haptic reading is

relevant to Despentès's work and I will thus argue in the following sections that the motif of (the threat of) touch is key to reading and subverting gendered power relations in her oeuvre.

Street harassment and (the threat of) touch

- 6 *Les jolies choses*, Despentès's third novel, tells the story of twins, Claudine and Pauline. Claudine embodies ultra-femininity and actively seeks to be/come an object of desire for men around her. Pauline, on the contrary, rejects traditional feminine attributes, while at the same time embracing conventional gender roles in her heteronormative relationship. When Claudine kills herself, Pauline chooses to take her sister's place to sign a contract with the production company Claudine was working with and pocket an advance on payment before running away with her partner when he comes out of prison. The stolen identity plot functions as a narrative device to explore gender identity in the novel¹⁸. Gender is presented as an embodied process, almost to a parodic extent in the text, and certainly echoes a Butlerian understanding of gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time; instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts"¹⁹.
- 7 This "stylized repetition of acts" is deeply intertwined with gendered violence and the threat of touch in *Les jolies choses*. Indeed, of particular interest for this article is the depiction of street harassment Pauline experiences, once she masquerades as Claudine, and, indeed, as a woman, to borrow Joan Riviere's terminology²⁰. Adhering to the feminine performance of gender grants Pauline-Claudine more visibility in society. She becomes "un parc d'attractions" (*JC* 122, 152), entirely devoted to male pleasure, as is made clear to her when she occupies public space:

Les gens la regardent. Il y en a même qui se retournent. Et d'autres se permettent des gros plans, impunément, ses jambes, son cul, ses seins, sa bouche, certains lui font des sourires ou des petits bruits pour l'attirer, sifflements. [...] Un monsieur sur le côté vend du maïs dans un caddie, odeur de grillé, il l'appelle, une sorte d'enthousiasme gentil, comme de vouloir jouer avec un chien. [...] Le vendeur ne se calme pas, même quand Pauline l'a dépassé de plusieurs mètres, il continue son gros barouf. Elle est tout à fait publique, abordable, tout à fait faite pour que tout le monde s'occupe d'elle. Elle est sapée pour ça. (*JC* 90-91)²¹

- 8 Sight is particularly important in the passage. Pauline-Claudine is the object of the gaze of male observers. The text performs this very objectification, as Pauline is often the object of verbal groups such as "regardant", "font des sourires", "attirer", "appelle". In other segments, she is simply omitted ("Il y en a même qui se retournent", implicitly "sur elle"); or reduced to body parts, emphasized by a very visual close-up technique. But other senses, such as hearing and smell, are equally relevant to understanding the objectification of the female body at play here and the assertion of male power over the female character in the public space. The female body is assaulted by sensory experiences, which make the male presence overwhelming to her. The male characters call her or make noises beyond language to deny her personal space, as the pervasive smell of corn also invades the scene. The sense of touch is never explicitly evoked, but the combination of these various sensory elements assaulting the female body form the always imminent threat of touch on the female body in the street. The comparison with a dog is telling in that regard and underscores a desire to *pet* the female character.

- 9 Following Guillaumin, Capucine Coustere observes that street harassment is a form of gendered violence that has its roots in gender inequality in the public space. She notes that interactions between strangers in public space are defined by what she calls a norm of indifference. This norm can be broken between two people in several cases, notably if “one of them is, or is accompanied by an *open* person, like a child or a pet”²². In street harassment, the woman harassed is perceived as an open person, like a pet, as suggested in the excerpt analysed, and the norm of indifference is broken. As Guillaumin notes, this is a strategy of intimidation performed to terrify the women into submission, and constantly remind them of their role as object of unlimited gaze, and of potential touch, the threat of sexual violence thus always contained in the practice of harassment. This excerpt portrays the collective appropriation of the female body in the public space, virtually belonging to any men passing by.
- 10 A comparable scene is depicted in *Vernon Subutex*, Despentès’s most recent novel, written almost twenty years after *Les jolies choses*. The novel initially depicts the descent into precarity of the eponymous character, who ends up homeless at the end of the first volume. The second and third volumes narrate the constitution of a community around him, of which Lydia is part. As in most of Despentès’s novels, the third person narrative gives the reader access to various characters’ thoughts, including Lydia’s, as she is experiencing street harassment:
- Il faut une certaine dose d’arrogance pour remonter de Bastille à Oberkampf à pied, seule, en talons hauts et jupe au-dessus du genou, passé onze heures du soir. [...] Fermer sa gueule, tracer. Les petits bruits de bouche pour attirer son attention. Les insultes – salope, connasse, grosse pute, sac à foutre viens par-là, où tu vas toi viens par-là, raciste, bobo de merde on va te défoncer, on voit ton gros cul, fais attention à toi doudou, toi t’as une bouche à bien me sucer. Ne pas ralentir. [...] Un jour à Sébastopol un gros lourd l’a attrapée par le poignet pour l’obliger à le suivre, elle a retiré sa main en lui disant “mais dégage” et le mec est devenu tout rouge, elle a vu qu’il allait vriller et lui en coller une. Il l’a forcée à s’excuser. Elle s’est exécutée, et puis elle a tracé. Tout le temps qu’il l’a retenue en la menaçant, elle n’a vu personne ralentir, ni leur jeter un coup d’œil. Il aurait pu la tuer à coups de pied, sur le trottoir, les gens auraient regardé ailleurs. (VS1 loc. 1937)
- 11 Similar tropes to the ones developed in the first excerpt can be found here. The female character performs femininity in a gender-conforming way (skirt, high heels), but dares to walk alone in the street, at night this time. As in *Les jolies choses*, the male presence manifests itself very audibly through non-verbal forms, and here, through extremely explicit language as well, amplified by direct quotation. The woman in the street is *slut-shamed*, fat-shamed, openly threatened with sexual violence²³. This flux of words is surrounded in the text by short injunctions that the female character addresses to herself, policing herself as the result of the overbearing male vocal presence. Here the threat of touch is realised and it is an act of domination of the male stranger over the female body. The initial act of objectifying touch is met with rejection, and this rejection is not tolerated by the male figure: “Il l’a forcée à s’excuser” (note again here the objectification of the female character performed grammatically). Power is asserted physically and verbally through the threat of more physical violence, enjoining the female subject to relinquish full subjectivity to the will of the male protagonist.
- 12 In these excerpts, the analysis of (the threat of) touch shows that power is understood through a binary structure, according to which male characters assert domination through intimidation and harassment over the female body, echoing Guillaumin’s

theorisation of the appropriation of women. However, in Despentés's texts the female body is not portrayed as a fixed entity given that the performativity of gender is also interrogated. Indeed, in *Les jolies choses*, Pauline-Claudine is only harassed in the street after she *does* her gender conformably; and Lydia also displays conventional attributes of femininity. The texts thus suggest a more complex understanding of gendered power dynamics, according to which this gender-conforming performance contributes to reducing women to objects, constantly at risk of abjectifying touch. This dehumanising contact is regularly portrayed in Despentés's narratives, particularly through the representation of rape, which I will discuss in the next section.

Dehumanising touch: rape as assertion of power

- 13 When writing in *King Kong théorie* about the rape she experienced as a teenager, Despentés reflects on the meaning of rape. She understands it as “un programme politique précis: squelette du capitalisme, il est la représentation crue et directe de l'exercice du pouvoir” (*KKT* loc. 414). It is depicted in most of her novels, and occupies a central place in the narrative, either as catalyst of the plot as in *Baise-moi* or *Les chiennes savantes* (1996); or as climax of the revenge plot in *Vernon Subutex* (that is, before the mass murder at the end of the narrative). Rape is mostly experienced by women in the texts, and perpetrated by men²⁴, and is a constituent part of women's experience, as observed by Patrice in *Vernon Subutex*, when he listens to female characters talking about the rape that one of them, Céleste, experienced: “Et Patrice les écoute donner leur avis sans oser poser la question qui le taraude: à combien d'entre vous c'est déjà arrivé, le viol? Parce qu'il y a quelque chose de sous-entendu [...] L'impression que la plupart d'entre elles sont passées par là” (*VS3* 342).
- 14 Rape is the inscription of the perpetrator's power on the body of the victim. Through this most violent form of touch, the subject becomes both object and abject. Céleste's brutal attack is characterised by multiple rapes, the first only sketched out for the reader through the perspective of Max, one of her captors: “Et quand Franck a ouvert sa braguette, il est sorti et il a attendu que ça se passe.” (*VS3* 299); with only traces of it visible for Max and the reader on Céleste's skin: “la gosse était couverte de plaques de foutre séché” (*VS3* 303). It is through her point of view that the reader discovers the scale of her ordeal:
- Tout était là, étalé dans sa mémoire, chaque heure passée dans cet enfer. Les bouteilles de bière. Franck ne bandait pas longtemps. Alors il y avait les bouteilles. Beaucoup d'objets, pour remplacer. La pisse, dans un coin de la pièce, la merde, qu'elle devait ramasser elle-même avant de se laver les mains pour ne pas sentir trop mauvais et qu'elle devait nettoyer, avant toute chose, lorsqu'il rentrait. Toutes les gentillesses qu'elle avait dites à Franck, pour l'amadouer. C'était le pire sa gentillesse. Le peu de temps qu'il avait fallu pour la soumettre. [...] Franck disait, en caressant sa joue, “je risque gros, tu sais, en leur mentant. Ils te croient morte, mais moi j'ai pas le courage, parce qu'on s'entend bien, toi et moi.” Sa gorge est serrée. (*VS3* 321)
- 15 Following Guillaumin, who observes that sexual abuse is anything but sexual, and rather a manifestation of power relations, the scene depicts rape as total and unlimited power of one person over the other²⁵. Touch and contact are mobilized in the scene, firstly through the horrific allusion to rape and the various objects used to violate Céleste's body; but also through contact with her own excrement that Céleste has to touch daily,

emphasizing her own self-disgust. The shame that Céleste experiences at her own submission, to which she owes her life, is indeed central to that passage and echoes the lived experience of many victims. This shame is best captured through the soft contact of a stroke on her cheek, which conveys a form of collusion with her attacker that she must fake, leaving her and the reader with a lump in the throat.

- 16 Indeed, the depiction of such violence has implications on the way we read the text. As Kathryn Robson observes about contemporary women writing of suffering, empathy is often problematic and problematised in these texts, that “stage a performative relation with the reader rooted in both proximity and distance or alienation”²⁶. Reading a fictional account of sexual violence can be an unsettling experience for the reader, the text exerting violence on the reader, leaving her or him powerless. *Apocalypse bébé* tells the story of Lucie, a shy and ineffectual private detective, who is hired to investigate the disappearance of Valentine, a teenager from a privileged yet emotionally abusive background. This is the first time the reader is introduced to La Hyène, a freelance detective of sorts with unorthodox methods here to help Lucie and who also comes to play an important role in *Vernon Subutex*. Rape is featured in *Apocalypse bébé*, but unlike Despentès’s other narratives, the rape scene is not described in explicit terms, and the reader learns of Valentine’s rape for the first time through one of the rapists’ perspectives:

On l’a tous baisée, tous, dans un parking en ville, mais elle était d’accord, elle nous a pas dit de ne pas le faire, elle buvait des bières sans arrêt et elle faisait tout ce qu’on voulait. Après, on l’a laissée là. Mais on lui a pissé dessus avant de partir, elle s’en est même pas rendu compte, elle était à poil sur le dos. (AB 99)

- 17 In the excerpt, the perpetrator is given a voice in direct speech to depict what happened and the possibility to deny the rape. The word ‘rape’ is not used, and although there is no doubt in the reader’s mind, the character describes the event as a particularly degrading consensual relationship. It is only through La Hyène and Lucie’s discussion of the confession that the act is named for what it is. It is a particularly uncomfortable position for the reader, where contact between her/him and the rapist is forced through direct speech, leaving us powerless in the face of this abject albeit brief depiction of a gang rape. It is only pages later that we get a glimpse of Valentine’s perspective on the event: “C’était un été un peu glauque. Ça s’était mal passé avec les gars de Panique dans Ton Cul. Elle s’en foutait, mais elle se trimbalait depuis une sensation de honte diffuse, une colère planant au-dessus d’elle” (AB 237). Again, the term is not mentioned, and the brief allusion is lost in the flow of her thoughts. However, the pervasiveness of the trauma is clearly fleshed out, with the mention of shame once more, as well as anger, which will play a part in the horrific denouement of the plot.²⁷

- 18 The focus on the rapist’s perspective is deployed to a greater level in *Vernon Subutex*. As discussed above, various forms of gendered violence and abject touch are explored in the trilogy²⁸. The rape Céleste experiences is part of a larger *noir* plot, originating in the rape, repeated humiliations, and subsequent murder of former porn actress Vodka Satana by film producer Laurent Dopalet and his powerful friends. Aïcha, Satana’s daughter, having found out what happened to her mother, decides to take revenge on the producer with the help of Céleste, who is a tattoo artist. Together, they break into Dopalet’s residence and attack him. Céleste tattoos the words rapist and murderer on his back. Dopalet’s later reminiscence of the event and wording of the trauma he

experienced at the hands of the women is expressed in terms of rape:

Dopalet a été ravagé, post-trauma. L'effraction de son domicile, la séquestration, les actes de torture... Il n'a plus été le même. Il a perdu le sommeil. Il a dû déménager. Il ne se sentait plus en sécurité chez lui. [...] Il n'existe pas de mot particulier pour en décrire les symptômes, aussi utilisent-ils [therapists] le terme qui se rapproche le plus de ce que décrit cet acte barbare – un viol. Une destruction totale de la confiance qu'on avait dans la sécurité de sa sphère intime. On a profané son corps. (VS3 82-3)

- 19 Again, through the use of interior monologue, the reader finds herself/himself in a particularly uncomfortable situation: immersed in the perspective of a rapist, who never acknowledges to himself that this is what he is and perceives his own experience of trauma to be rape. Over the course of the three books there is no awareness of the violence he perpetrated on Satana nor of the fact that a porn star can indeed be raped, a commonly held rape myth²⁹. The assault Dopalet experiences is one of forced dermatographia, described as “a medical term that means writing on, or marking, the skin”³⁰. In the passage above, dermatographia and rape are equated, conceiving of rape as an inscription in the flesh of the body, an immovable trace. In that respect, the scene offers one of the most eloquent depictions of the trauma one might feel after being raped: constant fear, paranoia, insomnia, loss of sense of self. The proximity allowed by the interior monologue technique draws the reader into that devastating account of the effects of an attack on the victim, left utterly powerless in face of the trauma experienced. However, this reading is complicated by the fact that the victim is a perpetrator of rape himself, who in the same monologue also expresses his former disgust of rape victims (VS3 83) or hatred of “feminazis” (VS3 84). In this way, the text problematises the dynamics of power, both in the diegesis, by portraying a ruthless perpetrator as a vulnerable victim, and from an extra-diegetic perspective, imposing a form of epidermal empathy on the reader, taking her/him out of their comfort zone, placing her/him in the skin of rapist and of victim at the same time.

Reinventing touch: new modes of contact in Vernon Subutex

- 20 New and more positive modes of contact that seek to destabilise fixed structures and hierarchies are imagined in *Vernon Subutex*. As noted above, the narrative revolves around Vernon's descent into precarity. After he becomes homeless at the end of the first volume, some of his friends who initially put him up, track him down and offer to house him again. However, Vernon turns down their hospitality and, as he chooses to continue living on the streets, a new relationship emerges between them, cemented by Vernon's role as official DJ and “passive leader” of the group³¹. By the end of the second volume, they have formed a nomadic anonymous community, moving from city to city, and organising what become known as “convergences” in the final volume. *Convergences* are inspired by the hippie communes of the 1960's and 1970's and the rave culture of the following decades³², with the notable exception that drugs and alcohol are not permitted. During these *convergences*, people are brought together by the music Vernon is playing:

Des silhouettes se détachent et forment des grappes éphémères. La Hyène est presque immobile quand elle danse, sauf ce léger mouvement des hanches. La plupart des corps ne bougent pas encore. Beaucoup sont restés allongés. Il croise le regard de Pamela. Il établit le contact avec les absents [...] Tout autour des vivants dansent les morts et les invisibles,

les ombres se confondent et ses yeux se ferment. Autour de lui, le mouvement est déclenché. Ça commence. Il les fait tous danser. (VS2 405)

- 21 The idea of *contact* is central in this excerpt. Bodies here are not marked by their gender - nor their race or class – rather, they form “des grappes éphémères”, grouping together, standing still, lying down, or joined through music and dance. They are connected by flux, and the figures of the dead mix with those of the living in a space where boundaries of time become just as fluid as those between bodies. Touch is not necessarily taking place as such during the *convergences*: “Elle dansait. Et elle ne touchait personne, elle ne frôlait pas d’autres corps, mais elle connaissait cette sensation – elle jouissait.” (VS3 128). Rather, a new mode of haptic contact between bodies emerges, traversed by music, and connected through their collective movement:

[J]e danse. Comme jamais j’ai dansé. J’avais les doigts de pied qui dansaient, j’avais les cheveux qui dansaient, j’avais les narines qui dansaient... Connecté. Je ne vois que ce mot. [...] Le jour s’est levé, je dansais encore, j’avais pas arrêté [...] et tout le monde était dans cet état. Même quand ça s’est arrêté, la musique, j’étais dans la tête des autres, sous leur peau, dans leur ventre, et dans chaque note, dans chaque instrument, j’entendais les silences qui créent les notes... (VS3 165)

- 22 As noted above, the tactile is just one sense of the haptic experience, which also includes proprioception and kinaesthesia. Proprioception and kinaesthesia are similar processes related to the perception of one’s own body parts and movement. Through the *convergences*, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive perceptions are enhanced and extended to the body of the Other. In the excerpt, all parts of the body are affected by music, from head to toe, forming a network of bodies overcome by a wave of sound. *Convergences* are, then, the site of the redefinition of one’s own body and of the body of the Other, where contact takes place through movement and pleasure. The shared sheer enjoyment of music and pulsing of bodies together undermines a univocal conception of power relations between genders, where one objectifies the body of the Other to exert total control over it. In the *convergences*, there is one female/male/trans/human body, moving in unison³³. The threat of the objectifying and abjectifying touch is annihilated and replaced by the pleasure of contact between boundless bodies. Movement and pleasure are the forces that structure the dynamics between the various bodies involved, which are not fixed entities but rather, as Ahmed and Stacey suggest: “inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, where one touches and is touched by others”³⁴. Although this portrayal of a transformative experience with others may seem naïve, it does offer an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between genders, and arguably for the first time in Despentès’s writing, suggests the possibility of a respectful and pleasurable community of humans.

- 23 As a conclusion, looking at touch in Despentès’s novels has provided a way of reflecting on gendered power dynamics through the study of objectifying and abjectifying touch. Thus, the narratives are prefiguring and echoing current women-led social movements such as #MeToo or #NousToutes, that recently brought sexual harassment and violence against women and gay men under the spotlight. I have also discussed reading rape as a form of power struggle through forced immersion in the perpetrator’s experience. Finally, the article has discussed new modes of haptic contact that disrupt fixed and binary power structures. Despentès’s work should be thought of in relation to a larger haptic turn in French contemporary fiction, which has been most notably studied in film studies, in the work of Bertrand Bonello, Claire Denis, Phillipe Gandrieux or Marina de

Van, to name but a few³⁵. Looking at touch and the haptic is also relevant to literature, and as a practice questioning established hierarchies, I have shown here that it is particularly applicable to the analysis of power dynamics in texts, and to women's writing, which often engages with gender issues³⁶. In the narrative, the *noir* plot eventually catches up with the group, and the community is decimated at the hands of Dopalet with the help of the narcissistic and opportunistic Max, giving the novel a tragic resolution, possibly one of the darkest of Despentés's oeuvre. However, this final portrayal of male-dominated extreme violence³⁷ should not hinder our haptic reading, since we as readers are moved by the possibility of new non-hierarchical, non-binary modes of being together, our bodies traversed by the euphoria experienced by the characters, transmitted paper to skin as we turn the pages.

Dominique Carlini Versini
Durham University

NOTES

- 1 Virginie Despentés, *Vernon Subutex 1*, Paris, Grasset [Kindle], 2015, loc. 1934, from now on *VS1*. Words often uttered by female characters in Despentés's fictional world.
- 2 Virginie Despentés, *King Kong théorie*, Paris, Grasset, 2006, from now on *KKT*.
- 3 See for instance: Nicole Fayard, "The Rebellious Body as Parody : *Baise-moi* by Virginie Despentés", *French Studies*, vol. 60 , n° 1, 2006, p. 63-77 ; Shirley Ann Jordan, "Dans le mauvais goût pour le mauvais goût? Pornographie, violence et sexualité féminine dans la fiction de Virginie Despentés", in Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers (eds), *Nouvelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix?*, Amsterdam, Brill Rodopi, 2002, p. 121-41; or Nadia Louar, "Version femmes plurielles: relire *Baise-moi* de Virginie Despentés", *Palimpsestes*, n° 22, 2009, URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/palimpsestes/191>.
- 4 Virginie Despentés, *Les jolies choses*, Paris, J'ai Lu, 2001 [1999], from now on *JC*; *Apocalypse bébé*, Paris, Grasset, 2015 [2010], from now on *AB*; *Vernon Subutex 2*, Paris, Grasset, 2015; *Vernon Subutex 3*, Paris, Grasset, 2017; from now on *VS* followed by volume number.
- 5 A term used by Michèle A. Schaal in "Virginie Despentés or a French Third Wave of Feminism?", in Erika Fulöp and Adrienne Angelo (eds.), *Cherchez la femme: Women and Values in the Francophone World*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2011, p. 39. Despentés's recent column, "Désormais on se lève et on se barre", published last March after the *Césars* ceremony, continues her engagement with "proletarian feminism". The title of the piece refers to actress Adèle Haenel, herself a victim of sexual harassment and abuse, leaving the ceremony following the announcement of film director and convicted rapist Polanski being awarded the César for best director. The text is distinctively Despentésque, with a mix of hard-hitting images and coarse language, and analyses power dynamics in terms of dominants abusing vulnerable bodies: "Et c'est exactement à cela que ça sert, la puissance de vos grosses fortunes: avoir le contrôle des corps déclarés subalternes" (Virginie Despentés, "Désormais on se lève et on se barre", *Libération*, 1st March 2020, URL : https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/03/01/cesars-desormais-on-se-leve-et-on-se-barre_1780212).
- 6 According to Julia Kristeva, abjection is experienced when the boundaries of the self are under threat, particularly through the breakdown of the distinction between subject and object, which as I will argue, takes place in sexual harassment and violence (*Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris, Seuil, 1980).
- 7 See, for instance, the work of Michèle Schaal: "Virginie Despentés or a French Third Wave of Feminism?", *op. cit.*, p. 39-55; "Une nécessaire rébellion féministe: la violence féminine chez Virginie Despentés" in Colette Trout and Frédérique Chevillot (eds), *Rebelles et criminelles chez les écrivaines d'expression française*, Amsterdam, Brill Rodopi, 2013, p. 267-82; *Une troisième vague féministe et littéraire: les femmes de lettres de la nouvelle génération*, Amsterdam, Brill Rodopi, 2017; "Les Chiennes savantes de Virginie Despentés ou l'hétéropatriarcat triomphant", *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* vol. 72, n° 1, 2018, p. 77-104. See also: Virginie Sauzon, "Virginie Despentés et les récits de la violence sexuelle: une déconstruction littéraire et féministes des rhétoriques de la racialisation", *Genre, Sexualité & Société*, 2012, URL : <http://gss.revues.org/2328>; and Hélène Sicard-Cowen, "Le féminisme de Virginie Despentés à l'étude dans le roman *Baise-moi*", *Women in French Studies*, n° 16, 2008, p. 64-72.
- 8 See Michèle Schaal, *Une troisième vague féministe et littéraire: les femmes de lettres de la nouvelle génération*, *op. cit.*, p. 99-105.
- 9 See for instance Michèle Schaal, "Virginie Despentés or a French Third Wave", *op. cit.*, p. 39-55; and Virginie Sauzon, "Virginie Despentés et les récits de la violence sexuelle", *op. cit.*

- ¹⁰ Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir: l'idée de nature*, Paris, Les Éditions iXe [Kindle], 2016 [1992], loc. 47.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, loc. 450.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, loc. 532, my translation.
- ¹³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in Leo Braudy et Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film: Psychology, Society and Ideology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 837.
- ¹⁴ As for example in the notorious opening scene of Zola's *Nana* (1880).
- ¹⁵ Irving Goh, "Introducing Touching Literature: Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*", *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 19, issue 3, 2019, p. 243.
- ¹⁶ See, for instance, Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007; or Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000; as well as the founding work of Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Paris, Métailié, 1992. This mode of criticism is influenced by phenomenology, notably Merleau-Ponty's work, see for instance *La phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005 [1945].
- ¹⁷ Abbie Garrington, "Touching Texts: The Haptic Sense in Modernist Literature", *Literature Compass*, vol. 7, n° 9, 2010, p. 821.
- ¹⁸ These themes will be explored in more depth in my forthcoming monograph *Le corps-frontière: figures de l'excès chez Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentes et Marina de Van* [in preparation]. See also Michèle Schaal, *Une troisième vague féministe et littéraire: les femmes de lettres de la nouvelle génération*, *op. cit.*, p. 99-153.
- ¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1999 [1990], p. 179.
- ²⁰ Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as Masquerade", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, n° 10, 1929, p. 303-13.
- ²¹ For a discussion of this scene from a materialist feminist perspective, see also Michèle Schaal, *Une troisième vague féministe et littéraire: les femmes de lettres de la nouvelle génération*, *op. cit.*, p. 121-22.
- ²² Capucine Coustere, "Le harcèlement de rue dans une perspective de genre: significations, effets, solutions", unpublished dissertation, Institut d'Études Politiques de Toulouse, 2014, p. 34, my translation.
- ²³ See the *slutwalk* against rape culture, that originated in Canada, before becoming a global movement.
- ²⁴ This does reflect reality, as studies show that women are much more likely to be victims of rape than men and that men are much more likely to be perpetrators of rape than women; although recent research shows that women are as likely as men to commit other forms of sexual abuse. See for instance the WHO report on violence against women, https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77434/WHO_RHR_12.37_eng.pdf;jsessionid=59362514C49762286A6D701B167BFC88?sequence=1; or Lara Stemple and Ilan H. Meyer, "The Sexual Victimization of Men in America: New Data Challenge Old Assumptions", *American Journal of Public Health* n° 104, 2014, URL : <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.301946>.
- ²⁵ Colette Guillaumin, *op. cit.*, loc. 550.
- ²⁶ Kathryn Robson, *I Suffer, Therefore I Am. Engaging with Empathy in Contemporary French Women's Writing*, Oxford, Legenda, 2019, p. 21.
- ²⁷ For an analysis of rape in *Apocalypse bébé*, see Sauzon, "Virginie Despentes et les récits de la violence sexuelle", *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ Notably domestic violence, which is only explored through the point of view of the perpetrator.
- ²⁹ See WHO report [online].
- ³⁰ Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds), "Introduction: Dermographies", *Thinking Through the Skin*, London, Routledge [Kindle], 2001, loc. 529.
- ³¹ This is how Despentes refers to him in an interview with François Busnel for *La Grande Librairie*, France 5, 18 May 2017, URL : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZKb8T9vPzQ>. See also Colin Nettelbeck, "The Novelist as DJ: *Vernon Subutex* and the Music of Our Times", *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 72, n°1, p. 183-202.
- ³² As observed by Busnel in the interview mentioned above [online].
- ³³ Indeed, this is the first of Despentes's novels to portray several trans characters.
- ³⁴ Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds), *op. cit.*, loc. 185.
- ³⁵ See for instance Martine Beugnet, *op. cit.*, or Sophie Walon, "Le toucher dans le cinéma français des sensations", *Entrelacs*, n° 10, 2013, URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/entrelacs/530>.
- ³⁶ See also Dominique Carlini Versini, "Excès et métamorphoses de la peau dans *Truismes* de Marie Darrieussecq", *Women in French Studies*, n°27, p. 170-86. The article discusses the objectified skin of the characters and the emergence of new modes of eco-contact with the environment in the narrative.
- ³⁷ Although Dopalet and Max organise the attack, it is carried out by a young woman who is then executed by Max.