



**Finding Power Behind Bars:**

How *Bitch Planet* plays with the 'Gaze'

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*The cover image is a photoshopped version of the original Bitch Planet cover.*

*Thank you, Robin Overal for this adaptation.*

*All images used in this thesis are from the comic "Bitch Planet, Book One: Extraordinary Machine" created by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine de Landro, Image Comics: 2015.*

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### ABSTRACT:

This thesis focusses on patriarchal power structures portrayed in the dystopian comic *Bitch Planet*. *Bitch Planet* is an unapologetic intersectional feminist comic which situates within the genre of grindhouse. This genre often focusses on the male gaze in the shower scene, which *Bitch Planet* uses to expose the associated power structures, through the portrayal of the body. I intent to show that the medium of comics could be used for feminist practices.

## 1. Introduction

The way comics frame their stories with beautiful images and expressive texts is what draws me to the medium. But as a intersectional feminist I noticed that there were not many comics that depicted diverse characters or feminist storylines. Fortunately there are exceptions, such as the comic *Bitch Planet*. The story of *Bitch Planet* is set in a dystopian version of our world where ‘non-compliant’ women are sent to an off-world prison, the *Auxiliary Compliance Outpost* (ACO), better known as *Bitch Planet*. To avoid confusion between the comic and off-world prison, I will call the prison the ACO from now on. *Bitch Planet* depicts multiple women who are sent to the ACO and are forced to fight in a game called *Duemila*. I specify two characters in the comic: Penelope Rolle and Kamau Kogo, which I will go into in my analysis.

Creators of *Bitch Planet* Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine de Landro intend to make an unapologetic *intersectional* feminist comic. The book even refers to Kimberlé Crenshaw who coined the term *intersectionality*, in one of the last pages titled ‘Bitch Planet Discussion Guide’:

Intersectional feminism is the view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

The comic uses these axes of difference to expose patriarchal power structures in society through satire. In an interview De Landro explains that comics are a fascinating format for exploring these intersectional representational practices.<sup>2</sup> I will analyse how *Bitch Planet* uses representation to tell a feminist story.<sup>3</sup> Representation is therefore an important concept, which Stuart Hall explains in his book *Representation* as: “[the] act of portraying, depicting, symbolizing, or presenting the likeness of something.”<sup>4</sup> I will go further into this concept in my theoretical framework.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly Sue DeConnick, Valentine de Landro. “Bitch Planet Discussion Guide,” in: “Bitch Planet, Book One: Extraordinary Machine.” Comic Book. Vol. 1. *Bitch Planet*. (Berkeley: Image Comics, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> ComicsVerse. “Valentine De Landro interview at New York Comic Con 2015 by ComicsVerse,” published on December 30 2015, YouTube video, 7:42, watched on April 5 2018, 2:10.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmjUx6Bkm44&t=1s>

<sup>3</sup> Idem.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon. *Representation*. (Second ed. London: Sage Publications, 2013), 458.

De Landro's explanation of the comic reveals the core of my research question: "*Bitch Planet* is set in the distant ... future where women are regulated and controlled by this governing body comprised mainly of men. [They] are trying to make all women conform and comply to certain standards."<sup>5</sup> The standards which women in the comic need to conform to, are related to power structures. I use the concept of patriarchal power structures by examples of the power on the body and the power of looking. Therefore my research question is: How does the comic book *Bitch Planet* challenge and/or reaffirm patriarchal power structures through the portrayal of the body?

To this end, I look into these power structures in *Bitch Planet* by means of three sub-questions. The first sub-question is: How does *Bitch Planet* use comic-specific techniques to depict power structures? I argue that comics can be used for feminist practices. First, I would like to give a short introduction to comics with the help of Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.<sup>6</sup> McCloud gives the following definition: "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."<sup>7</sup> I use McCloud's definition of comics for this research. In the section where I explain my method, I go deeper into the subject of comic analysis.

The second sub-question is: What purpose does the body and/or nudity have in *Bitch Planet*? Notably there is a lot of nudity within the comic, it is therefore of importance to analyse how *Bitch Planet* frames bodies within the panels and thus using comic-specific characteristics. Sexualised images of naked female bodies is often used to establish a male perspective, which is the case in the film genre of *grindhouse*. *Bitch Planet* situates itself within the genre of grindhouse, which I will discuss here shortly to later explain further. DeConnick describes in an interview that she loves 1970s grindhouse films, but acknowledges as a feminist that these films were "problematic".<sup>8</sup> Situating a feminist story within a genre which is generally known for its exploitation themes and sexualising and violent content, could indeed be seen as problematic. It is then important to analyse how *Bitch Planet* uses this genre.

I will focus on the trope of *the male gaze*, which is used in the genre of grindhouse, to establish whether *Bitch Planet* challenges and/or reaffirms structures of power associated with the gaze. Which leads to the third sub-question is: In what ways does *Bitch Planet*

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<sup>5</sup> ComicsVerse. "New York Comic Con", 0:54.

<sup>6</sup> Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, (New York: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> SYFY WIRE. "Kelly Sue DeConnick on Captain Marvel, Bitch Planet and More (Behind the Panel) | SYFY WIRE," published on 18 November 2017, YouTube video, 3:10, watched on 2 April 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sldgTGAaBB8&t=2s>

challenge and/or reaffirm *the male gaze*? Laura Mulvey explains in her text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, that the gaze is the active act of looking from a heteronormative male perspective to gain pleasure.<sup>9</sup> I will explain the gaze further in the next section: the theoretical framework.

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<sup>9</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, in: Media and Cultural Studies Keywords. Malden, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham, and Douglas M. Kellner. (MA: Blackwell Publishing: 2006), 346.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Starting by explaining key concepts and theories, this section supports the formulated research questions. These questions concern concepts such as power and power structures as well as the genre of grindhouse and the male gaze. In the centre of these questions is the body. How power operates is linked to the body as I explain by means of Michel Foucault's notions of power.<sup>10</sup> Hall explains the relation between power and representation, which I then apply to *Bitch Planet's* representation of the body.<sup>11</sup>

Next, I discuss the genre of *grindhouse* or *exploitation*, because of its connection with power structures associated with patriarchal practices and because of the significance of the style and tropes used in the genre, which might oppose the feminist message in the comic. David Church contextualises the film genre within the 1960s and 1970s in his text: "From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films", which I will use to describe grindhouse.<sup>12</sup> Anne Schwan's text "Postfeminism Meets the Women in Prison Genre: Privilege and Spectatorship in Orange Is the New Black" illustrates how the tropes are used in the women-in-prison genre, a sub-genre of grindhouse.<sup>13</sup> Schwan defines one trope that is particularly important for this analysis: the shower scene. This scene exposes the male gaze, which I will explain on the basis of Mulvey's scrutinization of the concept. On that account, I use the concepts of exploitation, the male gaze and representation in relation to power structures to answer my questions. In the next subsection, I start by defining power.

### 2.1 Power and Power Structures

Power is often seen as one group having power over another by means of force and exploitation, such as in police violence being used to silence political views. Power is sometimes visible in the form of objects, such as rulebooks or uniforms, but also in action, such as physical violence. But power is also invisible, for instance how cultural norms are constructed word-to-mouth. Stuart Hall describes that power "... always operates in conditions of unequal relations".<sup>14</sup> But according to Foucault, power is more than that in the way that power is not linear but rather is everywhere; it circulates.<sup>15</sup> Foucault makes clear

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline And Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon. *Representation*. (Second ed. London: Sage Publications, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> David Church, "From Exhibition to Genre: The Case of Grind-House Films." In: *Cinema Journal*, Volume 50, Number 4, (2011): 1-25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2011.0053>

<sup>13</sup> Anne Schwan, "Postfeminism Meets the Women in Prison Genre: Privilege and Spectatorship in Orange Is the New Black." in: *Television & New Media*, Vol. 17(6), (2016): 473– 490. DOI: 10.1177/1527476416647497.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 250.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 251.

that we all are caught up in a net-like organisation that power exercises through.<sup>16</sup> Hall describes this as follows: “The argument is that everyone — the powerful and the powerless — is caught up, *though not on equal terms*, in power’s circulation.”<sup>17</sup> Nobody is outside of power and therefore everyone is influenced by it. The net-like organisation and circulation of power refers to the structures that reside in power. Hall explains where these power structures are vested:

Power relations permeate all levels of social existence and are therefore to be found operating at every site of social life — in the private spheres of the family and sexuality as much as in the public spheres of politics, the economy and the law.<sup>18</sup>

Power touches upon every aspect of life, which power structures preserve. Power structures, then, are described as systems, organisations and rules (such as laws, but also unwritten rules formed by society), which maintain the circulation of power.

Foucault argues that in the centre of the formation of power relations lies the body.<sup>19</sup> Since the body plays an important part of the analysis of *Bitch Planet*, it is therefore essential to study the connection of the body and power. Foucault explains the body as something that is *produced* by historical and cultural aspects.<sup>20</sup> How the body behaves and moves, as well as what it looks like and where it is situated is connected to what is chosen to be acceptable within society, and therefore cultural structures of power. Foucault uses the example of prison, where the state is the powerful and the criminalised body is the powerless, to illustrate how the body is in the centre of power. Those who have power over another body—in the case of prison, it is the state which embodies that power—use what Foucault calls *biopower*. Biopower uses many techniques to maintain control over bodies.<sup>21</sup> An example of such a technique is incarceration as used by Foucault, where power structures are then applied to the criminalised body in the way of punishment: locked away and inflicted with pain.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, power structures are immediately visible by use of biopower in *Bitch Planet*, as it already is an example of the criminalised body within prison.

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<sup>16</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 251.

<sup>18</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009), 109.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 35.



Since this analysis focusses on media representation in a comic, it is important to determine the relationship of power and representational practices. Hall describes this relation:

Power, it seems, has to be understood here not only in terms of economic exploitation and psychical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way — within a certain ‘regime of representation’.<sup>23</sup>

According to Hall, representation can be used to produce meaning through language, signs and images that represent things.<sup>24</sup> But he notes that representation is not that straightforward. For example, what Hall calls the *regime of representation* describes the visual representation of *difference* at any one historical moment.<sup>25</sup> Images showing racist depictions of black people are used to show power over them. This regime of representation is then described as a power structure that maintains the circulation of power. Therefore, *Bitch Planet*’s representational practices and its relation to power are of significance here, as they may challenge or reaffirm power structures associated with a regime of representation of black people or any other axe of difference.

## 2.2 Exploitation as a Genre

Representation is not the only aspect of *Bitch Planet* that relates to power; the chosen genre in which it is situated also shares this connection. Grindhouse, explains David Church, is known as a type of film theatre: “GRIND HOUSE (n): A theater playing back-to-back films exploiting sex, violence, and other extreme subject matter.”<sup>26</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, grindhouse cinema was produced as a reaction to the ‘feminised’ mainstream film, as mainstream was supposedly too politically correct.<sup>27</sup> Church illustrates how this unfolded: “Unlike mainstream cinema, exploitation films were screened for adults-only audiences, often in gender-segregated screenings if the films contained sexual content—helping create the impression that grind houses were places of sexual ill repute less suitable for women.”<sup>28</sup> Here it is made clear that the content of the films was gendered in a way, for even the

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<sup>23</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 249.

<sup>24</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 222.

<sup>26</sup> Church, “Grind-House Films,” 24.

<sup>27</sup> Idem.

<sup>28</sup> Church, “Grind-House Films,” 10.

screening itself served as a gendered space. These low-budget films aimed for spectacle in the form of sex, violence and other extreme themes, which gave grindhouse a negative connotation.<sup>29</sup> Later the films were categorised under the name *exploitation genre*, which Church also describes:

“Exploitation” is an overarching generic label loosely applied to various genre products, though it usually classifies films on the basis of budget, style, and sensibility. Exploitation films are popularly seen as cheap, excessive spectacles in bad taste, often directly appealing to the (male) viewer’s body; [...]<sup>30</sup>

From this point forward, I refer to this genre as the exploitation genre. Exploitation films are focussed on a male perspective and its history embedded within sexist practices, as in the example of the gendered screening. It is then extraordinary for an intersectional feminist comic to choose a genre with these connotations and history. To be able to analyse the comic within the exploitation genre, it is important to understand the genre’s content, which Schwan helps to clarify.

Schwan analyses the sub-genre of women-in-prison genre. She illustrates that the stories in this genre mostly concentrate around a white protagonist with a consumerist approach to women’s sexuality, pleasure and agency.<sup>31</sup> Women’s sexuality is then subjected to a gaze that sexualises it rather than depicting it realistically. Schwan mentions tropes in the genre such as the sexualised imagery of women, the lesbian shower scene and the gaze.<sup>32</sup> The shower scene is where all these tropes come together, as it focusses on the heteronormative male perspective of sex, as described by Church. Before discussing the gaze, I would like to illustrate one last point Schwan makes: the power of using the genre for a different purpose than it traditionally had.

Schwan notes that the media depicting these stories are not outside power structures, but rather provide criticism from within these structures. By using these women-in-prison tropes, the associated power structures become apparent, therefore enabling the medium to expose the genre’s limitations.<sup>33</sup> DeConnick notes in an interview that she loves the exploitation genre but acknowledges the problematic connotations of the genre. The question DeConnick then poses shows a certain awareness of this criticism from

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<sup>29</sup> Church, “Grind-House Films,” 2.

<sup>30</sup> Church, “Grind-House Films,” 20.

<sup>31</sup> Schwan, “Women in Prison Genre”, 476.

<sup>32</sup> Schwan “Women in Prison Genre”, 477.

<sup>33</sup> Schwan, “Women in Prison Genre”, 476.

the inside: “Could I do exploitation that was not exploitative?”<sup>34</sup> Whether *Bitch Planet* succeeds in doing so becomes clear in the following analysis.

### 2.3 The Gaze: Looking at Comics

The act of looking is vital when it comes to reading a comic. McCloud states that comics are, as a *mono-sensory* medium, exclusively visual representations.<sup>35</sup> He focusses on the reader’s act of looking, which I address in the analysis shortly. More important is how the gaze is portrayed within *Bitch Planet*. Subsequently, I will categorise two gazes: that of the reader and the gaze portrayed in the comic through other characters. How this unfolds is explained by Mulvey’s research on the male gaze.<sup>36</sup>

In her text, Mulvey explains that both the active act of looking, as well as the passive act of being looked at, can convey pleasure.<sup>37</sup> She notes that films mainly produce male pleasure through the gaze. Mulvey defines the male gaze as the projection of the male fantasy onto the women portrayed in film.<sup>38</sup> By using a male main character, film uses the gaze to identify with the male audience’s pleasure:

The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle.<sup>39</sup>

The heteronormative division of the man in power, the active looker, and the woman as a mere object to be looked at reflects patriarchal power structures.<sup>40</sup> Mulvey also addresses the gaze of the viewer which is guided by film-specific characteristics to enact the male gaze through a male character in the film. Furthermore in the case of comics, the gaze of the reader is often guided through the panels and could also be connected to the gaze of a

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<sup>34</sup> SYFY WIRE. “Kelly Sue DeConnick on Captain Marvel, Bitch Planet and More (Behind the Panel) | SYFY WIRE,” published on 18 November 2017, YouTube video, 9:12, watched on 2 April 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sldgTGAaBB8&t=2s>

<sup>35</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, in: *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*. Malden, edited by Meenakshi Gigi Durham, and Douglas M. Kellner. (MA: Blackwell Publishing: 2006),

<sup>37</sup> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 344.

<sup>38</sup> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 346.

<sup>39</sup> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 347.

<sup>40</sup> Idem.

character. I explicate how comics use its medium specific characteristics in my method section.

Mulvey's concept of the gaze reveals power structures in film. But it is of significance to note that since Mulvey wrote her text, things have changed in media representation as well as in academic research on the gaze. Schwan notes that scholars have extended the view on the male gaze:

Recent critical approaches to the women in prison genre by scholars [...] have shifted away from a concern with women as mere victims of patriarchal exploitation and objects of the male gaze to a more complex understanding of female agency in relation to the gaze and sexuality.<sup>41</sup>

In the example of the shower scene, Schwan describes that it is also possible for women to objectify other women by focussing on difference. The complexities of the gaze and the changing climate in which it is theorised is a footnote in this research, as I do not seek a new definition. This because of the focus of this research on patriarchal power structures within comics, of which the male gaze is just a part of the analysis. For that reason, I use Mulvey's definition of the gaze to show how *Bitch Planet* plays with this concept to criticise it 'from the inside'.

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<sup>41</sup> Schwan, "Women in Prison Genre", 477.

### 3. Method

I use a feminist comic analysis as my method. This entails that I use a intersectional gender approach to reveal, for instance, sexist and racist practices within comics. My intention is to be critical towards gender related issues and reflect on representation in *Bitch Planet*.

Moreover, are comics a visual medium in which images can manifest power through the portrayal of that what establishes or challenges patriarchal power structures. I think it is therefore important to approach comic analysis from a feminist perspective.

I explain comic analysis through two prominent writers in this field: McCloud, and Thierry Groensteen by use of his book *System of Comics*.<sup>42</sup> By means of McCloud and Groensteen I explain the following comic-specific characteristics: the combination of text and image, the panel and the panel sequence. In the next sub-section, these characteristics are explained further.

I focus on two aspects in *Bitch Planet*: the first aspect is narrative; how power structures, such as power in looking, are used in the plot. I focus on the overall story portrayed over several panels or scenes. The second aspect is the use of comic-specific characteristics, such as the individual panel, composition and the art style of *Bitch Planet*, which resembles the grindhouse aesthetic. De Landro notes in an interview that he wanted to reproduce the comic style of the 1960s and 1970s for *Bitch Planet*.<sup>43</sup> His use of bright colours and thick shading shows a relation to comics in that time period associated with the exploitation genre, which I will explore below. He notes that every aspect of *Bitch Planet* has been thought about: “[Kelly Sue DeConnick and I] are doing our best to make sure that everything has a meaning.”<sup>44</sup> But how is meaning produced within comics?

Comic analysis relate to the visual methodology of semiotics, which is defined by Gillian Rose explains in her book *Visual Methodologies*, as the study of signs. She elaborates that semiotics has a strong connection with ideology, or not only looking at images themselves but also looking at the cultural and political meanings behind them.<sup>45</sup> Although, semiotics are a part of comic analysis and I do not go into semiotics fully, the cultural and political aspect behind signs are important here which I will mention later. The sign is a fundamental part of semiotics, as Rose explains:

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<sup>42</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *System of Comics*, translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> ComicsVerse. “Valentine De Landro Interview at Special Edition: NYC 2015,” published on June 26, 2015, YouTube video, 12:21, watched on April 5 2018, 3:10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kjinbAYITOs>

<sup>44</sup> ComicsVerse, “New York Comic Con”, 2:10.

<sup>45</sup> Gillian Rose, “Researching visual materials: towards a critical visual methodology.” In *Visual Methodologies*, (London: Sage, 2001), 69-70.

The sign is a unit of meaning, and semiologists argue that anything which has meaning — an advert, a painting, a conversation, a poem — can be understood in terms of its signs and the work they do. Signs make meaning in complex ways [...].<sup>46</sup>

Thus, semiotics focusses on signs and how these signs can be decoded and interpreted, or how images make meaning. I focus on the sign within comic analysis and how this relates to feminist practices. I will first describe the comic-specific characteristics in the next section.

### 3.1 *Within the Panel: Text, Image and Style*

Comics require a different approach to semiotics, as Groensteen illustrates by renouncing two ideas within the field of semiotics: First, the study of comics has to dismantle “constitutive elementary units”. Groensteen argues that this micro-analysing method is not able to produce a specific language for comics.<sup>47</sup> The second idea relinquished by Groensteen is that comics are essentially a mixture of text and images and should therefore be examined through linguistic and visual codes. Instead, Groensteen intends to formulate the theoretical importance of the image, which he generically calls *visual codes*.<sup>48</sup> He argues that “[the] image provides the example of a semiotic system devoid of signs, or at least not reliant on a finished system of signs.”<sup>49</sup> To be specific, where existing semiotic methods anticipate dissecting each sign within a comic's frame and analysing it by using a system of signs, Groensteen contends that visual codes should be analysed in larger amounts.<sup>50</sup>

According to Groensteen, a larger number of units, of what he call the *system*, constitutes the most important codes, as they create context.<sup>51</sup> Groensteen emphasises that the focal point is important when analysing comics: “[The] problem ... is not which code to privilege; it is to find an access road to the interior of the system that permits exploration in its totality so as to find coherence.”<sup>52</sup> I will take Groensteen’s notion of analysing the whole to understand smaller signs in the comic into account.

In my analysis I focus on a page or scene, in the same way Groensteen mentions, but I also focus on signs within the individual panel to develop meaning. McCloud explains how signs could create a specific meaning through his use of *pictorial icons*, which he describes

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<sup>46</sup> Rose, “Researching visual materials”, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *System of Comics*, translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 11.

<sup>48</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 24.

as “any image to represent a person, place [or thing] [emphasis omitted].”<sup>53</sup> He explains that images are “... designed to actually *resemble* their subjects. But as resemblance varies, does the level of iconic content.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the drawing style of the pictorial icon is important here, because the style can change its meaning, as it may resemble ‘real life’ in a different way. The before mentioned 1960s style of *Bitch Planet* can therefore influence its meaning. I want to focus on the element of style comics to emphasise this argument.

The style of a comic concern, among others, lines, backgrounds and colour. McCloud explains that lines and backgrounds are expressive and can be used to portray a certain feeling or emotion of a character.<sup>55</sup> For instance a uninterrupted thick line addresses a different emotion (confidence) than small, sketchy lines (anxiety). Backgrounds and lining are then used to emphasis the general message of the panel. McCloud notes that if lines and backgrounds fail to express a particular message, the text balloon can fill in the gaps by expressing sound.<sup>56</sup> The shape of the balloon and lettering style try to capture the essence of sound. Big wavy letters can portray loud noises, whereas tiny thin letters can portray the smallest sounds. Text balloons, letters, lines and backgrounds are not the only elements which emphasis the message in the panel, colour also is expressive. Colours can be used to emphasise movement, characters, emotions and so forth. Although, I only mention these style aspects briefly, I do want to mention the rise of colour in comics. McCloud explains that when colour was introduced in comics it could only produce four colours because of the restrictions of the technology. The *four colour process* created a certain look: bold simple outlines and bright colours and the distinct dots.<sup>57</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s this use of colour was very the prominent look in comics (see fig. 1). This is also the style what De Landro refers to, which I address in my analysis.



Fig 1. Cropped image of the front page of *Bitch Planet*. Displaying dots.

<sup>53</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Idem.

<sup>55</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 132.

<sup>56</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 134.

<sup>57</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 187.

### 3.2 The Panel

The panel is an important comic-specific characteristic, which is particularly interesting as all the signs are framed by this outline and it captures one moment, like a single frame from a film. Each panel takes up new space to move the timeline of the story, according to McCloud<sup>58</sup> But the panel is more than a time and space indicator. The panel is both a narrative tool as well as a visual one, as Groensteen explains:

[These] codes govern the articulation, in time and space, of the units that we call “panels”; they obey criteria that are just as much visual as narrative—or, more precisely, discursive. These two orders of preoccupation sometimes superimpose themselves to the point of indistinction.<sup>59</sup>

Panels are, hence, a visual tool by which the panel literally frames the story and simultaneously indicates time, as each panel drives the story’s timeline further. I therefore focus on the narrative aspect, as well as the visual aspect of *Bitch Planet*. The narrative can only be extracted from multiple panels; the panel sequence. In the next section I will focus on panel sequence and why it is important.

### 3.3 The Panel Sequence

On a page of an American comic, such as *Bitch Planet*, it is likely to see panels ordered in a timeline from left to right. McCloud explains that: “[Creators] assume as readers that we will know what order to read panels in, but the business of arranging those panels is actually quite complex [emphasis omitted].”<sup>60</sup> Put in the American comics context, I call this left to right composition *traditional structured panels*. The order in which panels are structures also shows a narrative choice. The panel sequence is, thus, another tool for comics to convey meaning.

Meaning is created through multiple panels, as each panel relates to another and because the narrative is spread over the page. Groensteen explains that the framework of these panels, which he calls the *multiframe*, on the page can be reduced to nothing more than a grid.<sup>61</sup> But the multiframe is more than that, according to Groensteen:

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<sup>58</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 12.

<sup>60</sup> McCloud. *Understanding Comics*, 97.

<sup>61</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 30-31.



To draw an ordinary multiframe is to consider not any particular comics page, but comics itself, to the device upon which the language is founded. These miniature representations of comics pages are kinds of symbolic pictograms; they give value to their signs, they express a concept, they enclose an implicit definition.<sup>62</sup>

Panels gives the signs within the panel meaning in relation to each other. For the analysis of *Bitch Planet*, it is thus important to look at the connections between panels. As a result, I have chosen scenes (rather than singular panels) to determine how the comic portrays power structures.

### 3.4 Semiotics in *Bitch Planet*

Semiotics functions as the common thread that links power structures to the theme and style of *Bitch Planet*. Both the story and the images portray a graphic exploitation narrative, but the creators have tried to do this from a feminist perspective. Here is where signs are an important element, as the drawing style and composition, in combination with words, can send a strong message.

I use the trade paperback issue one called “Bitch Planet, Book One: Extraordinary Machine”. This trade paperback contains the first five issues of *Bitch Planet*. I have chosen two scenes that portray the body in different situations, but both scenes share the emphasis on the body. This means that I do not go into other themes that *Bitch Planet* touches upon, nor do I analyse other aspects of these scenes. Therefore, I recognise that the scope of my research only relies on this specific theme in comics that can be used for feminist practices. The chosen scenes are described below.

First, the opening scene is analysed because it sets the tone for both the story of the comic as well as my research. This scene shows how the imprisoned women arrive naked on Bitch Planet. As a big woman, Penelope Rolle notices that her new uniform is not going to fit. The guard forces her to wear the uniform anyway and hits her. Penelope loses her temper and a prison riot breaks loose. The scene ends with the image of armed guards fighting naked women. This scene touches on my sub-question regarding nudity and how comic-specific characteristics are used here.

The second scene I analyse is a shower scene, where the protagonist Kamau Kogo discusses the upcoming Duemila with two other imprisoned women. This scene plays with the male gaze because the two women start a sexual act while aware that a guard is peeping through a hole to watch them. How this acknowledgement of the gaze is portrayed is

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<sup>62</sup> Groensteen, *System of Comics*, 31.

examined. Accordingly, I analyse whether *Bitch Planet* challenges and/or reaffirms the male gaze.

## 4. Analysing Exploitation and Power

### 4.1 “Welcome to the Auxiliary Compliance Outpost”

This section will first describe the opening scene, then I will analyse multiple panels to then ask critical question on the portrayal of nudity, the exploitation genre and power structures. This scene showcase power relations between guards and prisoners, namely in the embodiment of Penelope Rolle. On the ACO, all women get assigned an uniform, but Penelope notices that her uniform is too small. She addresses this with a guard, whose response is that the uniforms are specially made for their bodies. Penelope, as the owner of her body, is certain that it will not fit and starts to shout. Instead, another guard hits her on the head with a baton (see fig. 2). Penelope’s scream of pain is depicted in bold, red letters that jump out of the text balloon. The combination of text and the image creates a strong panel. Notice how Penelope is in the forefront of the image to emphasise her facial expression and therefore her experience over that of the guard.

Another woman, later introduced as Kamau Kogo, says that Penelope did not get violent, which emphasises the unnecessary use of force and abuse of power. The violence the guard uses to control Penelope, is an example of biopower.<sup>63</sup> Her nakedness connotes with vulnerability and defencelessness, which is in turn established through the guard’s violence. Foucault explains how the relation between power and body operates: “The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.”<sup>64</sup> The violence of the guard is an example of how power structures have a direct influence on the body.

The following panels (fig. 3) demonstrate resistance; instead of accepting her defeat, Penelope stands up after the blow and uppercuts the guard in the face, while repeating her question: “Where’m I s’posed to put my tits?!”<sup>65</sup> The letters are bold, yellow and jump out of the text balloon. The text is then accompanied by the image of Penelope’s violent action. This panel also focuses on Penelope’s experience. This is visible in the inability to read the expression on the face of the guard because of the obstruction of the helmet. The associations with nudity are then reversed, as Penelope shows power in this move. Both panels show violence, nudity and power but do so in a very different way. Especially when

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<sup>63</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109.

<sup>64</sup> Foucault, *Discipline*, 25.

<sup>65</sup> DeConnick, De Landro. *Bitch Planet*.



Fig. 2 (Above) Panel depicting a guard hitting Penelope



Fig. 3 (Below) Panel showing Penelope giving a guard an uppercut.

these panels are put side-by-side, *Bitch Planet's* feminist message becomes apparent. The comic makes clear that Penelope is not a mere victim of the system which put her in the ACO, but highlights her strength (both literally and figuratively) through her non-compliance.

This scene could be interpreted as society telling women, such as Penelope, that they are not accepted because they do not fit the beauty standards. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain these social norms imposed on the body, in their book *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*:

[The] norms of beauty and aesthetics that these images present in standards that establish white and Anglo features as the desired look and thinness as the essential body type are part of the normalizing gaze that viewers turn on themselves.<sup>66</sup>

Penelope does not conform to the white and skinny body type that is perceived as ideal. The violence used by the guard is therefore an extreme form of racism and *fat shaming*. Policing women's bodies in the form of fat shaming is a product of the beauty standards created by society. In the same sense, Foucault argues that the body is *produced* through history and culture.<sup>67</sup> This production is formed by images of the 'perfect' body in media, such as advertisements that affect our self-image, which refers to the *normalizing gaze* presented by Sturken and Cartwright.<sup>68</sup> I argue that beauty standards, as a form of power, thus have an immediate impact on the body. This is visible in *Bitch Planet* through the holograph inviting



Fig. 4 Panel showing the 'doll-like' holograph in pink.

<sup>66</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 111.

<sup>67</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 35.

<sup>68</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 110.

the women to the ACO, which has a 'doll-like' appearance because of her hour-glass figure, big hair and lips (fig. 4). Ellen Kirkpatrick elaborates on this representation of beauty standards in her text "'you need to learn to see yourself through the Fathers' eyes': feminism, representation, and the dystopian space of Bitch Planet", that are prevalent in *Bitch Planet*:

Aware of the effects of media representation, the creators of Bitch Planet powerfully demonstrate its use as a form of 'soft power'. The State's TV channel (the 'feed') [...] is an unremitting diet of celebrity gossip, body shaming and misogyny. The 'feed' encourages women to compete for male attention, and men's 'appetites' are whetted by images of available, submissive women.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, the 'feed' not only shows what power the media has in images, but it is also ideological: it shows a regime of representation of bodies. The world of Bitch Planet, then, has its own version of what Foucault calls the *docile bodies of modern state*: "... citizens who participate in the ideologies of the society through cooperation and a desire to fit in and conform."<sup>70</sup> These citizens are called 'compliant' in *Bitch Planet*. This disparity between compliance (the images on the feed) and non-compliance (the women in the ACO) in the comic exposes these power structures associated with the body.

The persistence of Penelope to stand up for her right to cloth herself, shows that she does not have a normalising gaze; she accepts herself. Kirkpatrick notices this body confidence in *Bitch Planet* as she explains that, despite the body shaming in the feed, the women appear to be unconcerned about their 'non-compliancy'.<sup>71</sup> This is where the dismantling of power structures is displayed, as Kirkpatrick explains:

The representation of women at ease with their bodies disrupts current somatic realities where women are, from an early age, pressed into uneasy relationships with their bodies and with food. This is an area of urgent concern for feminist theorising, and one justly receiving an increasing amount of attention. Bitch Planet places such concerns front and centre, dedicating an entire issue to tackling issues around body diversity, fat shaming and fat positivity.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ellen Kirkpatrick, "'you need to learn to see yourself through the Fathers' eyes': feminism, representation, and the dystopian space of Bitch Planet." In: *Feminist Review*, 116, (2017), 138. doi:10.1057/s41305-017-0051-1.

<sup>70</sup> Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 110.

<sup>71</sup> Kirkpatrick, "'you need to learn to see yourself", 138.

<sup>72</sup> Idem.



*Bitch Planet* disrupts the current notions about female bodies, as in the end, bodies are just bodies. In fact, nudity serves a body-positive goal in *Bitch Planet*, instead of a sexual one as in the exploitation genre. This is also noticeable in the subsequent panels.

Penelope's violent response to the guard relates to a shift of power. This shift is then accentuated in the following panel (fig. 5): a prison riot breaks loose. This panel is important because it shows multiple power structures and the body as a key element. It also seems to mirror the previous panels of the violence against Penelope. On the one hand, the women's nakedness could be understood as fragility and defencelessness, as seen in the scared-looking white woman in the right corner. This is particularly true in comparison with the guards, who can be intimidating because of their masks (depersonalising), black uniforms (as a united army) and batons (which spur violence) as well as their position of power. But on the other hand, especially because of this power relation, it is more extraordinary that the women fight back. They show that strength and power comes in more forms than a uniform and a mask; the women look determined or angry and show strength through violence. In this sense, these panels show that the women do not merely fight the guards, they fight the system that put them in the ACO in the first place: they are willingly non-compliant. This demonstrates the feminist undertones by putting the emphasis on being non-compliant not as something that should be punished, but as a way of surviving.

Although *Bitch Planet* does celebrate body positivity, it also fails to show certain types of bodies. De Landro explains in an interview that most comics artist use a template for the bodies to be able to reproduce a character faster. He notes that this practice creates the same body type time and again. In drawing *Bitch Planet* De Landro wanted to explore



Fig. 5 Panel showing the prison riot.

different types of bodies to his best ability.<sup>73</sup> But as Kirkpatrick explains, some body types are not represented:

Yet, for all its positivity, prisoner bodies still conform to some troubling contemporary beauty myths and body norms. We see no older women. No physically disabled women. No unruly body or facial hair, and pubic areas appear well-groomed. There is conformity in this hairlessness, for one imagines ‘compliant’ women also perform body-work to ensure they remain appropriately hairless.<sup>74</sup>

Kirkpatrick poses an important critical note here, as older, disabled and hairy women should have the same opportunity to be celebrated in a feminist comic as the bodies that *are* shown in *Bitch Planet*.

#### 4.2 “The Obligatory Shower Scene”

In this section, I focus on this shower scene and how *Bitch Planet* tries to uncover this trope, by analysing the male gaze. The scene starts with the caption ‘The obligatory shower scene’.<sup>75</sup> This sentence shows insight into the tropes of the women-in-prison exploitation genre, as it plays with the conventions of the gaze and eroticised shower scenes.<sup>76</sup> Notably, the exploitation genre, in which this comic is placed, often establishes male fantasies through the imagery of women. In contrast with *Bitch Planet’s* feminist message, the genre has been described by Church as a ‘male paradise’.<sup>77</sup> Therefore it is important to note *how* artist *Bitch Planet* portrays the women’s bodies within the artistic style of the exploitation genre, as the comic may fall back into the genre’s tropes.

The scene (see fig. 6) begins with Kamau Kogo receiving a note that says to meet in the shower, where she will receive information about the upcoming Duemila. When Kamau enters the shower, two women, Fanny and Renelle, invite her to join them. It appears that Fanny and Renelle are in a sexual relationship, as they kiss and caress each other. This relates to the lesbian shower trope used in the exploitation genre.<sup>78</sup> The story as well as the

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<sup>73</sup> Skybound. “The Veteran of Comic Books You Need to Follow - Valentine De Landro,” published on January 11 2018, YouTube video, 9:00, watched on April 22 2018. 5:16.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY2nHbdxw5Y&t=462s>

<sup>74</sup> Kirkpatrick, “‘you need to learn to see yourself”, 138.

<sup>75</sup> DeConnick, De Landro. *Bitch Planet*.

<sup>76</sup> Schwan, “Women in Prison Genre”, 477.

<sup>77</sup> Church, “Grind-House Films,” 10.

<sup>78</sup> DeConnick, De Landro. *Bitch Planet*.



art style both engage with this genre. Queer writer Nino Cipri explains how De Landro uses this style in a review of the comic:

De Landro's art plays with campy elements of both exploitation films and sci-fi blockbusters, utilising bright splashes of color and layouts that harken back to the story's cinematic roots. ...They're not beautiful or delicate, and that makes them thrilling to look at.<sup>79</sup>

Cipri mentions that the bodies are 'thrilling to look at', but what does that entail, especially when analysing a genre that is typically non-feminist? This 'looking at', or taking pleasure in looking, has a connection with Mulvey's *male gaze*:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. 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-atness.<sup>80</sup>

I use this binary of the active looking of men and the passive being looked at by women, to show how *Bitch Planet* addresses this. *Bitch Planet* transforms the gaze by means of comic-specific characteristics: panels.

The shower scene in *Bitch Planet* uses panels to encourage the reader to focus not on the sexual nature of the scene but on the actual content of the conversation (see fig. 6). *Bitch Planet* does this by overlapping the traditional structured panels (which depict the conversation), with a new set of panels (that show the background).<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the panel sequence demands that readers direct their gaze to these centred panels, but without reeling away from nudity (the bodies are still visible) and female pleasure (depicted not in showing the act, but in the moaning of pleasure). Accordingly, *Bitch Planet* uses its comic-

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<sup>79</sup> Nino Cipri, "BITCH PLANET #1 BY KELLY SUE DECONNICK AND VALENTINE DE LANDRO," in *Strange Horizons* January 12, 2015. <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/bitch-planet-1-by-kelly-sue-deconnick-and-valentine-de-landro/>

<sup>80</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 346.

<sup>81</sup> As fig. 5 shows, the background consist out of a wall with a hole in it. I will discuss this later.



Fig. 6 Panel showing Kamau (left) and Fanny and Renelle (right) in the shower

specific characteristics to redirect power structures. Yet in the following panels, the male gaze is more prominent.

How the pleasure of looking unfolds in the male gaze lies in the objectification of a person. According to Mulvey, “At the extreme, it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.”<sup>82</sup> Mulvey explains here that the audience would attend to this voyeuristic gaze in theatres. Conversely, *Bitch Planet* does not involve an audience in the sense Mulvey uses, but the comic addresses the ‘Peeping Tom’ directly in this scene. I argue that *Bitch Planet* does this through Fanny’s statement, which directly addresses the gaze: “Just because there are no cameras doesn’t mean we’re not being watched.”<sup>83</sup> This could be interpreted as self-referential (or meta) in the sense that the comic indeed does not follow Mulvey’s male gaze by the use of cameras. The ‘being watched’ could also refer to the reader’s gaze, hence acknowledging the power structures conveyed by the image. But more interesting is the literal meaning of Fanny’s statement, seen in the eye of a guard peeping through a hole, watching the women (see fig. 7). Fanny and Renelle even refer to this guard as Tommy Peepers; it could be argued that he is the personification of the male gaze. Jennifer DeRoss points out in her article “Countering the

<sup>82</sup> Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, 344.

<sup>83</sup> DeConnick, De Landro. *Bitch Planet*.



Fig. 7 Panel exposing Tommy Peepers

Gaze: The Liberatory Potential of Bitch Planet’s Exploitation Aesthetic” that here Peepers remains in power because of multiple cues. The first is the fact that he is a guard, so his status provides him power.<sup>84</sup> The second element is the text balloon that says: “...He gets to watch”, which appears to give the women power, because of the grammar they use, but in reality they cannot control the fact that he watches nor what occurs behind the wall.<sup>85</sup> Last, the placement of the text balloon shows the typical power relation, as the balloon enters the eye’s panel without showing the women. This prevents the power shift, which the grammar incites, because of the lack of the connection to the speaker, “... thereby rendering their words meaningless.”<sup>86</sup> And yet, as *Bitch Planet* sets up patriarchal norms in one scene, it smashes them in another.

The next scene shows Kamau alone in the shower touching herself (see fig. 8). She tries to lure Tommy Peepers by using her sexuality. This time, the reader gets to see the sexual act, which is framed in smaller panels. DeRoss notes that this scene plays with the gaze: “Positioning the reader from the perspective of the male gaze enables them to see how Kogo makes use of the same methodology the women utilized earlier while also disrupting

<sup>84</sup> Jennifer DeRoss, “Countering the Gaze: The Liberatory Potential of Bitch Planet’s Exploitation Aesthetic”, May 8, 2018. <https://themiddlespaces.com/2018/05/08/countering-the-gaze/>

<sup>85</sup> DeConnick, De Landro. *Bitch Planet*.

<sup>86</sup> DeRoss, “Countering the Gaze”.



Fig. 8 Panel showing Kamau masturbating Fig. 9 Panel showing Kamau and Peepers

the pattern of gaze-based objectification.”<sup>87</sup> Here, I argue that *Bitch Planet* directly plays with the trope, as Kamau is in control here; she is aware of his gaze and utilises it. But the strength of this scene is in how Kamau uses this power: she rips a showerhead loose and destroys the wall. Then she grabs Tommy Peepers (see fig. 9), who is exposing his flaccid penis, kicks him between the legs and threatens him. The framing of the penis also draws a parallel with Kamau’s masturbation panels, as DeRoss explains:

Arrows that come into the panel [...] point out each freckle that Kogo spots on Weldon’s now flaccid penis, thus cutting his body up based on perceived importance to the viewer just as he did hers and both of these acts carry power. This allows for an equalizing as they are now placed in the same revealed position.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, the use of a comic-specific characteristic—the panel—reveals power structures in order to then oppose the structures in the same manner.

I have shown how *Bitch Planet* first establishes power structures by using the gaze and the objectification of women to then deconstruct these relationships in another scene. Kirkpatrick notes that the comic is well aware of feminist theory and uses this to explore the power structures of the gaze, gender roles and more.<sup>89</sup> I hope to have shown this exploration and awareness of *Bitch Planet* in my analysis.

<sup>87</sup> Idem.

<sup>88</sup> DeRoss, “Countering the Gaze”.

<sup>89</sup> Kirkpatrick, “you need to learn to see yourself”, 135.

## 5. Conclusion

I have demonstrated how *Bitch Planet* uses existing power structures to convey a feminist message by establishing power in one scene, in order to subvert it in another. The reference to the genre of exploitation is used in the narrative (the setting of the dystopian prison) as well as in the style of the comic (lines, backgrounds and colour). This genre echoes its male dominated past, but *Bitch Planet* uses this to actively portray the opposite: an intersectional feminist approach to comics.

The first scene illustrates how *Bitch Planet* uses its comic-specific techniques, such as text balloons, to expose power structures in the form of biopower and policing bodies. Beauty standards and the guard's violence are proven to be power structures that tried to conform Penelope Rolle. Nevertheless is Penelope the embodiment of non-compliance, which *Bitch Planet* celebrates.

Another embodiment is Tommy Peepers, which relates to the male gaze, who is held accountable for his actions. *Bitch Planet* deliberately creates a male gaze to expose a trope used within the exploitation genre: the shower scene and the associated male pleasure of looking. The second scene depicts Kamau and how being looked at, could be redirected in something powerful. The male gaze is exposed here and then humiliated (through the portrayal of the flaccid penis and threatening).

Nudity is prominent in both scenes in *Bitch Planet*, as it shows that naked bodies are just bodies. Although, as Kirkpatrick mentions, did *Bitch Planet* seem to have missed the opportunity to also represent old, disabled and hairy women, the comic does try to show different bodies. Therefore the purpose of nakedness in *Bitch Planet* is to send a body positive message. Thus, to answer my research question, *Bitch Planet* first reaffirms and then challenges patriarchal power structures. In that lies a strong feminist message telling the reader to be unapologetically non-compliant.

Both the concept of power and the comic-specific characteristics were explained briefly, which could be used for a deeper analysis of *Bitch Planet* or another comic. I wish to expand the perspective of a feminist comic analysis to show that comics can function as a medium for feminist practices. As many other aspects are left unturned and my shortcomings in this analysis unanswered, I hope to see more research on the topic of a critical feminist view on comics.

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