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## 'Les petits bruits': little noises and lower volumes in Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999) and *Anatomie de l'enfer* (2004)

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers a discussion of the role of noise in the work of Catherine Breillat, and evaluates its importance in relation to the pornographic. The author argues that by focusing attention on the auditory, we open up another sensory dimension through which to think about Breillat's key relationship with the pornographic and her appeal to listening in spectatorship. Drawing on the conventions of sound in pornography and discussing how *Romance* (1999) and *Anatomie de l'enfer/Anatomy of Hell* (2004) respond to these sounds, the attention to Breillat's sonic practice offered here shows how noise reflects on wider questions of the 'real' and representations of the female body and pleasure that are at stake in Breillat's work more broadly. Attending to the noises of the body, noises emitted by Breillat's female protagonists and to her soundscaping, this article asks what possible critique of the pornographic thinking about noise offers, as well as what forms of resonant intimacy are constructed through Breillat's formal engagement with volumes and amplitudes.

### KEYWORDS

Catherine Breillat; pornography; noise; extreme cinema; Jean-Luc Nancy; postmodernism

Elle émet des petits bruits tout en continuant apparemment de dormir ; mais ne révèle-t-elle pas en cela une forme de duplicité – elle émet donc des bruits de petits grognements repus, satisfaits d'eux-mêmes et autoritaires. (Breillat 2001, 81)<sup>1</sup>

This article offers a discussion of the role of noise in the work of provocative French filmmaker Catherine Breillat, and evaluates its importance in relation to the pornographic. Though Breillat argues that her cinema operates within the stakes of the visual, here I show how by attending to the auditory, we open up another sensory dimension through which to think about Breillat's key relationship with the pornographic and her appeal to listening in spectatorship. Usually loud, usually prescriptive, sound is one of the dominant and most conventional ways our culture represents, recognises and hears female sexual pleasure and it is very much in the realm of the auditory in which the question of representing this pleasure is at stake. This issue is at the heart of Breillat's sexual politics and filmmaking as her films explore female sexuality, subjectivity and questions of obscenity.

Breillat's images encourage spectators to confront graphic, close-up depictions of the female body in terms of what Breillat sees as its facticity and materiality. Her images move away from 'le sentiment de la pornographie' to be instead in 'le sentiment que "c'est ça qui

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est” (Breillat 2006, 109).<sup>2</sup> For Breillat, it is important that representations of the female body and of female sexuality exist away from their usual pornographic frame; her cinema endeavours to show that ‘an image is not pornographic in itself, it’s the way we look at it’ (Breillat 2002). This importation of the pornographic finds its way into Breillat’s otherwise visually striking stylistic habits, characteristic of art cinema. Her films are distinct for their highly aesthetic, painterly style: long takes, decisive camera movements, subdued colour palettes with bursts of vibrant red, austere sets, classical symmetry and precise lighting. Martine Beugnet has stressed the tactility of Breillat’s cinema. She argues this tactility emerges with the ‘meticulous composition of its close up images’ and ‘the effect of high-resolution film, where [...] a wealth of content details and high concentration of the textures and hues reproduced can create a tactile effect’ (Beugnet 2007, 48–51). My own discussion builds on Breillat’s cinema considered in terms of tactility, but discusses the way pornographic sound complicates orthodoxies associated with tactile or haptic sound, and the way Breillat uses the tactility of her own little noises to anchor noise back to the body. For even if it is on the visual field that much of Breillat’s thinking takes place, little noises, I argue, are also an important part of her project. I refer to Breillat’s sounds as ‘petits bruits’ following her own description of the sounds emitted by the female protagonist in her novel *Pornocratie* (2001), which became the screenplay for her film *Anatomie de l’enfer/Anatomy of Hell* (2004). This text, as well as Marguerite Duras’ *La Maladie de la mort/The Malady of Death* (1982), which inspired it, provide literary supports to my own discussion of noise.

Breillat is not alone in her incorporation of pornographic codes within the more rarefied mode of European art cinema. After placing Breillat’s filmmaking in context, this article will establish some conventions of pornography and how sound works in particular. This is done using film theorist Linda Williams’s seminal work on hard-core’s generic codes in 1970s feature film pornography, to which Breillat’s films most evidently respond. I will then proceed to discuss Breillat’s own sonic practice, considering in turn bodily noises, noises emitted by her protagonists and Breillat’s approach to soundscaping. My argument shows how thinking about noise and volume – noises at extreme limits of audibility – reflects crucially on Breillat’s wider exploration of female desire and subjectivity as well as opening new avenues for thinking about her engagement with questions concerning intimacy, exposure and the real. Attending to her noises allows us to reconsider the relation between the pornographic and the postmodern within which Breillat’s ‘unwatchable’ images have been understood (Best and Crowley 2007; Downing 2004). I argue that Breillat’s ‘petits bruits’ create localised and less readable expressions that expose and imagine alternative noises, volumes and narratives of pleasure to hard-core pornography’s grand, totalising sounds. In Breillat’s engagement with volume in particular, she favours contained noises, expressions of response and resistance which occur at different volumes to the codified sounds of sex in pornography. In line with Jean-Luc Nancy’s distinction between hearing and listening, I make a case for Breillat’s little noises soliciting our ears and bodies in an attentive listening, one that is straining towards possible meaning, rather than allowing us to ‘hear’ these sounds in the service of stimulation and pleasure, as we do in pornography.<sup>3</sup>

## Contexts

Despite writing and making films since the 1970s, it was not until the end of the 1990s with *Romance* (1999) that Breillat came to international attention. Her films can be situated within

two concurrent tendencies emerging in French cinema from the beginning of the 1990s. On the one hand, she is frequently positioned alongside 'extremist' filmmakers also known for their provocative manner, such as Bruno Dumont, Philippe Grandrieux and Gaspar Noé.<sup>4</sup> Or else she is situated within a more sororal network of writers and filmmakers such as Ovidie, Catherine Millet, Laetitia Masson, and the filmmaking duo Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes, all of whom address explicit themes from a female point of view. Breillat forms part of an 'ongoing, national "conversation" occurring in French cinema about the possibilities around the *mise-en-scene* of heterosexual sex in the cinema and, in many cases, about the status of women and female sexuality in French culture' (Conway 2015, 464). When Despentes and Trinh Thi's notorious film *Baise-moi/Rape Me* (2000) was withdrawn from distribution after receiving an X rating, Breillat herself led a successful protest to oppose its censorship and repeal its rating. Breillat's earlier work, prior to *Romance*, can therefore be understood as paving the way for this reinvigoration within French cinema, but the period of her own success and greater artistic recognition came within the cinematic context of the 1990s.

Here, I discuss the two films where Breillat engaged most intimately with the pornographic: her first commercial and international success *Romance* and the subsequent *Anatomie de l'enfer*. Not only did Breillat cast the Italian porn-star Rocco Siffredi in leading roles in both films, but she herself claims that with *Romance* it was the time to 'regarder la pornographie en face' (Breillat 2006, 122).<sup>5</sup> The two films also prompt being approached as a pair; *Anatomie de l'enfer* could be considered a loose remake of *Romance*, an opportunity for Breillat to go further in her confrontation with the pornographic and challenge the fears that held her back when making *Romance*. In interviews with film critic Claire Vassé, Breillat claims that, despite the scandal that *Romance* provoked, with its scenes of un-simulated sex and use of porn actors, she did not go far enough. This is because she elided filming the female genitals from up close, despite such shots being planned and written into the script. Speaking of *Anatomie de l'enfer*, Breillat explains, 'il était irrépressible pour moi de montrer le sexe de la femme en gros plan dans *Anatomie de l'enfer* parce que c'était ce que j'avais évité dans *Romance*' (109).<sup>6</sup>

The plots of both films require brief summary here: *Romance* concerns Marie (Caroline Ducey), a primary schoolteacher who is frustrated with her boyfriend (Sagamore Stévenin) for refusing to touch her. As he does not acknowledge her desire, Marie embarks in a search to satisfy and discover her desire through a series of sexual encounters, while navigating wider social feelings of shame and disgust. *Anatomie de l'enfer* is a filmic redaction of Marguerite Duras' *La Maladie de la mort*, which Breillat rewrote into the novel *Pornocratie* before it became the screenplay for the film. In *Anatomie de l'enfer*, an unnamed woman (Amira Casar) establishes a contract paying an unnamed man (Rocco Siffredi) to watch her over the course of four nights. Her demand, as she puts it in the film, is 'me regarder par là où je ne suis pas regardable'.<sup>7</sup>

Determining exactly what kind of pornography Breillat is engaging with is not straightforward. While it is problematic to consider pornography a homogenous category, Breillat appears to be interested in confronting what exists in our mental and imagined repertoire of images and sounds when we picture what pornography is – its generic codes.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the casting of Rocco Siffredi imports, along with the associations and accretions that surround his hyper-masculine muscles, an entire history of his pornographic body. On his personal website, Siffredi claims to have had sex with over 3000 women in professional circumstances and the Internet Adult Film Database attributes 718 titles to his name.<sup>9</sup>

Siffredi's body thus carries a sheer weight of pornographic references that arguably exceed any specific text or style. Other potential source texts for Breillat might be the 'classical' pornographic feature films of the 1970s. Her cinema rethinks the relationship between narrative and sex number that characterises full-length feature pornographic films such as *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972) from the US, or *Emmanuelle* (Just Jaeckin, 1974) from France and questions the utopian discourse around sex that these films offer. Douglas Keesey, in his monograph on Breillat, suggests that her work is indebted to the relaxing of censorship laws surrounding the release of *Emmanuelle* in 1974 (Keesey 2009, 11). This connection becomes particularly compelling in light of Breillat's confession that she had wanted to make *Romance* since making *Une vraie jeune fille/A Real Young Girl*, which was realised in 1976.<sup>10</sup> Breillat also consistently positions the Franco-Japanese pornographic art film *Ai No Corrida/In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976) as the film that allowed her to make *Romance*. What is certain is that Breillat desires to use the hard-core elements of pornography, rather than titillating erotica or soft-core, evident from her own distinctions between the two, in which 'l'érotisme, c'est l'humiliation totale de la femme. L'idée que c'est acceptable, car joli. La pornographie, c'est laid, moi je préfère le laid' (Armanet and Vallaeys 2000).<sup>11</sup>

Linda Williams claimed in her ground-breaking work on hard-core pornography that 'there can be no such thing as hard core sound' (Williams 1989, 126). She defines hard-core as a condition of 'maximum visibility' that does not play 'peekaboo' and whose quest is to capture the involuntary confession of pleasure in the form of visible frenzy, epitomised in hard core by 'the money shot', also known as the 'come shot'. As Williams observes, 'maximum visibility proves elusive in the parallel confession of female sexual pleasure' (49) as sound cannot provide the same certainty, evidence or knowledge. As already discussed, a similar gesture of maximum visibility is evident in Breillat's own movement towards the female body. However, Breillat's films elide the male 'money shot' to focus instead on the female genitals and their own material secretions, leading Eugenie Brinkema to assert that in *Romance* 'the discourse of realism relies exclusively on the female body' (Brinkema 2006, 151). When Williams argues there is no such thing as hard-core sound, she refers to sound's ontology. Sound undermines what hard-core pornography desires, which is an 'assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of feminine pleasure, but its involuntary confession' (Williams 1989, 50).

A crucial formal difference in the use of sound in 'classical' narrative pornography from 'traditional' narrative cinema is the way it does not serve to anchor the images and enhance their realism. Instead it indulges an almost surreal effect, but does so, Williams jokes, 'without having the function of avant-garde deconstruction' (122). Because even big-budget hard-core films 'revert to nonsynchronous sound in the "numbers"', Williams suggests 'this technique would seem to be an important *formal* feature of the genre's representation of sex' (124; emphasis in original). Scenes are shot without sound so that the camera can get as close as it needs to bodies and move around them without capturing extraneous noise. Pornography thus seeks to suppress noise in favour of its codified sounds. These are added in post-production, with almost no regard for synchronicity with the image. Additional sounds of smacking, slapping or slurping are rendered through foley, and function to produce a sense of proximity rather than of spatial realism. Hard-core sound:

does seek an effect of closeness and intimacy, rather than of spatial reality. In hearing the sounds of pleasure with greater clarity and from closer up, auditors of hard core sacrifice the ability to gauge the distances between bodies and their situation in space for a sense of connectedness with the sounds they hear. (Williams 1989, 124)

Sound is thus not authentication but stimulation. It demonstrates haptic properties, privileging proximity, materiality and aural close-ups that collapse spatial realism to favour instead an immediacy and sense of touch with a female *acousmètre*.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to the theoretical orthodoxies of the haptic, in this instance, pornography's haptic economy could be said to support the violence of the scopical. The uncertain legal status of sounds that we might consider aurally pornographic means that female sex vocalisations are a more 'available form of representation' that 'creates another way of sanctioning the construction and circulation of women as the objects of sex, as being "on the market"' (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, 104). That the female voice is acousmatic in visual pornography makes this voice readily detachable and easier to circulate 'on the air' in other non-pornographic spaces. Sound thus constitutes another way in which women are constructed in and across different media as objects of sexual availability.

The female voice is also pushed to certain limits in pornography – either through straining the performer's voice or by manipulating the voice through technology – where the louder she vocalises, the more she puts on display her enjoyment. Volume becomes a quantitative measure of pleasure: to turn her on is to turn her up. Corbett and Kapsalis (1996) have suggested that a frenzy of the audible, of volume, provides an equivalent to hard-core's frenzy of the visible. However, this is insufficient as the verification provided by sound remains too uncertain to fulfil Williams's notion of hard-core's quest for evidence. It does nonetheless position the formal property of volume as problematic, and this is one aspect of Breillat's approach to her own sound that I explore later.

As well as raising issues about the real (is she 'really' enjoying herself?), sound in pornography raises questions about the codes that construct what we think of as real and the ways we narrate and communicate experiences of pleasure. The sounds of sexual pleasure are highly codified, and it is largely through pornography that the aural codes for voicing our own pleasure, real or faked, are constructed.<sup>13</sup> Pornography, and culture at large, could be understood as providing female sexual pleasure with one grand, loud narrative. To question this sound is to question the representability of this pleasure and the ways it has been made intelligible.

Breillat's films resist the repertoire of codified sounds found in pornography, instead privileging noises that interrupt its repertoire and formal features. Noise is a term used for sounds that are not acknowledged as meaningful, acceptable or pleasurable, sound that bothers or disrupts. Noise, as disturbance and disruption, arguably provides a better term for examining the auditory representation of sex in Breillat's work, for it reflects her wider project of confronting us with the disruptive, unpleasant and bothersome nature of female sexual subjectivity in its non-hygienic, un-prettified form. In considering noise, we move away from the prescriptive, intelligible 'sounds of pleasure' to noises not appropriable to stimulation, that challenge pornography's regime of representation and imagine alternative expressions to communicate pleasure and intimacy. This is not to suggest a definition of noise that denies semiotic content. However, in pornography, sounds are overtly laden with directed content and, as we shall see, Breillat's noises resist signifying in this way. Nor does this definition seek out a material or ontological conception of noise like that sought by Hainge (2013). Such an approach does not reflect Breillat's desire to expose the subjective structuring of our perceptions. Hainge even compares his investment in an ontology of noise to Justice Porter Stewart's famous ruling on obscenity – 'I know it when I see it', he said (Hainge 2013, 7) – a conception of obscenity that Breillat outright refuses. Rather, my use of the term 'noise' is

closer to that of Aimeé Boutin's historical, context-bound and subjective definition in *City of Noise* (2015). Like Hainge's association of noise with obscenity, Boutin acknowledges that cultural meanings of noise are typically shared, but she does so in order to draw out socio-cultural models of minority stakes in historical soundscapes, rather than moving toward a pure essence of noise. It is what is at stake in the gendered realm of the auditory in pornography that I draw out here.

### Breillat's 'petits bruits'

As well as a visual confrontation with the 'obscenity' of the female body, Breillat's films call upon us as listeners to this body. In *Anatomie de l'enfer*, Breillat's frontal, unflinching camera employs the same framing as the pornographic 'split-beaver' shot (a close-up characterised by visible genitals and legs ajar) and this is matched by aural close-ups featuring their increased audibility (see Figure 1). Breillat thus ties female noise back to the body and re-establishes a spatial realism through a use of sound that is particular to the body seen from this distance on screen. This attention to the materiality of sex has already been explored by Brinkema in her discussion of the viscous, sticky production of the female sex across Breillat's work. However, Brinkema's claim that 'Breillat's foray into the ontological realism of the image is always and uniquely centred on the sticky production of feminine desire' (Brinkema 2006, 149) passes over the noise of this desire and, as a reading, stops short of another way in which noise reverses the aural codes of pornography by re-orientating the discourse of realism onto the female body through these materialising sound indices and a re-establishing of Cartesian space through sound.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, the sounds of female genitals are present in pornography – it is a sound which pornographic foley goes to great lengths to render. However, this sound of wetness is usually included to represent genitals in action – to support what Williams terms the 'genital event' and offer the sound of bodies put to work in real pornographic performance (Williams 1989, 83). Breillat's body, by contrast, is almost always-already noisy. When her camera glides across



**Figure 1.** Breillat's extreme close-up in *Anatomie de l'enfer* (Tartan Films).

the surface of Amira Casar's body or approaches her in close-up, it is accompanied by various faint droning sounds. This simultaneously figures the body as already sounding, at the same time as it suggests (in borrowing sound typical of the horror genre) the horror this body inspires. Breillat's body does not require energetic penetration or action in order to hear it. Instead it is sounding at its surface, at the slightest touch, and is in fact not heard at all in scenes of penetrative sex. Volumes are engaged formally to announce autonomous arousal and presence, the noise of a body pre-touch, rather than the idea conveyed in pornography that a body's manipulation corresponds to a parallel manipulation and modulation of sound. One could say that Breillat's gazing camera is simultaneously functioning as a microphone held up to the female anatomy. However, a better comparison might be something like a stethoscope, an instrument of listening rather than amplifying, and specifically an instrument for listening that takes place at the surface of the body, bringing sound into focus only alongside the scale and proximity of the close-up shot. Breillat embraces the role her handling of technology can play in relation to mediating what Arnt Maasø examines as 'the spatial relationship between speaker and listener' (Maasø 2008, 38). Or in this case, body and listener. Noise here is not a figure of interiority, as many theorisations of sound conclude, but for exteriority, an emitted signal, expressive of this surface and boundary between the body's inside and out.<sup>15</sup> This mechanism of externalising is something Brinkema points out in reference to *Romance's* visual representation of female wetness, claiming it is an act of 'radically *othering* the image' by reversing the ontological authenticity typically centred on the male body in the pornographic image (Brinkema 2006, 152, emphasis in original). Just as *Anatomie de l'enfer* is a call to watch that which is unwatchable, it also ends up sounding like a call to listen to that which is (usually) unlistenable. Contrary to the aural close-up of pornography that has detached the female voice and bodily noises from the body on screen, in both *Romance* and *Anatomie de l'enfer*, Breillat engages a sonic materialism alongside the image that asks us to confront *this exact* body on screen, up close, and listen to it.

As well as anchoring noises back to a visual body, *Romance* and *Anatomie de l'enfer* privilege male vocalisations of pleasure at higher volumes than those of female pleasure. The female protagonists in these films remain relatively quiet during scenes of penetrative sex with Siffredi, making small noises, or taking breaths, more like the murmurs of a sleeper (in *Anatomie de l'enfer* the woman *is* asleep). The sex scenes with Siffredi employ aural close-ups of his sounds rather than hers, his breaths, as if they were hot in our ear (see Figures 2 and 3). At these points, it is as if the camera has become Marie's or Amira Casar's ear. The film image itself becomes a listening organ, an image of a cine-ear, that identifies with the female subject and constructs her as an active listening subject. Just as the camera became an *instrument* of listening at the point of confronting the female anatomy, so too does it at this moment of relation become an *organ* of listening, aligned with the female protagonist as subject. This embodied understanding of the image corresponds to Breillat's own statement about her filmmaking that 'les mots de *Romance* sont comme l'âme de Marie, l'image est comme son corps' (Breillat 1999, 23).<sup>16</sup> By simultaneously embodying these two different orifices on the body, eye and ear, *Romance* and *Anatomie de l'enfer* draw attention to listening as a mode of relation taking place alongside the act of looking.

Listening suggests a final level of attention to hearing that has been theorised by Jean-Luc Nancy in his distinction between 'entendre' and 'écouter' (2002). For Nancy, hearing seeks to impose understanding (reflected in expressions such as 'I hear you'), whereas listening is a mode of attention which is tense, anxious and straining towards a possible meaning that



**Figure 2.** Siffredi's breaths in 'her' ear, *Anatomie de l'enfer* (Tartan Films).



**Figure 3.** Siffredi's breaths in Marie's ear, *Romance* (Trimark Pictures).

lies beyond intelligible sense. Nancy employs an interesting language of capture and surprise when describing listening that echoes Williams's own terms in theorising pornography and its desire to capture the involuntary confession of pleasure: 'De quel secret s'agit-il lorsqu'on écoute proprement, c'est-à-dire lorsqu'on s'efforce de capter ou de surprendre la sonorité plutôt que le message ?' (Nancy 2002, 17; emphasis in original).<sup>17</sup> Pornography's address allows an auditor to hear, rather than challenging them to listen. Pleasure is made to speak,

but is inattentive to the sonority of communication itself – resonance – that Nancy identifies in listening. Breillat's novel *Pornocratie* makes clear that one of the modes of relation and intimacy Breillat is exploring is precisely a form of resonant sense away from intelligible sense. *Pornocratie's* description of the man drinking whiskey in his chair while watching the reclining woman lie naked on her bed, describes the bodily noise of his swallowing, standing in place of words, as a form of offering to her: 'Le bruit léger de sa déglutination tient lieu de l'espace des mots. Il lui offre cette intimité sonore' (Breillat 2008, 48).<sup>18</sup> The attention to this swallowing noise coming from the body's interior is carried over from novel to film, as the sound mix allows the interior of the body to be intimately heard in the detailed noise of Siffredi's gulping (Figure 4), between his own words as he claims that beings have nothing to say to each other and communication is impossible.

Though audition is one of the distant senses, according to Laura U. Marks's distinction (2008), listening is revealed in Breillat's work as a form of intimate relation with its own dynamics of presence. However, this presence is one we strain towards. The camera, in taking on the embodiment of an auditory organ, as well as an organ of vision, constructs listening as an active and fine mode of attention, one receptive to different noises and lower volumes. Elsewhere in *Pornocratie* are examples of noises occurring on contained, small scales equivalent to this 'bruit léger'. Breillat describes the woman's noises as 'petits', and these are figured as a form of resistance that is even perceived as duplicitous and threatening. In what is described as a power game between the sleeping woman and the man she pays to be the 'possesseur nocturne de son corps',<sup>19</sup> the little unconscious noises she makes divest these power positions of their dynamics. While the man manipulates the woman's body into lewd poses, we are told that 'elle émet des petits bruits tout en continuant apparemment de dormir ; mais ne révèle-t-elle pas en cela une forme de duplicité – elle émet donc des bruits de petits grognements repus, satisfaits d'eux-mêmes et autoritaires' (Breillat 2001, 81).<sup>20</sup>

Breillat is thus interested in contained noises, favouring quieter (though not silent) expressions of response and resistance which figure pleasure as non-appropriable and unknowable.



Figure 4. Hearing sounds from the body's interior, Siffredi's gulping in *Anatomie de l'enfer* (Tartan Films).

The noises remain close to their source, incorporated and attached to the body, cast out across a small range. Duras' *La Maladie de la mort* figures female pleasure in a similar way: inaudible and unknowable to the male watcher, incapable of hearing her. The first-person narrator, addressing the man, wonders: 'Je ne sais pas non plus si vous percevez le grondement sourd et lointain de sa jouissance à travers sa respiration, à travers ce rôle très doux qui va et vient depuis sa bouche jusqu'à l'air du dehors' (Duras 1982, 15).<sup>21</sup> As a cinematic work, *Anatomie de l'enfer* formally realises these descriptions of amplitude and volume. Although within the filmic diegesis, these noises remain a representation, they can be reconciled with a form of realism in the way that, as a listener, our auditory sense is addressed by an actual little noise that presents itself and engages us in a real play of volume.

These issues have broader consequences for thinking about the social and cultural constructs that inform Breillat's work. Paying attention to Breillat's soundscaping offers a further way we might understand her exploration of sexuality and its placement within the cultural frameworks that construct it. Discussions of Breillat's use of voiceover have already been addressed by critics such as Emma Wilson and Lisa Downing, discussing how in *Romance*, for example, Breillat 'uses the voiceover and dialogue to discourse upon the discontents of sexuality, from the point of view of the female located in the heterosexual economy' (Downing 2004, 270), or that 'the very distance and split between word and image seem to tell us something of the division between Marie's thoughts and sensations' (Wilson 2001, 150). Though interested in sexual identity and desire, Breillat's films are not a string of 'sexual numbers' without narrative. Unlike in pornography, where narrative is weakly embedded around sexual numbers to facilitate their initiation (something Williams discusses in her comparison to the conventions of the musical), Breillat's films intently explore and deconstruct how sexual relations are embedded into a wider narrative (social, cultural), as well as the presence of this narrative within sexual relation. Downing provides a full discussion of the way Breillat's work, alongside other extreme filmmakers categorised within the 'French extremism', are interested in pursuing this project. In contrast to the trend in the 1970s of including explicit sexual representation in narrative cinema, epitomised by films such as *Ultimo Tango a Parigi/Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), which, Downing argues, was reflective of a cultural moment characterised by 'a belief in the liberating potential of exposing, confessing and displaying sexuality', extreme cinema such as Breillat's does not 'seek straightforwardly to valorise or attribute a positive political radicality to the mere fact of exposing genitals and gazing at genital sex' (Downing 2004, 268). Instead, sexual number and narrative are brought together in these films to 'trouble value judgements about sexual politics, sexual exposure and aesthetics' (268) and use hard-core elements in new forms of narrative, in order to disturb longstanding cultural myths that construct narratives of sex and sexual difference. In this postmodern inquiry into sex:

Sex has become [...] not the object of enquiry we must constantly expose in our search for 'the truth' or for political liberation, but a rich discursive field that, if shaken, will reveal the conditions of its own construction, its plural points of apprehension, its multiple and textured perspectives and points of view. (Downing 2004, 279)

However, a vococentric attention only to voice and voiceover, at the expense of noise, stops short of the further ways noise can illuminate Breillat's dynamic of permeation between the spheres of the sexual and the social.

Breillat's soundscaping reflects, analogously, this interest between sexual relation (number) and the wider sociocultural framework that it operates within (narrative). Her

soundscape meticulously details and documents the material density of the environment and settings in which her scenes of sexual interaction take place, demonstrating an extreme attention to spatial realism through sound. Sexual relation is represented not as taking place out of time and space but as fundamentally anchored within the *mise-en-scène* of the rooms, settings and environments Breillat has chosen. In one of *Anatomie de l'enfer's* opening scenes, as the woman performs fellatio on the man having left the pharmacy, distinct aspects of the material environment are picked out: we hear dogs barking, the noise of distant cars, the wind. Similarly, our introduction to the woman's house by the cliffs is established through the chirping of cicadas, or possibly crickets, the noise of the taxi's rumble, the sea. Again, in her use of sound, Breillat preserves a Cartesian mapping of space, rather than the sense of spacelessness conveyed through haptic sound in pornography. This implies an exploration of sexual encounter in Breillat's work that is indissociably tied to context, setting and environment; it does not dissolve into a utopian space of sex.

This is in opposition to how Breillat treats the use of sound in the nightclub of *Anatomie de l'enfer's* opening where spatial realism *is* collapsed. Here, sound is 'on-the-air', Chion's term to designate sound within a scene that appears to be transmitted electronically by radio, telephone, amplification etc. Chion discusses the infinite variation made possible by on-the-air sound, which enjoys the mobility of crossing the boundaries of cinematic space:

Selon en effet le poids particulier donné par la réalisation (mixage, réglage de niveau, filtrage, condition d'enregistrement de la musique) soit sur la *source initiale* du son (la réalité des instruments qui jouent ou des voix qui chantent), soit *au contraire* sur sa *source terminale* (le haut-parleur présent dans l'action que l'on fait sentir matériellement par des filtrages, des bruits de friture, des résonances, etc.), le son de la musique *on the air* traversera plus ou moins les zones *in/off* hors-champ, et se positionnera plus ou moins, pour le spectateur, comme musique d'écran ou musique de fosse. (Chion [1990] 2017, 85; emphasis in original)<sup>22</sup>

In Breillat's nightclub the music shifts from seeming unambiguously non-diegetic as it accompanies the opening credit sequence to a suggested diegetic context within the image as the sound is re-contextualised by images inside a nightclub and people dancing seemingly in time with this music. From the film's opening, Breillat alerts us to sound's ontological uncertainty, something that mirrors the sleeping woman's duplicitous 'petits bruits'. The musical style of electronic house, *Timeless Bass* (2001) by Paris-based techno artist D'Julz, is not far from the rhythmic, instrumental, electronic music popular in pornography in the 1990s, used as 'filler' sound and edited to match the movements of bodies on screen. As this music makes its transition from non-diegetic to 'on-the air', the sound quality of the mix remains the same. It is only once the woman later enters the bathroom that the music takes on a quality expressive of the space. Rather than a precise mapping of space through an attention to the realism and materiality of sound found elsewhere in the film, the spatial realism of the nightclub *is* collapsed. The music smothering and smoothing over the noise we would hear.

What can be inferred from these two different approaches to soundscape, if we separate what might be classed as 'narrative' from what might be classed as 'number' in *Anatomie de l'enfer*? The nightclub scene is indisputably part of the narrative. Here, the film's only use of music and its sole collapse of spatial realism are suggestive of the way pornographic codes also infuse the space of narrative and infuse the body of the film, through sound's traversal across cinematic space and its metadiegetic status. Breillat's relationship to the pornographic, which Martin Crowley has claimed 'needs to be thought in terms of citation and entanglement' (Best and Crowley 2007, 55), is here in evidence as pornographic citation is heard

migrating across the different layers of Breillat's filmic construction to show how entangled the boundaries between the sexual and the social are; that pornographic codes and forms are present away from instances of explicit representation. The space of the nightclub is formally pornographic without being explicitly obscene, reflecting the ways that we think our own sexuality permeates within frameworks and interactions we do not necessarily believe to be sexual.

Breillat therefore uses two different placements of sound to explore a two-way traffic between the sexual and the social. In what we might classify as her sexual 'numbers', Breillat employs a realist soundscape. Rather than this realism suggesting claims to truth or reality, it is used to suggest mediation, the entanglement of environment and culture in those interactions that tend to be characterised as self-transcendent and part of private life. The starkness of the soundscape and the 'petits bruits' included to make up these spaces, alongside an acute absence of soundtrack for the rest of the film, do not suggest we are in a space of nature as opposed to culture (even if the sounds included are those of crickets, the sea, the wind etc.). Rather, they suggest an exposure of the relation between sexual identity and other mediating dynamics, where Breillat's cinematic language refuses the smoothing over, smothering or muffling that the addition of soundtrack achieves in pornography. By contrast, in the nightclub, a scene we might class as constituting narrative, Breillat uses the collapse of spatial realism to create an image of the social and the 'real' that is distorted by and entangled with the pornographic. Cinematic space, created through soundscape as well as the emplacement and displacement of noises, shows how these spheres cannot be thought in isolation.

## Conclusions

What critique of the pornographic do Breillat's little noises thus offer, and what form of intimacy do they suggest?

First, the alternative noises and volumes, which dial down the conventions for the representation of female pleasure in pornography, provide an alternative range of evidence in which we might hear female desire, away from a prescriptively legible portfolio of sounds and volumes that construct the aural codes of sexuality. In this sense, these little noises contribute towards the postmodern exploration of sexuality that Downing identifies in Breillat's work. This exploration is not invested in a belief of political liberation through sexuality, or an ideal of sexual relation that exists away from mediation, nor does it offer in place of pornography a 'more real' sound of female pleasure. The 'petits bruits' made by Breillat's bodies, female protagonists and the 'petits bruits' of her soundscapes, offer an auditory equivalent of Downing's evocation of postmodernism's 'petits récits' (micro-narratives) as proposed by Jean-François Lyotard (1979). These 'petits récits', singular and local, throw off grand narratives that totalise and naturalise what comes to represent or stand in for what is real. Instead, they bother and disturb these 'grands récits' or 'grands bruits' and the way we narrate the experience of pleasure. These 'petits bruits', a quieter form of expression that keeps sound local and close to the body, suggest a noisy rumble beneath this grand moan, something that sound in pornography literally suppresses in its silencing of direct sound and amplification of female pleasure.

In noises contained and incorporated expression at the surface of the body, in their variation and deliberate ambiguity, and in Breillat's favouring of faint, near inaudible volumes

such as the drone, we can hear a form of presentation that is not offering itself fully, not appropriable to meaning, confessing pleasure or manipulating female sex vocalisations in the service of a viewer's arousal. Understood against the aural codes of pornography, Breillat's noises are a form of literal resistance, in that our ear must strain towards them, we are required to listen. With these little noises and little volumes, a form of relation is withheld at the same time as it is presented. Brinkema theorises a case of 'near inaudibility' which, she argues, is not caught up in a metaphysics of presence and absence, a form of violence to being, but is instead a violence done to form. Near inaudibility

is linked to a separate set of conceptual and aesthetic terms: pressure, tension, intensity, and force. Silence and near inaudibility pose entirely different formal problems and set in motion opposing formal gestures; the former concretizes the discourse of silence into a concern with being, while the latter concerns itself with formal gradations of intensities. (Brinkema 2011, 213)

Brinkema theorises near inaudibility through Nancy's figuration of laughter, to arrive at the Nancean formulation that 'as opposed to tarrying with the language of presence and absence, [near inaudibility] is rather "suspended on the limit of its own presentation"' (Brinkema 2011, 213–214). Nancy's discussion of laughter, another example of nonsensical broken-down speech or response, is illuminating to the reading of Breillat's work offered here. It calls to mind an actual instance of laughter in *Anatomie de l'enfer*. A clear peal rings out from the female protagonist in response to the touch of the man, as he investigates her. Not only is laughter ambivalent as a form of response, but it is, according to Nancy 'ni une présence ni une absence. Il est l'offrande d'une présence dans sa propre disparition. Il n'est pas donné, mais offert : suspendu sur la limite de sa propre présentation' (Nancy 1990, 313).<sup>23</sup> This conception of laughter echoes Breillat's wider interest in responses we cannot read, whose meanings escape us, responses that exist on and at the limit of their own disclosure, and withdraw from us in the moment of their own presentation. Being attuned to Breillat's 'petits bruits' is the condition of resonant intimacy that we are offered through our ear's solicitation by these noises we strain towards.

For those who have read Breillat's work in response to the pornographic previously, Breillat's project is variously read as exploring 'the possibility of a non-pornographic pornography' which shows that 'a body is not pornographic in itself, it's the way we represent it, or, a space is not pornographic in itself, it's the way we inhabit it, or, even, a pornography is not pornographic in itself, it's the way we materialise it' (Brinkema 2006, 154). In resisting pornography's simulated sex sounds, and not putting them in the service of a viewer-auditor's stimulation, Breillat's noises are de-eroticised. Emitted by the 'sleeping beauty' of *Anatomie de l'enfer*, who, in all her serenity, cannot be humiliated, these noises become, as Nancy describes of 'sleeping monuments' in *Tombe de Sommeil*, 'vidés de leurs attributions et, avec elles, des affects qui y répondaient' (Nancy 2007b, 16).<sup>24</sup> Breillat empties the sounds of sex of their affective arousal, and, in the form of little noises, creates the possibility of imagining new ranges of evidence for intimate expressions.

## Notes

1. 'She emits little noises, while apparently continuing to sleep. Doesn't she reveal in that a form of duplicity – she emits noises, small satiated groanings, self-satisfied and authoritative' (Breillat 2008, 63).
2. 'Not in the sentiment of pornography, but in the spirit of "this is what it is"' All translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

3. For Nancy, listening is a more attentive register of our auditory sense, one which is active and straining towards a possible meaning, or a sonority that lies beyond sense as signification. Hearing, on the other hand, seeks to impose understanding, reflected in expressions such as 'I hear you' (Nancy 2002).
4. These filmmakers also display interesting engagements with noise and the auditory as part of their strategies of provocation and cinematic expressivity. Gaspar Noé famously used a drone of roughly 27 Hz during the first 30 minutes of *Irréversible/ Irreversible* (2004). At this frequency, the sound induced feelings of nausea and sickness in his audience at Cannes. Bruno Dumont is fixated with preserving aspects of noise captured while filming when he comes to mix the sound for his films. See, for example, the documentary *Le Fracas des pattes de l'araignée/The Spider's Footsteps* (Aurélien Vernhes-Lermusiaux, 2012), which considers the sound mixing for Dumont's film *Hors Satan* (2011). While Greg Hainge, underscoring the importance of approaching Grandrieux's work from a sonic perspective, has suggested that 'the sonic may provide an ideal set of concepts and figures through which to approach the cinema' (Hainge 2017, 265).
5. 'Confront pornography head on.'
6. 'In *Anatomy of Hell*, it was irrepressible for me to show the female sex in close-up, because I had avoided it in *Romance*.'
7. 'Watch me where I am unwatchable.'
8. Speaking in interview on why she likes to keep her actors away from their partners during the period of filming, Breillat explains: 'Car si on lui dit ce qu'on a fait, lui le transcrit en images horribles. Comme toujours sur le genre de scènes que je filme, les gens imaginent des images qui sont nécessairement horribles, des images répertoriées dans leur tête' (Breillat 2006, 143) ('If he were to be told what had happened, he would transcribe it into horrible images. As always with the kinds of scenes that I film, people imagine that they must be horrible, these images are repertoired in their heads').
9. Viewed May 19, 2017. Siffredi is most known for his appearance in Gonzo-style pornography, a sub-genre characterised by participants holding the camera themselves, creating first-person point-of-view shots from a male perspective.
10. Though the film did not enjoy general release until 1999, following the success of *Romance*.
11. 'Eroticism is the utter humiliation of the woman. The idea that it is acceptable, because it is pretty. Pornography is ugly, and I prefer ugly.'
12. 'Acousmètre' is a term coined by Michel Chion (1994). It designates a voice specific to cinema that is heard and not seen.
13. Pornography has also been a site that responds to debates about female pleasure and the problems sex raises. For a detailed discussion, see Williams's chapter on 'Hard-Core Utopias: Problems and Solutions' (1989, 153–183). Nonetheless, it is problematic that pornography remains one of female pleasure's few authors and sites in which this pleasure sees itself represented.
14. The term 'materialising sound indices' (M.S.Is) comes from Michel Chion's theorisation of film sound. It refers to sonic details that aim to 'materialise' their sound source.
15. The tendency to always align the auditory with interiority is lamented by Jonathon Sterne in what he terms the 'audiovisual litany' (Sterne 2003).
16. 'The words in *Romance* are like Marie's soul, the image is like her body.'
17. 'What secret is at stake when one truly *listens*, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?' (Nancy 2007a, 5).
18. 'The slight sound of his swallowing takes the space of words. He offers her that resonant intimacy' (Breillat 2008, 48).
19. 'Nocturnal owner of her body.'
20. 'She emits little noises, while apparently continuing to sleep. Doesn't she reveal in that a form of duplicity – she emits noises, small satiated groanings, self-satisfied and authoritative' (Breillat 2008, 63).
21. 'Nor do I know if you hear the low, distant murmur of her pleasure through her breathing, through the faint rattle going back and forth between her mouth and the outside air' (Duras 1986, 10).

22. 'Depending on the particular weight given by such factors as mixing, levels, use of filters, and conditions of music recording – i.e., whether the emphasis is on the sound's initial source (the real instruments that play, the voice that sings) or on the terminal source (the speaker present in the narrative whose material presence is felt through use of filters, static, and reverb), the sound of on-the-air music can transcend or blur the zones of onscreen, offscreen, and nondiegetic' (Chion 1994, 77).
23. 'Neither a presence nor an absence. It is the offering of presence in its own disappearance. It is not given but offered: suspended on the limit of its own presentation' (Nancy 1993, 383).
24. 'They are emptied of their responsibilities and, with them, emptied of the affects they once roused' (Nancy 2009, 4).

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## Notes on contributor

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*Deep Throat*, 1972, Gerard Damiano, USA.  
*Emmanuelle*, 1974, Just Jaeckin, France.  
*Le Fracas des pattes de l'araignée*, 2012, Aurélien Vernhes-Lermusiaux, France.  
*Hors Satan*, 2011, Bruno Dumont, France.  
*Irréversible*, 2004, Gaspar Noé, France.  
*Romance*, 1999, Catherine Breillat, France.  
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