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Time, corporeality and breath: Audrey Diwan's cinematic aesthetics of abortion in *L'événement / Happening* (Audrey Diwan, 2021)

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ABSTRACT

This article critically analyses Audrey Diwan's cinematic 'aesthetics of abortion' as affective sensations of sound and image in *L'événement / Happening* (2021). Engaging with breath in the film, the soundscape presents the voicelessness and disempowerment of the young female body. These sensations articulate the pressures placed upon young women against the contextual backdrop of the criminalisation of abortion in France in the 1960s. Combined with a proximate and immediate use of camera placement, the focus on the body presents a point of view where the spectator relates to the character of Anne as she experiences pain and suffering. Anne\ battles through this, advocating for the decriminalisation of abortion. The analysis of the sensations and the experiences—as communicated through the body and its breath—addresses individual experience as an ideological question posed to a nation that, at the time in which the film is set, holds conservative values at its core.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article propose d'analyser les « esthétiques cinématographiques de l'avortement » à travers les sensations affectives suscitées par le son et l'image dans le film d'Audrey Diwan, *L'Événement* (2021). La bande sonore, et la respiration en particulier, montre comment une jeune femme est privée de sa voix et de son autonomie. Ces sensations révèlent la pression exercée sur le corps des femmes à une époque où l'avortement constitue un acte criminel en France, dans les années soixante. La combinaison des plans rapprochés et du corps d'Anne crée un lien entre celle-ci et le spectateur, évoquant la douleur et la souffrance. Anne lutte et, par là, met en évidence l'importance de la décriminalisation de l'avortement en France. L'analyse des sensations, communiquées par le corps, sa respiration et sa peau, présente l'expérience individuelle comme une question idéologique adressée à la nation, qui, au moment où se déroule le film, demeure attachée à des valeurs traditionnelles.

A young woman, hair tied in a ponytail, descends a flight of stairs to meet a 'faiseuse d'anges' for an illegal abortion. She is 12 weeks pregnant. Diwan opens the

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sequence with a tracking shot, following Anne's nape as she is driven to an unsafe procedure, in 1963 when abortion in France is a criminal act. The camera is close to her body, placing the spectator within a proximate distance. In this sequence, filmmaker Audrey Diwan ties together two important aspects of the film's aesthetics: cinematic time, and the corporeality of the pressure of time on Anne's body through an emphasis on breath. As Diwan famously stated as she accepted her award at Venice: 'J'ai fait ce film avec colère et désir. Je l'ai fait avec mon ventre, avec mes tripes, avec mon cœur, (AFP 2021). Critics also drew on the film's corporeality, citing the 'peur au ventre' (Bouchard 2022, 6). Diwan's cinematics stem from the corporeal, where the film's socio-political comment intersects with the film's emotive encounter with the pregnant female body. Winner of the Golden Lion at Venice Film Festival in 2021, Audrey Diwan's *L'événement / Happening* (2021) takes us back to 1960s France, and follows Anne—a young literature student—as she comes to terms with her unwanted pregnancy prior to the decriminalisation of abortion.

Audrey Diwan initially trained as a journalist and, after working as a screenwriter, *L'événement* was her second feature film (Elkin 2022). In interviews in the United Kingdom, the United States and France, Diwan emphasises that the film was personal. She articulated much of her own positionality and background in the film's promotion from her own experience of medical abortion through to her Romanian heritage (mentioned during the discussions with Cristian Mungiu) (IFC 2022b). In February 2025, *Modern & Contemporary France* published a special issue on the theme of abortion in France, highlighting the importance of analysing women's reproductive rights on the 50th anniversary of the introduction of *La loi Veil*. Previously, the analysis of abortion in French cinema focused on films produced from the 1950s through to the early 1970s (Oliver-Powell 2019). From an ideological perspective, these films reinforced the punitive absence of liberal abortion rights for women, and they showed abortion as 'an expression of individual tragedy rather than a question of collective political justice' (Oliver-Powell 2019, 367). The aforementioned special issue included two references to Diwan's film (Bryan 2024; Carlini Versini 2024); however, these are qualified against either a reading alongside Ernaux's novel (Bryan 2024) or through the theme of sorority in the contemporaneous films of Céline Sciamma's *Le portrait d'une jeune fille en feu* (2019) and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Lingui, les liens sacrés* (2021) (Carlini Versini 2024). There is yet to be a dedicated close reading of Diwan's corporeal cinema. Although *L'événement* is set in the 1960s, its release in 2021 meant that, as Diwan reflects, the topic 'is always timely somewhere' and that 'it is a [current] story for so many women' (Diwan, in IFC Films 2022b). The film was particularly prescient when Diwan participated in discussions about it in the United States with medical professionals and researchers at the time of the six-week abortion ban in Texas in 2022 and the lead-in to the final Supreme Court decision (IFC and rePro Films 2022a). This has since led to changes to women's reproductive rights, such as the decision on 24 June 2022 to repeal the landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision of 1973.

This article contends that Diwan employs a distinct use of the cinematic articulation of time, and an emphasis on corporeality through breath to convey what I call the 'aesthetics of abortion'. This elicits two responses from the viewer: (1) the haptic; and (2) breath as an encounter. The first, through the camerawork, implies what Laura U. Marks calls 'haptic visuality', where the '[h]aptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between

the viewer and the image' (2002, 3). Diwan's long takes and her use of tracking shots engenders an affective and haptic response in the viewer to the time pressures of abortion in France in the 1960s. As Marks (2002, 3–4) contends, it is not the subject (i.e. the character) nor the object that the spectator sees on the screen that elicits a haptic response, but the image itself through its formal qualities.[1] The second aspect of this theoretical entanglement moves beyond the haptic to the sensations of the character's breath as aural cues for the spectator. Quinlivan draws this out of the gaps in Laura U. Marks' 'haptic visuality' (2012, 20), since, for Quinlivan, breathing moves past the surface of Marks' haptic visual 'touch' to offer a deeper relationship that 'involves the *mind* of the viewer as well as the body' (2012, 21). In this sense, this 'internal' understanding recalls Levinas' (1974) encounter with the Other and highlights the question of responsibility the viewer has to the Other (i.e. Anne). The 'aesthetics of abortion' highlights how Diwan's filmmaking techniques and the stress on breathing as inherent to the body elicits a response in the viewer to interrogate the lack of autonomy for women over their bodies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This differs from haptic and sensuous approaches to film through its combination of the analysis of the proximate 'touch' (Marks 2002) of the camera in addition to the internal articulation of bodily experiences both inside the film and outside of it through spectatorial responses.

The *Life of Breath* project addressed the lacuna of analysing breath as a phenomenological, emotional and metaphorical encounter, as well as nuancing how breathing borders between visibility and invisibility. Macnaughton writes that '[b]reathing occupies an important space as a lens through which to understand the body, as a bodily function essential to life but one that [. . .] we can interrupt and control at will' (2020, 32). The body, and the body's reproductive rights, are the locus of Diwan's film. Diwan fuses together cinematic time, the use of editing, shot types and the emphasis on the female body to offer an aesthetic that highlights the urgent topic of abortion. Through the systematic mapping of time through the shot types, this article emphasises how film's concept of time structures its aesthetics that also impress time onto the pregnant body. Through the analysis of six sequences, I draw on Brey's (2020) 'female gaze' for time and the body of the film, Carel's (2018) and Macnaughton's (2020, 33) 'metaphorical' approach to breath for the articulation of pain, and Quinlivan's (2012) and Levinas' (1974) exploration of breath as an encounter with the Other. The focus on editing, cinematography and corporeality highlights the deliberate aesthetic strategies adopted by Diwan to ensure that the film critiques the lack of autonomy and safe procedures for women to have an abortion.

L'événement is based on Annie Ernaux's abortion narrative of the same name. The film follows Anne (Anamaria Vartolomei), a young working-class university student, who is beginning to find herself and her own interests, as well as develop her future career and her passions whilst studying *lettres* at the University of Angoulême in the West of France. In her first year of study, she falls pregnant through a past relationship prior to university. With her unwanted pregnancy potentially meaning that she will be unable to complete her studies and the stigma of being a young, single mother in a conservative France, Anne turns to a self-attempted abortion in her bedroom, and later visits a 'faiseuse d'anges'.[2] Anne's story shines a light on the systemic inequalities for women in French society, and it highlights the State's control over women's bodies and reproductive rights.

The body in action: cinematic time through Diwan's editing and cinematography

Diwan's use of mobile cinematography and tracking shots eschew traditional filmmaking techniques, such as frontality, to focus on the back of her characters. Diwan produces a visual and filmic grammar that articulates the pressures of time through the camerawork and the long takes in the film. This technique has been employed previously by the Dardenne brothers. Writing in his journal, Luc Dardenne described Diwan's filmmaking technique in *L'événement* as 'spontaneous', placing an emphasis on the living body of Anne and avoiding stylisation (Dardenne 2023, 202). Diwan's filmmaking places an emphasis on the body, the corporeality of the cinematography, and the pressures of time (due to limits for an abortion) through the film's editing. The use of long takes places *L'événement* in dialogue with Cristian Mungiu's abortion drama *4 luni, 3 sapamni si 2 zile/ 4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days* (2007), and the two filmmakers discussed the filmmaking techniques for representing abortion on film as part of the Independent Film Company (IFC)'s online events for the distribution of *L'événement* in the United States.

In *Variety*, Lodge pointed out that the film's visceral scenes were 'shot candidly but not exploitatively, via an empathetic female gaze [to] form a vivid cautionary tale for the dangers of unsafe, clandestine abortions' (Lodge 2022, 109). This implies the filmmaker's perspective and how it shapes the film's cinematography and framing of Anne. Citing the theoretical work of the 'female gaze' (Brey 2020) in French cinema, Diwan notes that '[n]o sooner had she accepted the mantle of the "female gaze" than she was "limited" by it' (Elkin 2022). Brey's (2020) theoretical approach to the 'female gaze' highlights the relationship between the spectator-character-camera, their positionality and unequal power dynamics. As Brey contends: 'Le *female gaze* permet alors au spectateur de ressentir l'expérience d'un personnage issu d'une minorité [. . .] Ces images, en nous plongeant dans la corporéité du personnage féminin, nous font éprouver l'expérience de l'exclusion' (Brey 2020, 41). For Brey (2020), there is no clear film language for the female gaze, but the concept has a phenomenological relationship with the body.

Within this analysis of *L'événement*, there is a symbiotic relationship between the camera and the female body through tracking shots that instil movement in the cinematic image. Bryan acknowledges the potentiality of the 'female gaze' as a form of 'empowerment', and as a means by which the gendered spectator can share both the character's sensations and experiences (2024, 18). This is read through the shot patterns and Anne's unsuccessful abortion attempt through which male and female viewers can experience her trauma and pain (Bryan 2024, 18–19). However, this simplifies Diwan's aesthetic strategy for using repeated techniques to combine time with the image. This focus on the formal qualities affirms the 'female authorial voice', where 'the theorist may simply be unable to "hear" authorial voices that speak against the operations of dominant meaning, since those voices are much likelier to manifest themselves through isolated formal and diegetic irregularities than through formal systematicity' (Silverman 1988, 209). The mobile cinematography creates urgency—as noted repeatedly in film reviews—and 'empowers' Anne even more 'à rompre avec la fatalité prolétarienne de ses origines' (Bouchard 2022, 6). By suffusing time with the image, Diwan's 'aesthetics of abortion' highlight the pressures felt by women like Anne, who have restricted access to an abortion, where time is of the essence for their own social mobility. As Diwan states,

'[t]he idea was to focus on her body and not the setting. I asked myself: how can I film this so that we're not watching Anne, but rather *become* her?' (Diwan, in Elkin 2022). For Diwan, the filmmaker wanted 'not to look at her, but to be her' (Diwan, in IFC Films 2022b). Diwan, therefore, uses tracking shots to show Anne's perspective, to look over her shoulder, to be by her side and to see close to her direct experiences.

This communication of concerns from a minority position—as evoked through the female body—also chimes with Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Although Berlant writes about systematic exclusion as experienced through the body of the child in film, the general assumptions hold true for the experience of the young adult body in Diwan's *L'événement*. Berlant posits that 'affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments in which they find themselves' (Berlant 2011, 15). As such, Anne's experiences within the political context of France in 1963 resonates with the spectators' encounter with her body at the time of viewing the film (particularly in the United States in 2021/2022). Borrowing from Brey's analysis of Agnès Varda's filmmaking, 'son *female gaze*, c'est l'utilisation du mouvement. Ses héroïnes sont constamment en train de bouger' (Brey 2020, 191). There is scope for directorial intentionality within this cinematic dialogue, with Diwan citing that she was influenced by *Sans toit, ni loi/ Vagabond* (Agnès Varda, 1985), and Sandrine Bonnaire's movement in the film; '[t]he way she stands and moves [. . . .] There's something so physical about the way she expresses freedom' (Sayej 2021). Diwan's approach to the cinematography brings together the camera and the character by using mobile framing, and side-profile highlights how Anne's body, in this case, navigates her early pregnancy, as well as the politics of her wanting to have more control over her rights for a termination. In the film, Diwan employs 29 tracking shots from the 147 shots in total, following behind Anne's body as she walks through corridors, into doctor's surgery exam halls and through the countryside. The use of movement—in line with Varda's female gaze—provides a rhythm that emphasises Diwan's political point regarding women's reproductive rights.

To create this sense of movement, Diwan's use of tracking shots and a 'displaced POV' (Colvin 2017, 201–208)—that resonates with the Dardenne brothers' early work and Agnès Varda—breaks the film's formal system, using the camera movement to heighten the character's mobility and urgency. Diwan also uses the film's editing to evoke the length of the individual shots alongside hetereodiegetic narration in the form of intertitles that interrupt the film to indicate time to the spectator. The structure of time in the film concerns Anne's unwanted pregnancy, appearing at the discovery of her pregnancy at three weeks, continuing to 12 weeks. The final section at 12 weeks is the most critical, and includes an extended tracking shot as a long take. Currently, abortion is available up to 14 weeks of pregnancy for the surgical method in France, being extended from 12 weeks in February 2022 (see Chrisafis 2022). These sections of the film are, therefore, organised through the body, with the intensity and urgency building up to her illegal abortion. After the termination of her pregnancy, the time shifts outside the body, with the final intertitle reading '5th July'. Anne is liberated from the time-pressures of her body, and she returns to the Gregorian Calendar. By re-centring the film in this way, the film's use of time and intertitles moves away from Anne's body to a political moment. Although the film takes place in 1963, the date '5th July' is significant as the start of Algerian independence on 5 July 1962 (the year before the time frame in the film). By not denoting the year in the intertitles, Diwan ties together colonial oppression and the national liberation with

feminist struggle and women's liberation. This date is a moment of liberation, and this is the case for Anne after the termination of her unwanted pregnancy. These techniques highlight the importance of time-pressures on women's bodies during pregnancy and time limits for an abortion.

The placement of the camera behind the protagonist 'generally result[s] in confrontational, highly self-conscious rejections of frontality, the displaced POV function seems geared toward[s] articulating an alternative form of intimacy with the characters—even viewer alignment—while still eschewing the clarity and expressivity of classical frontality' (Colvin 2017, 194). Diwan's focus on corporeality recalls the Dardenne brothers' 'corps-caméra' (body-camera). As Fabre puts it: 'La caméra sur l'épaule collant à la nuque d'Anne' (Fabre 2021). Diwan employs this technique for the walking body of Anne as she enters areas of potential confrontation; the doctor's surgery, the illegal abortion service and her final-year exam. Anne's body is framed as mobile with the use of tracking shots, and this highlights her need to take back control over her body for herself. It emphasises the exhaustion and the weight of this task.

Let us focus on a key sequence, where Diwan uses this dorsal (Colvin 2017) technique most profoundly. After the heterodiegetic narration of 12 weeks unrolls on screen, the palpable immediacy of Anne's situation reaches its peak. The sequence is eight minutes in total, and it is broken into three shots. The formal pattern is two shots of 31.2 and 26.1 seconds, and one shot of 6 minutes and 59 seconds (396.2 seconds). An editing rhythm is produced through the repetition of shot lengths either side of the long take. Diwan's film draws attention to the significance of this sequence through the editing, since it is the lengthiest sequence. The average shot length in the film is 38.5 seconds across 147 shots.[3] As such, the shots walking to the illegal abortion service and the discussion between Anne and the 'faiseuse d'anges' afterwards are not extended, so that the importance of the illegal procedure is foregrounded through the long take. The editing of the sequences draws attention to the time pressures placed on the female body due to the limits during pregnancy on having an abortion procedure. Audrey Diwan discusses this 'aesthetics of abortion' in film by contending that there is 'a strong ticking clock inside when trying to have an abortion' (Diwan, in IFC Films 2022b). This evokes the opening of Cristian Mungiu's *4 luni, 3 saptamani si 2 zile/ 4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*, which starts with the sound of a ticking clock, referencing the importance of time in its title. Mungiu, when discussing the film with Diwan, highlights the importance of not editing in 'continuous moments' to 'let the spectator be the witness of the moment' (Mungiu, in IFC Films 2022b). Time is present on screen and through the film-watching experience through the long take. The length of the take enhances the pressures on Anne's body, making the experience of the illegal abortion process more pressing for Anne, as she is at 12 weeks of pregnancy. The passing of time is indexed in the dialogue and through heterodiegetic narration.

In this sequence, the spectator is not afforded her reactions and close-ups on the body as it undergoes the illegal procedure. The details of the experience are missing through the lack of close-ups, and it eschews the gaze on Anne's body. Diwan noted that she did not want to direct the audience in terms of having a political response to the film, but that she wanted them 'to ask their own question' (Diwan, in IFC and rePro Films 2022a). Through the tracking shots, the spectator does not see directly what the character is experiencing, what they are looking at, and how they feel. As such, it is not about

informing the spectator about what to feel in the situation, but the 'displaced point-of view' (Colvin 2017, 201–208) opens a space for interpretation where the spectator can contemplate the experience on a body. The spectator sees that this experience is 'intimate' (Diwan, in IFC Films 2022b), and they form an approximation of the danger and risk of the process by watching over her shoulder and from a similar position to the body of the actress.

This is a pivotal moment for Anne and her body. Diwan's film makes a point of highlighting this moment, and this is marked by a shift in the camerawork to a 'dorsal' tracking shot (Colvin 2017). The 12-week mark represents the end of Anne's first trimester of pregnancy. The tracking shot mirrors the movements of the character, generating an immediate and proximate feeling of following the character into action. As she descends, the camera tightly focuses on her neck and back, descending with her down the alley-way's stairs. The immediacy continues as the camera is plunged into darkness, following Anne closely, peering over her shoulder as she climbs the stairs and reaches the door. These opening two shots from the sequence present the body as it moves through space. It has urgency through the direct movement through the diegetic space. By focusing on Anne's nape, the camera withholds her expressions and emotions. This encourages the spectator to adopt the position themselves and 'to become' the character. The tracking shots move as if the spectators (as onlookers) are shifting from foot to foot, side to side, in a nervous and anxious gesture, which invokes the stakes that are at play. The preparation for the procedure unrolls 'in real time'; waiting, following, anticipating. The spectator forms their own skin in the film, through the proximity to the character, and in which they negotiate the urgency of what is at stake for the character. Marso describes this sequence in detail, outlining how the long take poses the spectator questions:

> Diwan's camerawork is unflinching as spectators watch the entire abortion procedure, filmed over Anne's right shoulder as she perches on a table in the abortionist's home [. . . .] Anne twitches, shudders, and squirms in pain. Are we positioned as witnesses? As participants? (Marso 2022)

During this sequence, Wheatley uses terms that allude to the painful sensations of the body, such as 'clenching, writhing and shuddering of Anne's body' (Wheatley 2022). This articulates the suffering, pressure, pain and struggle that is imposed upon Anne's young body. The mid-shot is set to the right of Anne's shoulder, offering a displaced point-of-view. The camera's gaze does not give Anne's perspective, since it provides an off-centre perspective where the spectator sees an approximation of Anne's point of view. The lamp brings a backlight to the proceedings, where the face of the 'faiseuse d'anges' is in shadow with her silhouette predominant. The lighting focuses the spectator's gaze on Anne's legs and lower torso, where the painful sensations are articulated through Anne's body as she writhes around in agony. Rather than using close-ups on Anne's face to directly evoke the feelings and emotions, the emphasis on the torso and the legs focuses on the automatic responses from the corporeal presence to articulate the act of the abortion. This provides the spectator with an approximate purview of Anne's experience, as the camera's gaze is situated by her shoulder. The squirming of Anne's body communicates with the spectator's own bodily and corporeal sensations to emphasise the pain. It eschews the visceral and the abject, withholding the possible emotion visible on Anne's face, for a more

sensorial experience of the procedure for the spectator. This encourages the spectator to interpret the sequence as potentially dangerous and harmful to Anne. It draws attention to the challenges that women face when their choices are removed, and the length of the take alongside the tracking shots ask the spectator questions with regards to how to prevent these events and procedures from needing to occur. The procedure is clearly perilous for both women involved.

The proximity of the camera to Anne's body heightens the film's 'corporeal field' (Wilson, Ségral, and Souliman 2025), through which the body is situated in a specific place and time. Framing Anne's pregnant body in the early 1960s draws a relationship between the physical and the social, i.e. the individual's body as illustrative of a wider lack of autonomy on the body's reproductive rights as governed by legislation. Wilson, Ségral and Souliman's focus on corporeality—albeit during the Covid-19 pandemic—highlights 'permutations of the social and physical links between air and voice, breath and tongue' (2025, 202). Combined with the breathing patterns in the film, Diwan implies a relationship between Anne's body and the spectator, the body and the camera, and, therefore, body-as-text. Let us now turn to the focus on breath as a metaphorical and affective encounter as part of Anne's corporeal experience of abortion.

A form of 'listening': breath as an encounter

For Sara Ahmed, breathing has a 'normative basis' that brings a proximate relation between the self and the Other through the 'intangibility of air' (Ahmed 2000, 140), i.e. both are breathing bodies. As Levinas writes and as Ahmed (2000, 140) also notes: 'Breathing is transcendence in the form of opening up. It reveals all its meaning only in the relationship with the other, in the proximity of a neighbour, which is responsibility for him [sic], substitution for him [sic]' (1974, 181). This draws from Levinas' thesis, where meaning comes from proximity and responsibility for the Other through a relational connection between bodies. For the spectator in Diwan's *L'événement*, the breathing patterns are laced with knowing feelings and an experience of pain during the sequences that capture her attempt for an abortion.[4] In her work *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed argues that 'it is through the intensification of pain sensations that bodies and worlds materialise and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, surface, and fixity is produced' (Ahmed 2004, 24). For Ahmed, these 'borders' are part of 'what separates us from others also connects us to others' (Ahmed 2004, 25). There is an encounter through an understanding of the sensation of pain.

Breath operates as a metaphor for pain. It also mediates how breath is used by the body. As Carel writes: 'We have some voluntary control over our breathing, and can override the "default" settings' and 'breathing [. . .] is associated with our state of mind and in particular our well-being and emotional state' (2018, 234). The spectator gains proximity to the character through hearing such intimate details, such as their breath. Returning to Levinas, this represents an 'openness', where 'inspiration to the end, even to expiration, is proximity of the other which is possible only as responsibility for the other' (Levinas 1974, 182). Cristian Mungiu contends that filmmakers 'can use cinema and art to listen to the Other' (Mungiu, in IFC Films 2022b). The character's breath as palpable through the diegetic sound design provides the spectator with a direct corporeal experience and encounter.

Throughout *L'événement*, Anne's voice is expressed through the discussions she has at university, her chats with her friends about experiencing sexual pleasure, and her experience of the lack of autonomy over her own reproductive rights through euphemisms.[5] Scarry contends that this is part of the making of a body in pain, since 'physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned' (Scarry 1985, 4). Anne's heavy breathing marks a return to the infant's body in place of language. Marso draws attention to this in the film, noting that breathing is so central to the film's effect on spectators: 'For physicality to exist, you have to use all your senses, so there were lots of things we used to have you feel something – we worked so much on breathing and use it as music to tell the story.' (Marso 2022).

Quinlivan further notes in the context of poststructuralist thought that 'although breath is acknowledged by Barthes as an aspect of the voice, it is not included in his *tangible* notion of vocality' (Quinlivan 2012, 16). As Quinlivan seeks to explore in her work, there is a need to consider 'how the filmic medium can provoke, further still, a tangible dimension of breath that might also be ordered by the gendered body in film' (2012, 16).

Anne's lack of voice, and the focus on her breath during key sequences where she is engaging in attempts at an abortion, emphasises the 'silencing' of the experience of abortion. Bryan (2024) observes the use of 'silence' and 'euphemisms' in place of the term 'abortion'; she writes that 'Diwan's Anne [. . .] spends much of the film unable to speak of her condition' (2024, 10). However, there is one subtlety when she discusses Doctor Guimet's 'sigh' in the sound design (Bryan 2024, 12). This emphasises the social interaction of breathing bodies, which is expressed through the meetings with Dr Ravinsky in the two appointments in his surgery and with her friendship group or sisterhood. Macnaughton writes that '[b]reath is an important mediator of social interactions. It is a shared, taken for granted, common denominator that connects people through the exchange of words and breath itself' (2020, 37). In *L'événement*, the modulation of breath in Anne's social environments reveals the patriarchal consents on abortion in France (with Dr Ravinsky) and the shared bond of female emancipation within Anne's friendship group.

During Dr Ravinsky's (Fabrizio Rongione) first medical examination, Anne exhales, prior to the subtle inhale from Ravinsky, before the news of her unwanted pregnancy is delivered. His inhales concern the ramifications on Anne's body and her future, stating 'Je sais ce que ça représente pour vous' (0: 13.47). Anne's rate of breath quickens as her mind races with the news. Ravinsky notes that her future is governed by the State through the limits of birth-control rights for women, suggesting that 'La loi ne fait pas de cadeau' (0: 14.01). Anne calmly notes that 'ce n'est pas juste' (0: 14.15), drawing the spectator's immediate attention to the resultant consequences, and the disavowal of agency in this moment. The act of breathing is subtle, automatic, but the nuances are present and shift more to the fore of the soundscape. Her breath functions as an automatic response to how her pregnancy has consequences for her current way of life, and the prospect of her lack of agency in decision-making for her own future. The second appointment between Anne and Dr Ravinsky further consolidates his breathing and his exhalations become more noticeable in the sound design. Surrounding his use of language, his exhalations imply that he does not 'approuve' of Anne's decisions, but he purports to show that he 'comprend vos [Anne's] motivations' (0: 49.23). Anne contrasts this with gasps of surprise in her voice, as she has taken what she believes are the required steps to terminate the

pregnancy. In fact, the 'or exhale' from the male perspective and the representative of authority in the film represents the concomitant criminalisation of abortion in France in the 1960s, highlighting the constant threat that comes with the Constitutional Law at the time. It is a disapproving judgement that takes Anne's future out of her hands, and into the hands of another.

During the challenging moments where Anne's anticipated abortion rises to the surface of the film, a shift in the soundscape privileges her breath as part of her corporeal presence. The corporeality of the pain-pleasure function of breath in place of voice is neatly explored through the contrasting use of breath within the 'sisterhood' (Blackhurst 2022) of the three working-class friends, as Anne's friend Brigitte (Louise Orry-Diquéro) shows Anne and Hélène (Luàna Bajrami) how to engage in the act of sex and masturbation with a pillow. The sequence is somewhat ironic as Brigitte demonstrates her mastery of this act of sex, showcasing the technique to her two friends Anne and Hélène, who, as it is revealed within the narrative, are more sexually experienced. Carlini Versini highlights that this sequence—which is informed by the spectator's knowledge of the women's prior relationships—shows 'le poids des mœurs sociales' (2024, 30). The breathing for pleasure in this sequence is modulated by the girls in the friendship group, where they express themselves behind closed doors. In this instance, breathing operates as part of a moment of 'solidarité sororale' to adopt Carlini Versini's (2024) and Bryan's (2024, 13) terms. This is then undermined by the peer pressure of Anne's abortion attempt. As the camera remains behind the left shoulder of Anne, a mid-shot frames the three girls, before cutting to a close-up of Anne's face. Moving away from the act of the body, breath as a diegetic sound holds the emphasis despite Anne's gaze. Brigitte's breath represents pleasure through sharp intakes, which contrasts with Anne's breath in the two sequences where Anne experiences two attempt to get an abortion and the final sequence when her pregnancy is terminated. This shows the potential of breath to shift from the carnal (sexual pleasure and desire) to the visceral (deep feelings and experience of pain) within the film's textual organisation. The dialectic purpose highlights the breath in articulating pleasure through the body and, later, pain and coping with pain with breathing as a management device—a technique that is recognised in *The Life of Breath* research project.

Anne's individualised experience during her abortion attempts further heightens the solitude experienced by Anne after the breakdown of the 'sisterhood' (Blackhurst 2022) with her working-class university friends. As Lodge observes: 'It is the general silence with which Anne's life falls apart that makes the film so wrenching' (2022, 109). In her dorm room, Anne prepares for a self-induced abortion, and she carefully arranges her items for the procedure. She lays a towel on the floor, invoking the visceral presence of blood, and sterilises a steel knitting needle with a lighter. The knitting needle functions as a motif for the re-appropriation of a domestic item for a medical purpose. As Anne engages in the act, holding a mirror in one hand and the needle in the other, the soundscape emphasises her breath, as she inhales and exhales through her nose. With the close-up on her face, the breath deepens to articulate the experience of this task. It exteriorises her 'interiority', i.e. the internal suffering and her lack of autonomy in this situation. This is the 'border' space that interacts in Quinlivan's analysis of cinematic breath (2012, 21). The sharp, deep breaths invoke the suffering female body, where the act of screaming or more aural sensations of pain are prohibited so as not to draw attention to her engaging in what is—

according to the Law and State (patriarchal social constructs)—an illegal activity. Through breath, Diwan's camerawork 'listens' to Anne's body through the closeness to her character's body. This requires the spectator to listen to her experience of pain and struggle, as the spectator's body would in this situation. The filmic border between the two is collapsed through the emphasis on breath. Rather than focusing on the horror of the sequence visually, Anne's breathing pattern—in terms of suppressing her physical pain—still articulates her internal suffering to the spectator.

The final sequence of Anne's pregnancy is harrowing in terms of the corporeal experience of loss and trauma. The sound design emphasises Anne's breathing patterns as a means of managing her pain and her commitment to her abortion. Anne sits with her gaze firmly fixed at the camera and the spectator, seemingly breaking the fourth wall. She shows her agency through her control of her breathing with a large inhale and exhale. Anne is then shown in side-profile pounding the streets, heavy breathing articulating her frantic and urgent commitment. The breathing drains her body. As she wakes, the non-diegetic soundtrack is jarring, reminiscent of the horror genre with an emphasis on string instruments. Anne's dialogue is interspersed with heavy panting and deep breaths orally as the intensity of the suffering is heightened. The pressure has built from the controlled breathing through to uncontrolled and unmanaged breathing, broken by brief yelps and groans. This pattern breaks her use of language, as she pleads with her *colocataire* to 'tu diras rien, d'accord?' (1.24.18). In this moment, language and the use of the term 'abortion' would be politically loaded. In *Another Gaze*, Blackhurst posits that 'the tightness of Diwan's profilmic perspective, which adheres so close to Anne the audience can often hear her ragged breathing, coveys the hothouse, claustrophobic milieu of an educational environment in which one is surveilled by their peers' (Blackhurst 2022). The absence of dialogue stresses breathing as an alternative form of interiority. Breath as an exteriorisation of meditated pain is heighted through the lack of language. However, the silence is discernible at addressing the social through an emphasis on corporeality. The broken language pertains to a silence that infers the social and political repercussions of abortion for young women and their reproductive rights in France.

Carel stresses the corporeality of breath and its interactions between the inside of the body and its outside. She contends that '[b]reathing is a richly modulated by emotional experience, be it pleasurable or painful. The lungs are the only bodily site (other than the skin) where interior and exterior spaces are in constant exchange' (Carel 2018, 234). Anne's uncontrolled breath articulates the proximity between breath as a means of articulating and mitigating painful and traumatic experiences. Anne's breath evidences the interdependence on air as immediate, automatic and unconscious to mediate sharp, stabbing pains, but also as an articulation of pain in a controlled manner through meditated breath. Anne's rapid shift from the unconscious to the conscious leads to a change in the register of her breathing patterns of gasps to rhythmic inhales and exhales as a vocality of suffering. The interiority of the experience of abortion is perceptual for the spectator, as Diwan shifts between a point-of-view shot, gazing up in a mid-shot at her *colocataire*, and an extreme close-up on her gaze. The perspective shifts as the breathing and gasps bring the interior to the surface. The sweat on her brow heightens this constant interaction of

the outside and the inside. As she runs to get to the toilet, all the spectator can hear is Anne's panting. Thinking metaphorically, the outside and the social and cultural politics press on to the skin and the body, through the criminalisation of abortion and the lack of autonomy of individual women's rights, with the trauma and suffering brought to the surface through breath. As Anne sits on the toilet, Diwan focuses on a close-up of her face, bringing about a face-to-face encounter with the character. Anne's breathing body is experiencing painful pressure through the sweat on her body and gasps for breath.

The breathing as an encounter with the Other and as an experience of their pain articulates the film's politics. Moreover, visceral imagery is held at a distance, whilst the camera remains tightly focused on Anne. The fluids of the body, particularly blood, are only shown during the final moments of the terminated pregnancy. Quinlivan's focus on breath commences with an acknowledgement of feminist film theory's analysis of Creed's (1993) emphasis on the body through 'blood, viscera, and skin' (Quinlivan 2012, 3). In *L'événément*, the presence of blood is combined with the subtle diegetic sound of the dead foetus (still attached via the umbilical cord) falling into the toilet. Before this point, the articulation of breath highlights 'a labouring, breathing body' (Quinlivan 2012, 16), as she struggles to maintain ownership over her own body and to ensure her 'freedom' (Diwan, in IFC and rePro Films 2022a). The young women, who had previously castigated Anne for engaging in sexual relationships, are posed with an ethical dilemma. They are confronted with a desperate, bleeding and panting young woman, who is fighting for her freedom from an unwanted pregnancy that would change her life. They protect her, along with the doctor in the hospital providing emergency care, who decides to confirm that it is a miscarriage. The use of this term prevents Anne from being prosecuted.

The affective experience of hearing Anne's gasps provokes ethical questions for the viewer. Ahmed contends that there is an ethics to writing about pain, where 'the impossibility of feeling the pains of others does not mean that the pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me' (Ahmed 2004, 30). This is where the cultural politics of the film lie. This article stresses the importance of nuancing the concept of the 'female gaze' (Brey 2020) to effectively understand how the film is conveying the urgency and challenges of Anne's harrowing situation through its 'aesthetics of abortion' that centre on time as articulated through the editing and shot types. This concept also addresses the phenomenological encounter with the Other through breath and breathing patterns to convey immediate social-cultural issues through the individual (Anne in *L'événement*)—from her articulation of pain and trauma through to her interactions with her friendship group and the medical profession. This all implies urgency. The 'aesthetics of abortion' addresses the 'haptic visuality' of the 'touch' (Marks 2002, 3–4) between the viewer and the image through the formal qualities of Diwan's filmmaking. This proximate encounter between the viewer and the film addresses the time pressures placed on Anne's body, expressed through the long takes and tracking shots. The camera's 'touch' foregrounds the nuances of breathing as an encounter with the Other. In turn, this facilitates a deeper exploration of the character's experiences of abortion as a criminal act through the phenomenological experience of Anne's breathing patterns.

Although Diwan's film is set in the 1960s and prior to the *La loi Veil* in 1975, which de-criminalised abortion after active campaigning in support of women's reproductive rights, Anne's sensations and experiences impressed on her body in the film relate to contemporary political transnational issues. In March 2024, 49 years after the introduction of *La loi Veil*, the French government moved to safeguard women's freedom of choice, making abortion a 'liberté garantie' after the aforementioned 2022 restrictions to women's reproductive rights in the USA (Margolis 2024; Imbach and Romain 2024). The French newspaper, *Le Monde*, has a section on its website that actively reports on abortion rights and how they have been 'régulièrement menacé' in many countries across the globe (Le Monde.fr, n.d.). Abortion rights have become a live debate in countries such as the United States, Hungary and Argentina, where measures are being debated to restrict women's access to medical care. In Argentina, healthcare workers have been reported as concerned about the removal of medical care for safe abortions, leading to the potential return of unsafe abortions for women (Barber 2024). In Hungary, there are growing concerns over the restriction of abortions for women by needing to 'listen to the foetal heartbeat' under Victor Orbán's right-wing government's 'tightening' of the previously liberal abortion law (Strzyżyńska 2022). As Diwan's film articulates, the corporeal experience of illegal abortions places pressure on the individual, takes away their freedom of autonomy, and places it in the jurisdiction of the government and State consents. The matter is not just located in the past, but, as these reports show, *L'événement* is happening to women across the globe in the present tense.

Notes

1. Quinlivan in her work on the *Place of Breath in Cinema* draws on Laura U. Marks' 'haptic visuality' to contend that 'it is not only the image of a body that is considered, but rather the image itself as a sensuous object' (2012, 20).
2. This short article by *L'histoire par les femmes* draws on the example of the backstreet abortionist, Marie-Louise Giraud, who conducted 27 backstreet abortions and was guillotined on 30 July 1943. It highlights how dangerous the procedures were for the women who needed them and the women who conducted them (Le Monde.fr n.d.).
3. The number of shots and the length of each take was calculated by the author manually through the FACT (Frame Accurate Cinemetrics Tool) recording system on Cinemetics.lv. The graph and full data is available at the following web address: https://cinemetrics.uchicago.edu/movie/32759372-6f17-4fc0-90cf-1e73b760b095.
4. In the forthcoming edited collection, *ReFocus: The Films of the Dardenne Brothers*, Chareyron's chapter engages with the concepts of 'care ethics' and 'the aesthetics of care' to highlight how breath and breathing patterns articulate the precarity and severity of the character's situations in the Dardenne brothers' films.
5. Bryan (2024) studies these euphemisms in her article on the film *L'événement*, which includes the film's title itself, sentences that are interrupted and the reference to 'un problème' (see Bryan 2024, 10).

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