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Article:

Holmes, D (2019) Bad Sex/Good Sex: Nancy Huston and the Boundaries of Erotic Writing. *L'Esprit Créateur*, 59 (3). pp. 60-72. ISSN: 0014-0767

<https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2019.0032>

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Bad sex/good sex. Nancy Huston and the boundaries of erotic writing

Diana Holmes

In 2012, Nancy Huston was the winner of the Literary Review's annual Bad Sex Award, a prize designed to 'reward' the author of "an outstandingly bad scene of sexual description in an otherwise good novel". Founded in 1993, the prize has been awarded annually and usually to male writers (only three female winners up to 2017, perhaps reflecting the gender imbalance of the literary scene in general and erotic writing in particular rather than acknowledging a gendered difference in quality), at a lavish award ceremony that the winner rarely attends. Tongue-in-cheek coverage with selective quotation from the shortlisted novels as well as the winner appears in the Review and in the mainstream press, and celebrated authors (Ian McEwan, Ben Okri, France's Jonathan Little, John Updike as winner of a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2006) are pilloried alongside the lesser known.

The Bad Sex award is a very British prize: there is a longstanding tradition of embarrassed jocularity about sex in British culture, and the prize is certainly meant to provoke laughter. But it also has a serious dimension, in the sense that it acknowledges the extreme difficulty of verbalising an area of experience so permeated with taboos, infantile longings and adult aspirations, sensation and emotion. Putting sex into words, the award suggests, always risks ineptness of style, pomposity or simply being ridiculous. It was awarded to *Infrared* (2011) the self-translated English-language version of Huston's novel *Infrarouge* (2010), in which the photographer-heroine focuses her lens mainly on male bodies, often as a prelude to sex. The question that this intentionally embarrassing prize raises, though, is this: what is good and what is bad writing about sex? What kind of writing oversteps the boundaries of good taste in a

negative sense, making the reader wince or laugh, and what kind transgresses limits in a positive sense particularly for women readers, given the indisputably masculine bias of the vast majority of erotic writing?

Only the second translated author to win – Jonathan Littel’s *The Kindly Ones*, English translation of *Les Bienveillantes*, received the award in 2009 -, Huston’s victory also raises the issue of translation, and the extent to which what constitutes good erotic writing in one language may transgress boundaries of taste and style in another. Huston, though, is a bi-lingual and bi-cultural author who translates and thus re-authors her own work with, we can assume, a similarly ‘native’ sensitivity to French and Anglophone cultural and linguistic norms and nuances. I will address the issue of translation in analysis of the passage singled out as worthy of the award, but the wider questions of how to write sex ‘well’ from a woman’s point of view apply to both French and English versions of the novel.

Nancy Huston's response to winning the prize was a spirited defence: she did not attend the prize ceremony, but issued a statement to the effect that she hoped her novel would inspire thousands of British women to take close-up photos of their lovers' bodies “in all states of array and disarray”.¹ In an interview with the *Nouvel Observateur*, she suggested that the jury had perhaps “ressenti un malaise à l'idée qu'une femme puisse désirer si fort et vouloir capter sur pellicule le corps masculin désirant ... C'est en fait une chose excessivement rare”.² And indeed, as Annie Ernaux points out in *Passion simple*, it is rare for a woman artist to represent the male body with the fascinated, desiring gaze so evident in (at least Western) art's passionate preoccupation with women's bodies.³ Despite the substantial changes realised by feminism, visual and verbal representation of the erotic remains more taboo for women than for men, and the women's movement itself has not always encouraged positive representations of heterosexual

desire and practice. If in the early days of Second Wave feminism hetero-sex freed from the risk of pregnancy and freely chosen by independent women seemed, for a time, like the road to liberation,⁴ doubt soon set in about the very possibility of an intimate relationship with a man that could transcend inequalities of power. Among contemporary French women writers there is more emphasis on the disappointment or downright harmfulness of sex with men than on its pleasures (for example Christine Angot, Nina Bouraoui, Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentes, Lorette Nobécourt), with some exceptions that include Annie Ernaux, Alina Reyes, Catherine Cusset - and Nancy Huston.

Huston's fictional portrayal of hetero-sex runs the gamut from the violence of rape (*Histoire d'Omayya*), to the tender familiarity of desire between long-term partners (*La Virevolte*) and the liberating intensity of mutual passion, transitory or otherwise (*Cantique des plaines*, *Une Adoration*, *L'Empreinte de l'ange*). In *Infrarouge*, she proposes a forty-something heroine whose sexual agency is flamboyantly displayed, and whose appropriation of the gaze is explicitly signified by the camera that accompanies her everywhere, and by her self-identification with 'real life' women photographers Diane Arbus and Lee Miller who similarly claimed the position of subject of the gaze, in Arbus' case with a transgressively sexual charge. Representing a diverse range of women's sexual experience, and refocussing the desiring gaze from a female point of view, Huston's fiction is clearly informed by a feminist agenda.⁵ I would argue too that as a whole it exemplifies 'good' rather than 'bad' erotic writing. It is these positive features of Huston's representation of sex that I mean to explore through the lens of *Infrarouge*, before addressing the more negative view expressed by the award.

Writing hetero-sex in *Infrarouge*

Rena, *Infrarouge*'s photographer-heroine, loves to photograph men's bodies at the height of sexual pleasure, her visual inscriptions not detached but passionately appreciative and erotically engaged. However, unlike the male gaze that Laura Mulvey so famously identified in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema",⁶ and that still operates in much visual representation of women (in mainstream cinema, the tabloid press, men's magazines), Rena's photographic gaze eschews fragmentation and close-ups of body parts. What she finds arousing and moving is the body as a whole, including the face – not perfect cases of the generic sexualised body, but particular bodies whose unique selfhood is rendered intensely visible by sensual pleasure. "Le morcellement en général m'ennuie", she reflects, "Moi, j'aime les histoires! Les visages racontent toujours des histoires, les corps parfois, les morceaux de corps, jamais."⁷ And Rena's photographic preferences work as a *mise-en-abyme* of Huston's literary approach to narrating sex: though verbally explicit and sensually evocative, her sex scenes can never be read as erotic vignettes punctuating the text – the narrative equivalent of visual fragmentation - but are always inseparable from story, the experience shaped by and expressive of a protagonist's specific history and circumstances.⁸

Thus in *L'Empreinte de l'Ange* the scenes of sexual intercourse between Saffie, a young German woman left traumatised by terrible wartime experiences, including rape, and Raphaël, her affluent employer who then becomes her husband, are chilling – they confirm his profound sense of entitlement, conferred by both class and gender, and her protective retreat into the self: "Ils ne font pas l'amour ensemble, non, loin de là: Raphaël fait l'amour à Saffie."⁹ On the other hand the account of Saffie's first, intense experience of mutual desire with Andràs is compellingly sensual, detailed and moving, as the warmth of physical release triggers her emergence from emotional paralysis (*L'Empreinte*, 98-101). In the case of *Infrarouge*, Rena's

sexual relationships form an integrated part of a narrative that also addresses parental and filial relations, ageing and art, and that is temporally and politically located in the moment of the 2005 *banlieue* revolts in France, and the 1960s Canada of Rena's childhood and adolescence. Huston's expressed intention was to explore, through Rena's story, "comment l'enfance, la culture, la société et la famille dans laquelle on a grandi ont un impact sur notre sexualité." (St Pierre).

And indeed Rena's whole past, revealed through memories during the single week of the primary plot, is shown to shape and drive her sexuality. As a seventieth birthday present for her Canadian father, Simon, Rena has invited him and her stepmother, Ingrid, to a week's holiday in Florence: the novel opens with Rena's arrival at the hotel, and ends with her departing flight home to Paris one week later. If Rena travels light - backpack and camera signifying her whole stance of mobile independence - the novel reveals how much metaphorical baggage of heredity, memory and accumulated experience she nonetheless carries with her. Moments of irritation with her father and Ingrid, viewings of statues and paintings, interrupted phone calls with her lover Aziz back in a Paris erupting into violence¹⁰ - everything plunges Rena back into memories and emotions, and a patchwork depiction of her life emerges: her sense of maternal abandonment, alternately conflictual and complicit relations with her father, and a long series of relationships with men. Her mother's frequent absence and emotional distance from her children, which itself echoes her father's experience of maternal loss (his Jewish mother, traumatised by the Holocaust, withdrew from all emotional engagement), underlies Rena's passion for traces, for conserving the ephemeral, through her photography but also for example in the opening scene of her arrival in Florence, still wearing on her skin the dried traces of sperm from the morning's lovemaking with Aziz in Paris. Her preference for infra-red photography that gives the novel its title comes from the fact that infrared illuminates the veins of her male subjects, the blood

flowing round the body: “L'infrarouge me permet de repérer ce que j'aime, ce qui m'a tant manqué, petite: la chaleur” (56). Desire is a composite mix of memory, family legacies, unmet needs and past happiness.

Sexuality is not, however, depicted as wholly determined by forces beyond the individual's control. Rena's sexual avidity is also a choice, a moral stance as well as an appetite. She has suffered sexual abuse: as a child she was first tormented then anally raped by her emotionally damaged brother; at fifteen she was seduced by her psychiatrist, a friend of her father's, into a relationship that was partly sadomasochistic. Rather than experiencing herself as a victim, she has developed an intense, analytical and sensual interest in men, in male bodies and the stories that they tell. Rena's camera works as a central metaphor for the novel's own passionate scrutiny of male physicality and the “jeux, masques et théâtres de la virilité” (128). Her aim as a photographer and as a lover is to get beneath the surface of men's performance of toughness, hardness, even lethal aggression, to the human emotions beneath: just as infra-red film penetrates the surface to capture the invisible, radiant energy within, so the vulnerability of mutual desire reveals the fears and longings that fuel aggression. If her interrogation of male sexuality is sometimes sardonic - she reflects that it is the shame of the involuntary erection “télécommandé par la chair féminine” that explains men's attachment to “choses qui demeurent rigides de façon fiable: fusils-mitrailleurs, médailles, attachés-cases, honneurs, doctrines” (83) - it also aims for comprehension. Men's obsessive fascination with female genitals she interprets not as Freud's castration anxiety, but as terror “devant (...) cette évidence aussi flagrante qu'inimaginable: que nous (...) devons tous notre présence sur terre à un con... ” (149). Existential fear of mortality translates into intense attraction/repulsion for the womb and vagina that signify the uncanny contingency of human life. This explains too women's lack of a

corresponding visual fascination with the male organ: though Rena reflects fondly on the feel, smell, sensation of penises, clothed and unclothed, she feels no desire to photograph them isolated from the whole man. Rena's adventurous sexual career is fuelled by a particular life history, but also by the choice, faced with ample evidence of male sexual aggression, to affirm a heterosexual woman's desiring, critical, complicit and oppositional gaze on men's bodies and men's selves.

In a world where the threat or practice of sexual violence plays a central role in the oppression of women – a reality acknowledged in the narrative through violent episodes in Rena's own history and in those of secondary characters – it is a delicate task to render a woman's sensual pleasure in the strength of male bodies and the urgency of masculine desire. Huston, like her heroine, takes on the challenge of affirming the beauty of virile bodies, whilst refuting the naturalised association of virility with power and aggression. Rena's multiple sexual encounters, relationships and fantasies produce explicit, appreciative descriptions of, for example, "le corps nu, gracile mais long et musclé" of a young Florentine, and the (imagined) pleasure of having "le sexe longuement caressé par ses longs doigts dorés" (38-9), of the sensation of slowly undressing a man, "humant à travers le tissu la chose qui doucement durcit" (152), of Aziz's "mains puissantes, ses dents blanches, son dos musclé, ses fesses fermes, son sexe long fragile et beau, si beau, nettement plus foncé que les cuisses sur lesquelles il repose" (196), and of the moment of deliberately delayed anticipation "où la verge hésite à l'entrée de notre corps, joue et frotte et taquine" before that of penetration and the slow ascent to orgasm. Rena's affirmation of her own sexual agency extends to placing herself in situations commonly seen as sexually dangerous for women. As a young teenager, she hitchhikes and accepts lifts from lone lorry drivers, welcoming rather than fearing their requests for sex in the truck's grubby

sleeping cabin that smells of tobacco, sweat and sperm, delighting in “la sensation de leurs joues rapeuses contre mon cou, de leur queue impatiente à la recherche de mon con” (148). The descriptions of Rena’s pleasure celebrate the assertiveness of female desire, but also the element of voluntary passivity (the grammatically passive form of “le sexe caressé” Aziz’s “mains puissantes”, the young Rena’s chosen non-resistance to the rough urgency of the truck drivers’ desire), and the release of self-abandonment that is also part of sexual pleasure.

Since female passivity is so closely associated with submission and oppression, and the virile male body, particularly the penis/phallus, with power and domination, the celebration of muscular male strength and of the passive element in women’s sexuality demands careful writing. But central to Rena’s project as a photographer, and to Huston’s as a writer, is the depiction of men’s sexuality, like women’s, as composed of both agency and self-surrender. A lyrical passage evoking a son’s passage from infant at the mother’s breast to adult lover of another woman sees beauty in his physical power: “ce corps qui (...) se blottissait contre votre poitrine s’élève puissant dans la belle violence virile au-dessus du corps d’une autre” (228). At the same time, the goal of Rena’s imaging of men at the point of orgasm is to reveal the vulnerability that underlies the assertion of power: “leur permettre de se cabrer et de découvrir l’immense bonheur de la passivité, (...) les calmer pour que puissent surgir leurs vraies forces, pas des forces factices dont ils font parade dans le monde du dehors” (131). Huston represents male and female sexuality as different, but also as fundamentally similar, sharing the contradictory but inseparable desires to affirm and to abdicate the self.

The attraction of male strength, the beauty rather than threat of the phallus, these are – for good political reasons – challenging themes for feminist writing. Huston’s depiction of female sexuality takes on a further taboo in celebrating the erotic component of maternity.¹¹ The

mother/whore divide¹² separates the pure, other-directed virtue of maternity from the selfish impurity of the sexualised woman, and is so deeply ingrained in most cultures – certainly Judeo-Christian ones – that the element of sexual pleasure in pregnancy and breast-feeding is rarely voiced. Huston’s interest in the relationship between motherhood and identity, motherhood and other aspects of women’s lives including writing, is apparent throughout her work (see for example *Journal de la Création* [1990], written during and chronicling her second pregnancy). Rena recalls her pregnancies as a time of “*érotisme délirant*”, of “*folle allegresse, qu’un autre corps soit si intimement mêlé au mien, d’abord dedans, ensuite dehors, et s’en nourrisse parfaitement*” (165). The sensation of the baby sucking one breast while tiny fingers play with the other is pleasurably recalled, and the stiffening of the nipple (“*le faisant se dresser*”, 165-6) makes the element of sexual arousal explicit. Here too, Huston’s narrative is erotic both in the sense that it vividly communicates sensation, and in the sense that it explores the nature of erotic experience and its place in the fabric of a human life. Like Huston’s wider body of fiction, *Infrarouge* rewrites the script of heterosexual relations from a woman’s point of view, and uses story to demonstrate the complex nature of bodily desire and pleasure.

The Bad Sex Award

So what then of the Bad Sex prize? How far did its award simply misrepresent what is in fact a skilled and unusually woman-centred piece of erotic writing, as one of Huston’s own responses would suggest, and how far did it identify some of the real risks of this difficult field of literary narration? The prize does not make judgement on a whole novel, but on a specific “scene of sexual description” (even if, in the reporting, this distinction tends to be overlooked). The “offending (not to say offensive) passage”, as one journalist put it, is that of Rena’s brief sexual

encounter with a handsome stranger, Kamal, whom she meets in Dante's house in Florence and accompanies to his hotel bedroom. They make love:

Dans un délire de désir retenu, je soupèse caresse et lèche les bourses de Kamal, puis je prends son sexe dans mes mains, entre mes seins, dans ma bouche, se rasseyant il s'empare de moi et je le laisse s'affairer à son tour de sa langue et de ses lèvres sur mes seins, ma nuque, mes orteils et mon ventre, explorer les nombreux trésors de mon entrejambe, ô merveille de la langue sur le sexe l'un de l'autre, en même temps ou l'un après l'autre ou l'un seulement, cette fois, et l'autre, une autre, jamais je ne me lasserai de cette fluidité argentée, le sexe nageant dans le bonheur tel un poisson dans l'eau, l'être libéré de l'un, de l'autre, sensations frémissantes, charnelles et roses palpitations qui vous détachent de toute couleur et de toute chair, font voir des étoiles, des voies lactées, vous propulsent sans corps ni âme dans l'espace ondulant, les cieux ondulants faisant onduler votre corps qui n'existe plus. (46-7)

The organiser of the 2012 award, Jonathan Beckman, found that this paragraph “pushes a number of classic bad sex buttons: sea imagery, astronautic travel and the ripe use of alliteration”.¹³

All of these ‘buttons’ are present, in the French as well as the English text; on the other hand certain features of the passage could equally well support an argument for its effectiveness as erotic narration. First, the narrative takes the form of a single, long sentence punctuated only by commas - comparable to a *plan-séquence* or sequence without cuts in cinema, which can also be used to render time as lived rather than measured, as Bergson's *durée* as opposed to the

structured time of clocks or calendars. This serves to render the sense of an interlude outside public time, and to capture the urgency and excitement of desire. Second, the shifting use of pronouns works to render the way that sex can both affirm and dissolve separate, individualised identity. The “je” predominates at first (“je soupèse”, “je prends”, “je le laisse”), emphasising the female perspective of the whole novel, materialised in the camera. The sense of a separate, singular subjectivity fades then into reciprocity – “l'un et l'autre” - and into the “vous” that signifies the indefinite subject, the “on”, and also the reader who is addressed as though they too knew this experience. Third, touch takes precedence over sight, recalling Irigaray's postulation of a female affinity with the sense of touch within the dominant, masculine scopic economy: “woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking”.¹⁴ Initially the vocabulary is simply denotative (everyday verbs, parts of the body) and transparently mimetic, until orgasmic sensation takes over and the language becomes more figurative, whilst the triple, incantatory use of 'onduler' signifies that language has reached its limits.

It is important to note too that the award went not to the French passage cited above, but to Huston's own English translation, and that this raises the issue of differing cultural attitudes to sex in literature. The English text reads as follows:

In a delirium of restrained desire, I weigh, stroke and lick Kamal's balls, then take his penis in my hands, between my breasts, into my mouth. He sits up, reaches for me and I allow him to explore me in turn. He runs his tongue and lips over my breasts, the back of my neck, my toes, my stomach, the countless treasures between my legs, oh the sheer ecstasy of lips and tongues on genitals, either simultaneously or in alternation, never will I tire of that silvery fluidity, my sex swimming in joy like a fish in water, my self freed of

both self and other, the quivering sensation, the carnal pink palpitation that detaches you from all colour and all flesh, making you see only stars, constellations, milky ways, propelling you bodiless and soulless into undulating space where the undulating skies make your non-body undulate...¹⁵

In terms of syntax, lexis and imagery the English text remains sufficiently close to the French for the judges' accusation of 'bad' sex writing to apply equally to the French original. Slight differences of vocabulary and structure, however, work to the advantage of the French passage. 'Le sexe' to mean both male and female genitals sounds less starkly biological than the English 'genitals' ("ô merveille de la langue sur le sexe l'un de l'autre"/ "oh the sheer ecstasy of lips and tongues on genitals"), and the French "faisant onduler votre corps qui n'existe plus" is arguably more graceful than what in English becomes, less rhythmically and more opaquely, "make your non-body undulate..." . It is possible that the French language connotes a greater cultural ease with the erotic; certainly, as Pauline Henry-Tierney puts it in an expert comparison of the French and English versions of the novel, there exists a "reluctance towards poetic eroticism in Anglo-Saxon culture"¹⁶ that is very different from attitudes in France, with its long tradition of, and respect for, erotic writing. A reaction of amused distaste at attempts to render verbally the intensity of sexual experience is much more common in Anglophone cultures, and Henry-Tierney found no equivalent French discomfort with Huston's mode of erotic writing.¹⁷ In this respect the prize throws an interesting light on cultural and linguistic difference in the representation of sex.

If the prize's characterisation of *Infrared* as a case of 'bad sex' sits oddly with the positive view of her erotic writing I have proposed above, this is mainly because it is in the

nature of the prize to isolate a particularly erotic passage from its narrative context. As I have shown, it is central to Huston's literary project that the experience of sex should be an integral part of characterisation and story. Yet here, the narrative status of the offending passage is ignored: it is not an episode in Rena's life, but a fantasy, indulged in after a brief glimpse of a handsome stranger on her visit to Dante's house, and recounted in the first-person to Rena's imaginary friend Subra (named in honour of Diane Arbus), an always willing, uncritical audience for her soliloquies. "Raconte!" Subra exhorts Rena, "Raconte encore!, susurre Subra, aussi avidement que si elle entendait ce laïus pour la première fois." (40). *Infrarouge* is exceptional within Huston's largely polyphonic fiction in that it is focalised from the perspective of a single protagonist, albeit (thanks to the device of Subra) in a mix of third- and first-person. But solipsism is quite foreign to Huston's philosophy of the novel: narrative fiction, she affirms in theory and in practice, is the art that fosters empathy by vividly evoking the irreducible diversity and reality of other subjectivities.¹⁸ In her fictional universe, subjective visions and aspirations must always contend with the resistance of an imperfect, complex and contingent world, and with the competing perceptions and desires of others. Thus Simon and Ingrid constantly frustrate Rena's plans for the shared holiday, and her increasingly fraught phone calls with Aziz reveal that his priorities and visions of their future differ sharply from her own. Kamal, though, is a fantasy, told to an equally fantasised listener: as a lover he embodies Rena's desires, in his flawless beauty, his willing transition between active and passive roles, his reciprocity and instinctive grasp of what will give her pleasure. Like most of Rena's objects of desire, Kamal is 'othered' by his ethnic origins (he is Turkish, Rena's four 'husbands' were Haitian, Senegalese, Cambodian and [Aziz] Algerian [22]): Rena's own sense of outsider-ness as a trans-national never fully 'at home', and as an autonomous woman, draw her to others positioned as marginal.

But in each of the ‘real’ relationships conflicts arise over cultural as well as personal difference: there is no utopian unity between different forms of marginality. The harmonious, fully reciprocal sequence with Kamal, however, is explicitly not anchored in the awkward imperfections of the real, for its function is to articulate Rena’s ideal of a sexual encounter. If it has stylistic weaknesses, these stem perhaps from the absence of contingent detail: the encounter has the generic, unlocated quality of imagined perfection and thus, we might concede, falls at some points into cliché. Nancy Huston herself, interviewed for the *Nouvel Observateur* on her reaction to the prize, acknowledged that “citées hors contexte”, some sentences in the novel “m’auraient peut-être fait rougir” (Guegan).

The features that judges saw as “classic bad sex buttons” (“sea imagery, astronautic travel ”¹⁹) could then be read as signalling the fantasised nature of the scene. They are thus untypical of Huston’s narrative practice, but they do indicate some of the pitfalls of trying to capture extreme sensual pleasure in words. As Rena reaches both for shame-free anatomical accuracy and to communicate transcendent joy, the two registers sometimes clash - as with the attribution of abstract “trésors” to the mundane “entrejambe”. The female “sex” (in the sense of vulva and vagina) swimming like a fish in happiness is also caught between two registers, in this case the exalted (“nageant dans le bonheur”) and the banal (“un poisson dans l'eau”). The galactic imagery (“étoiles, voies lactées”) is too familiar an image of rapture to provide that pleasing jolt of recognition that occurs when a sensation is aptly transcribed into words. Because the fantasised scene lacks the particularity of the lovers' bodies, and of their located, specific response to each other, the writing does fall at some points into commonplace imagery. The award itself defined this as an exceptional passage “in an otherwise good novel”;

contextualisation helps to explain its particularity, and points up by contrast the ‘good’ qualities of the whole novel as a piece of erotic writing.

Conclusion

Erotic writing by women has no recognised tradition in France, though there have been some valuable attempts to identify those authors who might figure in such a legacy, and to define the recurring features of a feminine, and even a feminist erotics.²⁰ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, in her groundbreaking 1988 overview of this “marginal canon”,²¹ observed that erotic writing can not be wholly separated from its more vulgar cousin, pornography, the goal of which is “to be sexually stimulating” (Frappier-Mazur, 113). Erotic writing, she continues, shares the aim of communicating in language the bodily sensations of sex, though it also “goes beyond the limits” of pornography in significant ways. Nancy Huston’s *Infrarouge* offers a graphically sensual evocation of the inseparably corporeal and emotional experience of female heterosexual desire and pleasure, inviting the reader to live, in simulated form, the intimacy of erotic exchange through a subjectivity other than their own (what Huston describes elsewhere as “la joie absolue de dire je à la place de quelqu’un d’autre”²²). But the novel also ‘goes beyond’ the communication of bodily experience in a number of ways that add to its quality as ‘good’ feminist erotic writing. Explicitly countering the hegemony of a regime of representation in which, as Laura Mulvey puts it, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey), her photographer-heroine represents women’s agency, as sexual subjects and as artists. Beyond straightforward affirmation, the novel also explores difficult dimensions of female sexuality: the survival of childhood sexual abuse, the element of self-surrender in erotic desire that can feel dangerously close to complicity in women’s subjugation,

the powerful taboo on the eroticisation of maternal love. The Bad Sex award, which does not take itself too seriously and was received with good grace by Huston, added to her list of high-profile literary prizes (among them the Prix Goncourt des Lycéens, Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle*, Prix Femina) and gave extra publicity to the novel's challenging agenda. Though it misrepresents the quality of her writing, the award serves to pose some interesting questions, notably about the different reception of erotic writing in French and Anglophone cultures, and about what might constitute 'good' sex in literature. By singling out a passage set in the register of fantasy, it also brings into focus the stylistic risks of imagining fully realised desire, and demonstrates by contrast the novel's overall integration of the erotic plot into the intricate weave of a human life.

¹ Maev Kennedy, "Bad sex award goes to Nancy Huston's 'babies and bedazzlements'", *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/04/bad-sex-award-nancy-huston> (accessed Jan.23, 2018).

² Nicolas Guégan, "Bad Sex in Fiction Award: la réaction de Nancy Huston", *BibliObs*, 5 Dec. 2012. <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/sur-le-sentier-des-prix/20121205.OBS1441/bad-sex-in-fiction-award-la-reaction-de-nancy-huston.html> (accessed Jan.19, 2012).

³ Ernaux's narrator, in the throes of a passionately sexual relationship with a man, finds herself alone in Florence gazing at Michelangelo's statue of David, "étonnée que ce soit un homme et non une femme, qui ait manifesté sublimement la beauté du corps masculin. Même si cela

s'expliquait par la condition dominée des femmes, il me semblait que quelque chose était manqué pour toujours" (Annie Ernaux, *Passion simple* [Paris: Gallimard, 1991] 50).

⁴ Angela Carter's description of the late 1960s for women in Britain could surely apply equally well to France: "Sexual pleasure was suddenly divorced from not only reproduction but also status, security, all the foul traps men lay for women in order to trap them into permanent relationships. Sex as a medium of pleasure. Perhaps pleasure is the wrong word. More like sex as an expression of is-ness." ("Truly it felt like Year One" in *Very Heaven*, Sara Maitland, ed., [London: Virago, 1988] 214).

⁵ By referencing Arbus and Miller, Huston situates her protagonist's work and the novel itself within a chain of feminist legacy. In an interview she also claims Eve Ensler, the playwright author of the *Vagina Monologues*, as "l'une des grandes inspirations du roman." (Christian St-Pierre, "Nancy Huston, Corps et Âme", *Voir*, 3 June 2010 <http://voir.ca/livres/2010/06/03/nancy-huston-corps-et-ame-2/> [accessed 22 January 2018]).

Like Miller and like the fictional Rena, Ensler survived childhood sexual abuse and went on to create inspirational art.

⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/visual_pleasure_and_narrative_cinema%28printversion%29.html (accessed 30 Jan 2018). First publ. in *Screen*, 16 (1975), 6-18.

⁷ Nancy Huston, *Infrarouge* (Paris: Actes Sud/ Leméac, 2010), 154-5.

⁸ Some critics contend (plausibly, I think) that women find the representation of sex more erotic when it is integrated into narrative. In an article on sex in women's novels in the 1970s, for example, Ann Barr Snitow finds that, as compared to their male contemporaries, women authors tend to fully contextualise erotic scenes within "the whole configuration of a person's life", as

part of a “densely populated context” (Ann Barr Snitow, “The Front Line: Notes on Sex in Novels by Women, 1969-1979” in *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4, *Women: Sex and Sexuality*, Summer, 1980, 706). Rowan Pelling, for many years editor of the *Erotic Review*, comes to similar conclusions: “During my years at the coalface of eroticism I noted that the chaps are more likely to grow hot under the colour about a particular sexual scenario (...). Whereas women are interested in the detail surrounding the story; they can't turn it into a satisfactory fantasy unless they have striven to make it realistic: who is this woman, what is her backstory and motivation (...)?” (Rowan Pelling, “Why are male writers so bad at sex scenes?”, *The Guardian* 25 Nov. 2011). <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2011/nov/25/male-writers-bad-writing-sex>

⁹ Nancy Huston, *L'Empreinte de l'Ange* (Paris: Actes Sud/ Leméac, 1998), 37.

¹⁰ In October 2005 three youths fleeing from a police raid at Clichy-sous-Bois, in the Parisian *banlieue*, hid in an electricity substation, where two of them died from electrocution. Existing tensions around youth unemployment and police harassment were ignited by anger at this event, and there followed three weeks of rioting in and around Paris and across France. A state of emergency was declared on 8 November. As a politically committed journalist and a child of the *banlieues*, Aziz is deeply involved in the unfolding crisis.

¹¹ In *Mosaïque de la pornographie: Marie-Thérèse et les autres* (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1982) Huston presents the sensual pleasure of pregnancy and breastfeeding as one of the great ‘unsaid’ of literature: ‘*l'érotisme maternel est le dernier tabou*’ (Huston’s italics), 17. See too Marie-Noëlle Huet, ‘Les configurations de la « romamancière »: Nancy Huston et la maternité’ in

¹² The mother/whore archetype in patriarchal cultures has attracted much feminist analysis: see for example Estela V. Welldon, *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood* (London and New York: Karnac Books, 1992).

¹³ Amol Rajan, “Sex doesn't get worse than this: Nancy Huston's *Infrared* deserved to win the Bad Sex Award 2012”, *The Independent*, 5 Dec. 2012

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/sex-doesnt-get-worse-than-this-nancy-hustons-infrared-deserved-to-win-the-bad-sex-award-2012-8381962.html> (accessed 19 Jan 2018).

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 26.

¹⁵ Nancy Huston, *Infrared* (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2011) 32.

¹⁶ Pauline Henry-Tierney, “Transgressive Textualities: Translating Gender, Sexuality and Corporeality in Contemporary French and Francophone women’s writing.” PhD diss, University of Manchester, 2015, 160.

¹⁷ Thanks to Pauline Henry-Tierney for granting me access to the relevant chapter of her thesis, which analyses much more fully than I can here the lexical and syntactic differences between the French novel and its translation, and includes a very interesting analysis of how the body is “lived differently” in different languages. She also points out how the book covers differ between the French and English versions, the French use of the lower half of a sensuous male body painted by Caravaggio announcing the book’s erotic themes, whilst English-language versions opt for much less explicit images.

¹⁸ Across many of her essays, Huston defends the novel as an ethical genre that “nous permet d’explorer l’intériorité d’autrui” (*L’Espèce fabulatrice* [Paris: Actes Sud, 2008] 191) and affirms “la miraculeuse presence des autres” (*Professeurs de désespoir* [Paris: Actes Sud, 2004] 322).

The majority of her novels are multi-vocal or polyphonic, told in multiple narrative voices that present diverse and sometimes conflicting visions of reality.

¹⁹ Beckman also cites alliteration as a failing but it is hard to find examples of this other than “pink palpitations”, the literal translation of the French “roses palpitations”.

²⁰ See Alex Hughes and Kate Ince, eds., *French Erotic Fiction Women's Desiring Writing: 1880-1990* (Oxford: Berg, 1996).

²¹ Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, “Marginal Canons: Rewriting the Erotic” in *Yale French Studies*, 75, 1988, 112-28.

²² Catherine Argand, Interview with Nancy Huston, *Lire* March 2001.

https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/nancy-huston_804287.html (accessed 24 Jan 2018).