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10.1017/S0261143023000521

Unknown *Pleasure*: interpretations of the mystery hiss in Feist's 2017 album

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Abstract

This article examines the critical reception of Feist's 2017 album Pleasure*, and interpretations by reviewers of the mysterious hiss that permeates most of the album's tracks. I firstly contextualise* Pleasure *in relation to the aesthetics of record production. I then examine interviews with Feist and her collaborators to identify the source of the hiss, and explain its presence on* Pleasure*. Lastly, I examine a corpus of 20 reviews, showcasing how critics (mis)identified and (mis)interpreted the sound, as well as the effect of this on their overall understanding of the album. To explain the relationship between the hiss and accompanying music, I assume a semiotic perspective. Following Poyatos, I regard these two kinds of sound as part of distinct yet related cosystems of signs, loosely analogous to the relationship between verbal utterances and nonverbal behaviours in face-to-face communication. Through this lens, I analyse how* Pleasure*'s hiss was heard to modify, support, emphasise and undermine the meaning of the music by reviewers.*

Pleasure, the sixth album by singer-songwriter Feist, was released in April 2017 on Interscope Records/Universal Music Canada. It reached number seven in the album charts in the artist's native Canada and was met with favourable reviews. What was remarkable about the album's critical reception, though, was the reaction to the pervasive hissing sound present on most of its tracks. The sound evoked widespread commentary from music journalists and critics and was often referenced in reviews of the album. No real reason was given for the hiss's presence. When journalists inquired about the hiss in interviews, only vague explanations were given, leaving its origin unknown. Reviewers therefore had to infer its source (what was making the sound), its cause (why it was making the sound), and its meaning. This article will explore how sounds like *Pleasure*'s hiss are interpreted when they feature alongside music as co-content of music recordings.

This article comprises three parts. In the first, I situate *Pleasure*'s hiss within the history of recorded music and existing theories of record production. In the second, I investigate *Pleasure* as a recording, exploring the cause of the hiss by examining interviews with Feist and her collaborators, promotional photographs, and videos of recording sessions. In the third, I examine a selection of media articles on *Pleasure*,

focusing on how they articulate their interpretation of the album in relation to its hiss.[1] The overall aim is to illuminate previously overlooked mechanisms at play in the interpretation of music recordings by listeners, and demonstrate a semiotic approach to the analysis of recorded music discourse, which I will now describe.

The corpus for analysis consists of 20 published media articles, comprising both features and reviews. These were purposefully sampled using the Google search engine on the criterion that they directly mention the hiss. Sources range from soft news articles by professional journalists to reviews by freelance music critics on specialised websites. Diverse cases have been selected to demonstrate and discuss the range of interpretations these writers communicated to their readers. These articles offer articulations of fully formed interpretations that, regardless of any underlying motivations, must appear plausible to their readers. In this way, they act as a cultural barometer evidencing conventional meanings associated with popular music recordings and their sounds.

There is more than one way to view sounds such as *Pleasure*'s hiss when they feature in music recordings. Eric Clarke classifies them as musical material (2005, p. 111). Phillip Tagg labels them paramusical sound, a musical equivalent to paratext (2012). Marie Thompson integrates them into her re-conception of noise (2017, pp. 59–60). Although useful in their appropriate contexts, these classifications connote degrees of significance and intention. The articles discussed later conceptualise the hiss less clearly, describing it as distinct from but coherent with *Pleasure*'s music. Within the basic context of the recording, I therefore treat the sound as co-content rather than as music, peripheral material, or noise. Technically, though, I classify the hiss as a *consequential sound* of music technology. This term, borrowed from product sound design, refers to the sounds products generate as a by-product of use (Langeveld *et al.* 2013). Although producing these sounds is not a product's primary function, they may nevertheless convey a range of meanings to users and observers. They can even be managed during the product design process to better convey certain meanings (Van Egmond 2008, p. 85). This classification acknowledges the hiss as a side-effect of musical performance without removing its capacity to convey a range of meanings, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

These considerations allow *Pleasure* to be regarded as a compound signification made up of co-systems of signs, using the Peircean definition of sign as 'something that stands for something else to somebody' (Peirce 1931–1935, Section 228). I situate the hiss within a sign-system that is distinct from, yet linked with, the music it features alongside. A loose analogy to help explain this relationship is how a speaker's verbal utterance is interpreted in relation to their nonverbal behaviour, and vice versa. Richard Beaudoin makes a similar comparison when discussing *corporeal liveness* in Dashon Burton's 2015 recording of 'Never Said a Mumberlin' Word': 'I see no reason to consciously and actively hear past the aural evidence of Burton's breath and body, in the same way that it makes little sense to ignore the facial microexpressions of an interlocutor as they speak' (2022, p. 21).

Fernando Poyatos's theory of *communicative co-systems* offers a framework by which this analogy can be applied.[2] He explains the ways in which nonverbal behaviours have the capacity to affect the meaning of a verbal message, and vice versa:

[1] These were sourced online from public, published material, from newspapers to specialist blogs. Their authors range from professional journalists to avocational critics.

[2] Poyatos's iconic (imitative), intrinsic and arbitrary sign-meaning relations (2002, p. 55) align with Peirce's icon, index, symbol sign–object relations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with relation to the message that we wish to express verbally, our nonverbal behaviors can confirm it (e.g. a gesture that supports it visually), duplicate it (e.g. a gesture that repeats it), emphasize it (e.g. a tear that intensifies it), weaken it (e.g. a voice type that weakens its credibility) and even contradict it (e.g. a voice type that betrays exactly the opposite), but also mask it with other nonverbal signs that sort of camouflage it (e.g. pretending indifference in order to conceal the anxiety something is causing us). (2002, p. 54)

Like an act of face-to-face communication, then, *Pleasure* may be viewed as a compound signification made up of semiotic co-systems.[3] This supports discussion of the media articles I have gathered, where distinct yet related aspects of the album (song writing, performance delivery, sound quality, etc.) were said to interact in contribution to its overall meaning. Many articles also cited surrounding discourse to interpret relationships between aspects of the album and surmise the circumstances in which *Pleasure* was made.

This article therefore makes use of Jones' (2014) concept of *production myth*. This term refers to 'a real or imagined backstory of a record's production process – perceived in the sonic nuances of a recording and fleshed out through its surrounding discourse – that carries implications of ideology or aesthetic orientation' (Jones 2019, p. 349). Jones lists 'feature stories, reviews, liner notes, interviews, and published images' as typical forms of the discourse that surrounds rock music (2019, p. 349). The reviews and feature stories analysed in the final part of the article demonstrate how this kind of discourse is used to construct production myths. Several of them reference or echo information from Universal Music Canada's press release, Feist's own tweets and promotional interviews published prior to the album's release. Many also refer to aesthetic conventions of record production, which I will now turn to discuss.

Aesthetic conventions of record production

How much records should reflect genuine live musical performance is a point of tension that can be traced back to the early decades of recorded music. In the acoustic era, records were cut using the acoustic power of the sounds being recorded. To achieve satisfactory results with this limited technology, music performances were necessarily altered for the recording room. In *The Reproduction of Sound*, Henry Seymour instructs recordists on modifying instruments and directing instrumental technique to sufficiently drive the apparatus (1918, pp. 62–4). How the music sounded in the recording room was unimportant. It was how the music sounded on record that mattered. Electrical recording introduced microphones and electrical amplifiers to record production, allowing the capture of quieter and more distant sounds, as well as a wider range of frequencies (Maxfield & Harrison 1926). J.P. Maxfield, a prominent figure in the development of this technology, saw electric recording as a chance to aim for 'perfect phonographic reproduction' (1926, pp. 494–95). This would present listeners with a sound identical to what they would have heard had they attended the recording session. Maxfield's hope was to capture and reproduce as much of the live music experience as possible. Well

[3] Poyatos defines communication as 'the emissions of signs by all the nonlexical, artifactual and environmental sensible sign systems contained in the realm of a culture, whether individually or in mutual construction, and whether or not those emissions constitute behavior or generate personal interaction' (2002, p. xvii).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

into the electrical era, though, Maxfield criticises the state of commercial recording and broadcast. He observes that recording artists have developed an unnatural 'microphone technic' and thus perform for the microphone quite unlike how they would to a concert audience (1933, p. 251).

The rift Maxfield observed between live and recorded music would continue to develop. Auslander (1998, pp. 1–2), Gracyk (1996, p. 77) and Horning (2000, p. 115) note that the relationship between live and recorded music has shifted to such an extent that the former is often judged by how well it recreates the latter. Yet, echoes of Maxfield's manifesto can be found in the *mediated liveness* cultivated by some contemporary record production practices. Porcello observes a comparable ideology and aesthetic orientation in the country, blues and roots rock recordings of Austin, Texas, which revolve around 'the link between sincerity and live performance' (2002, p. 72). Here, live performance is understood as 'authentic', and recordings are thought of as 'calculated' and 'alienated' (p. 78). The 'Austin sound' therefore aims to preserve the liveness and sincerity of performance on record, foregrounding 'microvariations in temporal and intonational dimensions of musical performance' (p. 70). One way to approach this aim is to capture uninterrupted live-off-the-studio-floor ensemble performances instead of tracking instruments individually (pp. 72–3).

Several theoretical concepts can be unknotted from the 'Austin sound'. For instance, this 'sound' privileges what Stuhl labels *technical fidelity*, which aims to faithfully 'capture the sound of live musicians performing simultaneously in the studio' (2013, p. 19). This notion is connected to Paul Sanden's concept of *liveness of fidelity*, where 'the further a recording or performance deviates from "true" (acoustic) performed sounds, the less live it is' (2013, p. 35). Stuhl explains that the 'technical' approach to record production avoids inessential technological mediation in an aim to preserve the original expressivity of performance (2013, p. 62). Technical fidelity (and liveness of fidelity) is therefore sought as a foundation to achieve what Stuhl terms *expressive fidelity* (2013, p. 64). To attain this, technical fidelity must create what Brøvig-Hanssen labels *transparent mediation,* where listener focus is directed to what is being mediated, rather than the act of mediation (2018, p. 207). If a listener is constantly made aware that they are listening to a recording by sounds like tape hiss or by studio effects, then mediation is not transparent, but *opaque*. Jones notes how the 'technical' approach to record production was applied to Chicago noise-rock and grunge in the 1990s by recording engineer and producer Steve Albini (2014, p. 77). Here, representing the commotion of dynamic rock performance 'noise and all' was considered essential to the authenticity of a production. In 'Vamos' by The Pixies, for instance, guitar amplifier feedback is allowed to occupy the recording alongside musical material. Albini's approach elevates the status of this consequential sound from mere noise to a valid part of rock performance.

In opposition to Stuhl's 'technical' approach is lo-fi, a term originating as an 'ironic inversion' of hi-fi or high fidelity (Strachan 2003, p. 307). Yet, the term only really entered public consciousness through the 1990s music press in reference to recordings that transgressed conventional production norms by featuring some kind of imperfection (Grajeda 2002, p. 358). According to Stuhl, although the 'technical' and lo-fi record production approaches unite 'in a practiced reverence for expressive fidelity', the latter '*sacrifices* technical fidelity for expressive fidelity' rather than obtaining the latter via the former (2013, p. 64). One reason for this is

that lo-fi imperfections like tape hiss and distortion evoke opaque mediation, drawing listener attention to the act of mediation as well as what is mediated (Brøvig-Hanssen 2018, p. 207). By skewing the representation of recorded sound, though, the lo-fi approach can be used to support aspects of musical meaning. For this reason, the introduction of consequential 'imperfections' like tape hiss to recordings is often welcomed in a lo-fi approach.

The concept of lo-fi carries several connotations that are relevant to the interpretations of *Pleasure* discussed later. Grajeda views lo-fi as a combination of amateur performance and technological primitivism, yet ponders whether this formation is a question of economics or aesthetics (2002, p. 357). Kromhout explains that although 'earlier examples of lo-fi' like the 'cassette-culture of the early eighties' were a consequence of economic circumstances, 'it now has become a deliberate artistic choice' (2012, p. 1). This is because innovations like digital recording 'make decent recording increasingly affordable' (Kromhout 2012, p. 1). Harper claims, however, that lo-fi sound signifies amateurism regardless of this, observing that 'amateurism can be a performance just as much as – if not more than – a natural state' (p. 13). Indeed, 'performed amateurism' was sometimes accepted within 1990s lo-fi discourse, since 'for some, part of the honesty of lo-fi was an open acknowledgment of artistic intentionality and posturing' (Jones 2014, p. 54). This contrasts the aesthetic of Albini's noise-rock production, where 'anything added by the studio producer – whether purposeful lo-fi noise or commercial "sweetening" – bordered on dishonesty' (p. 77).

There is, however, a middle-ground between these two approaches. This is in line with a convention of rock authenticity that Simon Frith outlines:

> The continuing core of rock ideology is that raw sounds are more authentic than cooked sounds. This is a paradoxical belief for a technologically sophisticated medium and rests on an old-fashioned model of direct communication – A plays to B and the less technology lies between them the closer they are, the more honest their relationship and the fewer the opportunities for manipulation and falsehood. (1986, pp. 266–7)

This passage might be taken to suggest that an authentic rock recording should exhibit minimal evidence of technological mediation, and that the consequential sounds of music technology would inauthenticate a rock recording. However, Ryan Hibbett observes the opposite in his investigation of indie rock:

> when one hears the crude 'makings' of the song – the hiss, the pressing of buttons, technical glitches, distortion – one comes to trust it as both honest and real, or to read in its imperfections a kind of blue-collar integrity. (2005, p. 62)

Hibbett observes that in an indie rock context, 'the most direct evidence of [record] production connotes its absence' explaining that 'from the indie perspective, mainstream production is understood as one that masks' (p. 62). From this viewpoint, noise demonstrates that technology has not been employed to hide its own presence. Compared with a recording that has been 'polished' to perfection, one with consequential sounds suggests that fewer stages of technological mediation have been implemented. Thus, both the 'technical' and lo-fi production approaches may signify authenticity through their inclusion of these sounds (whether or not this is interpreted as *authentic* authenticity, however, is another matter). We will now turn to see how Feist and *Pleasure* fit in to all of this.

Pleasure's hiss in context

Feist gained mainstream attention when her 2007 single '1234' was used to soundtrack an iPod commercial. The song went on to earn her Grammy nominations, as well as a guest appearance on the American children's television show, *Sesame Street*. This was followed by 2011's *Metals*, which reigned back the twee pop of its predecessor, 2007's *The Reminder*, for a more soulful sound. The surprise release of *Pleasure* in 2017 revealed an introspective 'left turn' for Feist. Naturally, this prompted comparisons with her former releases. In a review of the album for *Stereogum*, James Rettig noted its difference to Feist's previous efforts: '*Pleasure* is Feist's back-to-basics album. It strips back the belabored arrangements of 2011's *Metals* and eschews the pop sensibilities of her 2007 breakout, *The Reminder*' (2017).[4]

Universal Music Canada's press release for the album foregrounds the theme of introspection: 'Feist's first album in six years reflects on secrets and shame, loneliness and tenderness, care and fatigue and is at its core a study on self-awareness' (2017). It describes the album's 'sparse,' 'raw' arrangements as reflecting this (Universal Music Canada 2017). Feist announced the album in a sequence of posts on Twitter, highlighting the reflective mood of the album: 'I've been so inward facing during the making of this record that I hadn't quite prepared myself to face it, and myself, outward again' (2017a). She explained that *Pleasure*'s main aim was to reflect this introspection: 'Our desire was to record that state without guile or go-to's and to pin the songs down with conviction and our straight up human bodies' (Feist 2017a). This is where the album's themes, performances and production style cohere: 'I was raw and so were the takes' (Feist 2017a). Feist also gave interviews prior to the album's release, where discussion ranged from frank admissions of struggles with wellbeing to descriptions of how *Pleasure* was produced. The source of the hiss, however, was not directly identified, so we will now turn to investigate the reasons for its presence.

Clues to why *Pleasure* features such an audible hiss can be found in interviews given by those who have worked alongside Feist in the recording studio. In a 2008 article for *Sound on Sound* magazine, producer Renaud Letang outlines the production process for Feist's *The Reminder*. He describes how he achieved the 'dirty vocal' sound heard on all but one of the album's tracks. For this, Feist sang into two microphones, which were passed through a vintage guitar amplifier: 'I had a Neumann U67 and an SM57 both going into a Vox guitar amp, on which we EQ'ed and added reverb' (Letang 2008). This guitar amplifier was captured with a further two microphones, which were fed to a vintage mixing desk: 'The Vox was miked up by an SM57 and a U87 and then went into the old Neve A646' (Letang 2008). The hissy electrical noise of guitar amplifiers can be heard on numerous tracks of *The Reminder*.

Robbie Lackritz, recording engineer on *The Reminder* and *Metals*, provides details about the recording of both albums in an issue of *Tape Op* magazine. He recalls the 'dirty vocal' being used in a live-off-the-studio-floor context: 'She's singing through an amp into the room, and all the players are playing to her voice' (2013). According to Lackritz, the volume of Feist's amplified vocals meant they were sometimes picked up by microphones dedicated to other instruments:

[4] Italics added.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> There are moments where the vocals are way too loud, like on 'The Water' [from The Reminder] and it's awesome. There was literally no way of getting that vocal out of the piano. Not only is she singing pretty loudly, directly in front of the piano mics, but it's also blaring in an amp across all the delicate percussion mics. (Lackritz 2013)[5]

Lackritz explains that this technique is used because of how it allows Feist to perform: 'it's not really about the amp; it's about how she sings when she hears herself out of the amp, as well as being on the edge of feedback' (2013).

Promotional photographs documenting the making of *Pleasure* depict Feist in the centre of a hall surrounded by equipment in a recording set-up much like the one that Letang and Lacritz describe above (Rozzi 2017). This is Dreamland Recording Studios in Hurley, New York – a converted church, and one of three locations used to record the album. Letang's 'dirty vocal' technique is depicted in the photographs as it is described above. A U87 and sm57 pair have been placed to capture Feist's vocals. Facing her are two Fender guitar amplifiers, each with the same microphone combination positioned up against them (assumedly, one amplifier is for the 'dirty vocal', and the other for her electric guitar). The same technique is visible in a video titled 'Young Up (Alternate Version Featuring Chilly Gonzales)' uploaded to Feist's YouTube channel, FeistMusic, in November 2018, listed as an outtake from *Pleasure*. The footage shows Feist performing a version of 'Young Up', the final track on *Pleasure*, accompanied by pianist Chilly Gonzalez at Studios Ferber, Paris. Here, Feist is again singing into a U87 and sm57, and a guitar amplifier in the foreground can be seen miked with a U87 (if the dual microphone technique is being used, the sm57 is out of view). The audio that accompanies this footage is a mix of the 'Young Up' take that Feist and Gonzalez can be seen performing in the studio. The tinny resonance of Feist's voice gives away that it is being fed through the guitar amplifier. Hiss is audible on the recording, despite it consisting only of the 'dirty vocal' and acoustic piano tracks, which suggests that the sound is indeed generated by the former. Returning to the album itself, hiss can be heard to occupy the vocal tracks by how it holds the same position as the vocal within the stereo field. When lead vocals are placed in the centre, the hiss occupies the same position. When vocals are doubled, and each take is panned to the extremes of the stereo field, the hiss follows suit (as can be heard on the track, 'Lost Dreams'). This suggests that the hiss and the vocal occupy the same track.

All this makes it plausible and likely that the main source of *Pleasure*'s hiss is the guitar amplifier used to create the 'dirty vocal'. This kind of electrical noise is owed to the sporadic movement of electrons within the components of electrical devices. This causes random fluctuations in current, creating a hiss when converted into sound via a loudspeaker (Vasilescu 2005, p. 46). Such fluctuations occur in all electrical devices, but only take the form of hiss when transformed into sound. Since guitar amplifiers are electrical devices housing loudspeakers, they naturally generate hiss. Although recording and mixing techniques have been developed over the years to avoid this sound permeating recordings (Bartlett 1982, p. 60), such techniques were not employed on *Pleasure*, for reasons we will now discuss.

When asked about the hiss in an interview with *i-D* magazine, Feist describes the sound as a 'a necessary biproduct [sic] of recording live in a room' (2017b). She links its presence on the album to her preferred approach to studio performance:

[5] Square brackets in original.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'I need to touch knobs, and turn things up in a room, have actual volume responding to actual movements made by my body moving. It results in there being a lot of ambient noise' (Feist 2017b). Questioned on the same topic for *Pitchfork* magazine, Feist attributes the sound to the album's production approach: 'It's because the songs were recorded pretty much live' (2017c). In an interview with *Now Toronto*, Feist recounts that while recording the album, authentic-sounding performances were prioritised over sound quality: 'We could've spent time trying to comb away [the miscellaneous noise] because it's not "proper" or hermetically sealed [...] What overrode all that was whether we believed each other' (2017d).[6] She elaborates on this to the *Calgary Herald*: 'Production was secondary on my mind, because it was a performance-based record' (2017e). She explains: 'It wasn't a studio album in the sense that we weren't layering things in time and space, they were true performances live in the room' (2017e).[7]

These accounts paint the album's hiss as a side-effect of production and recording choices: the live-off-the-studio-floor recording; Feist's performance-environment preferences; the priority of convincing performances over pristine production. However, it is important to note that the hiss's presence on the album was not *purely* unintentional. Feist maintains in the *Pitchfork* interview that a choice was made to accept and incorporate the sound into the album: 'when it became clear to me that the hiss was embedded everywhere, I was like, "All right, it belongs in this play's cast of characters"' (2017c). This suggests that although the hiss (or at least the extent of its audibility) was not envisioned from the onset, it became an accepted part of the album early in the recording process. Feist recalls acknowledging the sound as consonant with the album's underlying theme, stating 'it felt in keeping with the whole experiment of investing in imperfection' (2017c). Co-producer Dominic Salole (aka Mocky) clarifies this statement in an interview with *The New York Times*, recalling that the general rule when making *Pleasure* was to 'be more vulnerable than you've been before' (2017).

In summary, then, *Pleasure*'s hiss can be said to appear so audibly on the album because of:

(1) the choice to sing through an amplifier set at high volume;
(2) the decision to record vocals and guitar simultaneously, in the same room as their respective amplifiers;
(3) the acceptance of the sound as a feature of the album.

To use Stuhl's terms, the production approach Feist describes could be considered more 'technical' than lo-fi, as it privileges the capture of live-off-the-studio-floor performance. However, the incorporation of the sound as part of the album's 'experiment of investing in imperfection' (Feist 2017c) extends into lo-fi territory. Media articles reflected this duality, describing *Pleasure* as lo-fi, live-sounding, and even both in some cases. However, Feist's identity as a female recording artist may have played a role in skewing the album's reception towards the former. To Jones (2019), the 'unfinished cuts and casual vagaries of lo-fi' embrace 'historically feminized attributes' whereas the 'technical' approach, with its focus on control

[6] Square brackets in original.
[7] There are overdubs on the album, so it is likely that Feist is describing the general approach to the album's production, rather than strictly enforced rules.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and precision, echo historically masculinised sensibilities (p. 354). These associations may have directed attention to the expressiveness of *Pleasure*'s production over its candidness. The album's characterisation as an expression of 'rawness' by Feist and her record label may have inadvertently supported this. Another key factor in the album's interpretation was how the hiss was labelled. And, as some identifications were based on the sonic characteristics of the hiss, I will briefly describe them before going forward.

The hiss is of a noticeable volume throughout most of the album and can usually be heard easily alongside its other sounds. Its frequency content is spread across a wide portion of the audible frequency range, simultaneously rumbling low, sizzling high and whooshing in the mid-range. In the field of acoustics, sounds that spread across a portion of the frequency range fall under the category of *wideband* (sometimes known as broadband) sounds (Moylan 2015, p. 33). These sounds create more of a mass of frequencies than a tone, but although *Pleasure*'s hiss has no audible pitch, it does exhibit some bands of frequencies with more intensity than others. This gives the sound a certain resonance or *colour*. The hiss is continuous in duration. As it extends over time, both its volume and its frequency content remain stable. This means that the sound itself does not change drastically over time, although its *audibility* does vary in response to other sounds in the recording. It is sometimes obscured, or *masked*, by other louder sounds as they come and go. But, because the hiss is wideband, and more extensively spread across the audible range than many of the other sounds on the record, louder but *narrower* sounds only mask a portion of its overall frequency range. This means that some of the hiss is still audible around the 'edges' of these louder sounds.[8] Over the course of the album, the hiss can be heard to occupy two alternating positions in the stereo field, either appearing to occupy the centre or to spread across the breadth of the field. As mentioned earlier, within each track, the sound's position in the stereo field can be heard to change with the vocals from one section to another. In the track 'Lost Dreams', the sound is centred during the verse, but spread across the stereo field in the chorus, when the vocals are doubled and panned to opposing sides. We will now look to the various interpretations of *Pleasure*'s hiss in reviews of the album.

(Mis)interpretations of *Pleasure* and its hiss

The source of *Pleasure*'s hiss is mostly misidentified in the media articles I will discuss in this section. In only two instances is the hiss identified as electrical noise of a guitar amplifier. Elsewhere, it is labelled tape hiss, ambient noise, or reverb. The former two kinds of sound typically exhibit similar sonic characteristics to electrical hiss: they are continuous, complex in frequency content and wideband in frequency range.[9] They also tend to exhibit a certain colouration, with some bands of frequencies more prominent than others. The misidentification of the album's hiss (amplifier noise) as other similar sounds (tape hiss, ambient noise, etc.) suggests that identifications were at

[8] For more on masking, see Moylan (2015, pp. 32–3).

[9] Ambient noise often features prominent low-frequency content, which is emphasised in its portrayal in film and television (Holman 2012, p. 163). However, for low volume ambience to be recorded at an audible level, the recorded signal must be boosted, often to an extent that electrical hiss, produced within the circuits of the recording apparatus, is also audible on the recording.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

least partially based on its sonic characteristics. This supports Michel Chion's assertion that a rudimentary form of reduced listening (or a casual focus on the sonic characteristics of a sound) is used to infer the cause of acousmatic sounds (or sounds with an unseen cause) (2019, p. 31). It is also plausible that *everyday reasoning* (Smorti 2008) was used to identify the hiss. If so, then it was heard to fulfil sufficient qualitative criteria to be labelled as a certain kind of sound (tape hiss, ambient noise, etc.), and this was good enough for it to be treated as such. In some articles, production myths were constructed around how the sound was labelled. Attributing the sound to a source and/or cause allowed associated ideas, qualities and feelings to be woven into the album's interpretation. It was as if the sound assumed whatever guise and played whatever role it was given. In such cases, following Feist (2017c), I will refer to the hiss as 'cast' in the role of this or that kind of sound, rather than as simply misidentified. We will now move to examine how the hiss was portrayed in media articles.

Some articles describe the hiss as a sign of the accompanying music's quietness. This is based on the assumption that it would have been drowned out by music performed at a normal volume: 'the songs on *Pleasure* are quiet enough that you can hear the hum of the instruments, the static of the tape hiss' (Hurst 2017); 'Most of it is so quiet you can hear amps humming away in the background, hear the hiss of tape during the pauses' (Raynor 2017).[10] In these examples, although the hiss is cast as a combination of amplifier hum and tape hiss, both sounds are characterised as quiet. And, because the album's music is heard to be of a comparable volume, it too is understood to be quiet. Emil Kraugerud has previously observed this kind of signification, explaining that it occurs because 'in recordings, we only hear electrical noise [...] when the music is quiet enough' (2020, p. 105). Eric Clarke takes this a step further, referring to amplifier hiss in the opening verse to John Parish and PJ Harvey's 'Taut' simply as 'hissy silence' (2005, p. 111). Kraugerud argues that electrical noise from microphones and preamplifers acts as a 'backdrop' when it features in music recordings, by which listeners can 'measure the quietness of the performance' (2020, p. 105). He explains that the sound can therefore be heard to signify intimacy 'precisely because it indicates that the other sounds are quiet' (p. 106). The reasoning behind this is that quietness suggests the kind of low performance intensity that musicians adopt when an audience is close. For instance, in his analysis of Siv Jakobsen's 'To Leave You', Kraugerud explains that 'the quiet hiss of a microphone preamplifier seems to further emphasise the restraint of the voice and guitar' (p. 106). To him, the presence of electrical noise can thus 'add to the perception of other sounds as intimate' (p. 129). An interpretation following this line of thought can be observed in Ben Raynor's review of *Pleasure*, where he refers to the album as 'nakedly personal' on account of the quietness signified by the hiss (2017).

It is correct that both amplifier hiss and tape hiss are more likely to be heard on a recording when only having to compete with weak audio signals. However, Robbie Lackritz's (2013) comments regarding the 'blaring' loudness of Feist's amplified vocals suggest that the audibility of *Pleasure*'s hiss is not due to the quietness of the accompanying performances. Rather, they suggest that it is an effect of the

[10] In both examples, the resonant quality of the sound was evidently associated with an amplifier and labelled hum, and its high-frequency content identified as tape hiss. Nevertheless, the hiss, heard as two separate sounds, was understood as being audible owing to an absence of louder sounds.

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vocal amplifier's high-volume setting, as boosting a loudspeaker's signal will also boost its inherent electrical noise. Taking this into account, it is plausible that the quietness inferred by reviewers is illusory. Nevertheless, these reviews highlight how the perceived interaction between different sounds within a recording, their *intraphonographic* relationship, may be used to make inferences about the scenario it is thought to represent.

Some reviews describe a different intraphonographic relationship: the tendency of the hiss to obscure or envelop other sounds. In his review for *Line of Best Fit*, Joe Goggins asserts that 'much of *Pleasure* plays out behind the carefully-crafted fog of a slightly rough production style' (2017); Alex Driscoll of *Raw Meat* refers to the sound as 'clouding studio hiss' (2017); Jason Anderson of *Uncut* describes it as a 'cloud of hiss that often surrounds the deliberately unvarnished performances' (2017). Later in his review, Anderson elaborates, noting that the music is 'often obscured by a level of sonic sediment' (2017). Chris Ogden of *The Skinny* tells readers that *Pleasure* is 'caked in hiss' (2017). In all these descriptions, the hiss is portrayed as separate but related to the music, veiling, concealing or surrounding it. Indeed, as *Pleasure*'s musical sounds ring out and fade in volume, the hiss may be heard to mask them. This is not dissimilar to how an object might seem to disappear into a mist, or the sediment of a muddy pool. *Pleasure*'s louder musical sounds may also be heard to partially mask the hiss (their limited frequency profile cannot fully mask all its frequencies). This is comparable with how a nearby object might obscure a portion of a more distant fog. Laura Stanley of *Exclaim!* extends the fog metaphor beyond mere description to connect *Pleasure*'s sonic nuances with surrounding discourse, creating a production myth: 'Feist described going through "foggy periods" as she was writing *Pleasure*, so perhaps the record's sonic imperfections are indicative of her life during that time' (2017). Again, then, we can see that the intraphonographic music–hiss relationship reaches outside the borders of the recording, forming an iconic extraphonographic association with an imagined backstory.

Elsewhere, the hiss is interpreted in relation to an assumed sound source, rather than how it was heard to interact with other sounds. When attributed to a particular source, the sound is sometimes described as assuming associated characteristics, almost as if it has been cast in a role. For instance, reviews that label the hiss ambient noise (possibly owing to Feist's comments on liveness quoted earlier) associate the sound with location and space. This follows quite naturally, as ambient noise is typically defined as the compound sound of all the sound sources within a given area. Furthermore, because this kind of sound does not have a single location within a space, ambient noise may be conceptualised as a feature *of* a space. Cast as ambient noise, the hiss can thus be considered a characteristic of the recording studio in which *Pleasure* was made. Ellie Wolf of *The Student Playlist* brands the sound 'the lo-fi fuzz from the room of recording' (2017). Ryan Dombal of Pitchfork calls it 'the hiss of the room' (2017). Owen Maxwell of *Northern Transmission* labels it 'studio hiss' (2017). Elsewhere, Paul Robertson of *20000 Roads* hears the hiss as supporting its musical co-content's sense of spatiality. By 'leaving a level of studio hiss in the mix', he explains, the songs are granted additional 'aura' (2017). James Rettig of *Stereogum* goes further, weaving this supposed sense of location and spatiality into the album's narrative: Explaining to readers that Feist and her collaborators 'recorded the album live three times in three different locations', he notes that 'the hiss of the rooms where it was recorded was deliberately kept in the final mix, creating an enveloping sense of warmth' (2017). The obvious issue with these interpretations,

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though, is that *Pleasure*'s hiss is not the ambient noise of Studios Ferber, Dreamland Studios, or any other space. It is the electrical noise of a guitar amplifier captured by microphones placed inches from its speaker cone. In these examples, then, the hiss is given a role in an imagined backstory through its misidentification. Because of its casting as ambient noise, it is associated with a sense of location or spatiality.

An account of how the casting process might play out can be found in Jason Anderson's review for *Uncut*. Here, he tells his readers that the hiss is the effect of acoustic reverberation:

> That hiss is the sound of air that's been pressurized by all the notes, noises and feelings that Feist and Dominic Salole [. . .] project and amplify into the rafters before it all comes bearing down on the performers again. (2017)

This is an intriguing casting, since reverb and hiss are sonically dissimilar (for instance, reverb is not a continuous sound). Fortunately, he explains further:

> It's the product both of the natural reverb in the studio where the majority of the new songs were first recorded – a converted church in Woodstock, N.Y. – and of Feist's preference for singing and playing unencumbered by the headphones and vocal booths she finds too sterile and isolating. (Anderson 2017)

Here, two facts are used to explain to readers that *Pleasure*'s hiss is reflected sound. The cited information is not audible in the recording but was available in interviews published prior to Anderson's review. This exemplifies how discourse supports the construction of a production myth, adding meaning to recorded sounds. Cast as reverb, the hiss is heard to give *Pleasure* a physical quality, situating it within a space:

> The result is music that has an acute sense of physicality – of words pushed up and out from diaphragms, of fingertips moving roughly on and across strings, of what she calls 'straight-up human bodies' in a space with some much-cherished gear. (Anderson 2017)

Here, again, the way that *Pleasure*'s hiss is cast plays a crucial role in how the album is interpreted and described.

While the hiss led Anderson to picture a studio scene, other reviewers reported that the sound evoked a sense of immersion. In her review for *Clash* magazine, Noveen Bajpai's tells readers '[a]n audible hiss populates much of the record, which with a little imagination, gives way to the illusion of temporarily inhabiting the same dimly-lit room as Feist herself' (2017). To Mike Doherty of *Maclean's*, the 'amplifier hiss' encourages the listener 'to imagine [they're] in the room with [Feist] as she's singing and playing guitar' (2017). John Pattee from *Radio Humber* reports similarly: 'Reverb and white noise fill the gaps between chords, and the instrumentation combines with these sounds to make it feel as though you are listening to Feist live' (2017).

These accounts correlate with Emil Kraugerud's claim that 'the noise of microphone preamplifiers, instrument amplifiers, or instrument mechanical noises, [triggers the] experience of presence in the recording situation' (2020, p. 106). By representing 'what happened in the studio', these sounds 'draw attention to the location of recording and trigger an experience of presence with the performers and recordists' (Kraugerud 2020, p. 106). In line with Paul Sanden's concept of *liveness of fidelity* (2013), immersive liveness is interpreted from the hiss in the above reviews because it is understood as part of the musical event captured on the

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record. Thus, its presence on the album is taken as evidence of the recording's faithfulness to the depicted live performance. Returning to Kraugerud's claim with this in mind, a distinction can therefore be made between the 'noise' of an 'instrument amplifier' and that of a 'microphone preamplifier' (2020, p. 106). Cast as the former, *Pleasure*'s hiss can be considered 'live' because it represents what would have been heard on the studio floor as the music was performed. The latter, on the other hand, is a by-product of the recording process and therefore represents deviation from the 'true' sounds of performance. Cast as electrical noise of a preamplifier rather than of a guitar amplifier, *Pleasure*'s hiss should not evoke liveness in the same way. As noted in part one of this article, there are exceptions to this rule. Sanden's *liveness of fidelity* does not account for recordings that are deemed live because they are understood to be 'raw'. Alanna Boudreau of *Lovegoodculture.com* describes *Pleasure*'s hiss as evidence of liveness for this reason, stating 'much of [the album] was recorded live, made evident by a hissy mix and minimal to no touch-ups' (2017). Here, to use Kraugerud's term, the hiss is heard to evidence the 'unmediatedness' of the recording (2020, p. 138). Some articles articulated similar interpretations based on assumptions about how records are produced, which we will now turn to address.

The interpretation of *Pleasure*'s hiss as a sign of 'rawness' assumes that hiss occurs as a matter of course when making records but is usually removed during mixing. For example, Mike Doherty of *Maclean's* explains that the hiss is 'the sort of white noise that routinely gets tweaked out of the mix in pop music' (2017). Ellie Wolf of *The Student Playlist* deems it the kind of sound that 'would usually get edited out of the final mix' (2017). Elsewhere, the sound was described as 'kept', 'allowed' and 'left' on the recording. In such cases, *Pleasure* is taken as an example of what a record sounds like before finishing touches are made. Accordingly, Jim Pusey of *Contactmusic.com* describes the tracks with *less* hiss as having 'more polish applied' (2017). These interpretations illuminate a prevailing assumption that recorded music, especially pop music, is typically 'touched up' (in the same way that an image might be 'photoshopped') to the extent that it no longer honestly represents the material that was recorded. In the above articles, *Pleasure*'s hiss is taken as indicating an absence of such technological mediation, with the album regarded more as a candid document of performance than an illusory studio construction. In his *20000 roads* review, Paul Robertson takes this further, reporting that 'leaving a level of studio hiss in the mix' aids Feist in 'gifting the songs a delicate authenticity' (2017). Taken as evidence that the recording has not been altered or 'polished', the sound is heard to modify the character of musical co-content, and the overall message of the album.

In yet another example of how discourse is applied in giving meaning to the sonic nuances of music recordings, Jordan Darville of *The Fader* uses Feist's tweets to explain the album's sound quality and minimalist arrangement: 'When *Pleasure* was announced this week, Feist described its songs as "raw". It's an apt description for the sparse self-titled track that hisses like your grandparents' AM radio' (2017). Ellie Wolf of *The Student Playlist* does the same:

> 'I was raw and so were the takes', spoke Feist of the recording process for *Pleasure*. The intent shows, with titular song '*Pleasure*' opening the album with a stripped down guitar riff that showcases restraint, backed up by a lo-fi fuzz from the room of recording in the background. (2017)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Feist's tweets don't lay out what was 'raw' about the takes, yet they are evidently enough to provide these reviewers with scaffolding to construct a production myth. Their interpretations closely follow Feist's description of the album, working to present evidence to affirm her statements. The final two articles I will discuss demonstrate how production myths can break free from what accompanying discourse dictates to create more elaborate interpretations.

In the first of these two articles, Josh Goller of *Slant* constructs a production myth founded on correlations he identifies in the album's content. In his review, he describes the album's production, songs, and themes as exhibiting a common imperfect quality:

> Leslie Feist's fifth album, *Pleasure*, exudes the artisanal vibe of an artist tinkering with half-finished songs in front of friends in her backyard. In fact, the album was mostly recorded live in three separate locations, a lo-fi approach – complete with noticeable tape hiss in its many quiet moments – that finds the Canadian singer-songwriter reveling in the organic imperfections of both her music and the fragile human condition. (2017)

Here, characterisation of the album as lo-fi is supported by the casting of the hiss as 'tape hiss', and Goller infers that technical fidelity has been sacrificed for the sake of expression. In turn, this paints the hiss as an imperfection, bringing it into correlation with other 'imperfect' aspects of the album, such as 'half-finished' presentation of its musical co-content. Goller links all this to the imperfect love referenced in *Pleasure*'s lyrics:

> Love will inevitably lead to heartache in one form or another and Feist confronts that reality head-on, unafraid in her songwriting to lay bare her faults and flat-out embracing flaws in the album's jagged production. (Goller 2017)

Goller interprets these correlating and complimentary significations of imperfection as culminating in a statement about acceptance, declaring that '*Pleasure* isn't a perfect album, and that's the point' (2017).

Not all reviews interpret the album's 'imperfect' hiss as supporting a genuine artistic or emotional expression. Casting it as tape hiss, Elizabeth Newton of *Tiny Mix Tapes* hears its inclusion as a disingenuous attempt to validate the album, labelling it part of a 'retromanic, pseudo-edgy, contrivedly Authentic™ recording aesthetic' (2017).

Newton's comments resonate with Filoseta's observation that the intentional use of noise to signify authenticity 'does not seem very far from the sort of authenticity we may ascribe to items of contemporary retro-chic' where '"imperfections" have been specifically manufactured to give the garment an aura of pastness' (2021). He continues:

> when transduction noise is systematically deployed as a rhetorical device to make a point about the work's own production and aesthetics, thus pursuing a strategy of imperfection, the result can appear just as contrived and no less artificial than the practices of hi-fi production. (Filoseta 2021)

Newton rejects the comments Feist made about the hiss in interviews: 'Feist uses these aberrations as evidence of her production team's "experiment of investing in imperfection," as if spontaneity were something a synergistic startup could sell' (2017). She integrates her suspicion of these 'aberrations' with her disbelief of Feist's claim that the album's release was announced without her knowledge:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143023000521 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> It's peculiar to me that a modern recording project with access to every audio gadget since the wax cylinder could fail to mask noise and deem it some kind of anti-style, but this is the same microsystem that permitted Feist to tweet that, much to her 'surprise,' NPR had leaked word about the release of *Pleasure* … (Newton 2017)

Newton clarifies: 'I'd think a team booking international tours would remember to tell the most important employee of their brand that her album release would be announced the next morning' (2017).

It is evident in this review that the cynicism towards Feist's 'raw' turn is rooted in Newton's preconception of Feist: 'Over-driven guitar and top-notch PR do not a blues singer make' (2017). Her interpretation demonstrates wry awareness of the meanings that consequential sounds like *Pleasure*'s hiss have accumulated. Here, the sound is not heard as evidence of 'rawness', as it was in the reviews discussed above, but as a sonic symbol employed to exploit associations with authenticity and spontaneity. Newton's comments disregard the prospect that the album employed the noise-and-all fidelity of a 'technical' Albini-style production approach. She views *Pleasure* through a *lo-fi lens*, while positioning Feist in direct opposition to the amateurism and impoverishment that hiss connotes in this context. Newton therefore rejects what she hears as performed amateurism. Although Jones has noted that performed amateurism has sometimes been accepted in lo-fi discourse on the condition that performers are open about their posturing (2014, p. 54), Newton's scepticism implies that, to her, *Pleasure* lacks such honesty. Ultimately, the authenticity conventionally signified by *Pleasure*'s hiss was contradicted by a pre-conception of Feist as an inauthentic, 'corporate' pop star.

Conclusion

Rather than categorising *Pleasure*'s hiss as noise, music or peripheral material, I have considered the sound co-content to the album's music. I have therefore taken *Pleasure* as a compound signification made up of co-systems of signs. This approach compliments the media articles analysed, as they, too, portrayed the hiss as distinct from but coherent with the album's music. In these articles, *Pleasure*'s hiss was variously shown to confirm, emphasise, weaken, contradict and modify the meaning of its musical co-content, and vice versa. This loosely compares with the relation between a speaker's utterance and their non-verbal behaviour in face-to-face communication. Indeed, the hiss was often described in the articles as interacting with other aspects of the album to form a kind of statement or message. For instance, the album's loose song structure, hissy sound quality and introspective lyrics were described as coming together in a sonic statement about the acceptance of imperfection.

Yet *Pleasure* was not interpreted solely by its audio content in these articles. Some asserted production myths, constructed through linkage of the album's sonic nuances to surrounding discourse. Some used press releases, tweets or interviews to support their interpretation and their (mis)identification of the hiss. In some instances, the sound's (mis)identification and/or (mis)attribution to a source/cause affected how *Pleasure* and its music were interpreted. For instance, in articles where the hiss was (mis)identified as ambient noise or reverb, it was also taken to depict a sense of space and location which 'rubbed off' on accompanying music. In such cases, since the hiss was made to assume the characteristics and connotations of another sound, I described it as being 'cast' in a role.

Furthermore, I have illuminated complications linked to the concept of liveness in recorded music. When heard as part of the musical event captured on the record, some articles interpreted a liveness of fidelity from the belief that the sound would have been heard on the studio floor. Yet when (mis)taken as a by-product of recording technology (which should imply deviation from liveness of fidelity), other articles took the hiss as a sign that *Pleasure* was 'raw' and unprocessed. It was therefore considered more faithful to live performance in comparison to the hiss-free 'polish' of conventional pop recordings. This suggests a fluidity to the liveness of fidelity. I have also complicated dichotomous relationships between some concepts in music production theory, explaining how *Pleasure* could be described as either 'technical' or lo-fi, or both (without collapsing the dichotomy between the two terms).

By examining how *Pleasure*'s hiss is represented in media articles, I have attempted to demonstrate the rich potential for interpretation that consequential sounds of music technology offer when they feature in music recordings, and some of the habits by which meaning is currently made from them. I hope this opens an alternative route for their meaning to be considered, one that does not involve their categorisation as noise, music or peripheral material.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on part of the author's PhD, which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's North-West Consortium Doctoral Training Partnership. The author would like to thank Professor Michael Spitzer and Dr. Elodie Roy for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

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