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Why internet porn matters

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BOOK REVIEWS

Why internet porn matters, by Margret Grebowicz, Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press, 2013, 152 pp., £10.38 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-804-78662-1

Published under Stanford University Press' *Briefs* imprint (an initiative providing 'bite-sized' volumes on academic topics), *Why Internet Porn Matters* offers a concise, adept study of the internet's most debated, hated, and beloved phenomenon.

Author Margret Grebowicz, a philosophy professor at Goucher College, stays true to the imprint's mission by approaching internet porn in a scholarly and philosophically rigorous fashion. To be sure, the general reader searching for current directions in porn statistics or trends may feel alienated by its language and degree of abstraction. As a consequence, this slim volume will probably be appreciated most by readers at ease with specialist language and concepts used in poststructuralist criticism and the discourses of feminism.

Early on, Grebowicz writes that in the face of the '*What is to be done about pornography?*' question (p. 3; original emphasis), a philosophical approach does not have much to offer. Instead, 'discipline-specific' questions offer the most productive and enlightening ways to talk about not just porn at large, but internet porn especially (p. 4). Grebowicz's 'discipline-specific' questions are framed by a feminist discourse and ask whether porn benefits the feminist project along power lines (why do females fake orgasms?) and legal edicts (might porn possess the capacity to eliminate ways women are subject to patriarchy under law?). Some other questions asked include: is internet porn fundamentally subversive by the means through which it spreads? Which mechanism in the internet's motor drives the circulation of porn—what role does online community play in this spread? And, how can anti-porn feminists distance themselves from the similarly situated political right? Grebowicz writes:

> The internet fundamentally changes the social meaning of pornography by embedding it squarely in the epistemological shift from knowledge to information, and the political shift to information becoming democratically accessible to everyone. These shifts […] effect a non-innocent, particular understanding of the sexual subject in relationship to the democratic state and to speech which, I argue, constrains the possibilities for sexual speech […] (p. 2).

Grebowicz is careful to explicitly align herself to one side of the porn debate (e.g. whether porn is a good thing). Instead of making an outright moral call on porn, Grebowicz relies on a tightly controlled pool of sources to illustrate the political ways internet porn not only affects online communities in a broad sense, but in a local and individual way too. In addition to Judith Butler, whose logic of confession, best illustrated in *Undoing Gender*, fixes academic feminism and speech acts through an 'ongoing elaboration of a self' (p. 21), Grebowicz frequently turns to Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard to delineate porn's cultural and political corollaries.

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Baudrillard's 'categorical imperative of communication' or the 'incessant pressure to make visible and exteriorize everything hidden and interior' (p. 34) figures heavily throughout *Why Internet Porn Matters*. The constant, felt need to broadcast our interior and interpersonal lives, according to Baudrillard, has led to an evolution of all things marked as real (in a cultural landscape) to become simulated (the hyperreal), including talk and reality television shows, but especially mediated representations of sex. What matters is not what is real – that is, what is staged or scripted – but 'What matters is the need for the *experience* of the real' (p. 35; emphasis added). When it comes to porn, the obscene is not what is shown, but what is not shown:

> It is no longer then the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden, or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, the all-too visible … what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and communication. (Baudrillard quoted on p. 34)

Baudrillard's concept of the obscene resonates with Grebowicz's later section on zoophilia, in particular, Petsex.com. There, a monthly fee can be bypassed (and membership indefinitely sustained) when its members opt to routinely upload their own inter-species sex videos. What makes bestiality so far removed from heterosexual, mainstream porn, Grebowicz writes, is not the deep-down degeneracy or vaguely illegal ethos of it all, although these do contribute to its obscenity, but that nothing is *not* shown.

Although Grebowicz frequently applies the work of Baudrillard and Lyotard in tandem with one another, she often uses those same voices, and voices of other theorists such as Julia Kristeva, to reframe the political expedient of current (anti-) porn activists. One particularly arresting throughline finds Grebowicz exploring the dual nature of first-person testimonials. Testimonials are a legislative tactic used during porn debates with which anti-porn advocates ask buffeted prostitutes and porn workers to reveal how porn has marred their lives. On one hand, these testimonials implicitly ask its audience to choose between anti-porn/pro-censorship or pro-porn/anti-censorship positions. Doing so belies 'the science' of the Truth – truth is rather related through the causation of stories instead of a methodological approach – and stages a dichotomy in which the former position (anti-porn/pro-censorship), and those who take its side, are seen on a moral high ground. On the other hand, testimonials work to upend heteronormativity by revealing the staggering, but hidden assumptions of patriarchy, best realized by Catherine MacKinnon

The work of anti-porn advocate and legal scholar MacKinnon pervades *Why Internet Porn Matters* and is at its most fruitful when Grebowicz uses it to discuss the power of testimonials and women's rights. Women's rights, MacKinnon ultimately claims, are always already figured within patriarchal norms because they are intimately tied to issues of human rights; which is to say, men's rights. When the feminine subject is most closely aligned with heterosexist norms, she is more likely to be protected under *de jure* law; otherwise, the more radically the subject is feminized, the more she becomes 'othered in an androcentric legal order and social imaginary' (p. 91). Extending this claim, Grebowicz synthesizes Kristeva's concept of the *abject* to animate the hyper-feminized political personhood of extreme and, sometimes, base cases of femininity – sex workers, porn performers, incest and rape victims. Kristeva's postructuralist tenor (broadly, the same tenor as Baudrillard and Lyotard)

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refashions MacKinnon's use of the testimonial as an event that interrogates the liminal edge of femininity to make claims about internet porn's far-reaching effects as a filmic guidebook to patriarchal ideas of subordination and power through porn as a speech act.

Grebowicz is also fascinated by how quickly online communities, especially those not necessarily dedicated to contributing to the user's sexual satisfaction, instantaneously become hubs for the promiscuous. 'It is as if the internet were uniquely equipped for pornography, in ways that print and film are not,' she writes: 'There is something about the imaginary of democratized information that immediately makes it porn-friendly. Or that at the very least makes people take off their clothes' (pp. 50–51). Grebowicz points to Chatroulette here, where men flock to masturbate with anonymity, but with predictable ubiquity.

Some readers might find *Why Internet Porn Matters* so immersed in socio-political and gender discussions that it often overlooks internet porn. Indeed, Petsex.com and Chatroulette compose the only specific sites Grebowicz examines in *Why Internet Porn Matters*. By orienting her study of internet porn under the auspices of philosophy, she avoids engaging in a close reading of any one particular porn scene and shows some resistance to discussing issues of porn addiction; for example, via psychoanalytic frameworks (p. 3). Although for readers willing to go long stretches of time without mention of internet porn to instead attend to porn's larger political implications, this should not be problematic.

While discussing the agenda of pro-porn feminists, Grebowicz writes: 'The task is to undo the reduction of women into bodies, to animate the pornographic body so that it becomes a person rather than a body and enters the public/political sphere, participating in the creation of new identities' (p. 103). Although this describes the M.O. of a specific group, claiming that this is exactly what Grebowicz does in *Why Internet Porn Matters* would not be a stretch.

With a breadth of sources and a style that places Grebowicz directly in touch with the current landscape of internet porn, *Why Internet Porn Matters* offers a much-needed contribution to porn studies.

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People's pornography: sex and surveillance on the Chinese Internet, by Katrien Jacobs, Bristol, Intellect, 2012, 203 pp., £15.95 (paperback) ISBN 978-1841504933

> 'If it exists, there is porn of it' (*Encyclopedia Dramatica* 2013, Rule 34, *Rules of the Internet*).

There is porn in China. Thriving in the gray area between the proliferation of networks and the recurring authoritarian crackdowns, the consumption and