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People's pornography: sex and surveillance on the Chinese Internet

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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

production of sexually explicit media, sexual identities and discourses in the People's Republic of China have been hailed as 'China's hormone revolution' (Morozov 2011, 70), 'desiring China' (Rofel 2007, 3), 'China's sexual revolution' (Burger 2012, 4), and so on. Katrien Jacobs takes this development as a starting point and sets out to explore the 'people's pornography', which she identifies as the broad range of cultural expressions evidencing 'a sexual rebellion within China's netizen culture' (Jacobs 2012, 183). In this book, her goal is to trace the undercurrents of a Chinese porn culture in different domains of the contemporary Chinese mediascape: from the online circulation of explicit materials to the discourses and exploits of online activists and bloggers, from the gendered reception of pornography and media scandals to the habits of dating website users and the queer identities of animation fan communities.

The author situates her work not in western pornography scholarship alone, but instead roots it in the traditions of cultural studies and media theory. Not limiting her focus to a descriptive approach, she strives to reveal the interplay of 'people's pornography' with civil rights and emancipatory movements in the paradoxical environment of Mainland China, where the repression of sexually explicit media runs parallel to the neoliberal discourse of the Chinese dream promoted by the current leadership. Jacobs' focus is on Chinese people as consumers and producers of an emerging porn culture, and on the ways they explore new sexual identities and new possibilities for civil emancipation through this culture.

People's Pornography begins with an interesting overview of the tension between the consumption and production of sexually explicit materials in Mainland China and the state surveillance, often internalized by the citizens themselves, resulting in different degrees of self-censorship, peer pressure and mob behaviour. In an effort to localize the discussion, Jacobs provides a concise yet thorough introduction to Chinese internet culture at large, briefly presenting the main actors of the local social networks and online communities, from the 'fifty-cent army' of state-employed astroturfers to the mob psychology of online vigilantism and the satirical memes shared by playful users.

In the second chapter, the author delves deeply into Chinese internet culture and presents the different personalities of Chinese bloggers dealing with sexuality as activists, sexperts, grassroots journalists, attention-seeking celebrities or simply private citizens pursuing their desires online. Instead of falling in the trap of defining the advent of blogs in China as a 'blogolution' (Chien 2005) necessarily leading to more freedom and civil rights, Jacobs explores the ambivalent sensibilities of sex bloggers, described as oscillating between an attitude of 'pride and pettiness' that praises sexual liberation simultaneously fostering idiosyncratic smear campaigns and dangerous bouts of mob justice around issues of public morals. Not limited to Mainland China's celebrity sexperts and activists, the chapter also references the China-oriented online marketing of Japanese pornstars and the work of Hong Kong performance artists, highlighting the trans-national implications of the leapfrogging developments of internet platforms for Chinese sexual politics.

After this introductory framing, the author moves her attention to smaller case studies and more specific qualitative inquiries. Chapter 3, 'Gender Variations on the Aching Sex Scene,' presents the results of surveys and interviews with students and academics about the consumption and interpretation of sexually explicit materials. It is in this chapter that the reader begins to get some glimpses of what the book title

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hints at – the pornography that Chinese people produce, comment on and consume across genders, religions and social background. This research is rendered in a very direct way, letting the participants' voices articulate their preferences and combining them in a flowing narrative, leaving to the reader the interpretation of how social norms and stigmas resonate across the comments.

Another interesting case study is presented in the following chapter, the detailed description of a digital ethnography of the Hong Kong local branch of a dating website. By crafting an online persona (a '40-year-old Caucasian bi-sexual woman who is the imagined granddaughter of American sexologist Alfred Kinsey', p. 135) Jacobs experiences, first-hand, online and offline encounters with other dating website users, tracing an impression of the cross-cultural imaginations of race and desire that characterize Hong Kong online platforms. The journey concludes with a peek at a completely different phenomenon, that of transvestitism, as practiced by Japanese animation costume players, Lolita impersonators and cross-dressers in Hong Kong. Again, the shifting boundaries between these subcultures and gender categories are presented through the voices of the protagonists and illustrate the implications of internet culture for the expression of queer identities.

The case-study-oriented chapters are three strong examples of a qualitative and participative research approach to digital platforms, online communities and porn audiences: the complexities of sexual desire, consumption and framing play out easily in the narration and respect the voices of individual research participants. It is possible to argue that the arguments set in motion in the first half of the book find little development in this second half, and on the whole *People's Pornography* ends up being a fragmentary read, a collection of essays and articles that are sometimes connected only tangentially to the topic of sex and surveillance on the Chinese internet.

Inevitably, the word 'Chinese' used to describe a 'Chinese porn culture', 'Chinese porn taste' and even the 'Chinese internet' ends up eliciting questions that this book alone cannot answer. The author's fieldwork, conducted in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, seems to postulate a 'Chinese' porn culture encompassing the whole Greater China Region and hopefully resulting in 'new possibilities for Chinese eroticism' (Jacobs 2012, 19). Yet, even though the first chapters describe the status of sexually explicit media, surveillance culture and blogging community in Mainland China, there is less about the People's Republic of China in the following case studies: only a few students among the interviewees are mainland students affiliated to Hong Kong institutions – a privileged minority – and both the online dating service and most of the interviewed costume players and cross-dressers are based in Hong Kong. It is indeed true that Hong Kong is a convenient gateway for a study of Mainland Chinese culture and society, but it is also true that in terms of internet and sexual cultures, Hong Kong is quite different (and eager to maintain this difference) from the People's Republic of China.

On a broader theoretical level, *People's Pornography* presents some claims that might need further verification. A case in point is the association that the author sees between the consumption and production of sexually explicit media and the networked participation in emancipatory movements. In China as everywhere else, 'sex' and related keywords are obviously the most popular search engine queries, but the extent to which the sharing of sexually explicit media can be framed as a form of collective expression and public negotiation of social change remains to be proved.

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Throughout the book, this assumption results in jarring contrasts between issues that are associated in terms of shared goals and activist sensibilities: playful internet jokes are juxtaposed with the work of sex activists, the usage of dating websites compared with the participation in 'sexual uprisings', and the belonging to fan cultures associated with the exploits of online celebrities or contemporary artists.

In its fragmentarity and theoretical diversity, *People's Pornography* provides a challenging and kaleidoscopic collection of snapshots of sexuality in the Greater China region, and explores multiple connections between them along the vectors of private consumption, media industries, surveillance culture, fandom and sexual identity. Although some of these connections still need to be fully interrogated, Jacobs' writing conveys the effort in representing 'subjectivities that may never substantially hold together or fully materialize' (Jacobs 2012, 180).

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The passion of Gengoroh Tagame: the master of gay erotic manga, by Gengoroh Tagame, produced by Anne Ishii, edited by Graham Kolbeins, art direction by Chip Kidd, introduction by Edmund White, Brooklyn, NY, PictureBox, 2013, 256 pp., $29.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-984-58924-1

Although there is a long history of comics aimed at various demographics and interests in Japan, even today and by contrast, many comics in English-speaking countries tend to assume a heterosexual male readership. The publication of *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame* is something of a landmark for manga (Japanese comics) as it is the one of the first examples of the *bara* genre to be released in English. The term bara refers to comics that feature male homosexual relations often created by and for gay men. In addition, bara manga often features masculine characters depicted as physically large; ranging from chubby to muscular.

Although Tagame's book is one of the first English-language bara manga to be officially published, homosexual-themed manga has been experiencing quite a boom