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Carnal resonance: affect and online pornography

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Ultimately, *The Passion of Gengoroh Tagame* is a beautifully-printed work that does justice to the power and artistry of Tagame's comic art. One of the few downsides to the book's publication, however, is that since it is one of the few examples of bara manga available in English, Tagame's work may be taken as representative of all such manga. Publisher PictureBox Books had planned to release an English-language volume called *Massive: Gay Erotic Manga and the Men Who Make It* that would have featured 11 different artists (including Tagame), but the company announced they would halt releasing new titles in December 2013. Hopefully a similar title in the near future will showcase the diversity of approaches that can be found in bara manga.

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Carnal resonance: affect and online pornography, by Susanna Paasonen, Cambridge, MA, MIT, 2011, 336 pp., $35.00 / £24.95 (hbk), SIBN 978-0-262-01631-5

Susanna Paasonen's *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* provides a useful framework for theorizing online pornography in all of its quirky, kinky, and sometimes shocking or grotesque particularities. While the book's subtitle implies that the text resides in the developing 'affective turn,' *Carnal Resonance* actively resists such a classification. Rather than placing her analytical orientation firmly within an affective or representation-focused 'school,' two broad areas of scholarship that the author contends have been unhelpfully and binaristically opposed to each other in recent years (pp. 8–12), Paasonen adopts the term 'carnal resonance' to make 'sense of the movement between porn and its users' in order to 'tackle the interactive nature of such attachments' (p. 16). She deploys the term in a two-fold fashion that attends firstly to how users are 'grabbed' by porn's 'visceral appeal and power to disturb' and secondly to the process by which users develop lasting affinities with specific websites, genre tropes, performers, or even individual texts

(p. 16). In framing the book's central organizing term in this way, Paasonen claims to account for both the representations that online porn produces as well as the material responses that these media elucidate in the bodies of their audiences (pp. 25 and 262). The book is doubly refreshing in that it is politically self-reflexive and situated beside, rather than within, tired antiporn/anti-antiporn debates (terms she deploys throughout the text) (pp. 27–29, 50–56 and 253).

Paasonen draws on new media and digital cultural studies to articulate how bodies, looks, and information (including written text, still images, videos, monetary transactions, and data collected about users) flow and are exchanged in online porn economies (pp. 12, 76–78 and 257). Chapter Two provides a history of online pornography, one of the hallmarks of which has been the rise of widely disseminated 'amateur' productions, which she discusses at length in Chapter Three. Her examination of amateur porn focuses on the production of 'realness' in these texts, the blurring of 'professional,' 'pro-am' and 'amateur' categories, and the visual materiality of amateur videos, which are frequently not confined to studios or traditional pornographic sets, but are often filmed in domestic spaces. Her archive of websites is drawn primarily from a research project through which she collected, categorized, and operationalized a wide array of porn spam emails – in her words, 'the lowest of the low' in terms of 'low' forms of cultural production (p. 115). These emails undergo content analysis in Chapter Four. Here, Paasonen focuses on the vocabulary of 'pornonormativity,' how some forms of ostensibly 'straight' online porn trouble heteronormativity, the construction of race in online porn, and the genre's investment in 'minute anatomical realism' and 'hyperbolic depiction to find points of resonance with its viewers' (p. 163). Chapter Five takes up the question of narrative and scopophilia in online porn. Here, Paasonen explores a wide array of different modes of looking at online porn that simultaneously support her formulations of 'resonance' and 'grab' and problematize canonical film studies and porn studies methods – particularly Linda Williams' take on narrative in pornographic film and Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze (pp. 182–185 and 172–177). Chapter Six, 'Absolutely Disgusting,' considers 'the gross-out pantheon' of shock sites (such as the infamous 'Goatse' and '2 Girls 1 Cup'), and focuses on how the proliferation of these media challenge the alleged 'domestication' of pornography and 'maintain the associations with dirt, filth, shame, and disgust' that have traditionally been connected to the genre in discourses as diverse as antiporn feminism, conservative rhetoric in popular culture, and scholarship concerned with shame and the abject in the production of queer subjectivities (pp. 22, 221–225 and 249).

The book closes with a self-reflexive meditation on the mechanics by which online pornography and other forms of digital media move viewers' bodies. In her final analysis, Paasonen attributes this specific relationship between new media object and user to the 'intra-active' aspects of online media, and in her framework she includes data collection by websites in addition to the repetitive procedure of clicking, surfing, viewing, and the embodied responses that these actions produce. The development of attachments and specific affective responses to pornography during this process operates through the production of enduring resonances that are constantly in flux as users are exposed to more online pornographies, experience unexpected grabs, hone their tastes, are pulled in different directions, and 'grab digital files in return' (pp. 256–262).

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Carnal Resonance is ambitious and expansive in its scope. On one obvious register, for those doing work on online pornography, the volume is one of a very few texts published on the subject that merits the label 'indispensible.' However, the volume is also valuable for those working with non-pornographic digital media. This is due to Paasonen's numerous and nuanced interventions that resist placement on one side of any extant theoretical, methodological, or political binary. Whether one considers the text's engagement with both antiporn and anti-antiporn critiques, affect theory and semiotics, and new media studies and canonical film studies, *Carnal Resonance* manages to find a place 'beside' all of these interdisciplinary literatures. On one hand, she models an ethos for scholars who similarly aspire to escape the unhelpful boundaries that define specific conflicts or theoretical divergences in any field. On the other hand, in each of these navigations, she provides a vocabulary for academics to use in deploying 'opposing' theories together in order to create a more holistic critical framework.

Despite my obviously appreciative reading of *Carnal Resonance*, the book does leave questions unanswered. First, given the author's extended attention to the importance of porn in the development of the early digital economy in Chapter Two, her investment in a narrative that places porn as always at the 'cutting edge' of media technology throughout the course of history in that chapter, and her consideration of performers' and viewers' immaterial labour in these spaces throughout the text, it would be interesting to hear her thoughts on the corporate structures and business models of the various proprietors of the websites she examines and how this informs the circulation of texts. Second, despite her concern with data collection and the tracking of users' IP addresses by porn sites, Paasonen does little more than gesture toward the implications of this for online porn viewers' subjectivities. Given her commitment to exploring the material effects of individuals' engagement with online pornography, and considering the growing body of literature concerned with the effects of 'big data,' algorithmically determined user categorizations, and the use of these tools to manipulate user behaviours and identifications, this certainly deserves further interrogation. Third, Paasonen similarly gestures toward the communal and communicative nature of online porn, specifically on highly popular 'tube' sites such as XTube, which contain communities of users organized around sexual practices and sharing their productions, but does not draw many larger implications from this. While she justifies this move by referring the reader to her own status as an observer (or 'lurker' in her parlance) of these communities rather than an active participant in them, and notes that this is also the experience of the vast majority of users who visit these sites, her lack of engagement with these cultural formations leaves the reader wanting more. Fourth, and finally, Paasonen's attention to mostly (although not exclusively) straight 'mainstream' online porn obviously limits her study's relevance for those working with online porn that caters to queer audiences. However, this specific criticism only relates to the media objects that the author considers. Her theoretical formulations, most notably 'resonance' and 'grab,' provide an excellent vehicle for the theorist of online pornography catering to gay, lesbian, and queer viewers. The challenge for those scholars will be how to interpret the function of resonance and grab when the targeted group brings a different set of, in the words of Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo (2004), 'cultural–aesthetic specificities' than the straight spectators with whom Paasonen's project is most directly concerned.

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While one can identify the gaps in *Carnal Resonance*, readers would be best served treating these comments as indicative of avenues for further research rather than a sustained criticism of Paasonen's work. In this monograph, the author has managed to convincingly straddle multiple disciplines and political and theoretical divisions to develop a vocabulary for analyzing online pornography, and has done so with deftness. For those scholars interested in exploring and further developing new tools that can account for the affective, material, and representational complexities presented by online porn and other new media objects, *Carnal Resonance* is a welcome and timely intervention that merits serious and extended attention and engagement.

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The feminist porn book: the politics of producing pleasure, edited by Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley and Mireille Miller-Young, New York, The Feminist Press, 2013, 328 pp., $13.77 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-558-61818-3

The Feminist Porn Book offers a comprehensive update of contemporary sex-positive feminist approaches to pornography and the feminist pornography genre in particular, and is simultaneously reflexive about the complexities inherent within this area of inquiry. Rather than attempting to adopt a *definitive* stance on feminism, pornography, and feminist pornography, the collection outlines the *fluidity* within the intersection of these categories. Released decades after the now infamous feminist 'porn wars,' *The Feminist Porn Book* is a reminder that the collision between pornography and feminism is more than a noteworthy chapter in the history of the movement; instead, the contributors collectively suggest that there is a dialectical relationship between feminism and porn that can aid our growing understanding of sexual and embodied subjectivity. By presenting the diverse perspectives of 27 contributors, this collection offers a timely feminist re-imagining of the pornographic text. According to the editors:

> Throughout this book, we explore the multiple definitions of feminist porn, but we refuse to fix its boundaries. Feminist porn is a genre and a political vision. And like other genres of film and media, feminist porn shares common themes, aesthetics, and goals even though its parameters are not clearly demarcated. Because it is born out of a feminism that is not one thing but a living, breathing, moving creation, it is necessarily contested – an argument, a polemic, and a debate. (p. 18)