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Hard to swallow: hard-core pornography on screen

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toward female sexual empowerment (p. 253). This section highlights the potential of pornography – in the classroom and beyond – for advancing our comprehension of the politics of sexuality and personal desire.

Finally, Part Four, 'Now Playing: Feminist Porn,' addresses issues surrounding representation and identity politics in feminist pornography, with contributions from performers and scholars dedicated to revealing the persistent complexities behind the signification of marginalized subject positions. Included in this section are essays from entrepreneurs Jiz Lee, April Flores, Buck Angel and Loree Erickson, who have harnessed their identities to connect with audiences that are often alienated from multi-dimensional representations.

The authors of *The Feminist Porn Book* represent the frontline of feminist porn scholarship, and whilst many pages are dedicated to describing the 'what,' 'why,' and 'how,' of this practice, the bulk of this contribution conceptualizes feminist pornography as a 'method of knowledge production' (p. 304). However, despite this invocation of the text as a form of cultural discourse, *The Feminist Porn Book* surprisingly does not include essays that specifically explore audience reception practices. Instead, this volume focuses on the identification of feminist pornography as a fluid, mediated marketplace of 'sex positive synergy' (p. 82) with essays that actively critique the cultural processes of normalization and discipline, resulting in an instructive contribution to contemporary conceptualizations of sexuality, identity, and media culture.

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Hard to swallow: hard-core pornography on screen, edited by Claire Hines and Darren Kerr, London, Wallflower Press, 2012, 249 pp., £17.50 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-231-16213-5

Editors Claire Hines and Darren Kerr describe *Hard to Swallow: Hard-core Pornography on Screen* as a collection of essays dedicated to critically addressing societal perceptions of either film or internet hard-core pornography. The book examines concrete examples of hard-core representations of sex over a 50-year period, ranging from the stag reels of the 1960s to the digital technologies of the twenty-first century. It asks of these representations: 'so, why is hard-core hard to swallow?' (p. 1). The answer lies in the term hard-core itself, which has come to indicate 'unwanted and unwelcome excess' and which is 'habitually contained within moral, ethical and political discourses on public health and collective cultural well-being' (p. 5). The book addresses the claim that 'pornography is now seemingly defined and readily explained before it is even looked at' (p. 5). What the essays collectively discover is the contradictory nature of this genre and 'just how *unknown* the hard core screen really is' (p. 5). In addressing public moral disapprobation and

lack of knowledge, the collection's purpose is to move 'beyond the hyperbole of campaigners' moral arguments about pornography and its effects' (p. 5). The editors express the playful hope that as a result readers will find the hard-core screen 'a little less hard to swallow' (p. 8).

The book is divided into three sections according to specific themes: Part One, 'Turned On: Hard-core Screen Cultures', offers an account of the coming together of pornography and the screen; Part Two, 'Come Again? Hard-core in History,' considers the necessity to critically engage with hard-core's heritage; and Part Three, 'Fluid Exchanges: Hard-core Forms and Aesthetics,' offers case studies that explore the intersections between pornography, culture and identity.

The challenge of the book is to interrogate the screen, in the spirit of Foucault, as a text that 'speaks' sex and as such opens up and/or closes down possibilities for sexual agency. I would expect that readers who take specific pleasure in the visual or in narrative will be richly rewarded by the detailed and thick descriptions offered here, engaging with a range of sexualities in national, local and historical contexts. For the sake of brevity I have chosen to review three chapters to illustrate this.

In Part Two, Chapter Six, 'Lost in Damnation: The Progressive Potential of *Behind the Green Door*,' Darren Kerr explores this feature-length film produced in the 1970s during what is described as 'the golden age' of the liberalization of porn. The film is ostensibly about the abduction of a woman for the gratification of male fantasy and is notorious for its series of slow motion 'money shots' onto the woman's body, articulated through an experimental psychedelic visual style that brings the film to its climax. Described by Linda Williams (1999) as a 'misogynistic classic', Kerr acknowledges the film's uncomfortable narrative of female sexual coercion; nevertheless, he opens up a space in which the film is appraised firstly for the potential of pornography to re-articulate issues of sexuality and secondly for its lack of some phallocentric aspects found in contemporaneous films. As such, he argues that the film 'should be lost in damnation no more' (p. 102).

Kerr suggests what is interesting about this specific example is that it is self-reflexive, calling attention to pornography as a fantasy space in which women's sexuality is active. For example, a rape scene is articulated as an exploration of a woman's fantasy, and her sexual agency in achieving her own gratification during the experience is foregrounded. On the one hand, the film appears to present men as pre-disposed to coercion, and to present the victim as unwilling to express or enact any resistance, showing this coercion as narratively progressing towards female pleasure, thus vindicating the violation and sustaining the position of male dominance. On the other hand, this scene can be read as polysemic in nature. The elevation of male pleasure is deferred, for example, and instead of the conventional close-ups of the fragmented female body, more common in 1970s pornography, the face of the female actor and her whole body is portrayed in movement in the attempt to capture her visceral pleasure. Indeed, as the film cuts to shots of an aroused audience, it is her frenzy that is prevalent, not that of the male actor.

In Part One, Chapter Three, 'Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn,' Fiona Attwood discusses the emergence and proliferation of alternative online pornographies produced by what she describes as the 'new porn professionals' (p. 42). Bella Vendetta and the Suicide Girls are examples of women who have wrested the production of porn from men and who also perform as models at their own sites. Although each altporn site is different, they share common attributes.

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They feature, for example, performers who do not conform to the norms of femininity represented by mainstream pornography. Performers express themselves creatively through display; tattoos and piercings, for example. These sites are considered woman friendly and sex-positive in that the performers' sexual display is combined with non-sexual content such as interviews, news items, discussion groups and chat rooms linked to a broader cultural context of music, art, counter-culture and politics. In this sense, Attwood argues, altporn can be seen as part of a broader participatory culture focused on social networking, women's self-imaging and production of user-generated content.

In positioning herself as a woman who is active rather than passive, Vendetta for example describes her participation in the pornography industry as a contribution to 'the sexual revolution'; expressing a mode of femininity that does not aspire to 'look like a Barbie doll and want cum on their face'; instead being 'a horny, kinky bitch who gets off knowing that strangers are jerking off to photos of me'; and finally, liking 'the concept of making money from my cunt' (p. 52).

Attwood's provisional solution to the knotty issue of women's representation in pornography is not to be 'for or against' altporn but to pay sustained scholarly attention to women's own experiences and voices as they begin to take on active roles as producers and performers. She argues that we need detailed understanding of the complexity of new online pornographies which, for the time being at least, bring pornography, women's sexual self-expression, and politics together in new and interesting formations.

Stephen Maddison extends the idea that texts 'speak sex' by moving into the deeper theoretical and political realm that Foucault occupied, namely that texts about sex 'speak us'. In Part Two, Chapter Seven, 'The Limits of Pleasure? Max Hardcore and Extreme Porn,' Maddison explores the limits of pleasure in mainstream pornography. He points to the way practices such as 'reverse double penetration, ass-to-mouth, cum swapping, anal gaping and so on,' once considered the province of hard-core, are now ubiquitous, copied widely by an industry fuelled by a high demand for 'sexual innovation and novelty value' (p. 113).

Secondly, in analyzing sexual pleasure and its specific relation to Foucault's concept of governmentality, Maddison places representations of pleasure into the political context of neoliberalism. He argues that sexual pleasure in neoliberal democracies is a requirement of our subjecthood, indeed it 'lies at the axis of consumer culture, ideologies of freedom and choice, and the mechanisms for proliferating capital, as a kind of injunction by which the individual secures their self-hood' (p. 114). In the current social and political conjuncture we are saturated by porn, 'not only in terms of its abundance and accessibility, but its integration into so much of our cultural life' (p. 117). He argues that 'we consume pornography inter-passively, whilst it performs our sexuality for us' (p. 117), providing limited constructions of human sexual possibility 'as a form of neo-liberal subjectification' (p. 123).

Thirdly, Maddison draws attention to the *gendered* ways in which pleasure and sexual subjectivity are *produced*. In an allegedly post-feminist world, women have the freedom to assert their 'right', alongside that of men, to sexual pleasure; however this right sits alongside a de-politicization of larger social and cultural structures of neoliberal societies where 'female empowerment becomes a function of consumer

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culture rather than a function of a structural re-distribution of gender power' (p. 116).

In conclusion, although the collection of essays in this volume explore the complexities of pornography as texts that 'speak', I find that, in spite of the playful hope of the editors, there is very little in the various critical engagements with the hard core screen in this collection that induced me to find pornography less hard to swallow with regard to gendered power and politics than I had previously.

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