

## Review

**Margret Grebowicz, *Why internet porn matters*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013. ISBN: 0-8047-8662-3, pp.135.**

Margret Grebowicz urges readers to look at Internet pornography through what she calls a 'philosophical register' (p. 2), which she identifies as a 'methodological decision' (p. 3). For Grebowicz, this is done by combining contributions from different authors with, at times, competing views on pornography and on Internet pornography, but always through a lens formed by the three main references throughout the book: Baudrillard, Lyotard and Judith Butler.

What interests Grebowicz is "the intersection of pornography and Internet distribution" (p. 2). This means that more than focusing on content or distribution, she aims to look at the political implications of Internet pornography as being something where both dimensions (the medium and the message) hold equal importance. But, and in a McLuhanian twist, the fact that cyberporn ('materials created specifically to aid in masturbation and circulated on the Internet, largely (though not exclusively) for commercial purposes', p. 7) is *on the Internet* turns it into something that 'constrains the possibilities for sexual speech [...] to resist or intervene in the state's policies' (p. 2), 'creates unprecedentedly docile subjects' (p. 2) and 'compromises the progressive potential of pornographic speech for reasons that have to do with the broader social meaning of the medium' (p. 28), among other effects.

And even though the status of pornography as hegemonic or transgressive cannot be answered in an abstract way, according to the author, the delimiting of the analysis undertaken is done only by referencing the Internet as a medium and 'a kind of modernity that may be called "American" in its particular production of governable subjects' (p. 5) – where "'America" is neither dream nor reality, but "hyperreality", where simulation becomes reality itself' (p. 35), as per Baudrillard. It is unclear to the reader if this means that the analysis done here is only valid to those subjects that are in a socio-cultural context that can (?) be short-handed with 'America'.

The book frames Internet pornography as being about information, first and foremost, which makes it 'subject to the logic of the democratization of information as well as to new fantasies of immateriality' (p. 29). Grebowicz looks at the feminist "porn wars" as

the speech-versus-practice debate (does it constitute speech to be protected by the USA's First Amendment?; is it an act of violence in itself?) that, according to her, uses a wrong model of speech. She then resorts to Lyotard, who 'distinguishes between [language's] figural function and its discursive function', with the figural pertaining to 'when language has an effect in the world that cannot be exhausted by what happens on the discursive level (p. 23) – and states that Internet pornography does not have a figural function. '[...] According to Baudrillard, today's Internet pornography is complicit in, even central to, the production of a body politic which can neither speak nor listen in interventionist ways' (p. 33).

The democratization of the access to Internet pornography is involved in a grander movement of self-exposure – it and the governability it brings with it are fundamental to the modern democratic state, as per Lyotard. There is then a (democratic) injunction to disclosure, 'the disappearance of spectacle and the imperative to complete transparency' (p. 39); '[as] the genre whose task it is to expose precisely the most secret thing, pornography is the ultimate manifestation of the ecstasy of communication' (p. 40). Such communication, however, is void of any transgressive power, and is instead linked to the idea of an '*ecstasy of community*' (p. 49), marked by 'communities, networks of support, sharing and open discussion' (p. 48) – as exemplified by Grebowicz's analysis of bestiality porn websites, and then back to the general notion of Internet porn, which 'constitutes a new kind of governable subject' (p. 62). "[The] communities formed around Internet pornography [...] function according to the logic of the "silent majority", silent because the imperative of communication produces no meanings' (p. 57); the mode of democracy underlying such communities 'requires the disappearance of the secret existence and the autointoxication of the social (p. 58).

For Grebowicz, a particularly problematic example of the above are the instructional sex videos produced by pro-porn activists since, for Baudrillard, it just leads 'to the creation and maintenance of a society in which so-called sexual liberation can be conceived of only as more and more sex' (p. 76) – a state of foreclosure, to use Lyotard's term, the opposite of liberty and resistance.

Such resistance comes only when 'freedoms and real speech (in the sense of intervention) are structurally heterogenous to the system' (p. 86), which also draws on the work of Judith Butler to think in what lays beyond intelligibility as a focus of resistance: 'The cultural unintelligibility of some marginalized sexualities becomes the very place from which to resist, rather than from identity and authenticity' (p. 95). This is represented by the abject, the inhuman, from Lyotard; a notion that is then used to recuperate MacKinnon's work and its precluding of women's agency, which Grebowicz identifies as real but, at the same time, as 'a strategic move which aligns her with postmodern developments of the politics of the object, the abject, and the inhuman' (p. 90). In face of this, we must then 'begin again, to reinvent the human, but this reinvention is precisely that on which every political project depends' (p. 100), 'that thing which disrupts the machinery enough to allow for movement and new articulations' (p. 105).

Internet as a distribution medium, the author claims, does just the opposite with its ecstasy of community, since it

functions to effect the forgetting (to borrow Lyotard's term) of the inhuman in various ways and on multiple levels, not in the contents of what is depicted but in the particular way that it forecloses the possibility of sexual speech to speak sexuality in figural rather than discursive ways (p. 112).

Nor can it actually teach anything, for Grebowicz, since the ecstasy of community 'precludes a true engagement with alterity and with the idea of language as that which inaugurates sociality' (p. 120), regardless of content.

For her, then, 'the best we can do is the feminist pornography sites that function as normalizing, no more connected to freedom than the literacy education which teaches children to write just well enough to fill out a job application' (p. 120); seemingly those who were the most problematic just some fifty pages before. As a counterpoint, Grebowicz suggests that

instead of focusing on the production of new and different pornographies, feminist and queer interventions could devote their energies to guerilla tactics, such as ever better viruses attaching to mainstream pornography so that the Internet ends up associated with risk and exclusion rather than with the safety of community (p. 122).

Grebowicz doesn't consider the possibility of a truly resistive pornography to be impossible, but the Internet, as a distribution system, will seemingly 'continue to function in ways that foreclose these possibilities' (p. 123).

Although the book raises several important issues around politics, speech and the role of the unintelligible, from an audience research framework, it seems to reduce users and consumers of pornography to the role of becoming-mass by virtue of the Internet. The Internet itself is only scarcely defined – in terms of fora, video ratings, comments – and when the author gives examples of the abject in popular culture (*Solaris*, *Alien Resurrection*) the focus shifts to content, rather than medium. Is the subversiveness of *Solaris* voided when someone posts the video online or shares it? Does its being already online rob the movie of its seemingly positive impact? Or, if we return to technology, what about the places where Internet usage is wildly dissimilar to the one done, on average, in richer countries? If bestiality, child pornography and Chatroulette are telling examples, how and why were they chosen? And if one of cyberporn's problems is the compulsion to showing, why doesn't Agamben's approach (which departs from the same assumptions to arrive at a wholly different conclusion) on pornography as profanation and profanation as a political tool of resistance figure in this philosophical debate?

The book is perhaps better appreciated if the several insights it offers are disconnected from its dualistic and techno-deterministic approach and its heavy-handedness when it comes to defining politics and (worthwhile) political action.

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### **Biographical Note:**

Daniel Cardoso is a PhD student in the field of Communication Sciences, at the Social and Human Sciences Faculty of the New University of Lisbon. His Master is in the same field and institution, and deals with Polyamory. He is part of the Portuguese team of the EU Kids Online research group since 2007. He has taken part in several publicly-financed research projects on gender and media as a research assistant. He is part of the editorial board of the Revista (in)visível journal. He teaches at the Lusophone University of Humanities and Technologies, and is a feminist and an activist in the area of queer, LGBT and polyamory. His personal website is [www.danielscardoso.net](http://www.danielscardoso.net).