

What matters about *Why Internet Porn Matters*

By Alexia Raynal

Review of *Why Internet Porn Matters* by Margaret Grebowicz (Stanford University Press, 2013)

Why *Internet Porn Matters* takes up, in an academic manner and from a feminist perspective, a series of vital questions regarding the underpinnings and social consequences of Internet porn—"the largest and fastest-growing commodity of the 'information superhighway.'" It is a book that demands and rewards dogged persistence, getting and seeming better the more one approaches the end.

In one of the latter chapters, and having reviewed most of the technical aspects of Internet porn, Grebowicz brings forward one of the most pressing concerns about pornography since the emergence of Internet. *How does Internet porn affect young people, and what (if anything) does it teach?* While attempting to uphold the conciliatory tone of the book, Grebowicz offers a twist to the common evaluation of the didactic role of Internet porn. The real problem, she suggests, is not its potential to teach violence and subjugation. Nor is it that it precludes learning about safe sex (i.e., pornographic materials rarely display the use of condoms or other contraceptive techniques). The main problem with Internet pornography, she says, is the hyper-realistic nature of its content, the capacity for it to be "more detailed than the real thing." By distorting reality, she says, Internet porn

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teaches conformity and subjection to social success rather than risk and invention... To borrow from [the French philosopher Jean-François] Lyotard, perhaps the problem is that today's pornographic pedagogy is about sexual expertise, not sexual philosophy Expertise is about increased performativity, efficiency, communicability and ultimately, power. Philosophy is about suspending reality, patience, starting over.

But in a world permeated by Internet access and social media, how can people pause and explore? The ultimate focus on success and power is particularly harmful when it comes to learning about sexual relationships, but it extends to most aspects of modern life. Temporary social acceptance, popular public identities, and viral online presences have never been as accessible and demanding as they are now in the age of the information superhighway. And, though people may think they are free from the threats of exposure, the truth is there is much to be learned about the vulnerability of the human body.

In thinking about all this, readers may appreciate, too, Grebowicz's discussion of the public and private nature of the body—of our bodies. Quoting from the gender theorist Judith Butler, Grebowicz argues, counter-intuitively, that our bodies may be first public spaces and then private ones.

It is onto bodies that gender, sexuality, race, and all other social markers are inscribed from the outside, in ways the subject cannot control "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and violence," [Butler has written]. Because the body relates me, places me in relation to others, it is public first and only later becomes claimable as private and a site of autonomy.

This recognition suggests, in a way, that no public act can be autonomous. People can only strive to be autonomous in private, intimate spheres. But when intimacy gets streamed online, where does autonomy go? Do we become responsible for the messages our bodies send even before we wish to communicate?

Grebowicz approaches these and other questions philosophically and drawing on the writings of an array of social scientists, feminists, and philosophers, including Judith Butler, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and Andrea Dworkin. Readers who are fond of these theorists' work will find plenty to enjoy in Grebowicz's application of their theories to the pornography debate.

It should also be said that Grebowicz does more quoting and discussing of other intellectuals' views than presenting her own. This approach leaves some things to be desired,

but nonetheless pushes us to think about how Internet and pornography have mixed. Her approach has the virtue of being open-ended, not imposing sharply defined answers, but providing readers with the possibility of exploring specific topics from different angles.

To give readers a sampling of the book and the opportunity to spend a little time with its questions, the rest of this review will briefly discuss two more of the questions Grebowicz raises and then comment on the book as a whole.

The Questions

What is pornography, and how do we define it?

One of the greater challenges of discussing Internet porn is reaching an accepted definition of pornography. Grebowicz offers that pornography can be “any material created specifically to aid in masturbation.” In the United States (where this book was published), pornography is both a taboo and a commodity. (Think, for example, about Miley Cyrus’s recent videos, or the American Apparel ads that sell promiscuity.) Where do we draw the line? What categorizes some things as art or marketing and others as pornography? More importantly, what if these categories are not mutually exclusive? What if we went beyond the “purely pornographic” and viewed marketing as a manipulation machine, seeking to both please and coerce consumers? Grebowicz offers enough information on different fronts for readers to form their own idea.

How does the Internet influence pornography?

One of Grebowicz’s strongest assertions is that Internet pornography contributes to how people develop “subjectivities”—the ideas, attitudes, expectations, and understandings that underlie their senses of themselves as specific people. Drawing on Baudrillard, she argues that “pornography is symptomatic of and central to a kind of modernity that may be called ‘American’ in its particular production of governable subjects.” Users’ obsession with self-presentation and online sharing renders them more visible and vulnerable than before. In fact, Grebowicz highlights a paradox in the modern use of Internet porn as both a way of promoting freedom of expression and a way of controlling it.

Take, for example, the idea that Internet porn helps liberate sexual expression, to include by making it easier for specific groups (e.g. women, gay men and lesbians) to have

their own pornographies that accord with their tastes and politics. But, on the other hand, and as has been seen in the news of National Security Agency spying, the openness of the Internet also means that pornography producers and users may be less free. Government agencies have ready means of monitoring and regulating what is being produced and consumed.

So how effective is the Internet in allowing people to express themselves or to explore alternative forms of sexuality? Grebowicz observes that new relationships between discourse and power in the age of information affect the ability of the body politic to produce something like “meaning.” She warns that “today’s pornography is complicit in, and even central to, the production of a body politic which can neither speak nor listen in interventionist ways.” If people use the Internet to resist mainstream constructions about sex, gender, and sexuality, and to propose alternatives, these challenges are also absorbed by the powers they purport to be resisting. (The Internet is, after all, the outcome of a U.S. Department of Defense project.) Sharing information involves making it more public, giving it away. The result is a mass of approaches to pornography that, in entering cyber streams, are becoming acknowledged and normalized.

The Book Itself

The absence of any images

Grebowicz or her publisher decided that this book on pornography would not include any images. Intended or not, the decision places more emphasis on talking about Internet porn than on interpreting pornographic images. By relying strictly on words, Grebowicz emphasizes the importance of pornography as a form of speech, as a space for communication that transcends the physical interactions, human organs, views, and positions involved. In fact, it is because the book has no images that readers are pushed to overcome the politics so strongly associated with pornography and to think more deeply about the subject. Are we losing something along the way? I don’t think so. By eliminating images, Grebowicz distances readers from preconceived notions about pornography and forces them to approach this phenomenon on her own terms.

The focus on heterosexual men

Grebowicz's survey of Internet pornography is strangely limited to Internet porn for men. From this perspective, it makes sense that she would take from the writings of American feminist Catharine MacKinnon to argue that "because sexuality arises in relations under male dominance, women are not the principal authors of its meanings." Though true in many cases, Grebowicz's view ignores alternative sexual products that do not involve men. Is it not possible to think about women-oriented pornography—say, for lesbian women? Grebowicz provides interesting insights about the dominant male gaze, but she also fails to acknowledge the existence of a whole range of porn products developed for and consumed by people who are not heterosexual men. This oversight calls into question Grebowicz's idea that Internet-porn ideas of sex are being exclusively constructed by the male gaze. Does this apply as well to LGBT pornography? Nowhere in the book does Grebowicz entertain the idea that non-heterosexuals may be creating their own meanings and exploring their own forms of pornography (and of sex of course). In this way, *Why Internet Porn Matters* is not only limited in its focus, but also ignores what might be learned from the full range of possibilities now available via the Internet, and in contemporary life.

Short academic books

Finally, I note that *Why Internet Porn Matters* is part of another new editorial phenomenon: quite short academic books (123 small pages in this case). Several presses—e.g. Palgrave Macmillan and Princeton—have been exploring this format, as has been Stanford University Press, which published Grebowicz's book as part of its "Stanford Briefs" series.

As a newcomer to porn studies, I relied on the promise of Stanford Briefs to deliver readings targeted *for specialists and non-specialists alike*. Although Grebowicz vigorously tackles this ambitious project, her book is not "freed from the technical requirements of the scholarly journal article," as claimed on the imprint's [online website](#). Indeed, Grebowicz's technical language and writing style present a daunting challenge for those who are not specialists in the feminist and pornography fields. And the courageous few who persist, and thus get to enjoy and learn from the better sections of the book, may also skip over parts of the discussion and be frustrated by the time they have to devote to reading this book.

Why Internet Porn Matters is for intellectuals highly interested in understanding the current academic debates about the political and philosophical dimensions of pornography

and related issues. Thus it would have made more sense to publish this text as part of a series of academic works in the fields of philosophy and feminism. Notwithstanding all the book has to offer the dogged or courageous, it does not fulfill the ostensible goals of such “briefs.” Generalist readers may be excused for feeling that the subject could be better explored in a much less academic, and much friendlier, way.

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