

Orgasm Without Bodies

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Annamarie Jagose. *Orgasmology*. Duke University Press, 2013. 251 pp.

Annamarie Jagose's *Orgasmology* is a glistening tome of a book. Speaking to the critical figure of the orgasm, *Orgasmology* – wittily masquerading as an encyclopedic-type entity – has something to offer to every sexuality and queer studies scholar, student, and practitioner. Jagose dedicates her monograph to a capillary stalking of the manifestations, representations, and discourses of the orgasm in the twentieth century. She chases orgasm through 1920s and 30s marriage manuals that called for the hetero-romantic magic of the “simultaneous orgasm,” 50s and 60s behaviour-modification practices that utilized the orgasm to straighten “deviant” male gay desires, cinematic and sexological representations of the orgasm, and contemporary enactments of the “fake orgasm” among heterosexual women. The orgasm – multitudinous, contradictory, and unruly – becomes Jagose's ground and model for rethinking all the big coordinates of sexuality, including practices, identities, ethics, pleasures, and politics.

Reading *Orgasmology*, what then is the orgasm? Where does orgasm's pleasure lay, if anywhere? How is it fixed today as a cultural site of pleasure-making and self-realization? Where has the orgasm been and what has it seen and made possible in its representative career as “the Big O, a story in four episodes” (Heath 1983, 68)?

Jagose's text serves as a rich compendium of queer theory, cultural studies, and critical theory. Like her previous significant texts, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996) and *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (2002), *Orgasmology* does not lack in depth or innovation. Populated by rich phraseology, with adroit navigation of queer theory and accompanying fields, *Orgasmology* is not a linear hobby-horse creation. At the same time, modeling her book on the “complex constellation of ideas” (18) that is the orgasm of the twentieth century, Jagose takes readers in so many directions, that we are left feasting without a common table.

Yet her contributions to the orgasm are several-fold, and not to be underestimated. Speaking to a queer and critical “theoretical aversion for orgasm” (9), she centers orgasm as a historical site of analysis in an unprecedented way. For instance, as Jagose argues, neither Foucault nor Deleuze nor Baudrillard cared much for the orgasm, delimiting it as a moment of capitulation to normalizing structures. The orgasm

has also been cast aside by queer theory as a moment not queer enough, occluded by other bodily practices such as anal sex and fist-fucking. Jagose thus looks to the orgasm as a cultural repository that, while ignored or disliked by critical and queer theorists, has nonetheless been a privileged figure of twentieth century modern sexuality, linked as it is to pleasure, the body, and sexual self-realization. “[A]s a complexly contradictory formation,” the orgasm, Jagose argues, may be “potentially disruptive of many of the sedimenting critical frameworks by which we have grown accustomed to apprehending sexuality” (xiii).

Second, Jagose locates the orgasm, and especially the feminine “fake orgasm,” as a site of creativity and political import on par with other privileged queer practices like fist-fucking. In her most innovative chapter, “Counterfeit Pleasures: Fake Orgasm and Queer Agency,” which was published also in the journal *Textual Practice* (2010), Jagose dislodges accusations of the fake orgasm as inherently unqueer and unfeminist in that it embodies an acquiescence to normative frameworks and a disloyalty to projects of sexual pleasure. Instead, she takes the fake orgasm as “one of the twentieth century’s few sexual inventions” (xv), which “makes available a mode of feminine self-production in a constrained field of possibility” (196) and should thus be understood as “less an imitation of orgasm than a critique of its disciplinary imperatives” (197). Effectively, then, Jagose recodes the social meanings and theoretical capaciousness of the Fake-O, demonstrating that it opens up feminist and queer possibilities for rethinking the postures of sex.

Third, yet more ambivalently, Jagose historicizes orgasm, reading the biological and cultural in tandem, denaturalizing the knee-jerk allotment of the orgasm to the natural, singular, and transparent. She talks back to pervasive contemporary discourses, which situate the orgasm as a bodily event, a reflex brought on by certain frictions. In this sense Jagose plots the orgasm as a site that is not self-evident or unified, but as a space in which contemporary hopes, anxieties, and futures are mapped.

In the first chapter, Jagose examines the simultaneous orgasm as a key site for the imposition of normative heterosexuality. She demonstrates that the simultaneous orgasm appears as an ideal in marital and sex advice literature of the twentieth century (and especially of the 20s and 30s), to preserve the institution of marriage – “to revitalize marriage at a time when the self-evident validity of the institution was being questioned” due to urbanization and increased women’s rights (57). With a white, middle-class audience in mind, the marital and sex advice genre hagiographed the “simultaneous orgasm” as the pivotal event of a loving marriage, an experience uniting the souls and bodies of two oppositely-sexed partners. Imbued with a new emphasis on equality in marriage, as on unity and companionship, the simultaneous orgasm straddles temporal zones, reaching backwards to an idyllic past when mar-

riage was unquestioned, and to an imagined future predicated on the preservation of the white nation.

Next, Jagose explores “the double bind of modern sex” (83), that is both its personalizing and impersonalizing motility, through Anthony Giddens’ figure of the heterosexual woman and Henning Bech’s figure of the cruising homosexual man. While not turning to the orgasm until the final section of the chapter, where she looks at its representations in John Cameron Mitchell’s film *Shortbus*, Jagose nonetheless provides a valuable discussion of the modernization of sex, a modernization that has linked sexuality to sociality, providing new opportunities for both intimacy and alienation.

In the third chapter, Jagose reads erotic aversion therapy of the 50s to mid-70s not for the cruelties it afflicted on gay men (when attempting to revise their deviant desires into heterosexual codes), but for the potentially queer reverberations of this applied behaviorism. Lacking perhaps in argumentative force, Jagose speaks of behavior-therapy as queer in that it reflects a “sexuality without a subject” (134), since it is less interested in orientation or identity than in the behavioral manifestations of sex. The orgasm is central to this discussion because it is around orgasmic reconditioning that these straightening projects are based, and orgasm becomes the measurable event or “somatic evidence” (113) of straightened desires.

Later, in “Face-Off,” Jagose’s fourth chapter, we are provided with an examination of the co-production of the orgasm, through “facialization” in cinema and effacement by medico-sexology. Films, starting already with Gustav Machatý’s 1933 *Ekstase*, wrestle with bringing the female orgasm into a visible register through the “well-established, even [...] hackneyed, representational protocol” (142) of the face shot – the “facialization of orgasm” (142). Sexology on the other hand, (and here Jagose is reading William Masters and Virginia Johnson, in particular), visualizes orgasm through the “carnal disinterest” (172) of universalizing graphs. Yet both cinema and medico-sexology share an investment, for Jagose, in beckoning the orgasm into the visual field, making it an object of vision.

Jagose’s final chapter brings us to a heady discussion of feminine “fake orgasm.” Revisiting Foucault’s call to “bodies and pleasures” from *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Jagose proceeds to deploy the fake orgasm to pry open sedimented relations between canonized queer sexual practices such as fist-fucking and barebacking and social change. The fake orgasm, as an unlikely and unlikeable figure made possible by “asymmetrically gendered access to sexual pleasure” (195), provides an “improbable opportunity for rethinking the relation between sex and politics” (177). Following Jagose’s argument, we learn to appreciate the fake orgasm not merely as indexical of sexu-social inequality but as an inventive erotic technique and counter-disciplinary practice. The Fake-O can thus help us rethink which acts count as political enough,

queer enough, and feminist enough, as well as the relationship between sex and politics itself.

So, the orgasm, where does this leave us in terms of the orgasm? We learn from Jagose that the orgasm is a historical entity, overrepresented and undertheorized, mystifying and quotidian. Yet we are never taken back to the body, to the feel and texture of the orgasm on the skin or to the ways in which the orgasm is lodged in the body's crevices, biological and cultural alike. Is the orgasm real? In the twentieth century and after, how is the orgasm *made* real to sexually differentiated bodies as a cluster of bio-culturally induced sensations and perceptions? We never find out from Jagose. Even while seeing orgasm's "facialization" in cinema, its avid effacement in sexological texts, its harnessing for behaviour-modification, its potent "faking," we lose track of how it is that the orgasm comes to inhabit the body, and what this means. For instance, while the fake orgasm might constitute "a mode of feminine self-production in a constrained field of possibility" (196), what might a routine invocation of the fake orgasm feel like for its practitioners? Jagose surrounds us with a compelling decentralized rendering of the orgasm but does not quite give us a fleshy body-at-orgasm, if there is – or ever was – such a thing.

Works Cited

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