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Orgasmology by Annamarie Jagose

Misty Luminais

Case Western Reserve University

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Jagose, Annamarie. *Orgasmology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. xxii + 251 pages. Paper, \$23.95.

In *Orgasmology*, cultural studies specialist Annamarie Jagose deploys queer theory to (dis)locate orgasm in the twentieth-century. Her main contention is that orgasm as a scholarly topic must be approached slantwise, since, as she explains, “queer theory—by which I mean those posthumanist and anti-identitarian critical approaches that are energized by thinking against the practices, temporalities, and modes of being through which sexuality has been normatively thought—has next to nothing to say of orgasm ... in which orgasm gets aligned with the normal, against which the queer identifies itself” (p. 1), especially against the backdrop of social theorists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard, who all find that orgasm loses its subversive potential, whether through normalization or as a *dénouement* ending to what could be waves of pleasure. She thus strives to maintain the tension between orgasm as an experience of the body and as a subjective experience with a cache of ideology tied to it.

By arguing that in both cinema and sexology, “the alleged indexicality of the representational capture of embodied orgasm is crucial and crucial also to the subsequent crises of authenticity and objectivity that inevitably attend attempts to stabilize orgasm in the field of the visible” (p. xv), Jagose comes to the heart of the matter of why orgasm is such a slippery subject. Sexologists’ quantifications and artists’ interpretations all attempt to reify an experience that is at once singular and universal. Jagose goes out of her way to avoid romanticizing or mystifying orgasm, but queer theory demands an approach that sidles up on its subject, necessitating some obtuse relations.

One of the main goals of the book is to approach twentieth-century orgasm through apparently heteronormative discourse and reveal its queer interpretation. It is here that the author contributes most significantly to the literature. Excavating the beginning of the simultaneous orgasm craze through early marriage manuals coinciding with the marriage crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century and following its subsequent dismissal in later popular media, Jagose elucidates the creation of the “normal sexual subject” (p. 43), particularly of the ahistorical heterosexual variety. Under pressure from a society increasingly devoted to measuring and explicating, she argues, “It is possible that the contraction of the vast field of polymorphous perversion to the more aerodynamically pared-back opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality is related to the increasing requirement that sexuality take up a position inside the protocols of statistical representation and hence be expressible in terms of norms” (p. 49).

Leaving aside questions of synchronicity, Jagose plunges into the careers of orgasm for straight women and gay men, who both “emblemize in very different ways both the forces and expressions of modern life, [and] they do so not together but at a temporal remove from each other” (p. 93). The sexuality of women and gay men stand in contrast to previous configurations of the normal landscape. Using the films such as *Shortbus* (2006) as her texts, the author deconstructs the quest for authenticity through representation with an insightful discussion about how the face has evolved as the focal point for cinematic depiction of orgasm.

Perhaps daringly, Jagose reads queerness into behaviorism’s attempts at “erotic aversion therapy” (p. 107) during the 1960s. The author acknowledges the cruelty of the treatments but asks the reader to attend differently to the archive, seeking out ways that behaviorism might inform queer theory. She notes, “Yet, notwithstanding the fact that for several decades behavior therapy was implacably bent on the eradication of homosexuality, from a queer theoretical perspective there is something unexpectedly refreshing and potentially productive about behavior

therapy's insistence on sex as a behavior unindexed to any broader characterological system – its insistence, that is, on the possibility of sexuality without a subject" (p. 134). Although not many may want to claim the behaviorists as intellectual forbearers, she makes a good case for winnowing out the radical perspective on sexuality from the chaff of inhumane treatment.

Jagose chooses "fake orgasm" as her final site of queer agency, taking the opportunity to discuss the politicization of sex, particularly focused on the impetus toward mutuality and reciprocity as ideals of heterosexual sex which "tempts me [Jagose] to consider fake orgasm as an inventive bodily technique that differently addresses itself to the regulatory apparatus of sexuality" (p. 195).

For social scientists, this book may not immediately be useful in explicating the topic of orgasm, the how or the why of it, but reading it could shift researchers' perspectives on the role of sexuality in their own work. A possible drawback could be the author's reliance on rhetorical analysis to the exclusion of phenomenological accounts, limiting the application of her methodology to texts rather than direct social interactions. For readers unfamiliar with queer theory, this book is a good example of the potential of the theory to revisit accepted dogma with new eyes. Relatively few people simply study sexuality, but all social scientists work with people who are sexual beings. Jagose forces the reader to confront the construction of heteronormativity and the invites the reader to reconsider the historical specificity of "normal" behavior. Although it leans more heavily toward the humanities, this book adds a queer voice often lost in the social sciences.

Misty Luminais, Ph.D.
Research Associate in Anthropology
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, Ohio