

## Orgasmology

Annamarie Jagose. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

*Reviewed by Angelika Tsaros*

What are the ethical implications of studying orgasm? In *Orgasmology*, Annamarie Jagose reminds us of Elizabeth Grosz's contemplation on the implications of writing about female orgasm<sup>1</sup>. What ultimately keeps Grosz from attempting to accomplish what she set out to do are, by her own admission, ethical considerations, first seeing such a description as "gender treachery" and disloyalty ("... by dint of being 'philosophically unsayable female orgasm must remain unrepresented'"), and secondly citing its irrelevance, being "idiosyncratic to the point of alienation" (33). Jagose, however, is quick to point out that "the discursive ambivalence of orgasm is a consequence of its promiscuous availability to innumerable insights" (36). It slips between categories and is "indentured to no particular sexual formation" (39).

It is strange to think that there is no systematic study about orgasm from the point of view of queer theory, or the humanities more generally. *Orgasmology* might be the starting point to set the record straight. Here Jagose, a theorist well-known for her work on representation, sets out to reconceptualize orgasm, this "unruly" (xii) subject, as a scholarly object.

At first glance, the new science of *Orgasmology* seems to lack coherence, be as slippery as its subject and its "always-in-the-future-until-it's-in-the-past"<sup>2</sup> temporality. It is this feeling of not being fully able to grasp it and give it a "thing-ness", however, that makes this inquiry productive, both conceptually and theoretically. The study is illustrated by material drawn from a diverse archive: from Bernini's *Teresa of Avila* to early twentieth-century marriage manuals, from mid-century behavioral experiments to artistic cinematic shorts and contemporary film.

Jagose starts out by discussing orgasm's construction as normative, structured in dominance and seen as being at odds with the progressive project, but at the same time questions the validity of this assumption. This "aura of oddness", descending upon anyone who takes orgasm seriously as a topic of scientific inquiry, she states, should not prevent us from challenging the premise that orgasm is in service to systems of social oppression. Jagose draws on Elizabeth Wilson who argues against the "anti-biologism of contemporary feminist theory" which has thus "tended to eschew the biological altogether" (23). Rather than seeing the biological side of orgasm as

1 Grosz, E., 1995. *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, New York: Routledge.

2 From Robert Glück's *Jack the Modernist*, quoted in note 7, p. 209.

an alibi for misogynist interests, Jagose asks us to be curious, suggesting that “new biological models might facilitate altered cultural understandings” (28).

This curiosity leads to a more detailed examination of orgasm in the “long twentieth century”. *Orgasmology* starts out by looking at marriage advice books from the beginning of the century and their construction of simultaneous orgasm as not only the norm but at the same time the ultimate expression of physical compatibility. Simultaneous orgasm here serves as a valuable figure for investigating the normalization of heterosexuality. Written at the time of the emergence of sexology as an area for scientific inquiry, authors of marital advice literature were fast to distance themselves from the new science, citing interest only in “normal sexual intercourse” (54). Thus, over time orgasm became a measuring tool for happiness and evidence of heterosexual compatibility. Chapter 2 explores the unlikely couple of straight woman and gay man, explaining what Jagose calls the “double bind of modern sex”, its being personal and impersonal simultaneously, by looking at John Cameron Mitchell’s 2006 film *Shortbus*. Chapter 3 turns to mid twentieth-century behaviorism’s attempt to “cure” homosexuality. Bracketing its underlying homophobia, Jagose sees opportunities for radical perspectives on sexuality by using the data at hand to ask a number of questions:

What relation does orgasm have to sexual behavior, for instance? Is it itself a sexual behavior? Or is it rather a means of getting a controlling purchase on sexual behavior? What relation does orgasm have to erotic orientation? Is it somatic evidence of a particular orientation? Or is it a behavior that iteratively constitutes orientation? Given the emphasis on erotic fantasy for orgasm-oriented behavior modification, what relation does orgasm have to ideation?

In the following discussion, Jagose develops approaches to begin to answer some of these queries; most, however, stand unanswered (and unanswerable?), inviting further research. Chapter 4 provides an investigation into the displacement of orgasm’s representation from the genitals onto the face through a discussion of Andy Warhol’s cinematic experiment *Blow Job* and early medico-sexological research by French doctor Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne, who conducted faradic experiments to discover the “grammar of facial expression”. A discussion of Masters and Johnson’s work on the sexual response cycle poses the question of the possibility of visualizing orgasm. Chapter 5, cleverly named “Counterfeit Pleasures” concerns itself with fake orgasm. Here, fake orgasm becomes a critical figure which lays bare assumptions spread through the cultural narratives of orgasm and heteroeroticism, good and bad sex, and discusses the political potential they carry. Drawing from queer theory (Rubin, Bersani, Foucault, Edelman, Halperin), the chapter investigates, in “critical hypothetical” thinking, “the difficulty with which fake orgasm is recognizable”, endorsing the “importance of alternative political imaginaries for queer conceptualizations of erotic practice and identity” (204). Jagose calls for “a recognition of fake orgasm as a positive cultural practice”, arguing that it poses several questions and problems (legibility of sexual pleasure, truth/ authenticity of sex, sexual norms) and “asks us to rethink the conditions of legibility for political agency” (206).

As a scientific subject orgasm offers many avenues of inquiry and can be approached from various angles. The fact that *Orgasmology* covers a wide variety of them makes it a worthy reading and densely packed study not only for scholars invested in queer theory, but anyone interested in human sexuality and the history of its

study. Its only detriment might be that the examples almost invariably are concerned with white, able-bodied and bourgeois subjects. Yet this could at the same time offer opportunities for further investigations, allowing more room that could have been afforded here.

Michel Foucault famously remarked that sex has been constructed in the modern age as the vehicle to find the truth about the self. Orgasm, however, seems to be determined to elude any firm grasp, instead seeming like light reflected from a prism: “Though orgasm makes itself felt through the materiality of the body, it also exceeds the body’s facticity, remaining itself immaterial” (214).