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Orgasmology by Annamarie Jagose, Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012. Pp. 280; 10 illustrations. $94.95 cloth, $25.95 paper.

Queer theory has never regarded orgasm particularly highly. Despite some of the more notably orgasmic moments of early queer theoretical writing—one immediately thinks of Leo Bersani's famous "image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to resist the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman"[1]—many if not most of the texts and philosophers most ideologically fundamental to the development of queer theory have expressed profound skepticism about the political utility of orgasm. Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, in particular, link "orgasm to the normalizing and striating strategies of modern power . . . characterizing it as an effect of the regulation and rigidification of sexuality," thus "explicitly exclud[ing] orgasm from any repertoire of progressive practices" (6).

Out of the ashes of orgasm's promise, then, emerges Annamarie Jagose's 2012 monograph, *Orgasmology*. Jagose's interest in orgasm is, in part, precisely the result of its status as an unexciting figure besmirching the landscape of queer theory; her professed task in *Orgasmology*, if not to recuperate orgasm as a progressive or nonnormative figure, is to "persist in thinking with and through orgasm even when it seems that orgasm was constituted by queer theory as its bad object" (9). If orgasm's putative uselessness stems from its ambivalent relationship to

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normativity, it is precisely in this affiliation between orgasm and the normal that Jagose locates orgasm's purchase as a historical formation bearing the potential to help us theorize the modernity of sexuality. In *Orgasmology*, Jagose reads medical studies, popular advice literature, psychological and sexological experiments, films, and a host of other often disparate forms of cultural knowledge surrounding orgasm "in order to recognize the capacity of [orgasm's] lateral energies to reorganize axiomatically or even complacently held knowledges about not only sex, sexual orientation, and sexual agency but also the social contract, democracy, ethics, capitalism, modernity, affect, and history" (xvi).

One of orgasm's many vicissitudes is its promiscuous indexicality, and, in this monograph, Jagose is particularly interested in the way that the life of orgasm in the twentieth century has been characterized by relentless efforts to provide evidence of orgasm—visual evidence, as in the case of midcentury sexologists and experimental filmmakers—and also to understand orgasm itself *as* evidence, of sex, of sexuality, of pleasure, or even of political liberation. Responding to what she terms the "anti-biologism of contemporary feminist theory" (22), Jagose brings together scholarship and questions hailing from queer theory and feminist science studies to explore orgasm within the special context of the "material facticity of the body" (21), understanding orgasm less as an index of a dynamic, progressive sexual experience and more as "a bodily event" (22). This focus on embodiment allows her to further tarry in the realm of sex itself, bringing the sex, as it were, back to sexuality studies specifically and to queer theory more generally. Jagose is especially interested in the impulse to read orgasm *as* or *for*, and her attention to this tendency produces a generative tension that Jagose seems to be more interested in registering or describing than necessarily interpreting. Jagose's thinking in *Orgasmology* is characterized by a certain speculative or observational tenor that allows Jagose to theorize orgasm as "less an organizing than a disorganizing principle" (xvii); for Jagose, orgasm is also a figure through which we might track the way that sex, sexuality, and heteronormativity emerged as critical and organizational, if not also constitutive, sites of subjective experience in the modern period.

Chapter 1, "Simultaneous Orgasm and Sexual Normalcy," puts early twentieth-century marital and sex-advice literature into conversation with theories of queer time to craft a narrative describing the emergence of modern heteroeroticism at the turn of the twentieth century. Historicizing this archive as evidence of a burgeoning cultural and medical sense of

sexual normalcy, this chapter "considers simultaneous orgasm as a trope of continuing importance for understanding how heterosexuality emerged—both as a sexual practice as well as a sexual identity—from the articulation of erotic normalcy across the twentieth century" (40). This advice literature importantly indexes the sociocultural emergence of the ideal of a monogamous sexual mutuality that can exist *independently of the institution of marriage*. Furthermore, the simultaneity of simultaneous orgasm is also critical here, as the cultural shift toward the prioritization of not only mutual but *simultaneous* gratification writes the changed temporality of this emergent heterosexuality onto the body and into heterosexual intimacy. Mobilizing "simultaneous orgasm as a figure presumed to register, at the level of the body, the transhistorical—even the ahistorical—character of a sexual order being radically transformed by the rise in expectations of mutual eroticism" thus also fruitfully directs our attention to the "structures of feeling to which such a mobilization might both respond and give rise: how it feels to be a normal subject" (42–43). Jagose is also interested in sexual normalcy as an affective experience, and ultimately this chapter also describes the emergence of heteronormativity as an affective social structure into which protocols of sexual normalcy are built.

Chapter 2, "Straight Woman/Gay Man: Orgasm and the Double Bind of Modern Sex," is concerned with the modernization of sexuality. Taking as axiomatic the consensus in the history of sexuality that understands the "twentieth century—or, as it has been dubbed, 'the sexual century'—to be the historical moment at which sex is, finally and emphatically, modernized" (83), in this chapter Jagose explores the conditions under which sex became a site for interpersonal recognition, one of the defining characteristics of modern sex more generally. Jagose argues that the suturing of sex to subjectivity is the result of a contradictory logic that she terms "the double bind of sex." Through a reading of John Cameron Mitchell's 2006 film *Shortbus*, Jagose argues that the straight woman and the gay man do the work of anthropomorphizing "the ways modern sex indentures us simultaneously to two contradictory regimes of 'recognition': the personal" (figured in this chapter by the straight woman) "and the impersonal" (figured by the gay man) (104). For Jagose, sex in the twentieth century is characterized by "the new conditions of erotic possibility attendant on intensified personalizing relations and increased opportunities for impersonal transactions or encounters" (89), and she thus theorizes the yoking of sexuality to subjectivity but also the tying of sexuality

to larger putatively impersonal structures such as markets or structures of governance with which subjectivity is thought less tightly bound. This is the second "double bind" (xiv) of modern sex, and it is also a vision of sexuality outside of subjectivity; Jagose implicitly suggests that a further defining feature of modern sexuality might be its potential to expand, as a structure, beyond the purview of the subject.

This interest in the life of sexuality outside of or beyond the subject reappears in the third chapter of the monograph, "Behaviorism's Queer Trace: Sexuality and Orgasmic Reconditioning," which takes up the role of orgasm in midcentury behavioral modification treatments for homosexuality. In this chapter, Jagose reads a series of therapeutic experiments conducted by British psychologists at Glenside Hospital in Bristol, England, and at Banstead Hospital, in Sutton, Surrey, England, in the early 1960s. These aversion therapies mobilized orgasm in the process of retraining the fantasies, desires, and, ultimately, behaviors of (often consenting and usually homosexually inclined) patients toward the goal of aligning their desires and behaviors with those of normative heteroeroticism. Jagose turns to this archive "to consider more carefully the salient questions behavioral modification generally and orgasmic reconditioning more specifically raise about the relationship presumed between orgasm and sex . . . in short, about the relationships, should any pertain, between sex and sexuality" (124).

Sex (as a set of behaviors) in the twentieth century is usually understood to exist in some kind of loosely expressive relationship to sexuality (as a set of putative inclinations, orientations, identity practices, and social formations), but what Jagose reveals in her analysis of aversion therapies and other behaviorist techniques is that "any attempt to think behavior therapy with queer theory comes unstuck with the realization that behaviorist paradigms do not recognize anything like sexuality as their constitutive context . . . . For the behaviorally oriented psychologist . . . erotic practice is not the external manifestation of an individual's intimate innate truths" (132–33). Ultimately, Jagose reads these radically problematic forms of therapy to make a compelling claim about what midcentury behaviorism might have to offer twenty-first-century queer theoretical understandings of sexuality: that "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" (134).

Chapter 4, "Face Off: Artistic and Medico-Sexological Visualizations of Orgasm," opens by turning to studies performed by

sexologists Alfred Kinsey, William Masters, and Virginia Johnson, in order to consider early efforts to "bring[] orgasm to representation" (174). Reading Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) and Masters and Johnson's, *Human Sexual Response* (1966), Jagose historicizes the means by which orgasm is represented in these texts—visually, via charts and graphs—within the context of contemporary developments in imagining technologies—medical, filmic, and otherwise. She is particularly interested in the way that an increased reliance on technologies of visualization is underwritten by, and also contributes to, a belief in the body as an expressive vehicle for internal, subjective experience; she pithily observes that "the notion that certain medical imaging technologies speak the body's truth is underwritten by the related notion that what the body speaks *is* truth" (170). Putting this midcentury sexological research into conversation with contemporary experimental film (Gustav Machatý's 1933 *Ekstase* and Andy Warhol's 1964 *Blow Job*), Jagose is especially interested in what she calls the "facialization" of orgasm, a figure that describes the fact that "the task of bringing orgasm to representation hinges to a significant extent on the face, its presence or absence" (174).

Writing Machatý and Warhol into the history of that "readily available cinematic convention whereby off-screen orgasm is indexed by on-screen facework" (161), Jagose yokes twentieth-century filmic tradition to midcentury sexology in order to historicize orgasm's rise to preeminence within twentieth-century sexology within the broader context of a culture of scientific, filmic, and subjective representation that requires visualization to assert authenticity. If orgasm or other types of sexual behavior are understood as bodily *expression*—an ideological relative of the Foucauldian notion that a certain truth-telling function putatively inheres in sexual desire—what we might call the truthiness or subjective authenticity of sexual behavior is compounded or amplified by its representation within visual media. In this way, Jagose points to the alignment between orgasm as an "act of display" that converts the pleasure of sex into visual evidence, and Foucault's concern about the disciplinary potential of the modern *scientia sexualis* as it takes shape as a form of *ars erotica*, wherein the "production of truth" (71) manifests as "an entire glittering array, reflected in a myriad of discourses, the obstination of powers, and the interplay of knowledge and pleasure."[2]

Chapter 5, "Counterfeit Pleasures: Fake Orgasm and Queer Agency," arguably the most important of the monograph, returns to the questions with which *Orgasmology* begins—those surrounding the

relationship between sex and the political. This penultimate chapter playfully turns to an inevitable figure in any consideration of twentieth-century orgasm: the *fake* orgasm, and its imbrication within twentieth-century cultural ideologies surrounding femininity and heterosexuality. Jagose's interest in fake orgasm hinges on its emergence as a historically specific phenomenon, the result of the process by which "two incongruous ideological formations emergent in the late nineteenth century around a heterosexuality newly defined in terms of heteroeroticism stall out against each other": "the sexual incompatibility of the heterosexual pair" and "the erotic, ethical relations of parity and reciprocity publicly rehearsed around that couple" (192). Fake orgasm, indexing the inevitable and ever-renewing failure of twentieth-century heterosexuality, is the logical result of the overlay between these two seminal, yet contradictory, twentieth-century ideologies surrounding heteronormativity. Fake orgasm thus offers Jagose another site for the exploration of the unpredictable indexicality of orgasm: specifically, the way that it lends form to the assumed relationality between sexual desire and sexual behavior, and, in this final chapter of the monograph, the relationship between sex and liberatory politics.

Building on Foucault's debunking of sex (and especially queer sex) as inherently politically resistant, Jagose theorizes fake orgasm as not only a counterdisciplinary practice (196) but also a counterdisciplinary pleasure, "the counterintuitive possibility that pleasure does not necessarily feel good" (199). Her exploration of the "counterdisciplinary" possibilities of fake orgasm answers Foucault's call for "the 'nondisciplinary' reorganization of the body through the production of new pleasures [that are] required to counter the disciplinary system of sexuality, whose most effective strategy remains, of course, its annexation of the body as its expression" (187). Fake orgasm, then, is not just an easy way out at the end of the night; it is also "an indexically female, twentieth-century heterosexual practice that, by putting into prominent circulation the problem of the legibility of sexual pleasure, troubles the presumed truth or authenticity of sex itself, recognizes that norms are self-reflexively inhabited by a wider range of social actors than is commonly presumed, and asks us to rethink the conditions of legibility for political agency" (205–6). A tall order for one of the century's most impugned sexual practices, but one of which we close the chapter convinced.

The epilogue, "Orgasm's End," offers a brief meditation on both the temporality and the materiality of orgasm, theorizing orgasm at the seam of the materiality of the body

and the immateriality of language, both inside of and outside of time. The status of orgasm as the conclusion to or narrative closure of sex and sexuality—one of the reasons that Deleuze understands orgasm as bearing a disciplinary function—does not, for Jagose, fully capture the realities of orgasm's slippery temporality, as orgasm is imbued with either a pastness or a futurity but never quite a presence. This lack of presence is in part due to orgasm's commensurately dubious relationship to materiality. While orgasm "makes itself felt through the materiality of the body, it also exceeds the body's facticity, remaining itself immaterial" (214) and also not fully available for representation in language. Jagose closes the text by suggesting orgasm as a "thing," not in a materialist sense of the term—orgasm is not, for Jagose, an object that can be touched or held—but a "thing" (194) in the promiscuous etymological sense of *thing* as a speech act ("thing," "thingy," "doodad"), a word that we deploy to designate the ontologically fuzzy status of an entity, "the name for that which takes us to the limit of our ability to name" (214).

This is a remarkably intellectually thick book, and despite Jagose's insistence that her goal is *not* to "resolve orgasm into a critical term, the usability of which will be evidenced by its portability and scalability to other critical contexts" (xvi), this monograph felicitously fails to curtail the "portability and scalability" of its key interventions. *Orgasmology* is a book that has much to offer scholars interested in queer theory—its past, present, and future—and one of its most generative contributions is the way that Jagose extrapolates some of the important revelations from some of the big-ticket concepts of queer theory's recent past (namely, queer time and the antisocial turn) in order to return to Foucault and his later theorizing surrounding the relationship between sex, pleasure, and the political. Beyond that, however, *Orgasmology* delivers on the immense potential of putting other related but distinct fields into consistent conversation with recent work in queer theory, among them feminist science studies, new materialisms/the ontological turn, and the twentieth-century history of sexuality.

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NOTES

1. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, quotation on 212.
2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (1978; repr., New York: Vintage, 1990), 72.