

Margaret Grebowicz
Why Internet Porn Matters
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Why Internet Porn Matters renews philosophical debate about the function of pornography for the twenty-first century by examining the effects of a "democratized Internet" as the new mode or form of pornography distribution and consumption, as distinct from philosophical and feminist criticisms of pornography, which take issue with the content and production of pornography. At stake in Margaret Grebowicz's text is whether Internet pornography has the potential for political transgression and the fostering of political subjects. Liberation, on her terms, requires that political subjects be able to intervene in the state's policies to resist being constituted as, in Foucauldian terms, "docile subjects." In this review, I will lay out three of what I take to be Grebowicz's key contributions in renewing this debate. First, I will take up her claim in the opening chapters of the text that this new approach is purposely *not* feminist from the outset, and how this enables the project. Second, I will lay out the relationship between rights discourse, the power of speaking subjects, and the intervention of the Internet on both of these. Finally, I will turn to her reevaluation of Catherine MacKinnon's classic work on heterosexism and pornography that finds radical potential in an often-dismissed contribution to the field.

Grebowicz claims at the outset that her project is first and foremost *philosophical* rather than intentionally and methodologically *feminist*. This does not mean that she ignores the contributions of feminist theory to questions of sex, violence, politics, and education. Rather, it means that she sidesteps or brackets the stalemate on pornography produced in the so-called feminist sex wars. Quoting Carol Smart, she writes, "The way in which [the arguments in this debate are] structured allows of only two positions: anti-porn/pro-censorship and pro-porn/anti-censorship . . . [which] locates the moral high ground with the pro-censorship lobby" (17). This debate centered on the content of pornography as well as the industrial conditions of pornography production, not explicitly on the mode of distribution or consumption. By bracketing this debate, Grebowicz can directly address the role that the Internet plays as a medium of communication that conditions the production, content, distribution, and consumption of pornography. She claims, *pace* François Lyotard, that the Internet creates pornography as *information* rather than as image or idea, so pornography is experienced by the consumer apart from the social context that makes it possible. This creates a sense of false neutrality that, in Jean Baudrillard's terms, deludes the information society into thinking that it is learning something about itself (56). On this point, Grebowicz addresses the misconception that the Internet medium

allows for consumers to affect the production and contents of pornography through online feedback in comment threads and voting mechanisms. The political effect of this delusion is that people *think* they know what they want/desire and they *think* they express this through efficacious speech acts, but these "masses" cannot "speak" because they are not proper persons in a community formed by alterity and dissent but a "silent majority" (57) that lacks any "social reality" (58). In short, whereas the early feminist critiques of pornography addressed the production and content of pornography, Grebowicz's account shifts to the arena of consumption, an arena that is conditioned by the function of the Internet in creating docile subjects with impossible dreams of effective political speech.

This structures what I take to be Grebowicz's second key contribution to a renewed philosophical study of pornography, namely the way that rights discourse must be revisited, again, in light of Internet culture. Critiques of rights discourse are not new on the scene. Criticizing the reigning model in legal literature, Iris Marion Young argues that rights are not something that we possess or have, but rather something that we exercise or something that we do in light of some social and political ends that are important to us (Young 1990). In this way, rights must be understood in terms of their function in our social and political lives. Pro-pornography theorists have invoked the right to privacy as a sacred right that staves off social or political intervention into the domestic, private sphere where sexual desire, practice, and consumption take place. The right to privacy is also conceptually tied to the right to free speech, a twin invocation that enshrines pornographic production and consumption as untouchable rights. There are political and conceptual issues with these rights. As MacKinnon argues, the right to privacy has structured all political subjects ahistorically and value-neutrally. But we know that historically, women have been objects in the private/domestic realms of men, not subjects themselves worthy of rights. Supposedly, democracy requires the protection of these rights; there must be an "inside" to each person that is free from political intervention, parts of which they can choose to "speak" or "express" in the public sphere. If we follow Baudrillard and Lyotard, the Internet has eroded the "secret" (private) lives of individuals with the imperative to speak, to be present politically (38-39). Thus, the private person has become the public person, another indistinguishable piece of the mechanical "masses." The homogenizing effect of the Internet on speech and public presence is precisely where the liberatory potential of Internet pornography comes into question. Having stated the goal of liberatory projects as intervention in the state's policies to resist constitution as docile subjects, Grebowicz remains skeptical of the Internet as a force that tends toward homogeneity and docility rather than heterogeneity, alterity, and transgressive "speaking against." Thus, even though the content of pornography has become more diverse--she cites zoo porn, deaf porn, feminist porn, and specific instances of lesbian and gay pornography--it nonetheless operates within a distributive mechanism that mutes the liberatory potential of sexual subjectivity.

Grebowicz's revival of MacKinnon's work is quite fruitful for this and future political debates concerning women's political lives. MacKinnon's work on pornography is routinely dismissed by contemporary feminists as antiquated; specifically, her arguments concerning the inherent objectification and subordination of women in heteropatriarchal societies is claimed to be dismissive of women's sexual choice and agency. Grebowicz argues that MacKinnon's work on the gendered nature of privacy (referenced above) is more fruitful for the analysis of Internet pornography than her actual work on pornography that feeds its dismissal. In doing so,

Grebowicz places MacKinnon in an unlikely alliance with postmodern thinkers like Judith Butler and Baudrillard, whose "commitment to a multiplicity of difference" (101) finds grounding in MacKinnon's attempts to undo the disappearing of gender in human rights discourse. MacKinnon's work on pornography and prostitution focuses on "hyperfeminized" (hyper-objectified) women in order to show that political concerns arising from the domestic, feminized sphere are not, and are never, considered "human concerns." As Grebowicz writes, "when violence is wielded almost exclusively against women, and not against men, that violence is figured not as a human rights violation. It is the fact that something happens to women and not to men that makes it *not* a human rights issue" (91). By focusing her analysis on hyperfeminized women, MacKinnon explores the *limits* of the human, revealing the concept of "human" in human rights discourse, and indeed in democratic politics, to be equivalent to "man." Thus, the strategy of so-called second-wave and liberal feminism was born: to insist that women fit into the category of the human and thus can properly be considered subjects of human rights.

MacKinnon's own work resists this move, as Grebowicz writes: "Rather than gesturing towards equality, neutrality, and state protection, MacKinnon thinks the subject of rights along the lines of the most abject and 'outside.' . . . This makes possible a rearticulation of the human to include the inhuman, the exiled, mute, opaque thing which is not subject to any rights, which constitutes its conceptual limit, exposing its contingency" (93). It is on this point that Grebowicz reads MacKinnon together with Butler, Lyotard, and Baudrillard and locates the possibility of the transgressive subject. Reading "woman" into "human" is to read women into a logic of human rights discourse and politics that has as its aim "stabilizing practices and meanings in relation to legal and social intelligibility," that is, it *forecloses* the possibility of intervening in the logic and policies of the state. Maintaining the abject can, at least in theory, leave open potential for critical speech and meta-level questioning about *all* aspects political life.¹ Although this point can be made outside of an analysis of specifically *Internet* pornography, there is an essential connection between maintaining the abject to highlight the boundaries of political belonging and the effects of the Internet on speech. Returning to Baudrillard and Lyotard, both share a concern for protecting the "secret" of individual lives that resists the massification of the body politic in the categorical imperative to be constantly present on the Internet, that is, to constantly speak. This secret, which originally makes possible any right to privacy or speech, is "always outside the law, beyond the reach of the state, and no civil or criminal legislation can properly protect it" (86). Thus, the Internet itself, not just Internet pornography, threatens the very condition for the possibility of democracy: that which is outside the state, be it the abject subject or the "secret."

¹ Grebowicz uses an instructive example here: the documentary *Live Nude Girls Unite!* depicts dancers and support staff at San Francisco peepshow venue The Lusty Lady unionizing in response to discriminatory wage practices. This example shows how the states mechanisms of control--law and policy--can be used to gain legitimation for abject persons, while never addressing meta-level questions about the exploitation of workers in a patriarchal, capitalist society. We might be tempted to separate questions of exploitation under capitalist systems from the sexual exploitation faced by women in a patriarchal society, but it is precisely the possible connection here that is obscured when we use the state's mechanisms of legitimation to seek entrance into the body politic without addressing the construction of the barriers to and mechanisms for entry.

This text is surely a valuable revival of MacKinnon's work. In addition, its return to early feminist concerns over the gendering of the private sphere in dialogue with the production of homogeneity through state practices enables critiques of the political tactics in current civil rights movements. This calls to mind feminist and queer theoretical critiques of the gay civil rights movement, specifically the movement's efforts for marriage equality. Although it is true that marriage affords political, economic, and social protections to individuals, it is and has historically been a mechanism used by the state and heteropatriarchal social orders to control the lives and property of those who participate in the institution. This has been deleterious to the lives of women, in particular, who historically entered marriage *as* property rather than as subjects consenting to the legal and social contract. Using the unexpected alliance formed here between MacKinnon and postmodern social theorists, we can use this analysis to argue that just as the "Internet" part of Internet pornography disables intervention and transgression, the "rights" discourse invoked in the demand for marriage equality disables meta-level questioning about the value and function of marriage as a social institution. This is merely an example, but it serves as a point from which to address political discourses focused on access to historically established rights and protections that is not critical of those rights and protections themselves.

One area for further thinking in this project is on the nature of the Internet itself, its function and its use. After turning to Internet distribution to look at the conditions of consumption for Internet pornography, the argument here would be furthered by examining the technological differences in different modes of Internet interaction and consumption. The Internet is not itself monolithic. Despite its influence on the massification of the body politic, the Internet is used in different ways by different people based on age, sex, race, ability, class, and global location. We must ask whether the technologies themselves, both hardware and software, affect pornography and consumption in different ways. Does the preference for small, handheld hardware over large, stable hardware change the way we relate to the publicity of the information we consume? Grebowicz uses the example of forums and "upvoting" as producing a false sense of community that threatens liberatory communities, but we must look also at how these platforms have been used for radical purposes. Reddit, Imgur, Instagram, and Facebook have each played a part in developing social movements. These were the platforms that organized international marches in response to police violence in Ferguson, Missouri. The Internet also produced larger political movements against its own censorship. Freethenipple.com, for instance, began as an Internet campaign to end censorship of women's breasts--on the Internet and off. This online campaign has produced movements to change public nudity laws that prohibit women from breastfeeding in public. Activists, connected through the Internet, engaged in graffiti campaigns and breastfeeding "sit-ins" to de-stigmatize, that is, de-domesticate women's bodies. Although Grebowicz is right to be wary of the Internet's potential for creating docility, it is not a monolithic or stable entity, and thus its possibilities cannot be *a priori* determined and written off.

Reference

Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.