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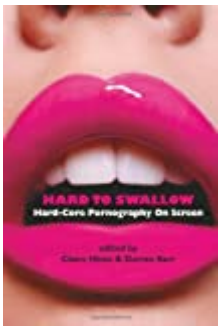

Claire Hines, Darren Kerr, eds. *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen.* London: Wallflower Press, 2012. xi + 249 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-16210-4; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-16213-5.

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Since the late 1970s, both popular and scholarly debates surrounding pornography have been marked by heated rhetoric and vitriol from those on all sides of the issue. Aptly dubbed "the porn wars," early feminist debates on pornography featured conflict between positions as disparate as the belief that pornography is morally equivalent to rape and the support for porn as a positive force for female sexual liberation.[1] Despite the emergence in the 1990s of excellent scholarship that sought to move beyond the porn wars debates, battles between extreme positions continue to this day. Given this contentious background, the nuanced and perceptive essays collected by Claire Hines and Darren Kerr are a refreshing shift away from strictly pro/anti conversations and toward a deeper critical analysis of pornography as a text.

Drawing heavily on queer theory, the collection's most prevalent theme is the question of pornography's relationship to other genres and cultural trends. Rather than assuming a "common sense" definition of pornography, these essays focus on the category's problematic boundaries and grey areas, demonstrating in the process that pornography is in no way homogenous or easily categorized. All contributors dedicate close attention to the ways that porn influences and is influenced by other cultural productions, including mainstream film, fashion, and art.

Within the shared theme of interrogating categories, Hines and Kerr have organized the volume's essays into three sections. In part 1, contributors analyze ways in which pornography is approached in various public contexts. In the section's opening essay, Brian McNair discusses attempts to incorporate "the sexually transgressive power of the pornographic" into mainstream film and television through the use of "porno chic" and "porno fear" (p. 25). Karen Boyle builds on this attention to mainstream film and television by arguing that allegedly objective or even critical documentaries about the porn industry often promote the very gender ideologies that they claim to oppose. Feona Attwood's study of the altporn subgenre interrogates the assumed divide between pornography and art by suggesting that in altporn "art, porn, sexual self-expression and politics are being brought together in new and interesting formations" (p. 54). The first section closes with Mark Jones and Gerry Carlin's essay on pornography and education, which challenges the notion that pornography can or should be sanitized and rendered purely academic in an educational context.

Part 2 offers historical perspectives on everything from silent stag films to recent mainstream crossover hits. The first essay in this section comes from Linda Williams, one of the most respected and frequently cited scholars in the field of porn studies. In her reflective piece on women in silent stag films screened by the Kinsey Institute, Williams identifies examples of subversive content as well as instances in which the agency of female pornographic performers is clearly circumscribed. Williams's points regarding the complexity of female representation in stag films are echoed in Kerr's essay on the golden age pornography classic *Behind the Green Door* (1972). As Kerr argues, *Behind the Green Door* has been unfairly dismissed as misogynist; his reinterpretation of the film foregrounds its unusual approach to performativity and its depiction of female sexual agency. Like Kerr, Stephen Maddison tackles a frequently demonized category of pornography: Max Hardcore's "gonzo" productions. In the section's last essay, an analysis of the pornographic crossover phenomenon *Pirates* (2005), Hines points out the numerous ways in which the film's mainstream success suggest that "the era of the mainstream pornographic blockbuster might finally have arrived" (p. 142).

The volume's final section delves more deeply into subgenres and common tropes within hard-core film. This discussion of pornographic subgenres begins with Pamela Church Gibson and Neil Kirkham's chapter on categories of porn, particularly BDSM, in which eroticism is based as much on clothing choices as on nudity. Using the art film *Shortbus* (2006) as a case study, Beth Johnson argues that hard-core sexuality has "spilled over, adulterating previous aesthetic boundaries of 'film art' " (p. 164). In the collection's only essay dedicated to questions of the relationship between local and global, Susanna Paasonen discusses ways in which Finnporn employs a stripped-down aesthetic to distinguish locally produced pornography from international products. In the volume's most direct challenge to antiporn activists, such as Andrea Dworkin, Clarissa Smith compares the performing style of porn stars Eva Angelina and Allie Sin in order to argue that hard-core actors do in fact perform and do not merely make their bodies passively available for on-camera use. Also complicating a cornerstone of antipornography literature is John Mercer, who uses the example of the "power bottom" in gay porn to question the assumption that to be penetrated is necessarily to be dominated (p. 220). Finally, Rebecca Beirne highlights several areas in which pornography produced by and for lesbians deviates from mainstream heterosexual porn and undermines established gender hierarchies.

The collection's only serious drawback is a relative lack of attention to questions of race and ethnicity. While several of the essays briefly touch on questions of race (most notably, in Williams's use of a Ku Klux Klan-themed film as a case study), it does not receive the same focus or critical attention as gender relations and queer politics. This is a somewhat baffling omission given existing scholarly work on racial politics in pornographic film and the volume's clear emphasis on interrogating categories.[2]

As a whole, however, this collection is a significant contribution to the study of sexuality and popular culture. As these essays demonstrate, there are scholarly approaches to pornography that go beyond the stark pro/anti choices offered by the porn wars. Both the individual essays and the volume as a whole adopt a balanced perspective, neither condemning the genre nor ignoring its more disturbing elements. Above all else, this collection argues persuasively for pornography as an aspect of contemporary culture worthy of serious academic study.

Notes

[1]. For discussion of both positions, see Drucilla Cornell, ed., *Feminism and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[2]. For several examples of strong work on race in hard-core pornography, see Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

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