

# Discursive Vitality

## *Orgasmology*

By Annamarie Jagose

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## Reviewed by Guy Davidson

AS A SCHOLARLY OBJECT, ORGASM, ANNAMARIE JAGOSE NOTES, IS 'UNRULY' (XII). THIS book, however, amply demonstrates that orgasm's unruliness can be conceptually and theoretically productive. Limning and deploying the multivalent profile of orgasm, Jagose makes substantial interventions in a diverse range of debates about the co-implicated categories of sexuality and modernity. At the same time, though, her argument returns persistently to orgasm's intractability, the way it resists 'being constituted as a stable, visible object' (36). Orgasm's 'promiscuous availability to innumerable sightlines' meant, she tells us, that there was a stretch of time during the composition of the book when she feared orgasm might *not* be good to think with (36). Building an account of the scholar's wrestling match with her conceptual material into the argument is not an unusual move in contemporary work in the humanities. In this instance, though, the move works not to point up the scholar's arduous journey towards an argumentative endpoint but rather to remind us of her subject's—that is, orgasm's—discursive vitality, the way in which, despite the rich and various analyses provided here, there remain political and cultural implications of orgasm still to be unfolded. Like all the very best scholarship, *Orgasmology* offers a compelling new argument *and* opens up new grounds for conversation and debate—specifically, in this case, in the fields of queer theory and sexuality studies in the humanities (38). Taking up a topic usually dismissed, when discussed at all, within these fields as a sign of 'quiescent normativity' (xiii), Jagose demonstrates that attention to orgasm disrupts 'what can feel like queer theoretical complacencies' around normativity, non-normativity, selfhood, community, ethics, and politics.

What is it that makes orgasm such an elusive target of critical thinking? As Jagose enumerates, orgasm in the twentieth century comprehends a range of opposed categories, including the personal and the impersonal, the everyday and the transcendent, liberation and regulation, the innate and the acquired, the social

and the asocial, among many others (34). 'In its insistent and unpredictable switch between registers, not one thing more than another,' she continues, 'orgasm figures less its own essential truths than the contingency and partiality of interpretation, which is itself always perspectival' (36). But this registration of orgasm's discursive multifacetedness does not lead to an account of orgasm as exclusively cultural in its meanings (and still less, despite the deconstructive flourish of the sentence I've just quoted, does it lead to an argument that instates orgasm as a figure for interpretation itself). *Orgasmology* instances a current tendency within queer theory to think seriously about the analytic purchase of embodied sexual practices, a project that has until recently been strangely neglected, despite queer theory's defining preoccupation with non-normative sexuality. For Jagose, this project entails a rejection of straightforwardly culturalist understandings of the body, whereby the biological is mere inert matter upon which culture bestows signifying status. In her introductory chapter, Jagose draws on the work of Elizabeth Wilson on the semantic richness of the biological to argue against the 'almost allergic' (23) reaction of feminism, queer theory, and sexuality studies to scientific explanation, concluding that 'thinking the biological with, rather than against, the cultural' will enable a more satisfactory account of 'the often contradictory ways' in which orgasm is 'both experienced and apprehended' (28). While the signifiatory potential of the biological is generally backgrounded in the pages that follow this discussion, the somatic dimension of orgasm is implicit throughout. Rather than consigning the bodily reality of orgasm to the solvent of cultural meaning, Jagose identifies the physiological peculiarity of orgasm as a key factor in its discursive ambivalence. As she writes in the coda, 'Though orgasm makes itself felt through the materiality of the body, it also exceeds the body's facticity, remaining itself immaterial' (214).

But however much orgasm's meanings are meshed with its status as physiological event, the ways we regard and experience orgasm are very closely associated with twentieth-century modernity. As Jagose notes, the transcendent quality routinely ascribed to orgasm could just as well be assigned to range of other bodily experiences, such as sleep or the experience of certain drugs and alcohol (33). It is orgasm's implication in the modern regime of sexuality that ensures its particular charge and its characteristic contradictoriness. For it is not only the case, as Foucault argued, that sexuality comes to define the experience of being a modern subject; it is also the case, as Jagose quotes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, that sexuality within modernity is 'all over the experiential and conceptual map' (34), pressed into service to represent and articulate an incoherent range of cultural and epistemological positions.

In accordance with the historical roots of our current attitudes towards orgasm, *Orgasmology* homes in on 'orgasm and the long twentieth century,' as the title of

the introductory chapter puts it. However unruly orgasm is, the book ‘does lay a claim to some forms of structure and narrative organization, proceeding as a loosely chronological series of case studies’ (xii). Jagose begins her case studies with a chapter tracking the changing fortunes of simultaneous orgasm across the long twentieth century, focusing particularly on its promotion in the marriage manuals of the 1920s and 1930s, and developing an arresting argument about the role of the ideal of simultaneous orgasm in the conversion of the then-new category of heterosexuality into the ‘timeless’ phenomenon of the norm. Next, she turns to the ‘double bind’ of modern sex—its status as both personal and impersonal, or social and asocial—elaborating her argument about how this bind might be rethought via a game-changing reading of the representation of orgasm in John Cameron Mitchell’s sexually explicit indie feature film *Shortbus* (2006). The impersonal dimension of sexuality also figures centrally in the next chapter, in which Jagose turns to the apparently unpromising archive of behaviorist experiments in aversion treatment for male homosexuality during the 1960s, arguing that a careful reading of this archive, despite its foundational homophobia, turns up an unexpectedly queer and potentially productive account of sex as a behavior untethered to the notion of identity. The next chapter focuses on a range of cinematic and medico-sexological efforts to visualize orgasm, insightfully expanding existing accounts of the connections and tensions between visibility and sexuality within modernity. Finally, Jagose turns to the topic of fake orgasm as practiced by heterosexual women in order to rethink the vexed issue of the relations between sexual practice and politics, and collaterally, the issues of what counts as sex and what counts as politics. Drawing its ‘counterintuitive energies’ from ‘the probable fact that most women who fake would rather have an orgasm’ (205), Jagose’s argument—in conjunction with and extending the arguments of theorists such as Lauren Berlant and Heather Love—enables an account of the political as not always ‘upbeat and forward-looking’ (203) but as ‘figuring the wedged-open possibility of return to some scene of deadening familiarity that might yet be done differently even if, more probably, done just the same’ (203).

As I hope my brief discussions of the book’s chapters indicate, *Orgasmology* itself enacts the discursive diversity and productivity that characterizes twentieth-century orgasm. Eloquently written, and supple and wide-ranging in its argument, the book is bound to produce galvanizing effects on scholars working in queer theory, gender studies and cultural studies.

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