

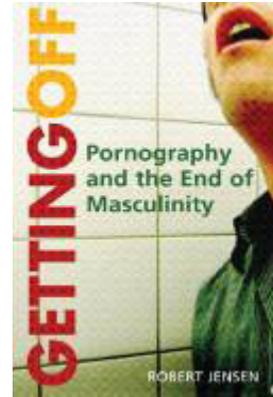
*Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*. Robert Jensen: South End Press (2007). ISBN 9780896087767, 197 pp.

Reviewed by MAIREAD SULLIVAN

Robert Jensen's *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* examines the current state of heterosexual, American pornography. He asserts that this has become increasingly violent and degrading while also seeming more accessible and normalized. Jensen beckons the reader into his world, sharing his own experiences of working within and against masculinity. He gives a detailed, if at times uncomfortable, account of the pornographic acts which he has seen. Employing a radical feminist critique, Jensen offers his own idealistic vision of a world in which masculinity is renounced for humanity, in which sex and sexuality is seen as a modality for experiencing greater emotion and intimacy, and in which sexual domination and degradation no longer exist.

From the beginning the reader is invited into Jensen's personal experiences with feminism, masculinity, and pornography. The book launches with a recounting of a scene witnessed by Jensen at the Adult Entertainment Expo: he recalls the mob-like quality of a group of men gathered around a performer, a woman simulating masturbation. Jensen asserts that this quality, that of a "mob, ready to rape" is "an expression of the dominant masculinity in the United States today" (p. 1). Jensen unpacks masculinity through both personal references and his interpretation of those he sees around him. He recognizes a plurality of male experiences while contending there is a dominant masculinity that shapes not only cultural conceptions of manhood but men's own perceptions of themselves. Central to his explanation is an engrained need of men to assert their dominance over others, particularly women, lest they be viewed, internally or externally, as not man enough.

The site which Jensen chooses to examine and analyze his theory of masculinity is the United States pornographic movie industry. In extraordinary detail, Jensen relays current trends in mass-marketed pornography. He highlights the rise of "gonzo" films, which have been noted to portray increasingly controversial sex acts such as anal and vaginal double penetration (where a woman is penetrated by two men at the same time) and ass-to-mouth (where a man removes his penis from a woman's anus and places it in her mouth) (p. 59). In a previous project, Jensen viewed



films which were rated as bestsellers by adult store clerks in both Boston, Massachusetts and Austin, Texas. Drawing from this experience, he provides the reader with a play-by-play of many of the controversial acts which he has viewed. Throughout this exposition, Jensen is in critical conversation with what he asserts to be pro-pornography arguments. For example, he systematically challenges the notion that female performers participate by choice. Herein, he evokes concepts of choice as viewed through the relationship of a prisoner and prison guard, a teacher and student, or a woman and her abusive partner; objectively, one may have a choice, though Jensen calls the reader to consider the subjective conditions under which that choice is made. Jensen spends much attention on exposing men's use of pornography as an act of consumption, not simply a viewing. He contends that such consumption relays messages, about both women and men, that feed a sexuality of dominance and emotional disconnect.

Jensen concludes with a call to a new vision of masculinity or, rather, a renunciation of masculinity in the name of humanity. He pleads with men to actively divest their masculinity, and engage their humanity, by ending their consumption of the sex industry, challenging relationships, theirs and others, that are based in domination, and recognizing their own fears as the poison of masculinity. Though he cautions against argument of biological essentialism, Jensen does invoke a notion of natural differences between the sexes, citing the female ability for childbearing and breast feeding. His purpose in doing so is to acknowledge perceived differences while asserting that human behavior has the capacity to reverse socialization based on said differences. He differentiates between shame, the feeling that one is bad, and guilt, the feeling that one's actions are bad; guilt holds men accountable and encourages progress, whereas, shame denotes an intrinsic, and in this way unflinching characteristic. The distinction is used to persuade men that it is their actions, not their personhoods, which need restructuring. When men are able to harness their actions, he asserts, they are welcomed to a sexuality, and ultimately a worldview, grounded in love, compassion, and solidarity.

Through honest and reflective critique, Jensen succeeds in contributing to a conversation which debunks binary gender, though he fails to do so himself, as he questions where pornography fits in a feminist discourse on sexual violence. He offers a personal voice that appropriately challenges the reader to critical reflection. His first hand accounts of particular films or sex acts gives the reader a level of exposure to the material that may not be achieved elsewhere. Few can disagree with his desire for a culture of humanity through the dissolution of the battle between femininity and masculinity. Ultimately, however, Jensen's arguments fall short of the goals he set forth.

My biggest criticism of Jensen's work is his assessment that increasingly violent pornography breeds an increasingly violent system of domination and a culture of rape without giving due attention to the inverse of that relationship. His call to a new understanding of gender is noteworthy, though his arguments as to how and why this goal is necessary are stunted. He is quick to link sex with love and intimacy, seemingly vilifying sexuality outside of romantic relationships and, undoubtedly, alienating many readers. There is a noticeable lack of queer reference in Jensen's argument, which not only ignores gay porn as a large segment of the industry but conspicuously disregards a theoretical lens, that of queer theory, which has had strong influence on contemporary discussions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, despite his critique that male feminists fail to check their socializations regarding power and leadership at the door, Jensen's argument leaves little room for voice of women in his call for a new humanity. In fact, he asserts that through men's choices to move away from their masculinity, femininity, too, will become passé.

In conclusion, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* is a worthwhile read, though I would hesitate before including it in the syllabus of an introductory level course on sex or gender. Jensen's arguments are rooted in a third wave feminism that many scholars are currently seeking to move beyond. Even so, Jensen provides a challenging critique of a sensitive topic.

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