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Porn or PorNO:
Approaches to Pornography in Elfriede Jelinek’s Lust
and Charlotte Roche’s Feuchtgebiete

This essay explores the role of pornography in Elfriede Jelinek’s Lust (1989) and Charlotte Roche’s Feuchtgebiete (2008) and outlines the changes the genre of pornography has undergone in feminist discourses during the nearly 20 years separating the two texts. It starts out by engaging with feminist positions towards pornography from the 1980s to the present and by negotiating the concept of ‘Frauenpornografie’, pornography by and for women. The analysis of the two texts puts particular focus on the use of language when negotiating pornography and employs theories of parody to draw out the differences between the literary engagement with the genre in the two books.

At first glance Elfriede Jelinek’s Lust (1989) and Charlotte Roche’s Feuchtgebiete (2008) seem to have more in common than elements that separate them: both novels have been very publicly labelled as pornography. Knut Ahnlund, the then 78-year-old member of the committee which awarded Jelinek the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004, called her work in general ‘whining unenjoyable public pornography’, and resigned from the committee. Elfriede Jelinek hat einen Porno geschrieben (Elfriede Jelinek has written a porn novel) was the comment in the online Feuilleton of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, in one of the many reviews of Lust that try to gauge the relationship of the text with pornography. Volker Hage’s review for Die Zeit sums up the critics’ uneasy engagement with the text: ‘Ein weiblicher Porno? Ein Antiporno?’ (Female porn? Antiporn?) Similarly, Roche’s début novel has been labelled “New-Porno” and described as ‘literary porn with a difference’, or as ‘Schleim-porno gegen Hygienezwang’ (phlegm-porn against hygiene compulsion). Feuchtgebiete was turned down by the publisher Kiepenheuer & Witsch for being too pornographic but was then published by Dumont. Like Lust, Feuchtgebiete enjoyed great commercial success. Roche’s title became the first German book to make it to the top of Amazon’s international bestseller list. However, the German town of Witte put forward an application to list the book as pornography and hence as breaching the federal Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media (JStV) because of its sexually
explicit nature. However, the Kommission für Jugendmedienschutz, a federal body, turned down the application. From a legal point of view, for purposes of distribution neither book has been classified as pornography. However, the wide ranging and heated discussions they have caused indicate the huge cultural implications of the topic and the diverse approaches when it comes to labelling material as pornography.

In a contemporary context pornography is generally understood to mean the ‘explicit portrayal of human sexuality, designed to produce sexual arousal’. Legal steps to regulate it have been undertaken since it started to be mass produced and distributed through literature or image-based media at the beginning of the 19th century. The US is at the forefront of government interference and tight laws also exist in Germany, Austria and the UK. The protection of minors and the prevention of crimes such as sexual abuse in the course of the production of pornography are usually cited as the main objectives of these legal actions. However, questions as to what is considered ‘explicit’ and ‘sexually arousing’, and by whom, elicit a great variety of often conflicting answers, heavily influenced by gender norms, moral or religious codes, ideologies, and by personal or socio-cultural circumstances. All these influences affect what is regarded as pornography in any legal, cultural or private context. The association of pornography with obscenity and offences against prevailing concepts of decency further complicate a discussion that generates several diverse points of view.

As to Feuchtgebiete and Lust, both authors have positioned themselves clearly in relation to pornography. Both texts include graphic representations of sexual acts and make references to mainstream pornography in the sense of explicit image-based depictions of sexual acts aimed at a heterosexual male market and produced by an almost exclusively male-owned industry. Jelinek’s 1989 prose text describes violent female suppression through scenes of sexual abuse and rape. Roche’s 2008 novel contains several explicit descriptions of auto-, hetero- and homosexual activity, and depicts actions involving what is perceived as disgusting: human excrement, bodily fluids, etc. In addition, both authors address the genre of pornography further in statements and interviews. In 1987, two years before the publication of Lust, Jelinek indicated that she was working ‘an einer Art erotischem Roman […], einem weiblichen Gegenentwurf zur “Geschichte des Auges” von Georges Bataille’ (a kind of erotic novel […] a female counter-project to Georges Bataille’s Story of the Eye/L’Histoire de l’œil). Her use of the