

Interview - Katrien Jacobs

Written by E-International Relations

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Katrien Jacobs is Associate Professor in Cultural and Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on how digital media influences perceptions of the body, art, and sexuality.

She published in the first issue of *Porn Studies* on 'Internationalizing porn studies'. Her most recent book is *People's Pornography: Sex and Surveillance on the Chinese Internet*. She has lectured and published widely about pornography, censorship and media activism in Hong Kong and global media environments. She is also working on long-term research projects in visual anthropology that detail the impact of Japanese animation on South East Asian youth cultures and social networks.

Professor Jacobs discusses her research on pornography in the context of global capitalism, social control, and superpower rivalry.

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Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Actually my field is called pornography studies, which to some people may sound a bit funny, but there is now a new journal by Routledge, *Porn Studies*, which opened a few months ago and is doing very well, even if the journal got attacked by conservative intellectuals. But pornography itself is changing a lot. There is the old school porn industry and there are the newer industries that are more women-friendly, feminist oriented but also queer. And these trends are followed closely by academics in the USA and Europe, so there's a different kind of porn-tolerant sensibility about movies and new media that is being openly discussed in the public sphere.

In Europe in general there's also another interesting development. Starting in 2005 in Amsterdam and Berlin, we were holding the first conferences on internet pornography, and we were moving away from commercial porn made by corporations, and emphasizing DIY porn by smaller producers, artists or activists who were also just starting up.

I have to mention Berlin because there is the annual Porn Film Festival organized by Jürgen Brüning where they show also new kinds of productions which are not the average commercial pornography. Tim Stüttgen in Berlin also developed a concept of "post-pornography" which developed out of the desire to develop a critical attitude toward pornography and the newer industries.

And these are big influences I can see in this field right now and in my own work. In cultures like Hong Kong (where I live now) it is less developed but the porn industries and post-porn sensibility is powerful everywhere; it's getting globalized.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Oh, that's a difficult question, isn't it? I think that I have to stick to what I know more about, which is I've moved to Hong Kong in 2005. As I moved here and started developing my work here, China became this superpower nation.

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You know, Hong Kong is partially incorporated into the big China but partially it's still independent. There is a big struggle going on at the moment between China and Hong Kong which wants to be more autonomous. The big superpower nation China has a very different way of governing from the participatory democracies in which I grew up in, and with which I am more familiar with. The big shift is that this is really happening and we see this happening all over the world. It's happening in Russia right now, it's happening in the Middle East. Democracy is still something we cannot take for granted. This is something I became a lot more aware of in the last years.

I think another global shift is that people are looking to China and how China is trying to govern, like clamping down on freedom of expression or civil rights issues etc. These are things that I was not so familiar with when I was living in the western world. It causes a big polarization. So if you look at the larger picture you see that the values that I grew up with are not very widely available to people all over the world.

How could the study of porn culture help understand international relations?

Well, if you look at how different people are governing pornography then you understand a lot about the culture as such. There is that one thing I look into: the difference in obscenity legislation in different countries, like the USA where they have a very well developed obscenity legislation. So people can develop pornography or even exhibit obscene imagery in public places.

Yet, in the US also the right-wing opposition for years has been arguing that there should be more restrictions because of the fact that the internet and social media make pornography much more available, especially to minors and young people. This idea that pornography is affecting minors negatively is very strong and has gone pretty much global from the USA into all corners of the world. So there's this idea now that young people are negatively affected by porn. It's interesting to see how other cultures are reacting to that. In China, for instance, they are not reacting strongly because all porn is underground and officially banned. But there is a porn industry and research has shown that young people do watch porn. That's something that's going on but there's not an open debate about it, which then could also resolve into a new type of legislation.

This is an interesting thing to work with. In some cultures these debates are open, in some they are not. Yet people do have more or less similar experiences with pornography.

Also, it becomes an issue sometimes that China will accuse America of spreading porn. That's one of the reasons why they wanted to shut down Google besides other reasons e.g. Google storing information about political dissidents. So porn always plays into this kind of mutual distrust. There's a history of mistrust in diplomatic relations and right now we're getting in one of these periods and porno easily plays into that. China accuses America of bringing porn into that country where there is supposedly no porn. This though is not really the case since research shows that China has its own kind of porn. China uses this because pornography stands for American corrupted values. It goes back in Chinese history a long time that porn consumption is a western bourgeois value. So porn plays into this cliché and become part of the stand-off between these two political nations, but the reality is that porn has already conquered both nations.

Although so-called liberal-democratic societies do censor offensive language and pictures too, the Chinese authorities seem to be specifically concerned about their citizens watching copulating couples. Why is the display of sexual intercourse perceived as a threat?

I don't think that the display of sexual intercourse is perceived as a threat. I don't think it's really about that. Perhaps it's about the desire to control people which China has done forever, under different types of imperial autocracies and since the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. With the advent of the internet, which is really growing enormously in China, they also immediately found a way of curtailing people's access to all kind of internet sites, including news sites, information about censored events, dissidents. So all of this is carefully administrated, as well as a whole "army" of people (the so-called 50 cents army) who are netizens hired by the government to take care of that. The regulation of porn is really part of that effort, it's the regulation of potentially disruptive media. You can think of information about Tiananmen Square, government corruption, etc, which is all very carefully maintained and

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censored every day. And you also think why is sex also censored? What does sex have to do with all these political issues? But I think they want to make sure they can also keep a handle on all kinds of people's grievances and dissent. Because maybe if people would have access to sexually explicit material they would start thinking about rights, about their sexual rights.

This is what people have been noticing; it's not just about people having access to porn. It's really about the right to have access to information about sex. That plays into queer activism, which is related to porn activism. Many of these queer groups are asking for recognition by the state (although they are as of yet not at the level of asking for gay marriage rights). All these other things come along with access to porn. I think the government does know that it's not just about the depiction of sexual intercourse.

But from the perspective I look into, say from 1949, with the rise of the Republic of China, all pornography was immediately banned out of the principle of the control of people. In 1949, after the Cultural Revolution sexually explicit materials were totally unavailable. People weren't even allowed to consider any kind of sexual pleasure outside marriage, or even to talk about being in love. It was extremely restricted at the time. But when after the revolution the economic reform era came along, it really did change. When all kinds of industry and commodity regimes were entering China, I think the porn came along right away with that. And so I think specifically young generations of Chinese got quite acquainted with that. I think the government doesn't want to take the risk of opening up because of its overall policy about social unrest.

We do know that it turns a blind eye on porn matters as opposed to the real sensitive political topics. So people know they sometimes can get away with discussions about sex or even screenings of porn or queer activity. They are not considered as grave as politically sensitive matters. But they just don't want to officially make these distinctions. For instance, right now, the authorities still do close films festivals regularly in these last years. It doesn't feel like its opening up exactly, because of the overall desire of government to control all media. So I really don't think they see a problem in the depiction of sex itself.

Are there specific aspects of porn studies feminist theorists should pay special attention to in order to challenge orthodoxy?

There's actually quite a big field now, where women are studying and producing pornography. Of course within feminism it's a very explosive topic. This topic is even a bit dominated by the anti-porn feminists. The most common answer you may find from feminists is that there is a problem with porn because it's masculine dominated and thus portrays masculine fantasies; it portrays the subjugation or exploitation of women; and it exploits sex workers as well within the industry.

Opposed to this is a newer school of scholars who are much more positive about it. There are new industries, female friendly porn producers for instance; there are a lot of queer porn stars. In the United States there is a woman called Jiz Lee, who is queer and has an androgynous appearance. She's enormously influential, attracting both lesbians and straight women. So it appears porn is attracting more female viewers. Thus, when the audience shifts from male to female a lot of things actually do change. For example, women do have different needs from that corporate manufactured male-oriented pornography, which the older school of feminists would find offensive, whereas the newer school would argue that such porn is just too repetitive and unimaginative. When I interview people, women often say they do like to see an emotional development between people, which adds authenticity. Not that kind of manufactured sex act where we can't sense women's or men's involvement. Since women are looking for more authenticity they find those pictures often in narrative cinema. Therefore, I think there should be more narratives around the sex act, so people can feel more involved.

Furthermore, women are more open to diversity in body depiction. Bodies don't have to be perfect. That's the DIY idea that different body types can be attractive to different people. All these new values represent quite a shift. And I think these old feminists opposing these values are not really acquainted with this new wave. For instance, there's a great new anthology called 'The Feminist Porn Book; The Politics of Producing Pleasure'. It has short essays by different scholars, activists and porn stars. The whole book is about this new wave. I think this is what's happening

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now. For example, in Japan, the other big porn producer besides the US, they also have now a lot of female oriented porn. Yet, contrary to the West, where many people are writing about it, in Japan it's not a topic of enquiry or debate. So again, we talked about it at the beginning of this interview, sometimes this shift that I am very excited about is not really reflected in mainstream culture in East Asia. But it's definitely happening underneath the surface and I am here to register and diagnose these eruptions.

Is there a difference between the porn culture in liberal-capitalist society and the Chinese porn culture which develops in the shadows of censorship?

The difference is that industries are underground in mainland China. They don't exist officially, but that doesn't mean that they are difficult to access. There are easily accessible websites, VCD's are sold on the street. But people still have to be careful, it's like crossing the border maybe. If running an industry you have to be extremely careful, because you might be persecuted for that.

Then another difference is that if you want to produce non-commercial sexually explicit material in China then you may experience some problems. For example, in my forthcoming book called *The Afterglow of Women's Pornography in Post-Digital China* I am now writing about women who are writing homo-erotic sexual fantasies (called Boys' Love) on websites. They also do their own cartoon versions based on Japanese Manga culture. A lot of these stories are gay stories. This is a big wave in Hong Kong and China right now, involving millions of women (but millions in China is not that much actually). Anyway, it's a big wave of popular culture and we're just finding out that women are doing this – writing micro-fictional stories based on Manga characters or even based really existing Chinese celebrities, or pop stars. They're just imagining these stars having sex affairs together. Although this is exciting it is also dangerous, because you can be persecuted for doing that. Although this kind of erotic culture has very little to do with hardcore pornography at all, this literature gets censored even though writers are very careful to be not too explicit and for example avoid references to genitals. At this point you easily realize how invasive and careless the economic superpower can be, again it is not just about censoring sex and sexually explicit representations, but about bland patriarchal visions of commodity culture, that the sex-less and self-censored media products will sell also, and the rest can flourish underground.

Can one say that porn culture in China can be thought of as a tool of liberation?

In China too it can be a tool for liberation or democracy. Some things become symbolic of peoples' desire for democracy. In China there's that symbol of the 'Grass Mud Horse', or 'cao ni ma', which is an emblem of political liberation. It is a little horse figure used by activists, which is actually named after a profanity called 'Fuck Your Mother' (cao ni ma). This profanity is used to name a symbol. Sexual liberation or the right to use vulgar language is used as a tool to think about democracy – in a humorous, not an angry way. People have made songs and photo collages of that horse it became an artistic expression.

One of the most famous Chinese artists, Ai Wei Wei, uses 'cao ni ma' to make photographs as well, popularizing this emblem even further. So, again, it's not so much about pornography. It's about the right to be humorous, to be naked; to be rebellious, I think. The right to be different in this climate of government control. To step out of this climate is how sexually explicit materials are sometimes used.

Still, this is all very fragmented as it is still dangerous to play this: Ai Wei Wei has been detained, as were many other artists, human rights lawyers and activists. The fight for democracy goes on and on, but it's also not exactly going somewhere. There's is no road that is being followed and it is not a positive vision of sexual liberation or political liberation at all.

Do you think that amateur porn, i.e. voluntary and not-for-profit exhibition of intimacy, is a response to the pressure of the profit motive in global capitalism?

It's very tricky because amateur porn is a response – but it is often just an appearance. There is a very blurry line between the commercial and the amateur environment. Most commercial porn is available on these kind of 'Porno

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Tube' websites, which look like YouTube. Yet while the latter has mostly user generated content, porno tube sites do not. It's mostly commercially produced content, giving an appearance of amateur porn. The commercial industry wants to celebrate this amateur look, like the MILF, or the housewife – MILF's and housewives are making porn, going around having sex with their neighbours. Another example, are 'dorm girls'. This kind of porn suggests that many students in dorms are now making amateur porn.

The interesting thing is that it looks more and more real, but it is still fake. I already wrote about in my first book *Netporn* which was published in 2007. It has been going on for many years now and it even becomes more sophisticated—the way authenticity is being faked. The way to distinguish yourself as being the real amateur is still possible but it is also harder to do. If you upload your own porn on these sites you may not be recognized and get any attention. This means you may have the freedom to upload your real porn, but it also means you're not sharing it anymore.

I think that has come along with the commercialization of the internet in general – how the usual major social media sites also have their own rules and regulations on how to behave and what to post. The big sites like Facebook, Twitter, and so on are very strict against any sexual representation. They are very conservative on their regulations about sexually explicit materials. That means that all the explicit materials have to go to all these XXX portals and tube sites. And these sites have been commercialized to such extent so that the amateur stuff is harder to find.

Especially with the proliferation of high-speed internet porn has become an established part of social life at least for the post-2000 generation. How do you think will this influence politics?

Porn has influenced politics for a long time already. The USA has been looking at that for more than ten years. The internet is making porn available to minors and children. It was John Ashcroft who started attacking this development in the mid-1990's already. But the ACLU has always been able to contain that and carve out a kind of freedom for internet pornography in the United States. So, this debate has been going on for a very long time, and I think it's been all very well regulated. I don't think there are any grave problems for the post-2000 generation. There are legal domains, making porn available to users who sign up and declare that they are older than 18; then there are also social media sites which are widely used and have very strict porn regulations. So I don't really know what the problem is. A perceived problem may be that young people are bombarded with porn and have no way to resist it. Yet, research has shown that young people distance themselves from porn. Australian scholar Monique Mulholland for instance did research on that matter in high schools in Australia and wrote a book about it. She finds that young people do know how to find porn very well but they also find many ways of distancing themselves. They are not negatively affected; they laugh about it, they forward it with a comments etc. She found that it's not problematic at all – just like other types of extreme media like violent media.

I also don't believe in porn addiction. All these arguments come from these older school of anti-porn ideologues, feminists and religious people for instance. So if some conservative politician rehash that argument about porn addiction, then I have to say we've heard that argument already, and luckily people in some countries have been able to overturn it.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of porn studies?

A lot of people contact me for advice. Like any field, if you take it seriously, you have to devote some part of your life to it. I think you have to be ready to really immerse yourself into what it is that people are watching and experiencing. A lot of people are scared of that. So I think people need to get more immersed and do more close ethnographic studies of how people perceive pornography.

Academia is not really ready to show young people in that direction because it's more interested in theoretical points. And there's a kind of history of bodily denial in academia, as well as a bias against porn. So you have to be quite strong and determined and ready to get immersed, then I think it could be quite an interesting thing to do. It's not that easy for people who are scared or too cautious. But it's a new and emerging field. There are a lot of things that can be studied. I encourage the younger generation to do porn studies because you can get a lot more response than if

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you'd be doing another kind of topic.

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This interview was conducted by Christian Scheinflug. Christian is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.