

Subverting *Pornormativity*: Feminist and Queer Interventions

By Johanna Schorn, University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract:

Feminist activist Robin Morgan is famously quoted as saying that "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice". This has long been one of the chief arguments of pornography-critics, both liberal and conservative, and this attitude has largely forestalled the possibility of critical feminist engagement with the medium of pornography. There is, however, a small but growing number of sex-positive feminist pornographers who produce images and films that interrogate and disrupt the phallogentric and heteronormative patterns of mainstream pornography and offer an alternative in the form of pornography that portrays bodies and sexualities in all of their variety. In this article, I provide a brief overview over feminist treatment of pornography, and then contrast it with the recent efforts by sex-positive feminists to reappropriate pornography in holistic and inclusive ways. I will underline my argument by providing examples from feminist producer Tristan Taormino and performer Jiz Lee.

1 In the preface to her 1979 book *Pornography*, feminist activist Andrea Dworkin defines the original literal meaning of the word pornography as "the graphic depiction of whores" (Dworkin 9). While the connotations of the word "whore" can be up for debate, sex-workers throughout history have been, and continue to be today, treated as second-class citizens and denied of certain rights. Thus the very meaning of the word pornography, then and now, seems to point towards the misogynistic and exploitative practices of the industry.

2 Over the years, countless voices on all points of the political spectrum have called to attention the myriad ways in which pornography negatively impacts society. In the 1980s, surrounding the investigations of the Meese Commission, a flurry of research was done to prove or disprove a connection between violent behavior towards women, including rape, and the consumption of pornography.¹ In her 2005 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, feminist author Ariel Levy examines the persistent cliché that adult industry actresses are overwhelmingly survivors of childhood abuse, and cites studies that support this (Levy 180). In the same book, Levy sees a connection between pornography and the increasingly invasive ways in which some women alter their looks (e.g. waxing, breast augmentation, labiaplasty) to come closer to contemporary standards of attractiveness (Levy 198), and she is hardly the first to make this connection.²

3 Accordingly, the feminist stance towards pornography has often been as negative as Dworkin's translation suggests. In the 1970s and 1980s, many feminists devoted all of their

¹ cf. Russel, Diana E.H. "Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model". *Political Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 1988). 41-73. or Linz, Daniel. "Exposure to Sexually Explicit Materials and Attitudes Toward Rape: A Comparison of Study Results". *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (February 1989). 50-84.

² cf. Walter, Natasha. *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*. Frankfurt: Krüger Verlag, 2011.

energies towards fighting against pornography. Especially vocal anti-porn activists were Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon.³ The two worked towards having ordinances enacted that would have given anyone harmed by the production or viewing of pornography the means for taking legal actions against the producers of said pornography (Cornell 3). For the two of them and for the purpose of these ordinances, pornography was defined as “graphic sexually explicit material that subordinate women through pictures or words” (Cornell 3).

4 Not all feminists of that time were fundamentally opposed to pornography, however. In fact, the issue became one of the most divisive topics in second wave feminism, causing what is now colloquially known as the “sex wars”. On the one hand were the feminists who were critical not only of pornography, but also of sex work and sometimes even heterosexual intercourse in itself. In a world permeated by patriarchal structures that always cast woman in a passive, objectified role without agency, they argued, woman never had the chance to say yes to sex – her yes was implied, or worse, unnecessary.

5 On the other side of this argument are the so-called sex-positive feminists. For them, it is not the individual expression of a given sexuality that is problematic (be that pornography, sex work, sadomasochistic practices or “plain old” heterosexual intercourse) but the cultural contexts in which they take place. While it is undeniably true that we live in a heteronormative patriarchal society that mandates certain ways of sexual expressions and does not generally place much of a focus on consent or equality, it should also be possible for individuals to experience their sexuality and pleasure in the way that feels most intuitive to them. For sex-positive feminists, the solution is not to restrict or outright ban certain practices, but to work together collectively to ensure that they can be performed within a “safe”, “healthy” and non-exploitative context. One of the ways in which this can happen in the specific example of pornography is through breaking apart the hegemonically phallocentric, structure of the porn industry and through producing and distributing material that gives a “realistic” and more inclusive view of human sexuality in general and female sexual agency in particular.

6 Since the 1980s, sex-positive feminists have been reappropriating pornography for a female and/or feminist audience against all odds. Female porn producers have been producing and creating products that put female sexuality and agency to the fore, and in fact specifically emphasize equity and consent. These films offer many things that mainstream pornography does not: depiction of women of size and women of color, “realistic” depictions of lesbian sexuality and inclusion of people on the trans* spectrum to name just a few. Additionally,

³ German readers may remember the PorNO campaign, initiated by Alice Schwarzer and waged on the pages of her magazine EMMA. Schwarzer also wrote the Foreword to the first German edition of Dworkin’s book.

many of these women have made it their specific goal to educate women about their sexuality and offer instructional videos and books designed to help women get in touch with their own sexuality.

7 In this article I will sketch the history of anti-porn feminism and its view of pornography, and pose the question whether or not it is possible for feminists to reclaim pornography despite its misogynistic roots. I will demonstrate that, though anti-porn feminists since the 1970s have felt that pornography is inherently degrading to women and detrimental to the feminist cause, more recent sex-positive feminists take a more nuanced approach to pornography. While mainstream pornography remains largely a product that is produced by and for men, at the expense of women, sex-positive feminists feel that pornography itself can also exist in a feminist context. Female producers and performers in the industry confirm this idea by creating porn that is aimed specifically (but not exclusively) at women and brings a more holistic and inclusive approach to the genre.

8 Feminism's involvement in the debates surrounding pornography can be traced back to the feminists of the second wave. While the first wave had been primarily concerned with ensuring political equality, second wave feminists fought for social equality and against the objectification of women. Writers such as Susan Brownmiller (*Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, 1975) and Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*, 1970) began to analyze the structures of society with the conclusion that the main means through which men control women is via sex. Brownmiller, in particular, made the connection to pornography as one of patriarchy's tools, and was one of the first to speak out against it. Together with other feminists, among them Andrea Dworkin, Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan, she founded the organization Women Against Pornography in 1978.

9 Andrea Dworkin's name is, perhaps, the one that is most closely associated with feminists' response to pornography, and rightly so. She was one of the most outspoken and passionate feminists of her time, and she personified the righteous anger and desire for change that has driven the feminist movement. For her, pornography is the embodiment of woman's status in society, and woman's status is at the very bottom of the food chain: "In the male system, women are sex; sex is the whore. [...] Buying her is buying pornography. Having her is having pornography. Seeing her is seeing pornography" (Dworkin 202), and "the ideology of male sexual domination posits that men are superior to women by virtue of their penis; that physical possession of the female is a natural right of the male; that sex is, in fact, conquest and possession of the female" (Dworkin 203).

10 Her role has been so pivotal that she is hard to overlook, and though her fame waned in the last years before her death in 2005, she used to be both one of the most loved and the most hated people in the US. Even sex-positive feminists like erotica writer Susie Bright acknowledge Dworkin's influence on feminist thought regarding sex and pornography. In a blog post following the news of Dworkin's death, she wrote: "every single woman who *pioneered* the sexual revolution, every erotic-feminist-bad-girl-and-proud-of-it-stiletto-shitkicker, was once a fan of Andrea Dworkin. Until 1984, we all were. She was the one who got us looking at porn with a critical eye [...]" (Bright, 2005). But while Bright and sex-positivists of the era, such as early pornographers Nan Kinney and Deborah Sundahl, used Dworkin's ideas as a starting point for discovering a pleasure-centered sexuality, Dworkin and her "sisters in arms" devoted their time to legislating pornography.

11 This endeavor found its climax with several ordinances that Dworkin drafted together with Catherine MacKinnon which would declare pornography a civil rights violation. The ordinances, MacKinnon writes later, "provide[s] a cause of action to individuals who are coerced into pornography, forced to consume pornography, defamed by being used in pornography without consent, assaulted due to specific pornography" (MacKinnon 132). These ordinances were put to a vote in a handful of jurisdictions and passed by Indianapolis and Minneapolis, though ultimately failed in higher levels of authority in both cities.

12 Dworkin and MacKinnon continued to lobby for their ordinances until the late 1980s, but with no success. By that time, the anti-pornography movement had lost its steam, just as feminism itself had lost much of its support in mainstream culture. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a waning interest and common agenda in feminism and its causes, and the movement only gained strength again with the onset of the third wave in mid 1990, which brought sex positivism with it as a major feature of feminism.

13 In a recent interview, sex blogger Clarisse Thorn gives this definition of sex-positive feminism:

[it] is about the belief that sex can be beautiful, it can be ugly, it can be difficult to deal with or easy to understand; some kinds of sex are widely misunderstood, and some kinds of sex are widely stereotyped; some people are really into sex, and some people aren't; but most importantly, all kinds of sex are okay as long as they happen among consenting adults. (Thorn 2011)

The aim of sex-positive feminists is to combat the restrictive social mandates that dictate what sexuality should look like. In our society, this means that sexuality is presented largely from a heteronormative point of view, with an emphasis on the pleasure of the male. Thorn sums up the effect this has on female sexuality: "[Women are] encouraged to be into sex in a very

performative way [...]. On the one hand, if we don't seem to enjoy sex in this very performative way, then we're seen as 'prudes'; at the same time, if we seem to enjoy sex too much then we're seen as 'sluts'" (Thorn 2011). Sex-positive feminists try to cut through those stereotypes and encourage everyone to explore the sexuality that feels authentic to them.

14 This concept is embraced and furthered by a host of activists who work in myriad ways to educate others on healthy, holistic sexuality. One of the most important aspects of activist work in this area is education around the issue of consent. Being able to give and obtain full, enthusiastic consent is one of the major tenets of sex-positivism: it is what makes the difference between sex as a performance, as exploitation or as abuse, and sex as a healthy and pleasurable act. One activist who has worked hard to promote enthusiastic consent is Jaclyn Friedman, who writes for the *Yes Means Yes* blog and is one of the editors of the 2008 anthology *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power & a World Without Rape*. On her blog, she defines enthusiastic consent:

Enthusiastic consent is an ongoing state, not a yes/no lightswitch. It requires sexual partners to be in ongoing communication with each other. It does not mean that you have to get a signed contract to touch my right breast. It does mean that you have to pay attention to whether or not I'm into it as you move your hand toward my right breast, and that if you can't tell, you have to ask. (Friedman 2011)

Of course, giving consent to any given activity involves having a certain amount of knowledge and curiosity about one's own body and one's own likes and dislikes. Neither of those are things that women⁴ are regularly taught about, either via media presentation (which tends very much towards the performance that Thorns talks about) or via sex education that they receive in school.⁵ This is also the reason why education is such an important and explicit part of the work of sex-positive feminists and pornographers. Their aim is to fill in the gaps and correct the misinformation that are the result of abstinence-only sex education and mainstream media.

15 Clear and enthusiastic consent is the overriding principle of sex-positivism, and it allows for the acceptance and inclusion of people of color, people of size, and people with any gender presentation or sexual orientation (including asexuality), as well as the acceptance of non -traditional relationships (such as all forms of non-monogamy) and sexual practices (such as BDSM). In accordance with this, sex-positivism also combats the stigmas associated with female sexuality, specifically the idea that women are naturally demure and passive, and that

⁴ Women are not the only ones who suffer under the perpetuation of these stereotypes. Plenty of men feel overwhelmed by the expectation to always be active and "up for it".

⁵ In the US, the majority of government funding available for sex education curriculums is earmarked for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Additionally, many states have laws that mandate that only these programs be taught.

women who enjoy their sexuality or have surpassed whatever the socially sanctioned number of sex partners is that day are deviant or “slutty”.

16 Given this philosophical and political background, it is only natural that some sex-positive feminist activists have been working at bringing all of these influences to the porn industry, and to create films that portray “safe, healthy, realistic and inclusive” sexuality.

17 Feminist pornography is as diverse an industry as mainstream pornography, and there are many different performers and producers who create a variety of films that cater to all sorts of different tastes. What all of the women in this business have in common is their dedication to positive and inclusive portrayals of sexuality, and their identification as feminists as well as their involvement in feminist activism. Tristan Taormino, perhaps one of the most prolific of the feminist pornographers, states this mission at the very top of her webpage, PuckerUp.com: she calls it “Tristan Taormino’s Sex Positive Salon”. Prominently placed on the site is also a link to an article on feminist porn, where she gives a summary of the relationship between feminism and pornography as well as her own genesis as both a feminist and a pornographer. In the article, she writes

Feminist porn is porn that empowers viewers, both women and men: it gives them information and ideas about sex. It inspires fantasy and adventure. It validates viewers when they see themselves or a part of their sexuality represented. It counteracts the other messages we get from society: sex is shameful, naughty, dirty, scary, dangerous, or it’s the domain of men, where only their desires and fantasies get fulfilled. It presents sex as joyful, fun, safe, mutual and satisfying. (Taormino 2011)

Aside from shooting films, Taormino is also the author and editor of several books and erotica anthologies, including how-to guides directed at women on anything from female ejaculation to anal sex. Additionally, she often speaks at conferences and conducts workshops.

18 One of such how-to guides is the movie *Tristan Taormino’s Expert Guide to Oral Sex, Part 2: Fellatio*. Released in 2007 through her own production company, *Smart Ass Productions*, this film is designed to be both pleasurable and informative. From the very beginning, it deviates from the expectations one would generally have of a pornographic movie. It neither starts with a perfunctory attempt at plot, nor *in media res* with a naked couple. Instead, the viewer is greeted by a classroom setting, with Taormino herself as the instructor. She is dressed modestly and conservatively in a tailored pantsuit, and joined by an audience that is also fully clothed. The members of this audience are women of varying ages, races and body types. Taormino, armed with flipcharts and diagrams, proceeds to explain male anatomy. At the end of this theoretical lesson, Taormino introduces to her audience two adult performers, and asks them to talk about their own personal experiences with fellatio, as

well as their own likes and dislikes. Only after this conversation does the movie finally turn to pornographic images proper.

19 The two performers undress, and start to give a practical demonstration of the theory. Audience and instructor remain in the room, however, and Taormino comments on the sex act from the off, giving hints and tips, and explaining the actions and their purpose. The performers stop short of the cum-shot, which has become a staple in mainstream pornographic movies, and Taormino rounds off the session with a few final comments. Thus, we see a woman in control of a pornographic movie in every element of the film: the title proclaims her an expert on the topic, the first scene introduces her as the teacher and thus authority figure, she dominates the sex act through her comments and suggestions, and she ends the scene before we are presented with its anticipated climax in shape of the cum-shot which, in traditional pornography, presents the ultimate proof of male dominance and sexual prowess.

20 The rest of the movie consists of scenes that present variations of the techniques and strategies mentioned by Taormino. Though these scenes are more traditional in some aspects (no audience is present in the room, the performers quickly undress and proceed to sex), they also differ in some major aspects. Firstly, each of the scenes starts off with a conversation between the two performers in which they talk about their experiences with fellatio and discuss their preferences. Secondly, the action is frequently paused and captions containing advice and hints appear on the screen. And thirdly, the couples in the scenes, though all heterosexual, present a variety of races and body types.

21 As this brief discussion shows, Taormino's instructional movies present a break with the traditions of mainstream pornography. Rather than portraying scripted and staged sex acts and adhering to a very narrow and normative view of sexuality, Taormino presents her performers as individuals with unique preferences and quirks, and gives them the room to explore and present their own sexuality.

22 In the depth and variety of her work, Taormino is no exception in the world of feminist pornography. Many of the women working in this field are engaged in many different projects and are not only producing films but also working as activists to push back against negative stereotyping and heteronormativity, in mainstream porn as well as mainstream media. The directors and producers also cover every point on the sexuality spectrum, from vanilla to kinky and from straight to queer. While Taormino focuses on heterosexual interactions, many others place an emphasis on queer sexuality.

23 One such representation of queer porn is given by Jiz Lee. Lee, who identifies as genderqueer, debuted in 2005 in the now classic film *The Crash Pad*. Unique to this film (and

the on-going series based on the film) is the fact that it features a very high ratio of people of color, as well as people who identify as genderqueer, including Jiz Lee and their then-partner Syd Blakovich, another prominent porn performer. This, in itself, is another aspect that is unique in the feminist porn scene in general and the *Crash Pad*-series in particular: rather than random pairings, it often shows scenes between friends and even lovers. This makes them appear much more organic and realistic, and also adds to the comfort levels of the performers.

24 Jiz themselves, like other expressly sex-positive performers, has been vocal about their sex-positive activist agenda. In an interview with the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, they say

I could write books and books on my thoughts on sex as a medium for social change and where this now fits within what could be defined as a renaissance of queer porn.[...] I think explicit queer sexuality on film will permeate the adult industry by opening dialogues about gender, sexuality, and sexual acts — queer porn can bring the seldom seen female-bodied authentic sexual response and pleasure to the screen [...]. (Lee 2009).

25 The movie *The Crash Pad* serves as another excellent example for the ways in which this brand of pornography breaks with the heteronormative and often sexist traditions of the genre. The eponymous crash pad is a house where people meet to have sex, but that only the initiated have access to. A limited number of keys exist, and no one can use their key more than seven times before they have to pass it on to someone else. That arrangement sets the scene, and pretty much takes care of the plot, which consists of various couples and groups having sex in the rooms of the crash pad.

26 The movie begins in the middle of a sex act involving two women, one white and one African-American, and a strap-on dildo. They are soon interrupted by Jiz Lee and another woman, and Lee is invited to join them. This scene undermines the standard porn narrative in several ways. Firstly, there is a diversity when it comes to body types and race that is not usually seen in pornography. Secondly, it is the woman coded as the most femme of the three who takes charge of the situation, giving directions and asking for what she needs. And thirdly, though the condom-use is not negotiated on-screen, both of the characters who wear strap-on dildos are shown using condoms.

27 The following sex scenes continue in this vein, showcasing women of various races, body types and gender expressions and placing an emphasis on pleasure and communication. In the second scene, especially, both partners stay in contact throughout, ask what the other wants and wait for explicit answers. The portrayal of an unusually high comfort-level and obvious fun finds its climax in the third scene, between Jiz Lee and their then-partner

Blakovich. The movie also presents an interesting twist at the end, when the performer of the last scene (a masturbation scene) waves at the camera. The camera closes in on the gesture and then zooms back, revealing a computer that shows the scene we just saw, through a camera trained on the kitchen of the crash pad. The person sitting in front of the computer is also a woman, which finally turns the heteronormative porn-paradigm on its head completely. Not only are all of the performers (at least biologically) female, but the scenes are also “directed” and consumed by a woman.

28 To be clear, the topic of porn remains a deeply problematic one, and the views on it cannot be neatly divided into pro-porn/anti-porn camps. The vast majority of pornography that is produced and circulated is the kind of mainstream pornography that is overwhelmingly heterosexist, that is focused on phallogentric power and pleasure, that perpetuates “unhealthy” ideas about women and sexuality and that supports the image of the ideal woman as surgically altered and sexually subservient. This kind of pornography has been, and continues to be, met with valid criticism by conservatives as well as liberals, including sex-positive feminists.

29 While there is a small but growing number of feminist, sex-positive pornographers, they at this point constitute only a small subset of the industry, and the average consumer can fulfill their needs without ever coming across a movie by Taormino or Jiz Lee.

30 However, I do think that feminist pornography presents an interesting and fresh perspective on this tricky subject. Feminist pornographers have carved out a niche for themselves in a very unlikely place, and they have effectively demonstrated that there are ways to engage with sexuality that are healthy and pleasurable for everyone involved. They provide a space where everything is optional except everyone’s enthusiastic consent and earnest desire to participate in sex acts that are mutually pleasurable. When contrasted with the regular narrative of sexuality that we are exposed to almost daily, that seems revolutionary in and of itself. And while this presentation is not front and center, it is freely available on the Internet for anyone who is looking for it, and it should provide some hope for anyone who is fed up with mainstream pornography and the way it has hijacked sexuality.

Works Cited

- Bright, Susie. "Andrea Dworkin has Died". 11 April 2005. *Susie Bright's Journal*. 20 January 2012.
- Chancer, Lynn S. "From Pornography to Sadomasochism: Reconciling Feminist Differences." *Annals of the American Academy of Social Sciences*, Vol. 571, Feminist Views of the Social Sciences (September 2000): 77-88.
- Cornell, Drucilla. *Feminism & Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. London: The Women's Press, 1979.
- Friedman, Jaclyn. "The (Nonexistent) Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Consequences of Enthusiastic Consent". 3 January 2011. *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*. 10 January 2012
- Lee, Jiz. "An Exciting Time for Queer Porn." 12 November 2009. San Francisco Bay Guardian Online. Interview by Juliette Tang. 11 January 2012.
- Levy, Ariel. *Female Chauvinist Pigs. Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. London: Pocket Books, 2006.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. "The Roar on the Other Side of Silence". *Feminism & Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 130-153.
- Taormino, Tristan. "What is Feminist Porn?". 2011. *PuckerUp.com: Tristan Taormono's Sex-Positive Salon*. 10 January 2012 < <http://puckerup.com/feminist-porn/what-is-fp/>>
- The Crash Pad*. Dir. Shine Louise Houston. Pink & White Productions: 2005. DVD.
- Thorn, Clarisse. "Interview with a Sex-Positive Feminist." 16 December 2011. *Feministe: In Defense of the Sanctimonious Women's Studies Set*. 10 January 2012
- Tristan Taormino's Expert Guide to Oral Sex, Part 2: Fellatio*. Dir. Tristan Taormino. Smart Ass Productions: 2007. DVD.