

Review

Tit-For-Tat Media – The contentious bodies and sex imagery of political activism

by Katrien Jacobs

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Pepe the Frog, mascot of the Euro-American (re-)surging white supremacist movements, has a Doppelgänger living on the other side of the world. In 2019, Pepe's genderfluid twin became the face of Anti-Extradition Movement in Hong Kong. With her analysis of the political renaissance of the Pepe meme, among others, Katrien Jacobs, associate professor at the Cultural Studies Institute of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, impactfully breaks down the differences and revealing commonalities in the gendered discourses of nationalist and nativist activism across the political spectrum at the same time. *Tit-For-Tat Media* (2022) was researched and written over the course of four years (2018–2021), spanning the beginnings, climax, and aftermath of the Hong Kong protest years. In this multidimensional (on- and offline) ethnographic study of sexual discourses and imageries, Jacobs – a leading scholar of sexuality, gender, digital cultures, and social movements – dives deep into the subject matter. Firsthand observations, conducted undercover on various Social Media platforms, as well as first- and secondhand interviews with activists provide valuable insight in the interrelated dynamics of digital and analogue discourses and how they engage sexuality and gender. *Tit-For-Tat Media* reveals, that all too often women's bodies become the surface for and object of the imagery and vocabulary of the sexually charged, even 'pornified' (Jacobs 2022, 2), and gendered discourses of various nationalisms. Following a concise introduction, chapters two and three further reveal that the right-wing sphere of the American and European contemporary new-right movements heavily impose hyper-patriarchal gender roles not only on female but also on male bodies as vehicles for white nationalist ideologies. These hyper-masculine male body imageries, Jacobs observes, seem to constantly serve a narrative of grandiose male heroism and simultaneously one of self-victimisation.

Jacobs reveals the historic fascist undertones of the heavily gendered visual discourses of the far-right movements in the US and Western Europe in chapter three, 'Feminity, Fluidity, and Floods.' With Leni

Riefenstahl's movie *Triumph of Will* (1935) as an example of fascist visual imagery and the staging of the masses, Jacobs derives a fascist narrative of leadership through feminisation and subsequent rape of the enemy's masses (Jacobs 2022, 43). Jacobs' deductions are in line with Susan Sontag's arguments from her essay 'Fascinating Fascism' (1975), which included a review of Riefenstahl's later literary work *The Last of the Nuba* (1974) (Sontag 1975, 12). While the exploration of Riefenstahl's lens is not completely new, Jacobs reveals that this fetishisation of hyper-masculine bodies also takes hold in the new-right imageries and discourses. Moreover Jacobs observes the same ongoing trend penetrates contemporary Flemish LGBTQ+ groups, especially the gay leather BDSM scenes, which according to one of her interviewees have 'become more and more right-wing' (Jacobs 2022, 26–28, 32). In her analysis of Riefenstahl's fascist cinematographic lens, Jacobs exposes a paradoxical yet historical tension of right-wing visual discourses: Between the staging of hyper-masculinity (and -femininity) and persistence of an innate naturalness of traditional gender roles on the one hand, and the fascist cult of the body on the other hand, which all too frequently tilts towards the homoerotic. Attacks by right-wing groups in Belgium on transgressive sexualities and gender identities, do not defy the fact that their own fascist visual language has historically lent itself to pornographic media and costume of the BDSM and gay scenes in various countries all over the world (Sontag 1975, 12).

The liberation, or cultural appropriation, of the Pepe the Frog Meme in 2019 from American incel-icon (incel, a misogynistic online community of self-proclaimed involuntary celibates, had quickly hijacked Matt Furie's frog character when it was first published in 2005) to genderfluid emotional catalyst of the Hong Kong protesters, as Jacobs illustrates in chapter four 'Pepe the Frog,' indicates that visual imagery is not necessarily bound to only one specific discourse. Artworks like the simple yet emotionally expressive frog character 'Pepe' with its humanoid body, big eyes and an even bigger smile, can be readily employed to any kind of politics regardless of the artists' intentions. For the incel community Pepe became the figurehead of violent antisemitic, racist, and misogynistic ideologies, while for Hongkongers to this day 'Pepe' embodies the protest fighters' emotional interior and the revolt against an inevitable Mainland takeover. The same is true for the female body and female nudity which are often used as projection surface for far-right and misogynistic

discourses, and yet at the same time these bodies can be reclaimed in an empowering way by the women inhabiting them. Hong Kong protesters prove that in their usage of nudity and a re-appropriation of sexual hate speech, usually received in, but not limited to online spaces, they are able to raise feminist issues within the protest movement. This embodiment of resilience and resistance through vulnerability, however comes at the cost of backlash and attacks, sometimes even from within the protest movement (Jacobs 2022, 89).

Shining a light on the other side of the protests, Jacobs employed online-ethnographic methods to investigate the gender and sexuality discourses of Mainland Chinese netizens, as well as official propaganda from the Communist Party and adjacent organisations. Hyper-cute, usually eroticised and infantilised, male and female characters are appropriated not only by contemporary youth cultures and fandoms, but also for national educational purposes. In doing so, the Communist leadership aims to gently stir public opinions towards the government and create a fandom-like dynamic between the leader figure Xi Jinping (习近平), seen as symbolic of the nation, and the citizens as his followers (Jacobs 2022, 95–96). Similarly, to the Euro-American context of nationalist propaganda, the political nationalist discourse in China makes use of patriarchal imageries in which the nation is seen as the protective father figure (sometimes gentle leader other times noble warrior), whereas the ‘other’ (foreigners, sexual minorities, Hongkongers) is infantilised, an outlier, a threat, a rebellious child (Jacobs 2022, 98–99). These gendered imageries, Jacobs notes, are not always readily accepted by the netizen communities. Jiangshanjiao, the hyper-cute icon, created by the Communist Youth League in 2020, was immediately disregarded by Chinese Mainland netizens. Leaning into Japanese manga aesthetics, the figure of Jiangshanjiao features big doe eyes, a youthful and extremely skinny body, long black hair in space buns, and wears a blue and red outfit with a qipao-style collar. Netizens quickly deemed this one-dimensional and supremely patriarchal character a betrayal of the real conditions of women in China, suitable only to the male gaze and certainly not to the taste of the predominantly female online communities

she was meant to emotionally engage (Jacobs 2022, 101–102).

Katrien Jacobs’ investigation of the visual-sexual turn in discourses of political movements, on- and offline, explores in detail the visual languages across the spectrum of online activism. The book draws bridges between historic and contemporary visual discourses of the Western far-right movements and the visual discourses of the Hong Kong protest movements as well as their counterparts in Mainland China. Meaningfully supplemented with images, interviews, and online-ethnographic research, *Tit-For-Tat Media* cleverly unveils the paradox of white supremacist fear-mongering against gender and gendered language situated in their own hyper-sexualised and hyper-gendered political discourse. The limitations of the book are its geographical and temporal scope. However interrelated, the case studies are specific to the Euro-American context, specifically Belgium, Germany, and North America, and the unique tensions between Hongkong and Mainland China in the twenty-first century. The book’s exploration into the past origins of visual discourses only reaches back to the early twentieth century. And despite its own criticism of hyper-gendered discourses, *Tit-for-Tat Media* seems to narrow its exploration of gender to a binary framework. Nevertheless, the research presented in *Tit-For-Tat Media* is a daring and rich snapshot of the contemporary visual culture of nationalist discourses. By shining a light on often overlooked or dismissed visual imageries of gender and sexuality in the context of political activism and movements, Jacobs’ research offers a highly valuable addition to the field of Visual Studies.

REFERENCE

- Sontag, S. 1975. “Fascinating Fascism.” *The New York Review*, Accessed February 6, 1975. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1975/02/06/fascinating-fascism/>.