Summary of Wendy Chun's *Control and Freedom*

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Introduction

In Control and Freedom, *Power and the paranoia in the age of fiber optics*, Wendy Chun explores how the internet, as a commercial medium that thrives on control, has also been conceived as a medium of freedom. According to Chun this conflation of control and freedom is characteristic for our current political situation where information technologies have become more ubiquitous, commercial and distributed over private users and corporations. Deleuze already showed in his work on the control society how such developments, with the emergence of the internet as it most important representative, challenge the traditional disciplinary workings of society. Where in the era of the cold war dangers and enemies could easily be mentally mapped, they have now become as invisible and uncertain as the new technologies they supposedly use. Furthermore these technologies also open up our private domains, resulting in a paranoia that makes us unjustifiable look for freedom in dreams of gated communities and control enabled by paradoxically these same technologies. These paranoid misunderstandings of information networks and the subversion of freedom restrict us from really enabling the democratic potentials of network technologies. These delusional rhetoric's currently lead to paranoia and actions that undermine the democracy and freedom we try to achieve and protect.

Chun responds with this work, to Katherine Heyle's call for media specific criticism, as in 'engaging visual *and* nonvisual aspects of networked machines-human and machine readings-as well as their economic and political impact', by examining four layers of networked media: hardware, software, interface and extra medial representations.[1] Along this way Chun explores how the internet emerged technologically and culturally as a medium through a particular series of events and contradictory discourses. By exposing these shaping forces and by subsequently criticizing them Chun allows for a better understanding of the effects and practices they engender. Through discourses around race, sexuality and freedom Chun reveals where the power of the internet lies, manifested in the 'linking of freedom and democracy to control, and the justification of this linking

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[1] Chun, 2006: p. 16

through technologically determinist explanations.[2] Chun's critic on today's deterministic attitude on information technologies as bringers of equality are not mend to say that such technologies have no power of their own, but rather that they alone can not solve political problems, and that the cost of such attempts is too high.[3]

Why Cyberspace?

This chapter shows how our notion of Internet as a 'Cyberspace' is a weird one. Although the term "Cyberspace" originated from William Gibson's the science fiction classic *Neuromancer,* it has also become a synonym for the internet in theoretical writings and juridical legislation. It brought a conceptualization of the internet as a technology where science fiction and reality collided and time, space and place seem to function in particular ways. 'Cyberspace, as a virtual nonplace, made the Internet so much more than a network of networks: it became a place in which things happened, in which users' actions separated from their bodies, and in which local standards became impossible to determine. It thus freed users from their locations.'[4]

This made the internet in our minds a perfect frontier, where users can navigate through as powerful agents invisible and freed from their physical bodies. Early internet theory did not distance itself from this mythical concept. Manovich's theory of the internet user as a 'flaneur' describes a powerful agent exploring a world while remaining invisible by carefully manipulating its own digital traces. This notion of invisibility by manipulating data induces paranoia 'for can not someone else with more knowledge and skill track the user?'[5] Chun shows that when looking at the actual working of the internet as a network of networks that functions through protocols like TCP/IP the, many of the mythical connotations of the 'cyberspace' become difficult to maintain. On a software level internet browsers like Internet Explorer and Netscape do treat the user as a captain on a ship who is in command and decides alone where he or she will navigate to today. In reality most of the communication processes, that are taking place are actually invisible

[2] Chun, 2006: p. 25
[3] Chun, 2006: p. 25
[4] Chun, 2006: p. 38
[5] Chun, 2006: p. 62

and out of control of the internet user. For the internet to work as a mass medium, computers are continually sending packages and involuntary representations on which their user has no control. To use the internet therfore also means to be used. This is why the internet is such an invasive medium, to use it means to be vulnerable. Only seldom an internet user is confronted with this reality, for instance the cases where a loop of advertisement and porn pop-up makes "free surfing" impossible and eliminates the feeling of being in control. The user should not be considered as a passing flaneur, since on the internet it is impossible to be invisible. 'Online, everybody automatically produces traces; every search produces a return address'.[6] Therefore one should consider internet users as gawkers rather then flaneurs. A gawker is never invisible but always part of the spectacle and the ongoing flood of information. Promoters and conceptualizers of the 'Cyberspace' always try to avoid the possible paranoid doubt and the vulnerability inherent to the use of the internet by emphasizing on the agency of the user and not the server.

The other issue that Chun addresses in this chapter is how the privatization of the internet in 1994-1995 that led to the mass popularity of the medium changes the 'space' of the internet from publicly (state) owned public space to privately owned public accessible spaces. A transformation that turned notions of public versus private into open versus closed. According to Chun this transformation 'poses the most significant challenge to democracy today'.[7]

Screening pornography

To explore how democracy is at stake through the above described forces that shape the internet Chun looks at the "great sex panic of 1995" reaction in regulations through the passing of the Cultural Decency Act by the U.S federal court. According to Chun the panic of internet porn originated from the feeling of not being in control over pornographic content. Users were supposed to be powerful agents on the internet but could not seem to resist the invasiveness of the pornographic content. The focus in the

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[6] Chun, 2006: p. 61
[7] Chun, 2006: p. 38

discourse came to lie on content that was either bad or good and the protection of children, the coal mine canaries of our society, because of their vulnerability and their lack of agency. If only the 'bad' content was gone, the internet could truly enlighten us. The U.S Government and federal courts reacted on the panic by putting the burden of regulation of this 'bad' content in the hands of commercial companies with the CDA. After all, the internet is a commercial public space. Through the CDA cyberporn companies became harbingers of social regulation on the internet, through creditcard validation and payment systems, instead of greedy profiteers that closed off information that should (or should not) be freely available. 'Pornography therefore was, and still is, central to the two issues that map the uneasy boundary between public and private: regulation and commerce'.[8] The pornographic content on the invasive privatized internet 'made media, government and commercial companies debate seriously and publicly the status of the Internet as mass medium'. Pornography also paved the way for the "Information Superhighway" by pioneering the commercial potentials of the Internet, necessary for the initiation of the 'Internet gold rush' or 'dotcom craze'. The paranoid discourses leading the panic showed little understanding of the nature of the internet and the way it can enable freedom and democracy. To understand this, the myth of the internet user as an invisible and private invulnerable agent must be critically reviewed. Being vulnerable on the internet to certain content and the freedom it's use enables, are two sides of the same coin. The desire to close off content labeled as 'bad' to enlighten the internet makes little sense when the democratic functioning of the medium works by opening its users up within a Habermaskian public space, where ideas are free floating. Furthermore this imagined technological deterministic solution of payment systems to guard kids from pornographic or other bad content masks the educational responsibility of parents/educators and the possibility of questioning the innocence and helplessness of these porn browsing children. This shifting from private/public to open/closed shows how power in Deleuzian terms shifts when societies evolve from a disciplinary to a controlled one. On the internet the panoptical gaze fails as an instrument of discipline since boundaries between private/public, visible/invisible become impossible to maintain and the visibility of the individual becomes a-synchronic.

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[8] Chun, 2006: p. 79

Awareness of our vulnerability and how it is inherently entwined with freedom is therefore essential for achieving and protecting this freedom.

"It's up to them to discover what they're being made to serve, just as their elders discovered, not without difficulty, the telos of the disciplines. The coils of a serpent are even more complex that the burrows of a molehill." (Deleuze, Society of Control, 1990)

Scenes of empowerment

This chapter deals with race as the domain to explore internet as a medium of control and freedom. By using MCI's commercial "Anthem" (1997) as an example, Chun shows how the internet has been promoted as a "cyberspace" where only the mind counts, since the user leaves its physical body behind. The commercial in a way naturalize racism. By reducing racism to a problem of a visible body that now has the ability to conceal it self, it locates the problem of racism not at behavior of individuals and institutions but at the discriminated. The discourse of the commercial paradoxically perpetuates and reaffirms minorities as bodies branded by otherness, which actually is the racist problem the internet company supposedly offers a solution to.

Habermas stated that the market destroyed rationale-critical debate by replacing it with consumption. The commercial offers its viewers the possibility to buy a prosthetic ID to get access into the realm of rational critical "debate" as a non marked body. This is done to redefine the internet from a pornographic badland to a marketplace of ideas, attractive for corporate investments. The internet makes it possible to once more believe in liberal and consumer equality. A discrimination free world, governments can not bring, can be brought by the commercialized internet. The myth of the user as empowered agent that conceals it self is the way one of the most compromising media to date is sold as freedom. Statistics however show us that the Internet is far from this imagined ethnical and racial place for equality. Predominantly white people have access to it.

The digital divide is thus of no problem of corporations, since they can use the idea of a division between potential and actual empowerment to present themselves as the

solution.[9] The mythical role of liberating marked minorities from inequality put on by commercial internet companies is shaping political action on a global and national level. UN panels urge the access to the internet in undeveloped countries so that also they can function as equals in the digital age. But what is actually the value of this access? To just accept access as the solution of equality is too easy. If we really are interested in ways of how ICT can enable equality we need to look at how they can be used to foster social and economic justice.[10] By reducing this problem to one of access one neglects the existence in disparities between types of access, which will result in a solidification of the existing structures of disparity. Efforts that just focus on access as the solution create "junior users" that will be structurally depended on their "motherland". Furthermore they obfuscate and exacerbate the problem of debt refinancing.[11]

On a level of the nation the same discourse is dominant. For solution to the digital divide all eyes are on the internet access of minorities. Cheskin writes in The Digital world of the US Hispanic that Hispanics are a lucrative overlooked internet costumer category. Race is here addressed as an attractive consumer base category. Chun states that such a mentality proliferates race. Race and ethnicity becomes a consumer category and is constructed as a category to be consumed: 'it encourages one to celebrate, or identify with, a race by indulging in the same "authentic" pleasures.'[12] "Through this new cosmopolitanism, one avoids the complex subjectivity of the other: the postmodern (virtual) subject appends various racial features to itself in order to "pass" as the other, with no regards to historical specificity or social process.[13] This principle has made race become a pornographic database.

Still not every sign of race on the internet has to be racist. Also consumption doesn't have to be racist. As Lacau and Mouffe noted, the interpellation of minorities as equal consumers can stimulate the emergence of struggles against old forms of subordination. Since the myth of internet as a racial utopia, that ensures inequality, is based on offering a space of virtual equality the antiracist solution is then to do the opposite by refusing to commodify or erase race.

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[9] 147
[10] 152
[11] 152
[12] 154
[13] 154

Orienting the future

In this chapter Chun puts the focus back on how "cyberspace" is portrayed in science fiction with the help of a deep analysis of Gibson's *Necromancer* and Mamoru Oshii's animated feature film *Ghost in the Shell.* Chun's objective is to move away from just accepting cyberpunk fiction as "originating" what we call "cyberspace". Her objective is to question how such a conflation could take place and if it's desirable. Gibson himself claims his work is only about the already past "present", the time he wrote and published his book. Chun insists that his work and other cyberpunk literature are also relevant for the present 'postmodern' times, since the visions and desires that they shows are still alive in the forces that shape the internet today. Chun argues that the key of cyberpunk literature's power lies in the seductive way in which they make the navigation and control of information networks possible, through 'high-tech Orientalism'.[14] In these fictional writings the orient other, invisible and uncontrollable through their advanced technologies, becomes again controllable through an objectification that reduces it to visualized data. In Gibson's *Negromancer* the main character is a free spirited 'digital cowboy' that likes to 'jack-in' to an orientalized (by Asian brand names) 'cyberspace' that is visually mappable and navigable. This way the 'digital cowboy' can prevail in a scary, disorientating technological world through navigation and classification of the social/racial other, 'reducing them to their markers of difference'.[15]

"Difference as a simple database category grounds cyberspace as a "navigable space"; trough racial difference we steer, and sometimes conquer"[16]

Thus cyberpunk fictions do not envision a world where differences are solved for the common goal of a 'happy consensus-driven space' but rather a world 'pocketmarked by racial and cultural differences that are ultimately readable and negotiable'.[17]

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[14] Chun, 2006: p. 177
[15] Chun, 2006: p. 63
[16] Chun, 2006: p. 63
[17] Chun, 2006: p. 62

Although cyberpunk fantasizes about the all powerful disembodied user in cyberspace, it also shows how being vulnerable and being used by using can be pleasurable. Since the 'digital cowboy' is dependent on the oriental technologies, to be this empowered hero that conquers through cyberspace.

"Did you know that the first Matrix was designed to be a perfect human world? Where none suffered and where everyone would be happy. It was a disaster. No one would accept the program. Entire crops were lost... ...human beings define their reality through suffering and misery. The perfect world was a dream that your primitive cerebrum kept trying to wake up from."
(Mr. Anderson, The Matrix, 1999)

Control and Freedom

In this concluding chapter Chun picks up the control-freedom argument and links it to the emerging of a generalized paranoia. This generalized paranoia is explained through the reusing of MCI "Anthemn" commercial as an example and Lacan's concept of 'paranoid knowledge'. According to Chun the MCI commercial is driven by a jealous and paranoid logic. 'Hurry up and get online because all these other people already want or have it' and you don't want to be left behind.[18] This paranoia works as a never ending loop of desiring technologic objects, because the fear of possible technology that the other is possibly using to get the advantage over you never ends. Lacan goes even as far as stating that this constant desire of the object of the other's desire is what differentiated humans from animals. Needless to say the events of 11 September did not make us less paranoid. Terrorism took over the role of pornography as the 'signal danger posed by the Internet'[19]. The danger shifted from bad content to bad people. Terrorists became the most feared others, who are possibly using technology against us that they don't suppose to have. With this notion ICANN 'critical reassessed the Internet', measures would be taken to prevent an "electronic Pearl Harbor". The Senate happily passed on laws to

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[18] Chun, 2006: p. 250
[19] Chun, 2006: p. 255

allow new electronic surveillance measures. The discourse then became; information technologies are dangerous because dangerous people are using them. By emphasizing on 'the who', accidents and vulnerability are obfuscated and the necessity of these "safety" measures are constructed through the fear of the other who is always there being a threat. Along the same line prevention then becomes a technological problem rather then a political one, with as its solution supposedly fail proof surveillance technologies. This delusional rhetoric that thrives on and perpetuates paranoia and conflates probability and possibility (everyone is always a suspect) is the key to control-power. Chun shows us exactly their working and how delusional they are by an indebt analysis of Face Recognition Technologies (FRT). FRT is being sold to the public as enhancing their civil liberties since they reduce the need for racial and ethnic stereotyping. This control-freedom rhetoric assumes a fail safe technological solution, a promise that is inherently bound to fail. FRT bypasses human subjectivity by inhumanly screening everyone and comparing them to a set of known "terrorists". A terrorist can therefore only be recognized by FRT because they already were marked and added to a database as terrorist beforehand. Such a database however is too big to be manageable by FRT or any other technology and would never be sufficient since new terrorists are recruited every day. The best strategy for a terrorist to be hidden from currently employed surveillance technologies, according to Chun, seems to be within the mass of data these technologies compile. This failing of surveillance technologies creates a viscous circle, because it induces rather then reduces general paranoia. Paranoia feeds just as happily of a perceived failing of a symbolic authority as it feeds of experiencing vulnerability of the autonomous self. This paranoid mind-set, where freedom is only understandable as complete autonomy of the subject, established through a controlled safe-place is the essence of control-freedom. A vicious state of being that is perpetuated by the disillusionment it can only offer. Freedom cannot be controlled, because it exceeds control. The conflation of freedom with safety reduces freedom to 'an innocuous property of subjectivity'.[20] Freedom comes with no guarantees and enables both good and evil. Coming to terms with both sides of freedom and critically engaging all four layers of information networks opens the possibility towards a different future, according to Chun.

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[20] Chun, 2006: p. 291

"To face this future and seize the democratic potential of fiberoptic networks, we must reject current understandings of freedom that make it into a gated community writ large. We must explore the democratic potential of communications technologies- a potential that stems from our vulnerabilities rather than our control."[21]

References

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Control and Freedom. Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics.* MIT Press: Cambridge, 2006.

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[21] Chun, 2006: p. 297