

*Control and Freedom; power and paranoia in the age of fiber optics* by W. Chun.

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### Introduction

Was or is the Internet a tool of freedom or control? Does it self-enable greater self-control or surveillance? *Control and freedom: power and paranoia in the age of fiber optics* argues that these questions and their assumptions are not only misguided but also symptomatic of the increasingly normal paranoid response to and of power.

Chun discusses the Internet as a mass medium, which is sold as a race-free utopia, as a 'theory come true', and critiques this view.

Furthermore, she examines the relationship between control, freedom and sexuality/paranoia, where in terms of Foucault, sexuality is the secret to power/knowledge (p11). Definitions on both terms are given:

**Control** is based on the French 'contreroule', that copy of an account, of the same quality and content as the original. This control gives users greater access to each others reproductions.

**Freedom** is based on Frei (Sanskrit) meant all the heads of family. So, those who are ones friends. And those who are no slaves. Liberty is linked to human subjectivity; freedom is not. (p10)

Chun wants to understand the linkage between freedom and democracy to control, that is often constructed via techno-deterministic explanations. Against recent trends in new media studies to view new media as the coming together of computation and media (ignoring the utopian/dystopian imaginings of cyberspace), this book insists on the importance of extra-medial representation (p23). Where technology has become (once again) the solution for political problems, Chun does not want to simply debunk this 'theory-come-true', but rather explore their effects and the practices they engender.

### Why cyberspace?

This chapter examines the 'weirdness' of cyberspace by looking at the ways in which it, as a heterotopia, plays with notions of place and space. She then discusses the congruities and tensions between cyberspace and internet protocols in order to explore the ways in which the internet is public. (p 38)

Cyberspace functions as a utopia because it enables one to see oneself where one is not. And it functions as a heterotopia because it actually exists. Cyberspace enables virtual passing, where this passing is explained as a redirecting, re-orienting of the self.

### *Controlling code*

Chun argues that the Internet is public because it is a protocol (which is synonymous for code), and protocol can be altered, shaped and changed.

The effectiveness of censorship depends on local configurations and routing protocols both of which have been dramatically affected by the privatization of the Internet. (p 66). About code, some scholars and their statements are mentioned:

Where open-source guru Lessig states that perfect control signals the demise of democracy, Galloway says that the principle of the net is control, not freedom.

Chun argues that control and freedom are not opposites (...) control is the *matrix* that enables freedom as openness. Chun defines her matrix as following: Control is the matrix that enables freedom as openness, where openness itself may not be democracy, but the openness enables by communication protocols can point towards this other freedom, this experience of (rigorous) freedom. By analyzing a corporate history of fibre-optics, cyberspace, pornography and race, Chun want to show how this freedom is under threat and how we must shift our focus in order to regain this freedom.

### Screening Pornography

Rather than explore the utopian possibilities of a space in which anything is possible, by refusing this myth, Chun claims that the Internet can enable something like democracy. She emphasizes the necessity to deal with questions of democracy in terms of vulnerability and fear. Resisting this vulnerability leads to the twinning of control and freedom – a twinning that depends on the conflation of information with knowledge and democracy with security (127). The post-mass medium does not only form more control or freedom but it does something else... it points up our new vulnerabilities. The argument is about how the Internet and surrounding discourse is a reflection to our vulnerabilities.

Chun is warning for both utopian and dystopian ideas (extreme perspectives might harm or effect democracy) This book is an analyses of hopes and fears instead of an analysis of what controls freedom.

### Scenes of Empowerment

Chun examines how corporations sought to blind users to their own constitutive vulnerability- the fact that in order to use, one is used, and that one's online interactions are fundamentally open- by conflating racial and technological empowerment, color-and technology-blindness. (130)

By analyzing two commercials on one side and Mongrel projects as critical art on the other, questions of the image 'the internet' as an open, race free public space are dealt with. Also, a kind of periodization is made, in showing how this image has changes after 9/11, where this happy place has made way for an extreme paranoia, due to the melting of security with freedom.

### *Corporate view*

The corporate view is that of glorifying the power of the mouseclick, transforming Internet from pornographic badlands to a user-controlled utopia, where the Internet turns every spectator into a spectacle (130).

Telecommunications companies state that now, a user can transcend the physical limitations of your own body, opening up a marketplace for ideas and possibilities. Technology makes it possible to believe once more in liberal and consumer equality. Moreover, the Internet is emancipatory, freeing oneself from one's body, also neutralizes racism due to this disembodiment; "there is no race"- race itself is racist. (p 132). The internet becomes separate but equal. Through the display of flesh (flesh that the Internet supposedly makes irrelevant) the televisual fantasy of the user as super agent emerges (136).

### *Chuns critique*

The corporate scenes of empowerment did not seek to get more raced others on the internet. Rather they sought to convince "the general public" that the internet was a safe and happy place. (147) The internet as a race-free utopia (and the user as super-agent) relies on, perpetuates, and solidifies the very stereotypes it claims to erase. The scenes of empowerment have helped make race simultaneously a consumer and

pornographic category, where virtual fluidity comes at the cost of real-life rigidity (135). Corporations offer a unearthly solution to inequality, selling one of the most compromising media to date as freedom (144)

### *Why is access so important?*

By defining technologically produced racial equality as the 'ideal', they (corporations) argue for increased technology adaptation until such racial (consumer) equality is reached, effectively giving themselves an unending 'mandate' (147).

Narratives of the digital divide and digital empowerment form a circle that circumvents questions about the value of information, or the value of access alone, since the Internet (redefined through issues of social justice) becomes inherently valuable and desirable (147).

Next, Chun mentions Informationology (information is knowledge), which conflates data with power and endows values to useless non-objects. The assumption that information technology represents a global public good relies on a naive reading of the current technology that deliberately ignores the intellectual property laws endorsed in this very document (150).

Chun: Access and information content production are important. Alone, however, they are not enough to address inequality but enough to sustain it.

ICT does not automatically mean more democracy (152).

### *Digital divide*

Corporations have no problems with the digital divide because they can keep presenting themselves as being "the solution"(147). Even the UN is behind this seemingly innocent strategy: "governments of developing countries and countries in transition need to nurture and support the private sector by providing institutional support, reducing barriers to entry, developing sources of financing and helping create and expand markets through tax incentives and export promotion zones etc".

Chun: "Nurture and support" means selling national telecommunications to foreign corporations. (148)

As a counter-movement, the Mongrel project is mentioned. A good example of a critical view towards access and race within internet, by stating racism as a global national heritage. Mongrel seeks to bring out how constructions of race in the form of

mental images are much more than simple indexes of biological or cultural sameness'. (p 162), playing with relation ideology and software, race as a database category. Still, Chun argues we have to keep seeing the Internet as a public space. An important step is to investigate disembodiment: The internet ... offers a space of virtual equality and autonomy, where domination stems from one's own body. In doing so, it makes one's body something to be consumed - it makes one's race a commodity in order to erase it'.

### *Chun on democracy*

Within a democracy, people do not have a voice as individual, but are becoming abstractions, where the individual is disembodied and turned into a statistic of the crowd. The internet does not, through its town halls or chat rooms or through its disembodiment, enable publicity as imagined by the Enlightenment nor do its protocols make its networks transparent. It does threaten a publicity that, as it makes irrelevant the distinction between public and private, enables something like democracy - an ideological polarization around control and freedom.

### Orientalism

In Orientalism, U.S. and japan cyberpunk make electronic spaces comprehensible and pleasurable through Orientalizing others and other spaces.

Via two movies, Chun analyses how two different societies deal with vast growing new technologies. From these technologies, new utopias and distopias emerge. A form that both scares and attracts us within the field of sci-fi, is cyberpunk and manga. Cyberspace can be seen as a literary movement that swept the world of science fiction in the mid to late 1980s. The famous Sprawl trilogy by Vancouver author William Gibson, (*Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*) is the canonical example of the genre, which emphasizes a gritty, streetwise view of technology, set in a near-future dystopia. Gibson's notions of a ubiquitous global network based on virtual reality interfaces, which he named cyberspace, were an integral part of his books, and his ideas have proved very influential with designers of CMC systems.

Both movie examples Chun discusses, create an East in order to create a cyberspace. U.S. cyberpunk makes future Japanese in order to effect cognitive dissonance... Japanese anime show U.S Multinationals are to blame (p 211).

In both movies, utopian/distopian ideas are shown, with a relation to today's 'everyday' world; this can be seen in certain aesthetic elements (sound of phone, recognizable streets, normal clothes etc.). Both movies act as a representation of hopes and fears that live now. The future in cyberpunk world, no matter how astonishingly technological, is always shockingly recognizable (p183). Within both movies, differences between cultures and racial differences are transformed. The clash between white/black, have & have-nots towards is transformed to a clash between cyborgs and humans. The anime cyborg-subjectivity makes us disembodied, and makes us identify with computerization (p233).

The most important markers in both films are racial and ethnic. The combination of jargon and foreign and make-up brand names gives the impression that this world should be knowable, or that some reader who knows should exist or emerge. Also, Japaneseness becomes humaneness. Where humaneness is mapped on Japanese culture, technology and global multinationals are mapped on the U.S.

The thorough analysis Chun that has performed, leads to the concluding point that the internet can only be portrayed as a space of mind if there is an accompanying Orientalizing of difference, if there is an accompanying display of Orientalized bodies (p244). The binary of disembodied mind on one hand, and disembodied Orientalized other, on the other breaks down real-time communication (p244). This binary does not break down because the orientalized other becomes a subject, but because the boundary between self and other, self and self, freedom and control, begins to collapse (p245).

Her larger argument is that we need to analyze the dichotomy between control & freedom. Cyberpunk represents both at the same time, thus gets beyond this contrast. Getting back to Chun's definition of the matrix, she is trying to substitute the control-freedom discussion. She is looking for representations that are more useful than the paranoid fantasies of total control or freedom. (Where one can question; is cyberpunk that important?, Are there no other cultural or technological examples to look into) How else to think about the internet, else than the freedom/control nexus in order to create openness. Cyberpunk is an example.

## Control and Freedom

In the closing chapter, Chun takes a broader, encompassing view on the matter discussed. Thus far, Chun argued that different and often conflicting agoraphobic cover stories – which combines freedom and control - underpin representations of fiber-optic networks as public. All these narratives assume that individuals precede public spaces, so that vulnerabilities result from contact with corrosive public air. Fiber optics expose and involve us with others before we emerge as users.

In Keenan's words: fiber optics allow for publicity, and publicity functions as a language; language allows for presentation and representation.

Chun goes further, by stating that fiber optics are more than merely a language, they act as a language that cannot be seen or heard. Where classical media studies assume computer-mediated communication, it actually is on its own, only sporadically allowing humans to read it; it creates an archive that defies our senses.

Moreover, users are not operating individually; they actually being used.

Chun phrases that cyberspace is a literary attempt to narrativize, map, to know this seemingly unwelcome public (p250). In the attempt to exploit freedom via a market place (the internet, in this case) is to destroy the very freedom one claims of protecting. This protection stems from paranoia. In order to explain where this comes from, Chun quotes Lacan, who states that “all human knowledge stems from the dialectic of jealousy” and, that “the object of human interest is the object of the other's desire”. Eventually, this paranoid knowledge comes from the mirror stage; where a child first recognizes its own reflection, jealousy of this image sneaks in. This concept is integrated in early internet advertisements; to not be jacked in the information highway, is to be left behind.

An historical analysis learns that after 9/11, the image of the internet (or cyberspace? Chun now mixes up these terms) altered from a happy, participatory place to a place of threat, where security becomes the only passage to freedom. As a result, paranoia is gaining strength. And, for the paranoid, there is always meaning (to expand technologies in this case). This drives the construct of prevention as a technological, rather than a political task (p 257). A consequence of this techno-driven construct is a human reaction to an inhuman mass of information that belies on rational analysis, being paranoia.

Lacan links freedom to paranoia, where in the construct of a ‘free private space, this space is actually destroying freedom. The discourse (on freedom, resp.), precisely

because it is personal and vague, produces resignation and abandonment of human rights (p261), where this is a discourse of the alter ego, that does not want to adjust to reality. (hence Chun's analysis of spectating 'the other'). Chun makes this point to explain the drive of the current combination of freedom with security. This makes us accept more and more invasive, yet painless- technologies (p263). In a metaphor of de-colonialisation, Chun argues, that freedom as something one cannot want is the key to control as freedom.

Next, face recognition technologies and webcams are discussed to make the point that a) it is never clear what a computer actually 'sees' and b) that every observation achieves the opposite of its goal; concealment instead of openness. This induces paranoia. In viewing webcams as democratizing media, it shows that we are still existing equals in front of a camera, where a shift has taken place from "I think, therefore I am" to "I am seen, therefore I am".

### *Chun on Freedom*

Chun has stated thus far the ways in which control-freedom has thrived on a paranoid knowledge that focuses on the technological rather than the political, and that relies on racial profiling. (p 290). Freedom has more to it than its often-metaphorical meaning. Freedom exceeds rather than complements control.

The notion of shared non-displaced space grounds the founding of the new world as frontier and the erasure of native peoples. Freedom is a spacing that constitutes existence; it is not the lack of relation, but the very possibility of relation; it cannot be separated from fraternity or equality. Freedom does not produce anything; it is a self-initiating being. The dream of an ever-giving, never displacing well of generosity uncannily resonates with the Internet as infinite capitalism. 'Freedom entails a decision of life and death' because biopower has been made symbolic, if not symbolic. Now, sexuality is just one tool in the arsenal of biopower.

Also, a link is made to Kittlers' claim that humans no longer have a singular claim to language, but it is moving towards machines, where programmability replaces free will. Not willing to go that far, Chun states that we do have a role in creating machines and their languages in the future. In order to do so, we must reject current understandings of freedom that make it into a gated community and we must explore the democratic potential of communications technologies, that stems from vulnerability rather than control; we must seize freedom with determination.