

CHARACTERS IN A DRAMA CALLED BIG DATA

Interview with Wendy Hui
Kyong Chun

Rosa Menkman



After her lecture ‘Crisis + Habit = Update’ for *The Noise of Being* programme at Sonic Acts 2017, I had the privilege to visit Wendy Hui Kyong Chun during her research fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin. I was introduced to Chun’s writing almost ten years ago, when I had to prepare a presentation about a chapter from her book *Control and Freedom*. Now, I find myself standing in the ballroom of the American Academy, overlooking a private harbour. In the distance, a storm is incoming, and I can’t help but feel slightly nervous.

Rosa Menkman (RM) Thank you for meeting me in this beautiful setting, looking out over the dramatic Wannsee. To begin, it would be great to have some insight into what you are currently working on. I understand you are here writing a new book. What is it about?

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (WC) I am working on *Discriminating Data*, a new book in which I analyse the re-emergence and transformation of categories, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, in the age of network analytics, specifically through proxies and correlations. The book also deals with how algorithms that claim not to take race, class, and gender into consideration actually track and mine them. Consider, for instance, the United States FICO Medical Adherence Score, which allegedly reveals how likely someone is to take their medication regularly. The FICO score is used to determine an individual’s health-insurance rate. A key indicator for this score is whether or not the subject buys car insurance – but whether or not an individual buys car insurance also depends on where they live, such as an urban or suburban neighbourhood, which connects to class and race. These are the entangled ways in which our identities are re-emerging and transforming through networked algorithms.

RM You released three books in the past ten years, which you refer to as ‘a trilogy’. Why is *Discriminating Data* set apart from this trilogy while its themes appear to connect to it?

WC I referred to my previous three books as a trilogy because I planned to stop writing books after *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. It is also a trilogy because these three books address how the internet and computers emerged as a mass medium. *Discriminating Data*, on the other hand, focuses on networked algorithms and big data, and in doing so, touches on issues beyond the emergence of the internet as a mass medium.

RM At the end of *Updating to Remain the Same* (2017), you use the Natalie Bookchin artwork *Mass Ornament* as a metaphor for the network. What role does art play in your research and writing? How can art be used to re-imagine the issues you are writing about?

WC Bookchin’s project was very important because of the way she re-imagines being part of a network. The way in which she plays with gestures can only be done through art. At first glance, her work seems algorithmic: a form of pattern recognition. However, Bookchin’s pattern recognition does not use computers. Thinking through this work, one realises we are all characters in a drama called big data. I wanted to understand the ways in which we occupy and play these roles. Artistic and dramatic questions greatly inform how I understand social interactions. Many theorists in performance studies, critical theory, and sociology consider their social actions as performance. Therefore, the writings of Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, and Peggy Phelan are important to me. Another artistic example I use is *TXMmob* by the Institute for Applied Autonomy. Their



TXMmob, Institute for Applied Autonomy.

work is often done under the rubric of art, thus enabling interventions that cannot otherwise happen. I look for moments where art, technology, and politics intertwine.

RM You write about art, but unlike other theorists interested in the same field, such as Lev Manovich, you seem less preoccupied with aesthetics. Your work focuses on the politics of big data, even when the object analysed is a work of art.

WC Manovich does cultural analytics; he often insightfully uses data analytics to analyse objects, such as selfies, to understand a culture. My research takes a different approach and object; I want to understand the impact of the various types of network algorithms. I therefore look at the basics of networked algorithms and then try to understand their inbuilt assumptions. We need to question the tools and ask how the tools are constructed as we use them.

RM At *Sonic Acts* you spoke about homophily – the axiom that people tend to like people from the same class, gender, and race – which leads to segregation...

WC The main point of the talk was that networked algorithms are structured via the principle of homophily. Homophily presumes that birds of a feather flock together; in other words, that similarity breeds connection. In order to structure and search through chaotic networks, people are clustered based on their likes and dislikes. A user is put into a neighbourhood based on how their likes and dislikes map onto others. We are doomed to be segregated because this principle assumes that neighbourhoods should be filled with similar people. Networked neighbourhoods presume segregation is a good thing, so we shouldn't be surprised that we now exist in little echo chambers.

My question is: how can we produce networks that do not produce echo chambers? One way to do this is by not assuming homophily. The history of homophily is very interesting. The concept comes from sociology, in particular from the work Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton did in the 1950s. They were actually studying residential segregation in the US; segregated and desegregated neighbourhoods. Crucially, they neither assume nor do they find homophily to be natural, which is why they also coined the term *heterophily*. But the notion of heterophily has disappeared and many now assume that homophily is natural: all these network algorithms are built on an extremely limited reading of their work.

RM Is there a way to counter segregation? And how can we tease this out in the network?

WC One way to counter segregation is by refusing to cluster people based on their extreme likes and dislikes. You could say: well, neither of you cared about X, you were all indifferent to X, and since you are all indifferent to X, you form basis for this cluster. This is often how cities operate: because people are all indifferent to certain things, they can survive and thrive together. Another way to fight segregation is by assuming that opposites attract. So if you like X and someone else likes Y, we can put them together and see what emerges. For me, what is most interesting is mutual indifference as connection – and it solves the problem of sparse databases. If we consider non-clicks as the signal, there is tonnes of data!

RM So what happens to the noise, what can be noise in a network that is all about organisation via homophily? And can we build a bridge to noise as described by Shannon and Weaver in their *Model of Communication*?

WC In the case of Shannon and Weaver, the question of noise is slightly different. Intriguingly, Shannon and Weaver make noise an external source, even though the mere act of transmission produces noise. So in other words: noise can never be completely eliminated. I first came across Shannon and Weaver as an engineering undergraduate when I was told a noiseless system could not exist. In network analytics, if you make homophily the signal, you make everything else noise. But, if noise is everything outside of homophily, then noise is important because it breaks us out of simply repeating the past or the same – it enables spontaneous action. As such, recommendation systems often will add noise: they are not based on mere homophily because they want to spark spontaneous actions. The project thus revisits algorithms that render everything outside of loving yourself as noisy, and it investigates how this ‘noise’ enables a different way to restructure networks and understand human relations.

RM In *Updating to Remain the Same*, you define habits as a combination of tics and scales. How do you connect the politics of scaling to habits?



TXTmob, Institute for Applied Autonomy.

WC Habit is considered to be second nature. Habit isn't instinct; habit is a learned action that becomes automatic. Crucially, habit is always something you learn from others, or in response to the environment. This is how habit not only reveals that we are always open to others, but that we internalise things and produce them within ourselves so that the outside becomes the inside. I understand habit as the scar of others within the self or the shards of publicity lodged within the self. A habit is always a form of connection or the revelation of connection. My question is: to what extent in a neoliberal society – a society in which there is allegedly no society – can habit be the basis for something like collective action? Habit is usually derided as enabling neoliberalism and celebrating the individual over collective action. For instance, rather than taking on large-scale polluters, we recycle. We imagine that through these little acts of recycling we are going to change the world. But this is wrong. We are not going to change the world through recycling. However, habits and the notion of habits are larger than simply one person recycling. Habit also implies that even within this gesture of recycling there is some sort of collective urge or collective possibility. So, by looking at something seemingly as pathetic as the individual, I want to see if there is something here that we can use as the basis for collective actions; a great place to start if our outwardly personal habits are not actually ours. The fact that habits scale and that they are traces of the collective in the self is not just a hopeful sign; they are a mainstay of data analytics that link you to others based on your habits. There is no singular action but rather an individual tic linking you to others.

RM Society means community – it refers to people actively sharing something, possibly their ethics. But you just implicitly referred to the



TXTmob, Institute for Applied Autonomy.

Margaret Thatcher's 'There's no such thing as society'. Has society become comparable to habit?

WC What defines society is infrastructure, which is what Thatcher was trying to discard. Before she became prime minister, Thatcher was infamously called *Thatcher the Milk Snatcher* because she withdrew free school milk for children. Neoliberalism undermines public infrastructures and institutions. If, however, we think about habit itself as infrastructure, something else emerges. When we think about new media, we usually think about viruses, of *virality*, of contagion, and how things spread. If you look at the ways in which diseases are discussed, contagion gets more emphasis than crumbling infrastructures. Social networks are often talked about like this too – as the purveyors of contagion. Maybe... But what happens if we emphasise how things *don't* spread? Habit attenuates viral contagion.

RM Habit turns the human into a habitual machine. To me, to handle this ethically seems like an active choice, a consideration. Is there still place for ethics?

WC Yes and no. Ethics is always about the relation between the self and other. In fact, that is often the diss of ethics. Many have argued that the ethical turn has undermined politics: the moment we talk about ethics, we stop talking about politics. So, in that sense, ethics seem much more linked to the habitual. My work concentrates on how we can move from something that seems so personal to larger political structures. I think Kara Keeling's work on race is very instructive in this respect. A lot of people have argued that the turn to affect moves away from questions of race and identity. Keeling's work brilliantly shows the opposite: our affects are shaped by our experiences, and we can actually

view race as being part of an affective response. I think the key move is that something that seems so personal — such as habit — is not simply personal. Habit is also infrastructural and institutional. Affect is always about the relationship between the two. The question of ethics that networked neighbourhoods raises is actually the question of Western ethics: who is your neighbour? How can one love one's neighbour as oneself? It takes a sword to cut through this Gordian knot, though, by literally making the neighbour the self.

RM Neoliberalism is a system that normalised the crisis; we are always living on the edge. What is your take on the crisis?

WC The fact that networks oscillate between the habitual and the critical is key. One formula I play with in *Habitual New Media* is 'Habit + Crisis = Update'. With this, I tried to understand how, as Lauren Berlant argued, we live in a society in which crisis has become ordinary. Berlant beautifully describes crisis as an impasse, an affectively intense cul-de-sac. So we are always going around in a circle. The notion that crisis has become ordinary does not just exist on the left but also on the right. Milton Friedman loved crisis, defining them as real or imagined, actual or perceived. He understood the utility of crisis. I find it interesting how networks exist as habits punctuated by ordinary crises; hence, the moment of the update. In the second chapter of *Updating to Remain the Same*, I examine the ways in which crisis punctuates time and makes the internet seem critical. It's a long and complex argument linked to the different imaginaries of television and the internet. Mary Ann Doane, for instance, reveals the importance of catastrophe to the idea of TV as 'live' — an emphasis that erases the central importance of economic crisis. Crisis and catastrophe differ: crisis always entails a decision; catastrophe is something



Mass Ornament, Natalie Bookchin, video installation, 2009.

that happens naturally. For me, the question became: if new media thrives on crisis, how does the banality of the crisis undermine the possibility of real change by transforming decisions into updates?

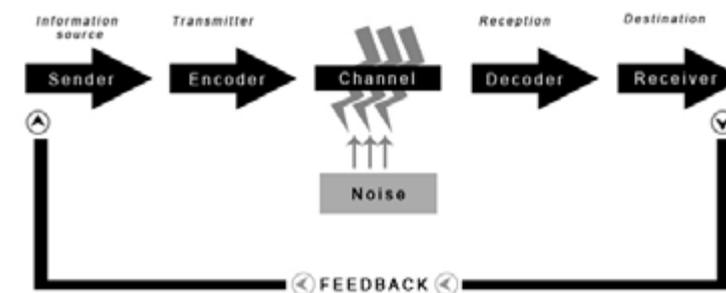
RM Two years ago, I was invited to give a talk called 'Where are the Newer Media?' at the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz. At the time, I wasn't even sure how to define new media. When I read your definition in *Updating to Remain the Same* I was glad to have found someone I can relay this question to, a question I'd long hoped to have answered: what are the newer media?

WC Firstly, this assumes that what matters is the new. This assumption is untrue because if new media were really new, they would be ignored. What matters isn't 'what is new' but what gets repeated; hence the move towards habitual new media. When they were asking 'what is newer media?' at the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, they were really asking 'what is next?'. They wanted you to prophesy. Everybody feels like they are somehow behind. Other people always use other media, and we never know what really lies at the cutting edge of obsolescence. It's an inane question, but there are different ways to respond. If you wanted to give the 'let's help people invest in companies' answer, you'd say: 'whatever the young kids are using'. A couple of years ago, this would have meant discussing Snapchat versus Facebook. Taking it to another level, you could interpret the question as: 'what do you think will become habitual?' or: 'where can we find the next habit?' What Milton Friedman so beautifully showed is that you can actually create the next habit, the next default. Disruptions will always happen. What matters is seeding habits that can take over when the next disruption happens – so that the impossible becomes possible. For instance, there will always be another crisis

regarding networks, privacy, and media. Networks are never private, but they are considered private. Snapchat rather brilliantly did not disrupt networks because networks are always already disrupted by revelations of leaking. Snapchat used these disruptions to seed more allegedly 'private' and ephemeral ways to communicate.

RM How does this connect to the concepts of loitering and diluting as they are described for instance by Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade in their book *Why Loiter?* (2011) It seems to be the opposite of what neoliberals would want?

WC I love loitering; a concept implying we should not fight for privacy, but for the right to be in public. We should say: when I am on a network, I am public. This does not mean I should be attacked or made vulnerable in a horrible, abusive manner. It means I need some rigorous public rights. Rather than constantly trying to say that these networked spaces are private, which they clearly aren't, we should understand how communication implies vulnerability and publicity – something Thomas Keenan's work nicely reveals. I have to be in public because this is the way signals operate; they are out there. We need to



SHANNON-WEAVER'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication.

rethink what it means to engage and communicate. The project by Phadke, Khan, and Ranade calls on everyone to occupy public space.

RM At the end of *Updating to Remain the Same*, you give the reader an assignment. You write: 'The task before us is simple: to grapple with these moments, which are as much instances of found habituation as they are of found collectivity. And, through these moments, to try to inhabit the inhabitable, to give in excess and in advance, so that we can re-member differently.' But how do we practice this in daily life?

WC Well that's the challenge I set for the reader, right? This paragraph moves through all of the book's different themes. To notice moments of found habituation can be moments for a beginning of politics rather than simply the ends of politics. It calls for us to inhabit neoliberalism, that which seems so uninhabitable. What is key here is to give in excess and in advance. It's a move against the epistemology of outing and nasty vengeance. We need to rethink the politics of memory and how things remain. If things remain within networks, it is because people and machines actively repeat them. Things need to be remembered differently. Communication does not simply mean 'when I communicate to you, I give you a signal that will be repeated back to me', but rather: 'to communicate or to friend is to send something out which you don't know will be received.' This is why I moved to the question of networked algorithms; I wanted to figure out how we can find these moments of found habituation so that we can refuse segregation. What is key is that in order to inhabit networks, we need to create other modes of collective habituation, hence the brilliance of Natalie Bookchin's work.



Mass Ornament, Natalie Bookchin, video installation, 2009.