

Chuck Klosterman on the Unabomber Philosophy

Chuck Klosterman is the best-selling author of several books focusing on pop culture.

His new book is a collection of essays called *Eating the Dinosaur*. In the final essay, titled Fail, Klosterman writes about a paper called Industrial Society and Its Future by Ted Kaczynski. Kaczynski, of course, is the Unabomber and while he doesn't condone the murders that Kaczynski committed, Klosterman does think the Unabomber Manifesto contains some interesting ideas, as he told Steve Paulson.

Chuck Klosterman: Everyone wants to think that the only thing that he's writing about is almost like Luddite ideas, like I hate technology, technology is bad, technology ruins our life, and of course that is in there.

But what he's really talking about is sort of a philosophical freedom that technology sort of puts a ceiling on.

He talks about how people have a greater, like their desire to have technology outweighs their desire for freedom and if you say that to a person kind of casually, they will immediately disagree with you.

But what he really talks about is a kind of freedom most people don't even realize has the potential to exist and as somebody who is really involved with technology on a day-to-day basis because I'm involved in media and I was rereading that document when I was living in Germany and I didn't speak German, so I was almost living my entire life through the internet because I really missed America and I missed my girlfriend and my friends and stuff. So I was really living on the internet.

As I would sort of think about the way he talked about the way technology changes our view of what freedom is, I thought, well, this seems worth examining again, and worth examining in a way that's not going to put the emphasis on his crimes, but really his ideas.

Steve Paulson: Well, and you even suggest that this essay could be remembered decades from now.

In fact, you say you can easily imagine a distant dystopic future where it's considered the most prescient work of the 1990s.

Chuck Klosterman: Certainly, especially if we get into one of those machines rule us situations, like in the Terminator movies.

If that happens, this is definitely going to seem like the unabomber will be remembered.

Yeah, if AI actually gets to a point where it does sort of enslave us, this will be like the manifesto of the underground revolution.

So that's kind of the dystopia I often imagine.

Steve Paulson: Well, I mean, what you're really getting at in this essay is what's real and what is mediated through, through various media and how do we tell the difference and you get at that by referring to another book, Gerry Mander's 1977

book, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* and he had a very interesting thought experiment, which you reproduce as well.

Can you explain that?

Chuck Klosterman: His ideas, written at a time, really even predating cable television, are kind of amazing, particularly one about how you ask someone to say, imagine the South during the Civil War and if they do that, in all likelihood, they are imagining a scene from, *Roots* or a plantation from *Gone with the Wind* or something, even what they imagine to be, when asked to imagine something real, they use television sort of as their only means for visualizing it inside their own mind.

Or, if you ask someone to imagine a bank robbery, well, they've almost certainly not been in a situation where a bank robbery happened, but they know what it looks like.

Or if you ask someone to imagine a basketball game, Very few people in America at some point have not attended a basketball game live.

Very few people have not at some point played a game of basketball if only for 5 minutes at recess in 5th grade.

But when you ask someone to imagine a basketball game, the way they perceive the court and what they see inevitably is a game they watched on television.

Steve Paulson: Is that true with you? I mean, you write about how you play basketball for years.

Chuck Klosterman: But I played basketball for 13 years and when someone asks me to imagine a basketball game, or when I was, when I first had that thought from that book, I did specifically imagine a play from one of the Lakers Celtics championship series, the play where Gerald Henderson intercepts a pass from James Worthy.

That, for whatever reason, has become my mind's understanding of what basketball looks like.

That's the placeholder in my mind.

So this idea that we can separate a televised image or the internet or even a photograph from reality, everyone kind of thinks that we have the means to do that and intellectually we can, but biologically we probably cannot.

I mean, technology has advanced so much faster than the way the human mind evolves.

You know what I mean? For the first 24,000 years or whatever, if a man saw a tiger, it meant there was a tiger there.

Our body is conditioned to understand that what we see is real, but for the last, say, 120 years, it's very normal to see something that's not there and even though we intellectually know that the Sopranos are different from our family, or that someone's persona on Facebook is different than who they actually are.

I don't know if our bodies have yet made that jump and I think that's why in a lot of ways, technology gives people this sort of strangely alienated sense of themselves and of the world.

Like they know that they love TV, they know that they love the internet, and yet these things make them slightly unhappy in this abstract way and I think this is why.

Steve Paulson: Well, this also gets to life simulation games.

Didn't you do an essay, I think in one of your previous books, about the sim games? And you played Sim Chuck, I mean sort of the sim game that's a version of yourself.

Did you find that especially appealing?

Chuck Klosterman: I think that this question about reality must have always been present because I suppose in all my writing part it is there.

I found it sort of fascinating.

I find thinking about such simulations often more enjoyable than actually experiencing the simulation.

I think what I'm realizing as I get older though is my life is a simulation.

What we're doing now, I'm talking about myself and I'm talking about my ideas, but this isn't really who I am.

This is the version of me I am when I'm on the radio.

You know, you're asking me questions about myself and I'm giving answers, but I'm not really talking the way I talk.

I can tell as I'm doing it now.

Steve Paulson: In other words, when you're talking to a friend with, you know, nothing broadcast, you're going to sound different.

You're going to say different, obviously you're going to say different things, but it's less of a sort of public persona.

Chuck Klosterman: I don't even know if, I mean, it's probably different with every person I talk to.

Because not only are we having the experience of talking, we're also had every other experience together, which we both have to a degree remember.

So we're filtering our current conversation through that filter.

So I wonder how often in life people are really themselves, you know? I mean, it seems kind of like a, I don't know, kind of like a fake stoner conversation or something like, are we ever really ourselves?

Steve Paulson: Maybe we just have to get a little postmodern here and say that there's no real self.

In fact, we have lots of different selves depending on what situation we're in.

Chuck Klosterman: That's true, but there's got to be a real self as well.

There has to.

I mean, I think that we intuitively know that there is somebody, that we are someone, okay? That there are some thoughts that are actually our own.

If you talk to somebody about politics, for example, you know, they're going to be very aware of the person they're talking to, and they know what views that they've heard on, you know, NPR or on Fox News or whatever, and that becomes a guide and they know which things are kind of acceptable to say because certain political views say something about the person themselves, you know? But Somewhere inside their

mind there is how they actually feel and I guess the question I often wonder is, can that even be accessed? We'd like to think it's a choice that we choose to have one persona in public and there's another person we actually are.

Steve Paulson: There's one passage in your essay that's particularly powerful.

You write, we are latently enslaved by our own ingenuity and we have unknowingly constructed a simulated world.

As a species, we have never been less human than we are right now.

Do you really believe that?

Chuck Klosterman: Oh, absolutely.

I will say that perhaps the way I write that overstates my degree of concern over that.

But in real terms, absolutely, this is the least human we've ever been.

Steve Paulson: What do you mean by less human then?

Chuck Klosterman: The degree to which our lives are unnatural.

I mean, you know, like, okay, a dog.

For the most part, most dogs in America now maybe live inside or spend some time inside and they have someone feed them.

They get their water from a source where someone just puts a dish down.

In a way, that dog is less of a dog than maybe 5,000 years ago he would have been, you know.

His inherent dogness in a way has been domesticated.

But still, for the most part, he lives the way a dog was sort of I hate to use this phrase, but what was meant to live, right? As a human, as people, we're farther and farther away from that with every generation.

I'm the 7th kid in my family.

My oldest sister's 18 years older than me.

I was born in 1972.

It's pretty clear when I talk with my sister that I was probably affected by technology 10 times as much as she was.

There's no question about it.

Things like TV, things like music, how I could get to music, my understanding of what's important and my values, certainly 10 times as much were impacted by technology as her.

But now I have nieces and nephews who are 18 years younger than me and when I talk to them, it's clear they've been affected by technology 100 times as much as I have.

So this exponential process seems to be happening, and I think it's probably been happening for way before I was born.

It's the backbone of the 20th and maybe even the 19th century, and it's going to become the whole polyskeletal structure of the 21st century.

We're getting farther away from the experience of being alive, so much so that I sort of capitalize that phrase whenever I write it, because I'm not even sure I know what that experience is.

I think even my understanding of the experience of being alive is now probably a media construction.

I do, I think I made that reference to Christopher McCandless, the guy from *Into the Wild*, I love that book, but not because I'm like, this guy, he totally is right, It's not even that I admire him that much.

I just think it's so intriguing that he has this idea of what being a free person is, and it totally seemed like it came from literature and from film he had seen, some might say, is camping, is camping closer to the experience of being alive? I don't know if it is.

I think camping has become sort of this way people sort of are able to construct the experience of what they think it used to be like to be a human.

Steve Paulson: Chuck Glosterman. He's the author of *Eating the Dinosaur*.

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