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Review: *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

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**Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics**  
by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 326 pp.  
ISBN 0-262-03332-1.

Kyong Chun's book, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*, presents a unique and insightful perspective for the field of cyberculture studies with specific focus on the dialectic struggle between control and freedom online. Essentially, the networking technology that can allow for freedom of speech and expression is also the same technology that can be used for surveillance and the limiting of access to content. Even as people express themselves on blogs and collaborate through wikis, commercial entities track every action taken on their websites, and governments block access to certain content as well as trace personal information across a multitude of databases. The control-freedom struggle affects every Internet user world-wide, because as people seek information and connections online, other people attempt to block these connections in order to make a profit. Corporations have set up tolls on the superhighway with the intention of making every individual pay per use.

Utilizing critical cultural studies methods to describe the control-freedom tension, Chun reads the current culture through an examination of cultural artifacts such as magazines, novels, movies, and websites, to name a few. The main purpose here is to illuminate the dominant or hegemonic views presented in the artifacts, while simultaneously revealing cultural inequalities in class, gender, race, or sexuality. Thus, at the core of her argument, Chun exposes the control-freedom struggle as being experienced and expressed through sexuality and race. She concentrates on sexuality as she believes it emanates from the very core of this struggle, which is symbolized by the "male and female" connectors that link one cable to another. Sexuality, she states, is the "meeting point between two objects of biopower (the power over life)...as such, sexuality is intimately linked to twentieth-century racism..." (p. 12).

One of the author's first and most interesting insights regards fiber optic networks, which are the backbone of the Internet. "They physically span the globe, buried within oceans or spanning office buildings' ceilings, while at the same time carrying the light necessary for these other [virtual] spaces" (p. 26). Chun makes an analogy between the light signals that are carried by fiber optic networks onto our computer screens with light that comes from a window. Both lights are "exposing us to others, even before there is an us ..." (p. 15). She goes on to say that fiber optic networks are like windows because the computer is constantly sending as well as receiving signals when it is connected to the Internet. The fact that this two-way communication is hidden from view by the software lulls the everyday Internet user into a dangerously false sense of privacy.

The general user does not know that they should use the shades on their “Internet” window.

In chapter one, Chun dispels the myth of cyberspace as space and place, and argues that the Internet today has nothing in common with cybernetics or William Gibson’s conceptualization of cyberspace in the fictional novel *Neuromancer*. The most interesting insight in this chapter deals with the assumptions about space and place online. “Fundamentally unmappable and unlocatable, cyberspace is a free space in which to space out about space and place, fact and fiction” (p. 43). The cyberspace terminology enabled the Internet to be conceptualized as a new frontier for expression as well as democracy.

The new frontier and freedom of expression was initially questioned when the Internet was colonized by pornography. According to Chun, “The Telecommunications Act of 1996 both deregulated the telecommunication industry ... and regulated Internet content for the first time,” (p. 77). Ironically, the pornography that the government attempted to control enabled the commercialization and eventual “Internet gold rush” (p. 79). The marketing strategies, such as running ads on search engines, and sophisticated technical advances, such as accepting encrypted credit card numbers online, created by the pornography industry paved the way for further commercialization and increasing popularity of the Internet. The struggle to control the proliferation and access to pornography exemplifies the control-freedom struggle online. Chun aptly quotes Lawrence Lessig, who stated that “code is law”, and therefore “decisions that once took place at the level of legislation are now taking place at the level of code” (p. 66). She further comments that code is in fact better than law because it needs no enforcement, or human acknowledgement. Therefore, the “tech guru” is the one in control. Even though commercial interests may try to secure technologies with digital right management (DRM), which is itself embedded code, other people are able to work around that code and regain control.

The control-freedom struggle is also experienced through race. In chapter three, Chun describes the central role that race plays in conceiving cyberspace as a “utopian commercial space,” which was hailed by promoters as “dissolving the *race problem*” (p. 128). She goes on to discuss in detail how corporations attempted to sell the Internet as a place where discrimination based on race, gender, and age does not exist because one is not confined by the body. The message sent by the corporations is that while online, anyone can enjoy the privileges that a white, middle-aged man already possesses. Online, whiteness is the default. So, in actuality, the Internet gives you the ability to cast off your body and to trade it in for a “better” model. In essence, the promoters transformed the “desire to be free from discrimination into the desire to be free from these very bodies” (p. 29). In further exploring this theme, Chun delves deeply into William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* in order to expose

the Orientalizing of electronic spaces. She argues that Orientalism is a way to deal with, and enjoy perceived vulnerability. Finally, chapter five concludes the book by linking control-freedom to generalized paranoia through readings of face-recognition technology and Webcams.

In *Control and Freedom*, Chun provides excellent insights into the meaning behind cyberspace, as well as the role of sexuality and race in the control-freedom tension. However, these important topics are often buried beneath a deluge of theory and theoretical analysis ranging from Foucault to Baudrillard to Derrida. Although a theoretical grounding in this type of work is important, it is not necessarily helpful to the reader, if these theories overshadow the author's commentary. As a result, the book is quite difficult to approach, unless one is already well versed in the work of these philosophers.

The insightfulness of the book makes me wish that it was in fact accessible not only to a broader range of academics, but also to the public at large. It is not often that individuals take a critical view of the technology that they utilize everyday and tease out the dominant representations and their oppressive counterparts. It is ironic that the purpose of cyberculture studies is to reveal hidden inequalities, since the book itself obfuscates these points with theory and thus only makes the book accessible to a privileged population of academics. The few main points that I was able to extract for the purpose of this review, such as: the sexualizing of technology, the hidden two way communication or "windows" of the Internet, the myth of cyberspace as space and place, the control-freedom struggle with the pornography industry, and the privileging of the white race, were quite difficult to extrapolate. Additionally, the book was made even more difficult by the often illogical and incoherent chapter organizations. Each chapter leaps from one thought to another, with sometimes only a thread of commonality between them, in the hopes of fitting in as much seminal research into the novel as possible. Certainly, the book's quality would have been improved if the major points of race and sexuality were coherently and logically presented, as well as supported from the research that is immediately relevant to the discussion at hand. Therefore, the aspects of the book that establish the control-freedom struggle as a fundamental tension with sexuality and race are quite insightful and profound in their statements, but one must engage in an intellectual treasure hunt to find the golden nuggets of wisdom that permeate this work.

### **Reviewer**

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