

Sky Huvard, 2005

*Art Historiography*

*Book Review: Alan Liu, "The Laws of Cool"*

Alan Liu's "The Laws of Cool" is a nonfictional dialogue that forms the background of 'cool' in an attempt to understand the future ramifications on literature and the arts in the age of knowledge work and the information society. Liu wonders if and why anyone will want to read literature after a day of research tasks. How will the future of the humanities and arts develop when their only outlet is content or multimedia entertainment? Tracing the development of cool throughout the recent era allows Liu to create a hypernarrative, marking historic shifts in culture that allow him to glimpse into the future of the creative arts. This method shows scientific influence, he simply plots the past to forecast the future. Liu exposes his methodology, building his credibility as a knowledge worker.

Liu explores the historical development of knowledge work created by the convergence of academia and corporate capitalism. This fertile ground offered its participants the means to be self-referential and increasingly justify their methods. Lui formulates this position in the postmodern tradition, describing discourse at the intersection of his critique. The demands of 'just-in-time' and 'kaizen' have thrashed historicism, the literary playground for cultural criticism - Now is the only knowledge worth developing. By introducing this concept to the reader, Liu exploits how this echoes in our lifestyle. Our cultural demands for contemporary understanding don't allow us to look back into the past, unless to plot a trajectory for the future.

Along comes networked information technology, bringing with it the hope that globalization will allow everyone to share the same stream of knowledge. This simplified model of information, a unified stream, can be witnessed as a cultural belief in economies of scale. Unfortunately, this economization has brought a massive homogenization of knowledge workers, feeding from a singular, corporate and capitalist stream of information that moved away from the independent autonomous voices heard during the beginning of the networks. Liu helps us imagine how simply and effective it would be to maintain 'one' knowledge but suggests an accompanying loss that could create cultural stagnation.

Liu asserts that cultural criticism and the creative arts must mutate themselves towards the dominate stream of information, and, at the last moment, inject their differences into the system. Otherwise, information patterns in the system would not accept these contributions because it could not recognize. By injecting carefully planned differences into the system, Lui suggests the new and different view that literature used to provide its readers could be absorbed and transmitted throughout the stream for all to witness. These tasks will be accomplished by the 'ethical hackers of knowledge work,' the only witnesses to the destruction in a society where all is innovative. Liu gives us the sense that performing these destructive acts is a way to regain the lost rights to our history that could not be absorbed.

Creative actors will perform destructive acts, because these actions immediately transcribe themselves into the stream of historical difference. That is to say, the act of destroying the category of 'baroque' in art history will force the system to readjust itself, to reabsorb all that was lost by ascrib-

ing that title to a work of art. Liu invites his readers who witness and appreciate this aesthetic, to take part in the community, appealing to their sense of lost freedom.

The ideology of creative destruction will be adopted and stylized, into what Liu calls the ethos of the unknown. This is what is left as contemporary 'cool' - the idea that only those who exist only in this singular stream of knowledge can seem to be outside. These cool people don't necessarily create anything new, but they destroy the old, stimulating a different kind of innovation. By destabilizing the solidity of the past, cracks in historicism allow new ideas to be planted.

The 'Laws of Cool' creates a feeling of loss that allows Liu to offer a redemption, in the same way those narrative literary thrill-rides of the past did. What is different about this book is its source material, it's no longer imagination or historical retrospective, instead its typical contemporary research infused with ideas and suggestions, the bias of the researcher. Liu as author mimics the role of ethical hacker with this book, accepted into the dominate stream of knowledge, unassuming and plain. The differences he adds, his opinions and insights - are introduced to echo, gaining magnitude throughout the story he projects inside our head.