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Criticism, Volume 47, Number 2, Spring 2005, pp. 235-239 (Review)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2006.0009>



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Attacking the Borg of Corporate Knowledge Work: The Achievement of Alan Liu's *The Laws of Cool*

ALAN LIU'S *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* is a big book—big in scope, ambition, research, vision, analysis, and the challenge it presents to the academy. Its publication represents a landmark event in understanding where we are headed as we plunge ever deeper into the infosphere of ubiquitous computing, global Internet culture, and information economies. Although Liu's original subject was to be the place of literature in the Age of Information, in fact almost all of his analysis is a kind of ground clearing that he considers necessary before we can even begin to entertain this issue. In the process he delivers a masterful, if occasionally overstated, analysis of the new landscapes of information culture and the relation of "knowledge work" to the traditional knowledges taught and perpetuated within the academy.

In positing the concept of "knowledge work," Liu brilliantly analyzes the pop literature of business culture to expose and dissect its ideology. Particularly astute is his deconstruction of "diversity management" within corporate culture. He argues that diversity management takes to the logical extreme ideas of "cultural class" and "identity group," but in a way that renders both of these previous categories, developed within the context of ideology critique, obsolete and unnecessary. Diversity management works by parceling into "skills" and "attributes" the differentially specific traits of different ethnic, cultural, and national groups, thereby obliterating their historical specificities and dissolving the cohesion that defines the group as such. Thus reconstituted, individuals become part of "teams" that are now formed, produced, and managed to work with maximum

*In this issue's review section, N. Katherine Hayles and Johanna Drucker review Alan Liu's *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; pp. xi + 573; \$65.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper), and Liu responds.

efficiency within the corporate informational culture. “The fundamental move is made,” Liu explains, “when identity is from the first swallowed alive by the cult of the team . . . the team is the unit of ephemeral identity that most flexibly fuses technologies and techniques into the skill sets (called ‘innovation,’ ‘creativity,’ or ‘resourcefulness’) adapted to the changefulness of the global economy” (47). This and other practices of contemporary corporate culture are deemed inevitable within the discourse of diversity management, because it assumes that competition within a global economy will require the implementation of these changes and enforce their perpetuation. Any company that resists or fails to grasp the new paradigm will simply be driven out of business, because it will not be competitive in the face of global exchange and transnational information networks.

As an exercise in understanding the assumptions and underlying logic of diversity management, and more broadly the ideologies of contemporary corporate culture, Liu’s analysis is perceptive and chillingly compelling. As a statement of how the world actually operates, however, it fails to distinguish sharply enough between the ideology and the actual state of affairs. Even under the coercive management of Henry Ford’s “Ford Sociology Department” that attempted to surveil and control every aspect of a worker’s life, including his home environment and even the magazines to which he subscribed, workers found ways to resist the coercive surveillance, as Liu notes in discussing this parallel to contemporary corporate practices (92–95). In light of Islamic fundamentalism and the growing power of the Christian right in the United States, surely no one can believe that the ethnic and religious identifications that define these groups can simply be erased by corporate culture, not to mention all the other ethnic, cultural, and national affiliations that seem to grow stronger and more contentious with each passing year. The exigencies of corporate culture are not the whole story, then, and in many instances are not even the most important story. I emphasize this aspect of Liu’s argument because what follows rests upon the implicit assumption that the major challenge facing contemporary culture is resisting the practices of corporate informational culture. A related assumption is that corporate culture acts as a kind of ominous cultural Borg, absorbing all other cultural activities into it and reproducing within them its own model of “knowledge work”—that is, knowledge practices that are deemed productive and useful to the drive for profit that defines the modern corporation.

Because there is nowhere to stand outside corporate culture, the only possible sites of resistance must be within. This logical inference provides the context for the “ethos of the unknown,” which Liu defines as “a zone where those who live and work nowhere but inside the system of contemporary knowledge can paradoxically, and with more than the normal (and normalizing) irony of cool, seem to stand outside it” (9). Though it may be true that few places on earth remain entirely unaffected by global information networks, surely it is an exaggeration to claim, as Liu says, ventriloquizing the voice of diversity management,

that “pure business culture remains definitive of all culture” (54). Although the ethos of the unknown may indeed be significant as a site of resistance, by no stretch of the imagination is it the only, or even the primary, possibility for participating in cultures very different from the culture of corporate knowledge work. In adopting a strategy of ventriloquizing that which he resists, Liu risks overstating the scope of business culture, or at least understating what remains outside its arena of operations.

With the ethos of the unknown thus foregrounded, Liu turns to examine its strengths and weaknesses as a site for resistance. Its great strength is familiarity with the very union of technology and technique that corporate knowledge work enlists under the banner of productivity and efficiency. Instead of supporting these values, the ethos of the unknown uses technical proficiency to subvert them, driving a wedge between technology and technique by using technique to appropriate the technology for ends other than those envisioned by corporate culture, including hacking, nonproductive work, the creation of viruses, Trojans, and other computer problems, along with all the other small and large ways in which skilled employees can subvert the wishes of their masters. The name of the ethos of the unknown hints at its weakness. “The unknown,” denoting in one sense the fact that these subversives are not recognized as such within the companies that employ them, in another sense gestures toward their lack of historical grounding for their subversions, a paucity of knowledge that siphons off their creative spirit into vapid gestures rather than effective resistance. “The cool seek the ethos of the unknown through a tactic of unknowing making them ever more vulnerable to the conglomerates that truly prey on the unknowing” (305).

Here enters the ironic cool of Liu’s own impassioned inquiry, for he sees a missed opportunity in the potential fit between the deep historical past preserved and passed on by the academic humanities, and the ethos of the unknown operating in the belly of the corporate beast. In a Martin Luther King–like chant, he intones “More’s the pity” over a series of clauses that contrast what is with what might be, summed up in this potent observation stimulated by John Guillory’s article “Ethical Practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading”: “Academic critique is always at risk of attenuation into abstract, bloodless skepticism, while cool irony is always at risk of materializing around the clichéd, media-dependent, yet nevertheless experientially visceral sense of the immediate. Together, they might be something” (306).

For Liu personally, the challenge metonymically condenses into the “cool” student in the back of his lecture hall, wearing sunglasses and listening to his iPod while neglecting to notice the possible utility of the knowledge Liu has to impart. In his desire to encourage the marriage, or at least the flirtation, of these two forces, Liu seeks to reposition and at least partially redefine the nature of the knowledge that the humanities have to offer. While acknowledging the importance of history—“It is difficult today to think of any authority other than history

that has the heft to match the ideology of postindustrialism and globalism” (376)—he argues that the history that counts will no longer center on artistic creation but on “de-creation” or “de-aring.” Following the lead of Dario Gamboni in *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, Liu looks for examples of “de-aring” that will have the “heft” to deconstruct the prevailing assumptions of knowledge work. This leads to what is in my view the most tenuous part of his complex chain of inferences, for “de-aring,” in its emphasis on destructive creativity (the opposite of the creative destruction heralded by the relentless and constant innovation that underwrites the ideology of knowledge work), can easily slide into vandalism and even terrorism.

The rubber hits the road with Liu’s discussion of the Critical Art Ensemble. Recently in the news because of the federal prosecution of CAE artist Steven Kurtz’s use of the bacterium *Serratia marcescens* in his artwork (Kurtz was first charged with bioterrorism and then, when that failed, with wire and mail fraud), the CAE has long advocated critical destruction as a strategic weapon against the cultural Borg of information economies. Liu quotes their response (issued several years prior to Kurtz’s arrest) that they could be seen as promoting terrorism: “How can terror happen in virtual space, that is, in a space with no people—only information? Have we reached a point in civilization where we are capable of terrorizing digital abstractions?” (368). As Liu points out, such distinctions seem spurious; they appear especially so when we recall that the U.S. military expects that the next war will be fought in cyberspace and that information networks will constitute a prime strategic target for terrorist offensives. Equally weak is the CAE’s advice to those who would follow its example: “Stick to attacks on institutions. Attacking individuals only satisfies an urge for revenge without having any effect on corporate or government policy” (368).

The idea that it is possible to draw a clear-cut line between institutions and individuals melts at the first hint of serious inquiry into this construction. Say someone exploits a weakness in Windows XP to create a virus that devastates millions of hard drives. Surely this could not be construed only as an attack against an “institution” (i.e., Microsoft), since irreplaceable information in private hands (say, Liu’s electronic text of *The Laws of Cool* before it was published) may be destroyed as a result. Such problems are only highlighted, not resolved, by the government’s outrageous decision to prosecute Kurtz. However misguided the government’s interpretation of his actions, the ethical problems inherent in the idea of critical destruction remain.

Liu acknowledges the problem but does not solve it when, in his introduction, he forecasts the seriousness of the issue by asserting, “Teaching the difference between such an ideology of critical destruction and terrorism—the subtle history between dark historicism and even darker inversions of creative destruction—will be the special concern of both humanities educators and writers or artists in the future” (9). A larger problem with Liu’s formulation is that he con-

ceives of resistance primarily, if not exclusively, as a mirror image of the problem. “Critical destruction” reflects and inverts the corporate mantra of “destructive creativity”; the history of de-arting reflects and inverts the erasure of history in diversity management. Attempting to make the humanities relevant to that alienated “cool” student in the back of the lecture hall, Liu seems to suggest that the preservation and transmission of history in the conventional sense has lost its value. But surely this cannot be correct.

During every term I encounter erasures of history that are stunning in their implications for understanding our present cultural situation: students who have no idea who Joseph McCarthy was and consequently no way to compare contemporary charges of “terrorism” and “unpatriotic” with insinuations of communism in the McCarthy era; others who have no real knowledge of the Vietnam War and what it meant for American identity, politics, and present U.S. policy in Iraq; still others who have no idea of the circumstances in which the present division of North and South Korea was effected and therefore no notion of what the history of that division implies. And that’s merely in the twentieth century, not to mention the deep past stretching into the classical era and beyond. In my view, the humanities cannot afford to abandon its connection with history, or to construe this connection solely as the history of critical destruction. Such a narrowing of historical focus and thus of the meaning and importance of the humanities would be a grievous capitulation to the very forces that Liu so admirably deconstructs and wishes to combat.

However, such criticisms should not obscure the central importance of *The Laws of Cool* to understanding our contemporary situation. If the case for knowledge work is somewhat overstated, *Laws of Cool* nevertheless remains the most compelling analysis of it that I have encountered; if the analysis of the problem is more cogent than the suggested solutions, *Laws of Cool* remains an awesome achievement in its breadth of research, depth of insight, and clarity of argument. Alan Liu has given us a remarkable book, and his achievement sets a benchmark for future discussions of these important issues and their implications for the future of the humanities, and particularly for the future of literature in the Age of Information.

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