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Liu's Ethics of the Database

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Review of: Alan Liu. *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008. Print.

In many ways, one might see Alan Liu's collection, *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database*, as a kind of retrospective or career long response to the issues raised by Katherine Hayles and Johanna Drucker's individual reviews in the journal *Criticism* of his earlier book, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*. While Liu directly responds in the same issue with "Understanding Knowledge Work" to Hayles's and Drucker's queries regarding the definition and function of history and aesthetics--indeed regarding the very "future of the humanities"--in the information age, his *Local Transcendence* takes the discussion much further and into the world of methodology. In *Local Transcendence*, Liu not only maps out a critical approach that will draw together the diverse terrains of the humanities, arts, information, and technology, but also argues that this very interdisciplinarity is the crux of the method. Interdisciplinarity *as method* is vital not so much due to the breadth of data revealed, that is as additional content in itself, but rather because it produces a "line of flight" away from established and rigid knowledge systems to an "unclosed otherness" (*Local* 185).

The question for Liu is: can there be an open method for history that can tell us anything politically instructive or ethically *useful*, especially in an age that has seen the so-called "death of theory," "death of history," "death of the author," "death of the subject," "death of cinema," etc.? What, for Liu, is left in the absence of essential meanings except as Liu notes a sense of the "cool?" The "cool" as Liu defines it is basically whatever brand we have decided to take on from our corporate and media-saturated culture. Our larger fascination with endless flows of information and with perpetual innovation, a world-view of "creative destruction," leaves us awash in data but strips the world of past knowledge that can anchor the present (*Local* 2-4). In such an environment, we do not have history but rather historicism--that is, only the signs or the effect(s) of a history (4). Moreover, for Liu our path of resistance comes from *within* our "cool culture" as a strategy of reversal or "destructive creation" and also from *within* postmodern historicism by turning its symptomatic "contingency" into a method (*Local* 11; "Understanding" 250). Ultimately, Liu maps out both the logic and critical method for our era of "remix culture," a phrase perhaps more apt than "information age" at capturing the blurred worlds of creation/consumption, art/culture, data/media, form/content, persona/person, public/private of the current epoch.

To understand the feasibility and value of Liu's method as detailed in *Local Transcendence*--as well as to situate his work in relation to a range of current remix practices from the archive to the arts to rhetorical strategies--it is useful to turn to the Hayles and Drucker essays. Both Hayles and Drucker take issue with Liu's "destructive creativity" as a value either for the arts or for the humanities. On the one hand, Hayles notes that this assumes a ubiquity of corporate culture in which we are trapped and can act only as borderline terrorists, albeit "critically" destructive ones. As Hayles quite rightly points out, the presumed corporate cultural "trap" and attendant critical subversion confirm the status quo via the negation or erasure of history since they effectively eliminate the possibility of imagining a counter-history or alternative *positive* possible pathways of resistance (236-239). Drucker is equally troubled by Liu's vision for the arts as "destructive," since it replays what she believes are tired oppositions from aesthetic discourses regarding the "resistance" of art (and specifically of the avant-garde) to dominant social/popular cultural order. Rather than a didactic or utopian purpose for the arts, Drucker says she prefers "embodied examples of a practice that has no purpose whatsoever except *to be*" (246-47).

Of course, the discussion of the shape, objective, indeed possibility of history and the arts haunts these essays and Liu's books, that is, what should teaching and scholarship look like given that the objects of study are themselves in question? Drucker argues for no less than an "overhaul" of academics from the object of study ("static artifacts") to its purpose ("self-improvement" "moral uplift") ("Games"). While "cultural preservation," "critical thought," and "artful expression" are core values retained in Drucker's educational re-tooling, the revolution in digital media is not insignificant in shaping the new practice. The tools of digital media are not *in themselves* the core, but rather what one learns from the engagement or more specifically the *practice* of these tools--that is, a diverse and flexible set of skills across a range of informational, expressive, reflective and critical tasks (**Drucker 246**).

Liu's direct response to Drucker (and to Hayles) in his *Criticism* essay follows closely on Drucker's (new) media literacy/fluency model, and indeed, he points to their collective work in assorted digital humanities initiatives that reflect the core values noted above. But a fault line appears towards the end of the essay when Liu draws a parallel between the objectives of formalist "close readings" and his own postmodernist approach in line with "deeply felt human 'experience,'" which he claims shares an affinity with Drucker's and Hayles's attention in their work to "experience" and "embodiment," respectively ("Understanding" 257). Setting aside whether or not these multiple uses and related terms share precisely the same *meaning*, it is more useful here that Liu's comment seem to confirm that we are now forever in a culture of remix (and may very well always have been) from which nothing "new" or outside can emerge. While Drucker and Hayles may not give up all hope of the "new," Liu implicitly exchanges this for the larger goal of education: "humanity" (252).

Is the "humanity" that Liu pursues from within "postmodern historicism" any different qualitatively from the formalist, romanticist, or indeed enlightenment individualized notions of the self, something from which our postmodern "cool" must surely diverge? In *Local Transcendence* Liu both draws important connections between seemingly disparate forms--especially between romanticism and postmodernism--and shows how such linkages provide an insight into his method of "contingency" and have implications for our contemporary "humanity."

Both romanticism and postmodernism offer an important counter-movement to the singular rational historical line followed by the Enlightenment and to the current techno-instrumentalist teleology of "innovation" (*Local* 7). Moreover, both romanticism and postmodernism offer an aesthetic or style that can set out the principles to an *historicist*, i.e., non-unitary, method. Liu's discussion of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805) points to the crucial romantic component--and key historicist principle--of *immersion*, and connects that quality to the "localism" and attention to contextual detail found in historicism. Further, Liu notes that Wordsworth seems to dislocate

description from historical time as he blurs past and present temporality into a "now" (13). Thus within this aesthetic/critical frame, we are "in" or "immersed" in history and yet "free from history"-- another key principle--that is, set loose from contextual and temporal blind spots and able to see "alternative pathways between past and future" (20).

Liu's third chapter meticulously explores the nuances and workings of "context" within cultural criticism. He notes that while it is necessary to provide detail for cultural criticism, it is not a sufficient basis for his critical approach and is at times a hindrance to what he believes should be the postmodern historicist objectives. Too often detail and cultural context are set up in stark opposition to theory and method, but in fact the rigidity of this resistance to theory, not to mention the reification of anti-method, turns into a deterministic method in and of itself (116). Here we are at the heart of his critique from *within* postmodern historicism, which is that detail and especially the mechanics of historicist detail conceived as a densely layered repetitive loop of struggle and resistance lead to a totalizing, detached, and far too comfortable observation of culture (137). More specifically, the sheer volume of detail, as well as its reiterative nature, makes this a "faceless" enterprise that turns away from the needed "emancipation seeded within, but not without ethical choice [that is] able to emerge from, the complexity of the past" (136, 21).

If the ethical turn brings us back to the question of "humanity," Liu's situating of our "choice" as both within and without history shifts the ground from the unique and highly individualized romantic self, but not to one completely in the domain of the "cool" postmodern "subjectivity." That said, the model for ethical choice and thus our method of *contingent postmodern historicism* is derived for Liu from the intersection of--or perhaps rather the related rhetoric found within--romanticism and postmodernism, which we might label as assemblage, montage, or remix depending upon the context and media forms we might implement. Time and again, Liu references Wordsworth and the romantics for their nonlinear pathways, a skipping between, zigzagging around time and objects as illustrative of the contingent method. Perhaps more significantly, he likens the contingent "method" to a chain of modernist and postmodern "reverie," encompassing cubism, Eisensteinian montage, and ultimately, less directly but logically, the database form.

Like Drucker, Liu invokes digital media as important historicist tools not for any utopian qualities they have themselves, nor primarily for the media fluency required in our digital age (which Drucker promotes), but precisely for the *rhetorical* opportunities they present towards a method. Ethical choice, without moral determinism or relativism -that is to say, "humanity" without singularity, universals, or moral anarchy--comes from a strategic engagement with information (117). Here, Liu's commentary on the "pragmatics" of interdisciplinarity is instructive about his idea that rhetoric and diverse media forms are central to his method. An interdisciplinary approach is not important because it transcends traditional boundaries (since it often only establishes other larger ones) but because it can help us rethink the assumptions and boundaries within our own "home" disciplines. It accomplishes this through the movement or translation of information from one discipline (or format) to another. As Liu notes, the "relation between the home discipline and the other or exotic discipline is really the relation between what might be termed a *convention* and a *figure* for knowledge"--in effect, a tropology--whose goal is "the very art of doing an end run around epistemological closure in order to say the impossible" (181). Visual media, images, extend that gap between convention and figure, or rather open up more possible pathways against closure (183).

The digital and networked world transforms the translation of information exponentially but also qualitatively. For Liu, that is, digital data's immaterial "base" facilitates exchange from one format to another, one receiver to another, thereby erasing form/content distinctions (234-35). Importantly, however, data translation occurs as the result of a highly structured consistent logic, meaning that this "open-ended" movement occurs within a "closed" system, and thus potentially ensnares us within the ethos of the endless circulation of meaningless signs. How then does the digital fit within Liu's

paradigm--can it maintain the ethical turn and "humanity" within this structure? Here it is important to remember that Liu's strategy is not simply one of movement and displacement; it is a *contingent*, not *random* methodology. Liu closes the eighth chapter, "Transcendental Data: Towards a Cultural History and Aesthetics of the New Encoded Discourse," by asking, "what experience of the structurally unknowable can still be conveyed in the structured media of knowledge (databases, XML, and so on)? Perhaps the arts--if they can just crack the code of ordinary cool and make it flower--know" (236).

While Liu prioritizes the arts, especially the romantics and 20th century avant-garde, both here and throughout the book, his title for chapter eight and his emphasis on "contingency"--what lies next to--are particularly instructive. That is, the chapter title situates "*cultural history and aesthetics*" in proximity, or in conversation, not in dialectical opposition or hierarchical form. Here we might well return to Liu's attention to the kind of movement he values early in his discussion of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, which allies the poetic and montage (13). The move is nonlinear but relational, or to put this another way, both within and outside of a history. In many ways, Liu's discussion is reminiscent of assorted proponents of montage as a new form of language--or particularly, as in the case of the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, a new model for writing history.[1] As James Williams notes, Godard sees montage (in cinematic and video form) as offering "a return to a moment before the order of linguistic and cinematic syntax has taken over and words and images have lost their immediacy, freedom, and innocence" (313). Godard's epic series *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (**1988-1998**) explicitly reasserts the "promise" of cinema and more specifically, of montage, to envision a more ethical world. This failed mission or "promise" is then reconfigured by Godard for video and digital media contexts with an intricately layered, collage like form that flows effortlessly between historical and cinematic epochs with a dazzling interweaving of text, image, sound, music, and spoken word collected from across a diverse spectrum of the arts and culture. Alifeleti Brown suggests in the journal *Senses of Cinema* that Godard's *Histoire(s)* can be seen as pioneering model of remix/sampling culture as the work is driven exclusively by quotation, certainly testing the limits of copyright, while at the same time making no claims for rights for *Histoire(s)*. A rich array of related experimental creative and critical efforts might then be sketched, which share and/or exceed the terrain mapped out by Godard's montage: for example, Gregory Ulmer's extensive work on electronic/digital fluency or "**electracy**"; Critical Art Ensemble's assorted activism/artistic interventions and especially their "Utopian Plagiarism" in **The Electronic Disturbance**; Eduardo Navas's history of "**Remix**"; and McKenzie Wark's "Hacker Manifesto," to note but a few.[2] All of these works situate their effort in a dynamic interplay between the clearly "contingent" areas of aesthetics and history, and all have ethical/political objectives.

I would like to close by noting that, in my experience, montage can play a strategic part when students use it to learn to make compelling and coherent arguments by editing together materials that often skip or zigzag across disciplinary terrains. Interdisciplinary translation, as we have seen through Liu's investigations, forces reconsideration of received knowledge, but the rhetoric of "montage" can helps us to envision *connections*, to discern what is random and what is "contingent" (i.e., to see a field of relationships), and finally allows us to make ethical choices. Montage may at different times be called the "poetic" or a "remix"; it is a powerful method that may lead us out of the "cool" as Liu defines it and back to the "human" in its most open-ended sense of the term.

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Footnotes

1. Godard's video series, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988-1998), contains both the argument and the illustration of cinema as a tool for historical method.

2. See also Wark's "A Hacker Manifesto" Version 4.0.

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