Chapter 7

The Feeling of Information

Cool Is a Feeling for Information

As may now be apparent, the ethos of information cool I discussed in chapter 5 is intimately related to the style of such cool I studied in chapter 6. To gaze upon the character of the informed is also to encounter the character of the designer. The move I now make similarly marks not so much a clean transition as a continuation along a single curve of inquiry. Given the paradoxical ethos and style of cool, we may ask, what is the feeling of that paradox? How does online cool complete the genealogy of industrial and postindustrial feeling that we have followed? How does the “Fordized face” of the automating era, already having morphed into “service with a smile” in the informating era, now morph yet again in the age of networking? The answer, as we will see, extends the issue of style. Cool style at the beginning of the twenty-first century completes the severe revision the twentieth century had already initiated in old traditions of affiliation between artistic styles and modalities of feeling.

The heart of the problem lies in determining whether the cool “feeling of paradox” is in fact a structure of feeling at all rather than, equally intuitive, a lack of feeling. On the one hand, information cool is robust with feeling. Cool, as we remember Netscape’s “What’s Cool?” page saying in its best circus barker’s voice, will “catch our eye, make us laugh, help us work, quench our thirst.” Cool on the Web is a heady brio, gusto, rush, thrill, feeling of information. Rather than being the dull, dim anomie that David Shenk calls “data smog”
(“increased cardiovascular stress,” “weakened vision,” “confusion,” “frustration,” and so on in the face of information), it is a keen or glossy heightening of sensation well expressed in all the “gloows,” “drop-shadows,” and other visual effects that Web page designers now routinely add like a glory around ordinary text.1 (The Netscape page is just one anecdotal evidence of the emotional halo in which cool burnishes information. A fuller study of the emotional tone of the Web (setting aside the more flagrantly emotive discourse of newsgroups, e-mail, and chat) would need to take a much broader sample of cool pages, scrutinize the subset explicitly called cool, assess the remaining quotient of cool on pages not specifically identified as such, and then use discourse analysis and empirical psycho-social research to calibrate the evidence of feeling against some historical or social baseline (measuring, for example, the pattern of affective terms on the Web against a sample of women’s and men’s magazines). Since such a study is beyond the scope of this book, I will employ a tactic intended just to take the practical emotional temperature of cool—like thrusting one’s hand into the water to see if it is cold, hot, or lukewarm.

The best single body of documentation for studying cool feeling on the Web is the Project Cool site, whose extensive historical archive of cool “Sightings” provides ample material for discourse analysis. Since 1996, Project Cool has gathered one “cool” site each day, supplying a brief and colorful annotation for each after November 1997. Like most general audience or commercial cool anthologies, of course, Project Cool’s archive is excessively PG-rated in its language of cool. Ideally, we would want to correct this bias by attending to the edgier (but less well-documented) youth subculture fringes of cool where feeling has either a rawer or noir quality. But if we allow for this astigmatism of sensibility (perhaps mentally alternating each of Project Cool’s epithets of cool with “rad,” “extreme,” or some more current adjective of subcultural edginess), then the pattern that emerges from the archives is revealing. Taking a continuous, one-year sample from the Project Cool archives for September 1998 through August 1999 (collected on the site in one-month segments under the title “Previous Sightings”), we observe the following structure of feeling.

“Cool,” Project Cool first of all believes, should definitely be said with feeling. Here, for example, are excerpts from the archive for December 1998 (numbers refer to date of month):

5 Maximov Online
Today’s Sighting is a portal to another region displayed in a beautiful interface.

6 Hamsters
Who says a site can’t be fun. Today’s Sighting certainly is.
While we’re not quite sure what to call Today’s Sighting, we are sure that it was quite enthralling.

A simple and elegant Liquid design is used to convey a message at Today’s Sighting.

Today’s Sighting, while visually appealing is also just plain fun to look at and we won’t even mention informative.

Today’s Sighting pushes the envelope of what can be done. Oh what a fine envelope it is, too.

Featuring tons of inspiration for interfaces, Today’s Sighting also gives back to the Web.

A clean, modern look at Today’s Sighting showcases content you don’t necessarily need the language for.

It’s too bad that not every website goes to the trouble ofToday’s Sighting to be both fun, informative, and seasonal.

Today’s Sighting is almost a coloring book, almost. It’s also a lot of fun.

The evocative, moody presentation wins at Today’s Sighting.

In its adjectival excess, such writing injects from the start a breathless “oooh” or “ahhhh” into browsing intended to elevate the ground tone of affect, much like turning up the brightness of the display. Indeed, “oooh” is not far off the mark. “Oh what a fine envelope it is, too,” Project Cool choruses about the Bacardi site on 21 December, using the classic poetic device of the vocative to summon up inspiration. The specific spirit thus invoked—not classic but Disney—is “fun.” Fun is the primary mood of cool according to Project Cool. Of the approximately 360 sites designated cool in the period from September 1998 to August 1999, no fewer than 30 are explicitly denoted as “fun” (or a close variant, such as “playful,” “made us laugh,” and so on). Besides the fun in the above excerpts, for example, we can adduce such other rote samples as: “Some of the best fun we have is playing with presentation. Today’s Sighting obviously had lots of fun” (21
January 1999); “Today’s Sighting is nothing more than fun. That’s all, nothing more” (13 June 1999); and “Cartoonish, humorous, retro, fun” (30 July 1999). Fun then fans out in the archives into more adult colors as well, as in the praise for the “enthralling” Zen site or the “evocative, moody” White House News Photographers’ Association site (14 and 30 December). We are indulged elsewhere in our surveyed period with a connoisseurship of sites “dreamy,” “pleasant,” “colorful,” “positively swimming,” “enjoyable,” “flavorful,” “whimsical,” “charming,” “captivating,” “delightful,” “curiously strong,” and “wild.”

Cool information, in other words, is not just colorless bits, keystrokes, files, and passwords. Nor is it just the neutral colors of the cubicle (tan, suede, gray, or sage) except insofar as such earth shades can be assimilated in fantasy to the archetypal desert landscape of knowledge work I previously depicted: a wildscape on which the “strong” and “wild” roam and where even the barest pleasures (a smoke, beans simmered on a campfire, a quiet sunset, or the knowledge worker’s equivalent—a Starbucks coffee) become, by contrast with the total desiccation of the cubicle, an explosion of the senses. Or if sublime landscape is the wrong precedent, then we might look to eighteenth-century “picturesque” landscape to appreciate all that is “charming,” “delightful,” and “whimsical” about cool. After all, we should not be surprised that the epithets used to excess in the wake of the Enlightenment to describe detached, visually framed scenes of enjoyment should reconvene in the age of knowledge work to describe an equivalent visual frame—the computer screen.

Cool Is an Apathelia of Information

Yet, with equal certainty, cool in Project Cool’s archives and elsewhere is anything but emotionally expressive. Here I take my cue once more from the “Editorial Policy” appended to Netscape’s revised “What’s Cool” page in 1998, which states that the “personality” of cool should be hedged in by severe barriers to expressiveness: “When it comes to cool sites, personality goes a long way. Even a site devoted to toast can offer fascinating information that’s packed with humor and punch. On the other hand, exciting information should steer clear of hype and cliche (unless of course, it’s appropriate to the site’s objective). We look for sites that use language that is engaging not obnoxious, informative not boring.” Like finding the toy packed into a Cracker Jack box during the mainframe 1960s and saying “cool!” opening a Web page in the network age is cool if the page is “packed with humor and punch.” But immediately the “other hand” of discipline
exerts control. In plain contravention of “packed with humor and punch,” Netscape recommends in its best hall monitor’s voice that “exciting information should steer clear of hype and cliche.” “Be bold, be bold . . . Be not too bold,” we are thus told as if we were Edmund Spenser’s Britomart watching a pageant masque (the Renaissance version of what the Web calls “eye candy”).

Or we can look to Restoration and neoclassical times for a closer precedent. Like eighteenth-century poetic “wit” with its famously paradoxical portraits of character (or like the picturesque somewhat later, as well), cool is an emotional state so torn between incitements and proscriptions to passion that it is oxymoronic, even manic-depressive, in feeling. Here, for example, is Alexander Pope on the characters of women: “Reserve with Frankness, Art with Truth ally’d, / Courage with Softness, Modesty with Pride” (“Epistle II: To a Lady”). Here is John Denham on the river Thames: “Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull, / Strong without rage, without ore-flowing full” (“Cooper’s Hill”). And here is Netscape on cool: “engaging not obnoxious, informative not boring.” It is not accidental, perhaps, that those tricksters of the Web—the authors of Web Pages That Suck—are satirical in the grand old neoclassical tradition. What is Web Pages That Suck, after all, but the postindustrial Dunciad? Cool is caught in a paradox of feeling and not feeling so severe that the only clear expression for it is the meta-feeling of neoclassical satire, which, as in the best of Pope, is a feeling of edgy, above-it-all mockery that somehow also accommodates keen affects of sympathy, mourning, and love (as in the portraits of individual women in “Epistle II: To a Lady”). To recur to the precedent of modern times, cool is the “irony” of paradox savored by those critics of modernity so well studied in neoclassical wit: the New Critics.

Thus, if we return to the Project Cool archives, we see that the full structure of feeling sketched there is one that inhibits as much as it releases feeling. Two of the entries during the year I surveyed are emblematic. One is for the cool site of 17 February 1999, about which Project Cool says, “Capture a feeling? Today’s Sighting definitely does that. It also gives great coverage to a passion.” The site thus honored is The Jalopy Journal, which is devoted to hot rod cars (represented in sensuous, high-quality images). The other is for the cool site of 25 May 1999, named .ttf, which offers downloadable text fonts. Project Cool writes: “Color and a feel of precision make this download site stand out as Today’s Sighting.” Read in tandem, these two sites testify to the signature of cool as distinguished from such previous forms of paradoxical emotional detachment/attachment as irony. There may be tremendous “passion,” but passion feels strangely like detachment be-
cause it is “captured” within a specific kind of attachment—the enormous need of twentieth-century cool not so much to consume as to be consumed by a particular class of affect-objects. That class consists of technologies and increasingly techniques. That Project Cool pays homage to a hot rod site is nostalgic for all the twentieth-century technological objects that subcultures had used to front their cool assimilation/repudiation of mainstream culture. In contemporary information cool, however, libidinal investment in technology converts with unprecedented ease into the pure eroticism of technique. While technology and technique may both be necessary objects of cool passion, in other words, now there is an excess of passion for technique. The really cool sites for Project Cool are those like the .ttf site that allow us to enjoy the “feel of precision.” Cool is feeling that is muted by the technical. It is a technical feeling or feeling for the technical.

This is to say that the heart of Project Cool throbs for design, which can now be understood in a fresh context. Design is how we can be dominated by instrumental rationality and love it, too. When one reads through the Project Cool archives, the overall impression that emerges is not “fun” but the containment of fun and other feelings in a “design sense” that compresses emotionality within narrow, even minimalist parameters—for example, the all-black or all-white backgrounds of many faux-modernist cool sites. The predominant name that Project Cool gives such design sense (the equivalent of what engineers and programmers call technically “sweet”) is “elegant.” If fun appears in 30 of the site descriptions in the year I surveyed, elegant appears in 21. What is important to Project Cool is not just fun but fun expressed elegantly in design technique; for example, “liquid” HTML tables adaptable to browser window size, sophisticated Javascript rollovers and other dynamic HTML, well-chosen colors and backgrounds, deft Flash animation. Elegance is technique become the fetish of enjoyment. The description of the PBS Online site on 10 January 1999, for example, subordinates all affect within the pleasure of elegant design: “a useful, elegant and quite eye-pleasing design.” Similarly, the description of the Belles de Jour site on 10 February 1999 praises a “pleasingly designed directory.” Or consider the following hedonism of design (phrased with a touch of wit) in regard to the HM Prison Service site: “I could stay and examine the elegant design for quite some time” (2 June 1999), or again the hedonism of pure technique regarding the Wayback site: “we took great pleasure in its animations and effects” (27 November 1998). Combined with such other à la mode terms of design worship on the site as chic, graceful, stunning, exquisite, and so on, the “elegant” affective discourse of Project Cool testifies powerfully
that emotions in the information age are not by preference communicated
through smiles or frowns (which are barred by the physical circumstances
of networked computing), or even through the ironic “emoticons” that for
a time flourished in e-mail. Emotions are instead vested in the design of
the interface itself. We now style or posture our feelings through the techni-
cal design of the browser in a way that supplants the predecessor social
techniques of emotional management: rituals, habits of dress, hair styles,
slang, and so on. Once the cool dressed and walked just so. Now the cool
dress their pages in complex tables, colors, and fonts while letting DHTML
(dynamic HTML, responsible for certain motion and interactive effects) do
their walking for them.\footnote{We can now understand why, when measured against historical artistic
styles and their modalities of feeling, cool seems so diminished an experi-
ence. We remember that once the great public genres and style of affective
experience—for example, tragedy, comedy, the beautiful, the sublime, and
so on—corresponded with modes of feeling that, however much zeroed out
at crucial moments in \textit{apatheia} (serene passionlessness, as in the aftermath
of tragic purgation), were painted in broad emotional gestures. Big laughs,
big anger, big tears, big terror. By contrast, what is remarkable about the
public Web (as opposed to the flame wars that break out in less fully public
quarters of the Internet) is the severe restriction of acceptable modalities of
feeling. There are a few pages on the Web that are tragic or sublime, includ-
ing such superbly designed sites as the San Francisco Exploratorium’s \textit{Re-
membering Nagasaki} and such crudely designed, yet no less moving sites as
Tim Law’s \textit{Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support} (pages I have regularly di-
rected students to as counter-examples to cool). But the tragedy or sublimity
of such pages—even if, as in the case of the Exploratorium site, they are
sometimes called cool by the anthologies—is fundamentally incommensu-
rable with cool. Cool feeling may be everywhere on the Web (cool, after all,
ranks among the most totalitarian aesthetics ever created). Yet there is so
little feeling in cool feeling. Before all the horrors and despairs offered up
on even ordinary journalism Web sites, cool is wordless, or at best responds,
“That’s uncool.” (In the vernacular of student discourse: why not kill some-
one? Well, it’s not cool.) And for extremes of pleasure rather than horror, the
Web can only direct us in a sly whisper to the back alleys of the information
superhighway where “hot” is just as much a stylized mask of feeling—that
is, to XXX sites. In the information world, we may say, this is all that is
fun: \(\rightarrow\) This is all that is sad: \(\leftarrow\) And the only mask of lust is: \(X\). All terror,
anger, lust, joy, and so on thus bleed out of cool to manifest with compensa-
tory, even artificial, fervor in personal e-mail, alt. newsgroups, chat, hate sites, porn, and other parts of the Internet that sequester themselves from postindustrial knowledge work by being intractably “unproductive.”

Cool may not be exactly a “Fordized face” of no emotion, then, but as the alter-face of the interface of information, it is just as constrained. Like the “mirrorshades” of cyberpunk science fiction, information cool is a kind of high-tech Fordization of the face we might call “designer emotion.” At base, its rictus of compulsory fun is automatic feeling, a holdover of the age of automation within postindustrialism. Who is cool in the information age? Street performers gathered at the great tourist and transit centers of contemporary urban culture know. Look at that street performer painted all in silver who enacts the “feel of precision” in the form of a robot whose limbs move in synch to ventriloquized machine sounds: “zzzzzzzzz,” “hmmmmm,” “brrrrrrrrrr.” There is the spitting image of all the information workers who gather around the performer on illusory holiday from their own routines dedicated to nothing other than the feeling of precision. And so the entire genealogy of cool we have followed in the twentieth century at last downloads onto our desktop: the “cool pose” of subculture as Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson title it in their book on the detached rage of young black men in America; the cool counterculture that borrowed the pose of subculture to protest angrily in the streets while elsewhere being “laid back”; and now cool Webheads (rather than Deadheads) who inhale the most mind- and emotion-numbing, yet also consummately professional, of all consciousness-changing drugs—information. These are the generations of cool.

There is, however, at least one other name for the cool pose of information that we have yet to consider. This name—equally familiar to subculture, counterculture, hackers, and now cubicle warriors—is attitude (as in “bad attitude”). Attitude is the incomplete politics of cool.