

JUDITH KOHLENBERGER, *The New Formula For Cool: Science, Technology, and the Popular in the American Imagination* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 345 pp.

In *American Cool*, Peter Stearns famously calls “cool” a “distinctly American” concept, which “permeates almost every aspect of contemporary American culture” and has “seized a central place in the American imagination” in its many manifestations.¹ If one takes Stearns’s argument at face value, then investigations into the many permutations of “coolness” should also hold a central place in American Studies. The only catch is, however, that pinning down the precise Americanness of “cool” is as difficult a task as defining “cool” itself, as the term has proven too elusive and vague to be easily compartmentalized. As Dick Pountain and David Robins have pointed out, “cool” may be “a philosophy, a sensibility, a religion, and ideology, a personality type, a behavior pattern, an attitude, a zeitgeist, a worldview” (17-18). Cultural artifacts are not inherently “cool,” but we certainly recognize their coolness when we see it; therefore, coolness is not a durable quality, but rather the product of attitudes, affective reactions, and aesthetic sensibilities. A popular sense as to what is “cool” and what not so much will change “from place to place, from time to time, from generation to generation” (Pountain/Robins 21).

Judith Kohlenberger’s monograph *The New Formula For Cool: Science, Technology, and the Popular in the American Imagination* explores one of the most recent changes in the meaning of “cool,” a paradigm shift that has decisively shaped the landscape of American popular culture in the last two decades. While “coolness” has been extensively analyzed in relation to advertisement, fashion, music, and other expressions of youth and counterculture, it has now, the author argues, invaded the world of (techno)science and digital cultures. Rather than merely add new manifestations of “cool” in American popular culture to the vast archive of previously studied permutations of “coolness,” Kohlenberger wants to demonstrate that “recent popular cultural representations of (techno)science in mainstream American film and television are in-

creasingly informed by a prominent focus on cool as an aesthetic and affective, rather than a cognitive or ethical form of scientific legitimation” (13). The aim of her study is thus twofold: on the one hand, it analyzes the use and effects of “cool” beyond its conventional, and well-studied, realms of thematic application, so as to contribute to the “ongoing dialogue between the scientific and the popular in contemporary American society” (15). At the same time, this book understands “cool” as a response to former discourses and sources of scientific legitimation and argues that “cool” challenges, or even replaces, traditional cognitive and ethical modes of justification. The proliferation of (techno)science in virtually all aspects of life in a modern information society—ranging from household gadgets and smartphone applications that supposedly make our lives easier, to digital fingerprints and constant surveillance—both “results from and contributes to these constructions of ‘cool science’ in the popular cultural fabric of the United States,” Kohlenberger notes (13).

The primary material of this study includes recent Hollywood films and TV-series informed by notions of “cool technoscience,” such as Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* franchise (2000-present), or *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present). These diverse productions all emphasize “cool” as a “highly effective source for legitimating the cultural prestige, epistemological authority, and financial, ecological, and other resources enjoyed by contemporary technoscience,” the author argues (14). The originality of Kohlenberger’s study lies precisely in its unique attempt to discuss the proliferation of cool technoscience under the premise that popular American film and television programs are a response to the postmodern crisis of legitimation proclaimed by Jean-François Lyotard; in other words, the author proposes that the highly commercialized and intellectually rather trivial mass cultural productions she analyzes in her study legitimize what is actually one of the most elitist and “high brow” realms of human cultural practice, that is, Western industrial science.

In order to build up her argument, the author prefaces her four analytical chapters with three theoretical-methodological chapters that discuss the emergence and evolution of “cool” from a countercultural practice to a notion of global dominance, on the one hand, the crisis of scientific legitimation in the

¹ Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York: NYU Press, 1994): 1.

American information society, on the other, and, finally, science and/in/as popular culture. The first chapter counters the argument that “cool” is dead because the values and emotions it stands for (detachment, irony, sarcasm, narcissism, artifice) are viewed with suspicion, while authenticity, sincerity, and empathy are becoming more preferred and desirable attitudes in personal interaction and public discourse. Kohlenberger convincingly argues that even though the rebellion and narcissistic self-stylization associated with coolness may have devolved into nothing more than a charade, the “iGeneration” is very much invested in the creation and celebration of the self which, in turn, has made the mastery of technological gadgets and digital practices one of today’s major connotational fields of “cool.” The second chapter suggests that technoscience permeates all aspects of life in the twenty-first-century information society, including popular culture productions which both reflect and contribute to the progressing dialogue between science and the aesthetics of popular culture. This development, the author notes, can be traced back to a “veritable crisis of legitimation concerning scientific practice and its production of risks,” to which the adoption of “cool” as an aesthetic and affective form of scientific legitimation became a viable response (46). The most succinct and original of the theoretical chapters is the third, in which Kohlenberger problematizes the concept of “popularization,” a buzz term that is frequently used to summarize the interaction between science and public. “Popularization” is an ideologically and culturally loaded term implying inherent hierarchies and value judgments, which Kohlenberger’s study seeks to overcome in favor of a circular or network model of interaction. According to such a model, science and its representations are performatively constituted, historically and culturally contingent products of discourse, and politically charged, just like any other cultural practice. Consequently, Kohlenberger argues, an exploration of how “traditional channels of American popular culture, informed by the all-pervasive notion of cool, are appropriated as resources for legitimacy purposes of science” is more feasible and sensible than an examination of the popularization of science by means of popular culture (90).

The traditional channels of American popular culture Kohlenberger examines in the remaining four chapters of her study are film

and television. The first analytical chapter on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and the third analytical chapter on the blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* as a case study for cool science in disaster movies prove to be the most convincing chapters, in which the objective of Kohlenberger’s study become particularly clear. *CSI*’s investigators, with their professionally detached attitude and subdued emotionality, ooze coolness; at the same time, “cool” emerges as the show’s dominant aesthetic code in its representation of high-tech gadgets, which pronouncedly focuses on sleek, glossy surfaces, cold textures, and spectacular visual imagery. In *CSI*, the laboratory becomes the cool chamber of truth as every episode reassures the audience that forensic science and pathology can solve any crime and is absolutely infallible, thus unmistakably legitimizing science on an aesthetic level. Kohlenberger’s analysis of *The Day After Tomorrow* is similarly straight-forward and lucid: being safe, the film tells its audience, relies on an advanced level of science, which a technologically progressive nation like the United States can offer and which the savvy scientist-turned-savior can utilize to redeem his fellow citizens. *The Day After Tomorrow* foregrounds the cognitive value of science and establishes the scientist as the rational, athletic, and (above all) cool hero, whose intellectual prowess lets him prevail over the enormous natural disaster. The moments of disaster, similar to the representations of the *CSI* lab, primarily serve the purpose of letting the audience revel in impressive imagery, in this case in computer-generated shots of icy landscapes that “parade the spectacular results of technoscientific production” (219). While the aesthetic dimension of science is downplayed on the diegetic level, it is all the more pronounced on the level of production, as the breathtaking images of impending disaster and catastrophe move the audience and promise the restoration of human community through radical emotional experience (212-13).

The other two chapters on *The Big Bang Theory* and the biopics *The Social Network* (2010) and *Jobs* (2013) are certainly less obvious examples of representations of cool science, but Kohlenberger’s readings of these productions in line of her argument are persuasive and highlight the mutability of “cool.” *The Big Bang Theory*, she argues, develops its own “geek cool,” an alternative form of “cool” that celebrates nerdiness and capital-

izes on geek attire and behaviorisms (151). Coolness, it follows, is a direct consequence of the scientifically informed storylines and the protagonists' nerdy mannerisms, looks, and eccentricities while science *as such* is more or less irrelevant for plot development. The focus is put on the "geek cool" of the scientists, just as the discussed biopics concentrate on Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Apple co-founder Steve Jobs as iCons of coolness. Kohlenberger's analysis significantly points to the emergence of a "consumer cool" that is marked by elaborate and outstanding branding and marketing campaigns, which the two biopics are part of. Both films frame their respective protagonists as countercultural icons in popular media, Kohlenberger notes, who become symbols of cool capitalism, consumerism, and commodification. At the same time, they rely on imagery that constructs mass-produced high-tech devices as expres-

sions of individuality. The cool aura of devices like the iPad, the pure aesthetic of the gadget, legitimizes continuing investment into technological innovation—and, in effect, legitimizes highly controversial capitalist ventures.

The New Formula For Cool is a rich and rewarding read, which offers new perspectives for re-examining the notion of coolness as well as the relation between science and the popular in contemporary American culture. The theoretical part of the book is quite dense and complex, but it is precisely Kohlenberger's attention to detail and the care with which she approaches the subject matter that makes this study so compelling and insightful. *The New Formula for Cool* is an important contribution to the study of American popular culture and will be a fixture in future discussions addressing the many permutations of "cool."

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