

What Does It Mean To Be Cool?

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein links Stoicism and Hip Hop

In principle, to be cool means to remain calm even under stress. But this doesn't explain why there is now a global culture of cool.

What is cool, and why is it so cool to be cool?

The aesthetics of cool developed mainly as a behavioral attitude practiced by black men in the United States at the time of slavery.

Slavery made necessary the cultivation of special defense mechanisms which employed emotional detachment and irony. A cool attitude helped slaves and former slaves to cope with exploitation or simply made it possible to walk the streets at night. During slavery, and long afterwards, overt aggression by blacks was punishable by death. Provocation had to remain relatively inoffensive, and any level of serious intent had to be disguised or suppressed. So cool represents a paradoxical fusion of submission and subversion. It's a classic case of resistance to authority through creativity and innovation.

Modern Cool

Today the aesthetics of cool represents the most important phenomenon in youth culture. The aesthetic is spread by Hip Hop culture for example, which has become "the center of a mega music and fashion industry around the world" (*montevideo.usembassy.gov*). Black aesthetics, whose stylistic, cognitive, and behavioural tropes are largely based on coolmindedness, has arguably become "the only distinctive American artistic creation" (White & Cones, *Black Man Emerging: Facing the Past and Seizing the Future*, 1999, p.60). The African American philosopher Cornel West sees the "black-based Hip Hop culture of youth around the world" as a grand example of the "shattering of male, WASP cultural homogeneity" (*Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America*, 1993, p.15).

While several recent studies have shown that American brand names have dramatically slipped in their cool quotients worldwide, symbols of black coolness such as Hip Hop remain exportable.

However, 'cool' does not only refer to a respected aspect of masculine display, it's also a symptom of *anomie*, confusion, anxiety, self-gratification and escapism, since being cool can push individuals towards passivity more than towards an active fulfillment of life's potential. Often "it is more important to be 'cool and down' with the peer group than to demonstrate academic achievement," write White & Cones (p.87). On the one hand, the message produced by a cool pose fascinates the world because of its inherent mysteriousness. The stylized way of offering resistance that insists more on appearance than on substance can turn cool people into untouchable objects of desire. On the other hand, to be cool can be seen as a decadent attitude leading to individual passivity and social decay. The ambiguity residing in this con-

stellation lends the cool scheme its dynamics, but it also makes its evaluation very difficult.

What is Cool?

In spite of the ambiguity, it seems that we remain capable of distinguishing cool attitudes from uncool ones. So what is cool? Let me say that *cool resists linear structures*. Thus a straightforward, linear search for power is not cool. Constant loss of power is not cool either. Winning is cool; but being ready to do anything to win is not. Both moralists and totally immoral people are uncool, while people who maintain moral standards in straightforwardly immoral environments are most likely to be cool. A CEO is not cool, unless he is a reasonable risk-taker and refrains from pursuing success in a predictable fashion. Coolness is a nonconformist balance that manages to square circles and to personify paradoxes. This has been well known since at least the time of cool jazz. This paradoxical nature has much to do with cool's origins being the fusion of submission and subversion.

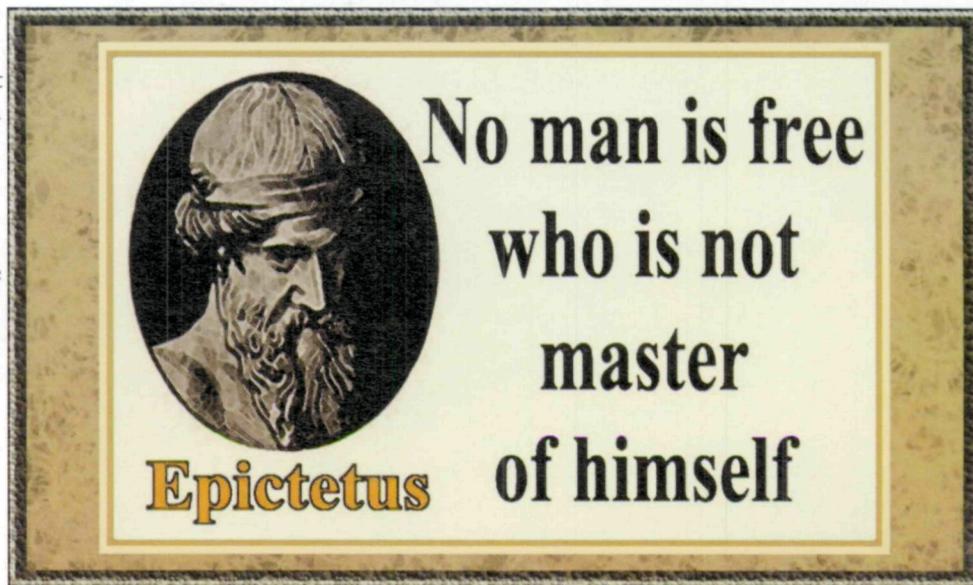
A president is uncool if he clings to absolute power, but becomes cooler as soon as he voluntarily concedes power in order to maintain democratic values. This does not mean that the cool person needs to be an idealist. On the contrary, very few of the coolest rappers are idealists. Idealism can be extremely uncool, as shown by the self-righteous examples of both neoDarwinists and creationists. Cool is a balance created by the cool person's style, not through straightforward rules or imposed standards. Coolness implies the power of abstraction without becoming overly abstract. Similarly, the cool person stays close to real life without getting absorbed by it. Going with the masses is as uncool as being overly eccentric. It is not cool to take everything, nor is it cool to give everything away: it seems rather that the master of cool handles the give and take of life as if it were a game. The notion of 'play' is important to cool, because in games power gets fractured and becomes less serious, which enables the player to develop a certain detached style while playing. For the cool, this detached style matters more than the pursuit of money, power and ideals.

Classic Greek Cool

In ancient Greece, the Stoic philosophers supported a vision of coolness in a turbulent world. The Stoic indifference to fate can be interpreted as the supreme principle of coolness, and has even been viewed as such in the context of African American culture. The style of the jazz musician Lester Young, for example, was credible mostly because Young was neither proud nor ashamed. This is a Stoic attitude. Also, in 'Rap as Art and Philosophy' (in Lott & Pittman (eds), *A Companion to African American Philosophy*), Richard Shusterman likens Hip Hop culture to a philosophical spirit which is also implicit in Stoicism.

Epictetus the Stoic posited a strict difference between those things that depend on us and those things that do not depend

on us, and advocated developing an attitude of regarding the things we can't influence as unimportant. What depends upon us are our impulses, passions, attitudes, opinions, desires, beliefs and judgments. These things we must improve. Every-



thing that cannot be controlled by us – death, the actions of others, or the past, for examples – should leave us indifferent. Through this insight that all the things upon which we have no influence are best neglected, a 'cool' attitude is nurtured.

Stoics have been criticized for being deterministic and fatalistic. As a matter of fact, we find in this materialist and rationalist philosophy the same spectrum of problems that are linked with coolness, because the Stoic, just like the Cool, has to continually decide what is up to him and what is not. In as far as his indifference extends to areas of life that are within his power because he wrongly believes them to be outside his power, the result will be fatalism, decadence and alienation. Yet should he decide to care about things he believes to be within his power although they are not he loses his coolness. Once again, coolness is a matter of balance; or more precisely, of negotiating a way to survive in a paradoxical condition. It's about maintaining control while never looking as though you might have lost control. All this is why losing and still keeping a straight face is probably the coolest behavior one can imagine.

Living With the Paradox of Cool

Coolness is control; but the dictator who controls everything is not cool because he does not balance a paradox. The self-control of cool black behavior in and before the 1960s, on the other hand, is immediately linked to the African American inability to control political and cultural oppression. This paradox of the need for self-control in the face of a lack of control nurtured a cool attitude. Thus, instead of revelling in either total control or total detachment, the aesthetics and ethics of cool fractures and alienates in order to bring forward unusual constellations of ideas and actions. In a phrase: the cool person lives in a constant state of alienation.

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