

Fashioning Value: The Work of Identity in the Age of Digital Reproduction

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Abstract

The traditional notions of value rooted in the system of physical print publication have been irrevocably altered by the emergence of electronic publication. Where the value of the book could once be easily quantified as a tangible product which contained and conferred various forms of value, this value has now been challenged by the proliferation of digital products. Contemporary studies of literary value have so far been dominated by the theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his distinctions of capital value, and while his theories are a productive means of exploring the problem of distinguishing value, digitization lessens the necessity for and value of the traditional institutional imprimatur which Bourdieu predominantly focuses on. This is so because digital technology has given writers an unprecedented ability to engage directly in mass public discourse and for readers to circumvent intended modes of reading. My thesis thus explores how value has been redefined in the digital age by questioning whether the digital literary paradigm is not altogether unlike the print-based one. By treating all aspects of each paradigm as information, be it the text or identity, my thesis conducts a meta-analysis of the social and cultural operations underlying the evaluation and evolution of value in the field of literature.

Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter 1: Using Anomie to Restructure the Field of Cultural Production	29
Making Sense of Information.....	36
Oprah as Rousseau 2.0.....	38
The Success of Oprah’s Habitus	45
Substituting Credentials.....	47
Invoking the Meme as a Quantum of Value	48
Chapter 2: The Scope of O	56
Moving From Gender to Memes.....	58
Rebranding Texts, Coopting Memes.....	74
Truth and “Truthiness” as Valuable Memes	78
Franzen’s Memeome Rewritten	89
Chapter 3: Penny for Your Thoughts; Doctorow and Digital Authorship	97
Engrossing Value	99
Determining an Equal Measure of Value	101
Real vs. Digital Value	103
Fluid Value in Equivalent Mediums of Exchange	121
Conclusion.....	125
Works Cited.....	133

Introduction

The men who produce works of genius are not those who live in the most delicate atmosphere, whose conversation is the most brilliant or their culture the most extensive, but those who have had the power, ceasing suddenly to live only for themselves, to transform their personality into a sort of mirror, in such a way that their life, however mediocre it may be socially and even, in a sense, intellectually, is reflected by it, genius consisting in reflecting power and not in the intrinsic quality of the scene reflected.

—Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*

Writing about the state of the publishing industry in the wake of the digital revolution in his book *The Merchants of Culture*, John B. Thompson identifies distinct phases in a publishing value chain, and argues that each of these phases adds a specific form of value to a book that distinguishes it in the publishing field. However, Thompson's analysis ends once this product leaves the publishing house. Furthermore, Thompson ignores the impact of the digital revolution on the value of a book. The traditional notions of value outlined by Thompson, which are rooted in the system of physical print publication, have been irrevocably altered by the emergence of digital e-printing. Where the value of the book could once be easily quantified as a tangible product which contained and conferred various forms of value, this value has now been challenged by the proliferation of digital products. Carrying on from Thompson then, my work will explore how value has been redefined in the digital age. The purpose of my thesis is to explore the ways in which the rise of the digital economy (and not simply the question of what to do with digital products) has caused publishers, authors and readers to reconsider concepts of value.

One way of approaching this problem would be to consider the concepts of value that inform the growing interest in preserving the history of the World Wide Web. The most extensive archive of the internet, the Wayback Machine, began in 1996, and to date there are over 42 separate initiatives dedicated to internet archiving including those undertaken by The Library of Congress and the British Library. The efforts of digital archaeologists to recover and preserve digital history have in the process re-configured the traditional understanding of the Web's value beyond an economic one, placing it more in line with the field of literature. One initiative in particular, the Digital Archaeology Exhibition, bears scrutiny for the way it selects sites deemed worthy of preserving and displaying to a mass audience. The Exhibition first began in London as part of Internet Week Europe 2010, and then emigrated to New York for its Internet Week in 2011. It is this version which I will use as a case study to consider what forms of value the Exhibition is attempting both to preserve and to cultivate. This Exhibition is unique in that it preserves not only the content of specific old webpages, but also the programming language of those pages within their historical and technological context, a procedure which requires preserving and reproducing the hardware, the browser and even the plugins. These efforts to reproduce both the language on the page and the meta-language producing that page suggest that the very linguistics of the Web have value, at least according to the organizers of the Exhibition. Little work has been conducted, however, to define the value of this language. John Guillory identifies the same problem of determining the value of language in his book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, and posits this problem—as the title suggests—as one endemic to literature.

Contemporary studies of literary value have so far been dominated by the theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his distinctions of capital value. In “The Forms of

Capital,” Bourdieu identifies three fundamental forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. The first designates money and property, the second is largely institutionally mediated and can be converted into economic capital, and the third refers to forms of social connection that may be converted into either of the first two forms. While his theories are a productive means of exploring the problem of distinguishing value, digitization lessens the necessity for and value of the traditional institutional imprimatur which Bourdieu predominantly focuses on. This is so because digital technology has given writers an unprecedented ability to engage directly in mass public discourse and for readers to circumvent intended modes of reading.

As a theoretical framework for addressing this problem of value then, I will use Guillory’s theories of canon formation to give context to the Exhibition’s attempts at legitimizing other forms of value for the Web beyond its historically understood economic form. In the process, I will also argue that the lack of emphasis the Exhibition places on the economic value of these pages in favour of an individual experience reflects a broader historical resistance of the Web against economization.

Following the work of Bourdieu, Guillory identifies the university as the origin of cultural capital, and argues that this capital is controlled by the unequal access to education, that is to say, to the very cultural capital the university has inculcated. Guillory furthermore argues that the literature of High Culture develops in the same fashion, as “a reduction of all literature to a written language which produces a difference in speech, a social distinction, among those who have *access* to this second language through the schools” (emphasis added, 133). The global and nearly universal access of the World Wide Web complicates this narrative of cultural capital, however, since the historical class position inculcated in the university which Guillory points towards has been eroded as much by the broadening of the university as it has been by the

diffusion of information online. The conclusion Guillory circles at the end of his book is, essentially, the idea that if products are made accessible then the cultural capital that was previously attached to these products by virtue of their exclusivity may be reconfigured, and that this shift would have significant impacts on the formation of cultural capital.¹ Indeed, the traditional methodology of economic scarcity, the law of supply and demand, struggles in an economy of values that is predicated on access to information. The majority of websites (save for a few notable exceptions²) only increase in value (be it cultural, symbolic or economic) as their exclusivity diminishes. The success of a website is contingent on whether it is visited by as many consumers as possible, and not by the imposition of any artificially imposed scarcity or exclusivity.³

However, this “total autonomy from the laws of the market,” as Bourdieu would define it, does not, as Guillory points out, “prophesy the disappearance of cultural capital” (339). Instead, cultural capital transforms into “pure ‘symbolic distinction’” (339). That is to say, capital that is judged on “aesthetic grounds, as the products already are, but not on the basis of their inaccessibility, the restriction of access guaranteed by the educational system” (339).

The work of the Digital Archaeology Exhibition seems a useful case study, then, for the way in which it argues for the viability of websites as an artistic medium. This perspective is exemplified by the extreme lengths undertaken to preserve the materials and their apparatus to

¹ “If the status of cultural products as cultural capital is in certain historical circumstances overdetermined by limited access to certain works, or by limited access to the means of consumption, then one might hypothesize that a total democratization of access to cultural products would disarticulate the formation of cultural capital from the class structure and from the markets” (Guillory 337).

² Asmallworld.com, for example, was an invitation only private online community. Interestingly, as of 2013 this site has adopted a subscription membership, suggesting that not even one of the “world’s leading private online communi[ties]” is above the maxim of mass distribution.

³ The typical tradition of restricted access guaranteed by the educational system is illuminated by Bourdieu: “[T]he educational system, claiming a monopoly over the consecration of the past and over the production and consecration (through diplomas) of cultural consumers, only posthumously accords that infallible mark of consecration, the elevation of works into ‘classics’ by their inclusion in curricula” (*Field of Cultural Production* 123).

stress the artistry of these pages, an aesthetic quality that becomes an index of their perceived worth. In other words, the majority of these sites are considered important by the archaeology team not simply because of the words on the page, but for the manner in which these words are displayed. Indeed, the press materials provided by the Exhibition tout “interactive design” on each site as a reason for inclusion.

The Exhibition’s commitment to showcasing these pages on the technology of the time stresses the crucial interplay between the art and its medium, highlighting the importance of the technology in the experience of consuming art, or, at the very least, digital art. Faster load times, reduced latency, sharper screen resolutions, ergonomic keyboards and mice, on sleeker, slimmer and more user-friendly machines. All of these features become readily apparent as one scans the historical array of sites at the Exhibition; cumulatively, they suggest that the unique display of each site contributes to its forms of capital. Moreover, the ephemeral nature of these sites bears out the time-sensitive nature of this value. Unlike literary aesthetics, which shy away from claims about the subjective aesthetic worth of one period versus another, the aesthetics of the internet would seem to be inextricable from subjective aesthetic value judgments. A website from 1996 cannot compete aesthetically or even ergonomically with its modern incarnation, if only because the technology for permitting and enabling access to the content, and the means by which the content can be displayed has evolved as the infrastructure and technology of the internet has improved, all of this driven by the goal of facilitating user interaction with the content. Comparing a screenshot of Amazon from this early period to that of its contemporary iteration will bear out this division. It is a language of aesthetics that contemporary modes of academic discussion simply are not equipped to engage.

The gist of the Exhibition's argument is exemplified by the epistemological dilemma of its material. Consider the state of Tim Berners-Lee's first webpage, the crown jewel of the Exhibition. (Berners-Lee was the founder of the Internet in 1991.) As the curator of the Exhibition, Jim Boulton, laments, it's not really the first page ever created. Berners-Lee wrote over *that* page. The first web page is lost to the digital abyss. Boulton has something more like the first extant webpage, the second ever created. But then it's not the "real" page that he possesses, in the same way that a collection can claim to have a real Gutenberg Bible. Boulton implicitly anticipates this existential dilemma by offering to compensate for the lack of historical authenticity. No, there can be no logic in claiming to possess the original code of a page, he seems to admit, but he can, however, provide the original apparatus. But there again the Exhibition confronts the dilemma of authenticity. No, this is not *the* computer Berners-Lee used, but it is a copy of a machine he would have used. In the same way then that the code on display is merely a copy (indeed, what else could computer code ever be?) the display itself is a copy. The existence of the Exhibition alone would speak volumes of the digital paradigm, but its success speaks louder. Boulton proudly informs us that "It was Internet Week's most talked about event and received worldwide attention from major media outlets such as the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mirror*, *Reuters*, *Wired*, *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal* and over 100 other news organisations." This success suggests two incongruous features of the digital paradigm: either our current conceptions of material existence are unequipped for the digital era or historically mandated modes of authenticity are irrelevant in the digital era. In other words, either the patrons just do not get they are not dealing with the "genuine article" or they do not care. If the latter, their lack of care is no doubt motivated and mitigated by the unalterable fact that issues like "real", "original" and "authenticity" do not and in moreover cannot apply in the

digital realm. I'm reminded of a section in James Gleick's *The Information* detailing the early years of the telegraph, when operators had to contend with customers seeking to 'send' perishables to loved ones via the wire or claiming that their messages had never been sent since the letter never left the office.⁴

The relatively brief history of the web is comprised of countless and successive eras, each one consuming its predecessor with rolling updates and overwrites. Faced with this global maelstrom of information, one spinning with centrifugal force broader and wider as it moves across time, the team at the Exhibition has wondered how any text might hope to secure a position. Their impulse seems to be to fasten it to a technocultural specific moment in history, and to further secure it with an ideological tether. The Archaeology Exhibition returns to these websites their "web-like" configuration by treating them as distinct moments in a vast and diverse ocean of technology and communication, moments which must be contemplated within that time and space by attempting to replicate it. They are, in effect, approximations of what futurist Bruce Sterling dubbed spimes, "a blend of *space* and *time*" (McFedries). "Spimes are manufactured objects whose informational support is so overwhelmingly extensive and rich that they are regarded as material instantiations of an immaterial system," Sterling explains in his work *Shaping Things* (11). Investigating the correlation between the artefacts on display in the Exhibition and spimes is useful in that spimes "have the capacity to change the human relationship to time and material processes, by making those processes blatant and achievable" (43).

Though the artefacts on display are similar to spimes in that, like spimes, they represent what Sterling calls "the intersection of two vectors of technosocial development" (43), the

⁴ See Gleick, *The Information* chapter 5, especially page 150.

objects assembled and collated by the Exhibition do not meet the criteria of full-fledged spimes, which are “an historical entity with an accessible, precise trajectory through space and time” (77). The Exhibition’s pieces are ‘gizmos’⁵ and products made artefacts, where a unique identity is retroactively infused into them. They are offered as instantiations of a technocultural epoch, but are themselves locked in space and time. For example, the function of the once mass-produced Apple iMac G3, its very existence endangered in contemporary culture by virtue of its inevitable obsolescence (as the processor was upgraded to a G4 and G5 chips before the entire product line was superseded by the intel iMac processors—all gizmos on display at the Exhibit), is reconfigured from its original identity as an object of utility into an historical curiosity in service of the Exhibition’s mandate. The range of the iMac’s production is isolated into a singular artefact which the Exhibition uses as a gizmo to enable what Sterling terms the ‘end-user’ (in this case, the attendee using the iMac) to access a subjective chronoscope of technoculture. Though the exhibit stops far short of Sterling’s utopian vision of a synchronic society in which “every object worthy of human or machine consideration generates a small history” (45)—spimes in other words—it is nevertheless a step in that direction. “These histories are not dusty archives locked away on ink and paper,” Sterling adds, “They are informational resources, manipulable in real time” (45).

Even a cursory scan of the pages reveals that the presentation often takes precedence over the content. The way the information is displayed, ordered, and remixed, along with the unique manipulation of the technology that allows this accomplishment, overshadows the actual data.

⁵ Sterling defines gizmo thusly:

“Gizmos” are highly unstable, user-alterable, baroquely multifeatured objects, commonly programmable, with a brief lifespan. Gizmos offer functionality so plentiful that it is cheaper to import features into the object than it is to simplify it. Gizmos are commonly linked to network service providers; they are not stand-alone objects but interfaces. People within an infrastructure of gizmos are “End-Users.” (11)

How else to explain the inclusion of a site like Cyber Orchids, a website designed exclusively as an e-card commerce service. Or 1997's The Web Stalker, which isn't even a page itself, but a browser designed to "strip out the superfluous, so only the raw text, links, meta data remain" ("Digital Archaeology"). So too does Bang and Olufsen's site from 2000 make the cut, not because of the money spent on the site, nor the substantial revenue it generated, but because of its supreme technical and aesthetic brilliance, ironically perhaps a direct result of the untold sum of money which must have been spent on its design, implementation and operation with the intent of generating revenue and increasing brand recognition and status.

It is the willing acquiescence of these sites to that special class of the internet user to generate and bestow cultural and symbolic capital on the product and its author that brings me to my second point regarding a resistance against economization. For though these sites defer to user perception with the hope that this distinction can then be used to gain economic capital, they were not chosen by the Exhibition to represent the internet purely because of their economic success. Instead, the selection of the sites, and the historio-technological manner in which they are presented by the Exhibition, reflects a turn towards the very subjectivity of individual experience that has been predominantly kept separate from critical theory.

The emphasis of the Digital Archaeology Exhibition on the material conditions of a given website, which Boulton was keen to mention in every interview and press release, is a radical epistemological break with accepted notions of textual reproduction. The work of Archimedes, for example, only arrives to modern scholars through medieval manuscripts, and then to the general public through digital scans or modern editions (if at all). Are we to say that Archimedes cannot be understood, or even read without the original manuscripts? Or that any reading of Archimedes is contingent on the artefact used to read it? Or any textual product? Yet it would be

a sly work of casuistry to say that the Digital Archaeology Exhibition argues for a quasi-technophilia. Their work instead represents an ambiguous and inchoate appeal to subjective judgements to generate value by suggesting that a given work is made valuable through these acts of participation.

The selections of the Exhibition quickly and visibly stresses the futility of employing concepts such as economic and social capital for understanding this material. The issue to grapple with then is the overwhelming volume of material. If the Exhibition stresses anything, it is, perhaps unintentionally, the need for critical apparatus in the realm of internet studies.

In the case of the Exhibition, for example, few authors receive the attention reserved for Tim Berners-Lee, who is depicted by the press materials as a shambolic proto-god of the internet, one who like the biblical one before him saw a better vision of his creation and irrevocably destroyed the first incarnation. In contrast, many other authors are not even mentioned.

Instead of the focus being on the authors of the site, the users themselves are like the sculptors of the artifact. Each webpage presents its own canvas to be filled. The process is a collaborative and sometimes even simultaneous effort between spectator and artist, the one who produces the content and the other who helps shape its meaning. The website “We Feel Fine”, for example, from 2006, would “constantly search the web for new occurrences of the phrases ‘I feel’ and ‘I am feeling’” and record the subsequent adjective,” in the process creating “a barometer for the world’s emotions”. The feelings were furthermore categorized “by the age,

gender, and location of the author and beautifully display[ed] as individual colored dots”.⁶ As the site itself explained, it was “an artwork authored by everyone” (Harris and Kamvar).

In some cases the distinction between artist and receiver is not so clear, or even present. The internet, from its very inception with the work of Berners-Lee, was designed with hypertunneling in mind—that process whereby users slip through countless streams of hyperlinks of their choosing. (Anyone who has ever began a session on Youtube with a TED talk and wound up watching fluffy ninja kitten videos has participated in this process.) It is a unique process facilitated by the medium of the multi-media web. Unlike flipping through the pages of a book, web content is constantly reframed through the monitor. But it’s not just interactive television, instead it’s user-generated, user-controlled, user-mandated and user-maintained expressions of art, history, culture and commerce prompted and curated by a website. Fitting and telling then that the majority of the sites selected for the Exhibition document experiences unique to the digital domain.

The situation of user interaction is precisely what Guillory speculated in his vision of a truly marxist society, in that the society’s engagement with its literary products would entail a “vast enlargement of the field of aesthetic judgement” and that “canon formation would then become a much larger part of social life, because not restricted to the institutions of the materially advantaged” (339). The question to consider then, as it seems to me at least, is to whom does it fall to enlarge this field?

The efforts of the Digital Archaeology Exhibition, curated by Jim Boulton, vested with the academic imprimatur of The British Library and the Library of Congress represents a

⁶ This information originally appeared on the now defunct website <http://www.storyworldwide.com/dig/sites/21.php>, though portions of it remain on the Digital Archaeology Wikipedia entry.

tentative first step towards an institutionally sanctioned canon of the internet (as well as being supported by the corporate authority of Google). After acknowledging how unlike the field of internet products is from the field of literature by stressing the technology and the user interaction, the Exhibition regresses to a traditional mode of canon formation, one established in the academia and relying on the restricted access to cultural goods.

This restriction, perhaps unsurprisingly, places the Exhibition in an exclusive position, where its organizers alone can mediate access to the content. The user may be free to shape meaning, but only so long as it is shaped within the paid admission space of the Exhibition.

Yet the chosen sites, and their corresponding descriptions, stress the concept of the canon as a collective memory, as a collection of common reference points in culture, and not in a distinctly American or North American or even European one, but rather a cultural melange. The Exhibition marks the emergence of a diachronic canon rather than the enforcement of a monolithic one, and, it must be noted, one intrinsically bound up in aesthetics.

Far from an isolated instance, however, the same pragmatism is applied by publishers to digital content. Publishers have responded to the advent of digital reproduction by re-enforcing the notions of traditional value onto the digital product. Faced with the potential for a single book to be disseminated (or even pirated) an infinite number of times, publishers have imposed Digital Rights Management (DRM) software to lock the binary code of a particular book within an arbitrary digital shell. In a recent case, Dutch publishers unveiled a new agreement with anti-piracy group BREIN to add digital watermarks unique to each e-book⁷ downloaded to the corresponding customer account. The tactic, while intended to deter people from sharing their e-

⁷ Though there does not appear to be any standardized spelling for this term, this thesis uses the OED spelling 'e-book'.

book data online, also reinforces the pre-digital logic of individuality, a status conferred by institutional authority. One book, one account (never mind how many readers use it). Multiple readers reading the same book is obviously not a new situation to the publishing industry, but the unprecedented ability for information to be transmitted *ad infinitum* forces the players in the market—from publishers to authors and even readers—to confront the value dilemma presented by digital reproduction. Ironically, the answer publishers seem to have arrived at is to import an artificially created scarcity into the digital arena as a standard measure of value.

The publishing industry's compromise of treating the account as the choke-point of data, or as a *node*, conflates the individual with his or her digital identity. This impulse to set up arbitrary boundaries to deal with the potential flood of data inadvertently displays the liberating potential of the digital paradigm. Moreover, it elucidates a crucial disconnect between individual identity conferred by institutions (anything from a degree to a Twitter account)⁸ and individuals capable of assuming and occupying multiple identities. Where the printed book represents a tangible container of intangible values—those based in the realm of the senses—the digital book's lack of tangibility⁹ complicates this same notion of a fixed container of the values Bourdieu outlines.

Without altogether abandoning Bourdieu's theories of capital, I consider whether his theories might still apply in the digital realm despite the shift in emphasis from products to ideas. I question whether the digital literary paradigm is not altogether unlike the print-based one by deferring to the basic assumptions underlying these systems. In order to track this evolving concept of identity, my discussion refers to a scientific theory for tracing cultural evolution. In

⁸ For example, Michael Ondaatje's Twitter account, @him12323, remains unverified by Twitter. The account may be the author, or it may simply be a fan; while the content of the tweets does provide some clue, there remains no way to be sure without Twitter's blue stamp of accreditation next to the account name.

⁹ A digital book requires only binary code to produce and can exist in multiple states at multiple locations at a given moment.

his seminal 1979 book *The Selfish Gene*, famed biologist Richard Dawkins wrote that “[c]ultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution” (189). Seeking to explain the means by which non-genetic materials evolve, Dawkins proposed the “meme” as a model for tracking cultural transmission. Though an enthusiastic Darwinian, Dawkins conceded in *The Selfish Gene* that “for an understanding of the evolution of modern man, we must begin by throwing out the gene as the sole basis of our ideas on evolution” (191). Instead, he invoked a separate and complementary mechanism, for “[j]ust as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (192). The anxiety expressed by readers, authors and publishers over the digital book’s lack of materiality is illuminated by meme theory’s attempt to identify and track a somatic presence detached from physical products.

Unable to ascertain the specific location of memes, Dawkins defined the concept in a very broad sense.¹⁰ “Examples of memes,” according to Dawkins, “are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (192). Meme theory allows us to explain and describe the dynamic and interchanging perceptions of art and value that before were invariably tied to the discourse of economics or aesthetics—between Platonic notions of essence and Cartesian dualism. Incorporating meme theory into the discussion of literary value can

¹⁰ Dawkins explains the roots of the word thusly:

We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme** If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’, or to the French word *meme*. (*The Selfish Gene* 192)

enrich the scope of cultural studies by providing an explanatory matrix for ideas and their interchange between brains.

While memetic theory is not unique in the field of cultural studies, as anthropologist Robert Aunger notes, many studies rely on the current imprecision of the science underpinning memes to “blithely debate possible features of memes, ignoring the fact that their existence needs to be proven” (21). As a result, meme theory has become something of an intellectual dumping ground for contradictory theories. “In 25 years of consideration,” Aunger concedes, “no major conceptual or empirical advances in memetics have appeared” (22). Aunger accuses Susan Blackmore, for example, of overreaching in her 2001 book *The Meme Machine*, in which she “argues [...] that we can explain phenomena as diverse as the expansion of the human brain and tipping in restaurants as the direct result of memes working in our daily lives, while offering no evidence for how these hypothetical entities accomplish these things” (21).

Writing several decades after Dawkins initially introduced his theory of memetics, Aunger offers a compelling counter-model of memetic transmission in his book *The Electric Meme: A New Theory of How We Think*. Rather than possessing physical attributes, memes are instead, per Aunger’s theory, states of electrical potential. Memes, if they exist at all, he argues, reside exclusively in the brain. What then do we make of the objects in our environment, Dawkins’ vehicle for meme transmission? Aunger treats them as artifacts, as the “extended phenotypes of memes, created through an intermediary agent, the host organism” (278). Existing independently beyond the host organism, artifacts represent “the *embodiment* of an idea” (original emphasis, 278). They are physical expressions of memes, the “made-things” of culture, but they do not contain the memes themselves.

With Aunger's meme theory we can see how books function as the extension of the author's ideas. What makes his memetic theory unique for the discussion of literature—and different from nineteenth-century Romantic notions of the author, for example—is the way in which the author functions as an extension of memes. The book, we come to realize, is not a container of ideas, it is a mirror. This mirror can be said to exist as paper and binding fixed in time and space, but the ideas being transmitted, the signal reflected through the page (whether print or electronic), do not. Extending this logic further, the author himself functions as another mirror, capable of reflecting memes. Identity and individuality, this theory seems to suggest, paradoxically come from the agency an individual exerts over the meme pool to craft a unique identity—to first find the light (the idea) and then to angle the mirror (the expression of the idea) accordingly so that this light might be reflected in other mirrors.

In order to explore this concept of agency as the means for articulating a unique identity, and to examine how the unprecedented availability of numerous technological forms has enabled this potential by reconstituting the forms of value, I will focus specifically on two separate and vital nodes in their respective meme pools who grapple with these same issues: Oprah Winfrey and Cory Doctorow, to each of whom I will devote a section of my thesis. By examining these subjects I seek to articulate the evolving definition of value in the wake of the digital revolution.

I explore the ways these nodes have reconfigured “traditional” notions of value away from the product and onto the ideas which a given product may contain, in other words, by articulating the product (the artifact) as an extension of a given meme. Aunger considers the study of these artifacts essential to any discussion of memes, since “[c]oevolution between memes and artifacts is at the root of cultural change” (277). “Memes *coevolve* with artifacts” in a symbiotic relationship (297). You can't have one without the other. Without memes, artifacts would not be

created, and without artifacts memes would not be communicated. For this reason, Aunger argues that cultural change must take into account “the evolution of both technology *and* cultural knowledge” (299). In order to explain his theory further, Aunger considers the Rosetta Stone. The rock upon which the hieroglyphics were carved does not project memes; instead, it reflects the signal that corresponds to a natural pre-disposition of memetic states in the mind of an individual. Aunger describes the process thusly: “The stone functions as a long-term storage device for the written templates that, when ‘read off’, produce a catalytic signal, which then helps in the re-creation of the meme in a brain” (288). The message exists in the same way an email does, since the messages are not sent in the physical sense, merely transmitted, reflected off a mirror, be it a computer screen or a rock. In the case of the email, the content (the words and any attached files) is the artifact while the interpretation represents the meme. Moreover, it is the memetic state of that individual. With meme theory we recognize that this difference in states, at the surface a difference in interpretation, constitutes identity.

Though Dawkins admits he was deliberately vague in his initial discussion of the meme, in *The Extended Phenotype* he takes great pains to define the meme more clearly, noting that “[i]t has a definite structure, realized in whatever physical medium the brain uses for storing information” (109). Although no physical trace of the meme has yet been discovered, both Dawkins and Aunger maintain that the meme must have a physical structure that can be located within the brain. The ideas are not being put on the page to then seep their way back into the brain, from author to reader. This functional equivalence—the view that, for example, “brains and computers can serve as equivalent storehouses for means because those can produce the same behaviors” (Aunger 153)—has been the shaky foundation of both traditional memetics and pre-digital paradigm. Aunger gives a precise and useful definition to replicators in that they are

defined by their information content, not their material embodiment (156). Memes and genes are tied to their substrates, but they are not equivalents. “Information is not *metaphysical*,” Aunger concludes resolutely, “it’s merely physical” (158).

If memes are physical, and Aunger insists they must be, in some form or another, they are most likely to be electrical.¹¹ “A meme,” he writes, “is essentially the state of a node in a neuronal network capable of generating a copy of itself in either the same or a different neuronal network, without being destroyed in the process” (325-6). Aunger describes the act as signals firing in the brain, whereby “[a] signal stimulated one node to fire, causing another node to acquire the same conformation or electrical potential, while itself returning to its original state” (326). The result of this memetic transmission is that “[t]hen two copies of the state existed, probably in similar locations” (326), in the same way that an email or telegram does not physically travel to another location, but rather exists as a copy of itself in multiple locations, on both the sender and receiver’s computer screens. “Information in the form of binary 1s and 0s,” so Peter J. Bentley reminds us, “is stored by high and low voltages” (31).¹² The signal from one node (or transistor) causes another node (in another transistor, in another computer no less) to acquire the same conformation (the email). The process is known as spiking, and it occurs in the human brain as it does in the computer memory. Just as binary code forms a computer’s memory, memes comprise an organism’s memory in a binary sequence of fired and unfired

¹¹ The precise physical location of memes is irrelevant to my project, in no small way since spatial geometries do not exist in the virtual world. When you send someone an email, for example, you are not really sending that message, you are simply rendering your message into bits and notifying the intended recipient these bits exist. The receiver is not receiving the original bits you created, since those bits never existed in the first place. Instead, they only represented states of current, in the same way that a telegram does not literally send the message, it sends only the information, rendered into a binary stream of current on, current off. Neither message exists spatially or geographically.

¹² Bentley’s understanding of memes conflicts with Aunger’s however. While Bentley argues that the meme exists without space, Aunger contends that memes are comprised of electrical potential. Since even electrons possess mass, and two electrons cannot occupy the same quantum state, if memes do exist, and if they are electrical potential, then they are comprised of mass.

neurons.¹³ In theory at least, binary code can represent memes, since both can be reduced to a difference in voltages, between high and low electrical states in a given brain, be it a living organism or a computer's memory. Put another way, brains and computers are considered functionally equivalent of one another.¹⁴

The digital paradigm sets these ideas free, or rather, forces us to understand they were never contained to begin with. In so doing, this paradigm shift emphasizes the importance of our relation to ideas.

The epistemological distinction seems rather an obvious point, but it is one that bears further scrutiny. Even an organism, Dawkins reminds us, is not a replicator, it is only the vessel for its genome which is the replicator (EP 99). Dawkins relates how if a stick insect loses a leg, for example, that loss does not pass down the genetic line. In the case of a product like the Rosetta Stone, even losses of the original hieroglyphs cannot be treated as losses of the original (intended) version. If the sign can't be read then the connection to the information is lost, the reflection is disrupted, but the fundamental meme of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs is not changed. Indeed, scholars can even examine the fundamental structure of the idea to aid in their interpretation. Shakespearean scholars, for example, are quite adept at this inferential reading to note when individual lines are suspected to be fraudulent insertions by a later editor or compiler.

This memetic understanding of the text paradoxically disabuses readers of their interpretive power while simultaneously consecrating it. In the case of an organism, successive mutations to the genome will eventually evolve to produce new species that share a genetic ancestry, while in

¹³ Memetic replication, to paraphrase Aunger, is the change of the state of a pre-existing substrate into a configuration that duplicates the meme in another site (197). Configuration is defined by Aunger as "those factors that determine a node's propensity to fire" (197), factors like the biological conditions of the neuron.

¹⁴ As Aunger elaborates: "it is possible that brains and computers can serve as equivalent storehouses for memes because both can produce the same behaviors" (152-3). Aunger uses the Turing Test as an example of this (see pages 152-153).

the case of an idea, successive mutations to the meme will eventually evolve the idea to produce new ideas that contain varying degrees of fidelity to the original idea. The pronunciation of hieroglyphs, for example, is known only so far as the modern pronunciation of ancient Greek corresponds to the hieroglyphic phonemes. In short, even experts have no way of knowing whether they're pronouncing these words right, or even if they have the exact meaning of the words right, only that they have the basic sense of the idea. But since there are no other nodes capable of accessing the original, intended pronunciation, no other readers and speakers with access to the hieroglyphic meme, the interpretation of modern Egyptologists is the sole means of access.

So it appears necessary to understand and to analyze the way this information is read, interpreted and assimilated within structures of meaning—'digested' as Rousseau would have put it—and the prime means, as it seems to me at least, is to study a reader who exerts an enormous influence over the field of cultural production: Oprah.

Oprah is a useful case study for the opening chapter of my thesis because she treats the author and the book equally as artifacts; both serve as conduits for transmitting Oprah's signals. Indeed, Kathleen Rooney comments that Oprah's Book Club (OBC) treats its selections "as stepping stones to a better lifestyle", concluding that Oprah "treat[s] [her selected books] as corollaries to her program's doctrine of mindless American optimism, a doctrine that seems to suggest that via pluck and forgiveness, everything can be worked out for the best" (142). Confronted with the post-scarcity market of book titles (never mind copies of a single book), Oprah's solution is to reduce the field to a manageable quantity of products vis-à-vis her Book Club. Though Oprah's canon formation is not a unique development in the book market—nor indeed is the history of literature lacking arbiters of elite literary taste, or popular reading clubs

like Reader's Digest—Oprah is unique in the history of criticism in the way she figures herself, that is to say her brand and her empire (all run under her own name), as artifacts themselves in an economy of values. Her acquisition of value lies in positioning her identity (which encompasses her moral and aesthetic judgments) as a reflector for transmitting the memetic signal of the Oprah ideology. In this way, Oprah functions as a paradoxical artifact for transmitting Oprah. Though this re-branding of artifacts is not unique in the literary field, Oprah and her Book Club are unique in that Oprah does not print or distribute her selected books—unlike, say, Charles William Eliot's "Five Foot Shelf", which "was a commercial enterprise from the beginning" and distinguished itself with Harvard's institutional imprimatur (Kirsch). Oprah's vested interest in the success of her selections remains predominantly to maintain and proliferate her symbolic and cultural capital and so, by extension, the authority of her project.

After exploring the function of the meme node in the assignment of value, my thesis then turns to consider how the politics of aesthetics factors into the production of value. To do so, the second chapter examines the problematic of aesthetic value engendered by two distinct figures in the history of the OBC. In the first case I analyze Oprah's protracted interactions with renowned author Jonathan Franzen, from his impolitic expression of his opinion of her Book Club prompted by her selection of his celebrated novel *The Corrections*, to the author's next novel, which was penned, as I will argue, as an obsequious reconciliatory reply to Oprah's once-denigrated aesthetic disposition. In order to further explore how Oprah's particular process of rewriting of artifacts has helped form her media empire and disseminate her memes of what constitutes value, I also consider the controversy surrounding the Oprah's Book Club selection *A Million Little Pieces*. After rebranding author James Frey and his fictionalized memoir as worthy of the OBC label, Oprah engaged in what was for her an unprecedented level of back-pedaling to

retract any endorsement of Frey and his book. Ironically, however, the book stayed on the OBC list. My concern is not with the perceived quality or value of the book, but rather to explore what Oprah's abrogation reveals about the complex interchange of ideas that occurs at a memetic level between individuals and the identities they create. Since Oprah's Book Club does not directly benefit economically from the success of its selected books, what other forms of value did she stand to gain or lose from this endorsement? How might we understand the nature of this influence beyond what sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu describe in terms of capital?

Though two chapters of my thesis ostensibly feature Oprah, the focus is not intended to imply any axiomatic value to her role in the post-digital economy. Since the first chapter focuses on the role *nomothetes* play in the economy of value, it would have been odd indeed to ignore a figure that has exerted an enormous influence over contemporary book publication. Though I could have focused on other cultural commentators who push content at their readers, Oprah is useful to study due to the enormous role her empire has played in shaping the concept of literary value in popular culture. Though the structure which underlies the Book Club operates in a similar manner to that of any blogger, the unprecedented degree of social, economic and cultural capital Oprah cultivated and distribution to both herself and other nodes (books, authors, publishers) in the process bears scrutiny. However, both chapters also consider whether Oprah's personal and uncritical evaluation of texts conceals an insidious process of overwriting the memes inscribed in the artifacts to construct an individualized corporate identity.

My final chapter turns to Doctorow to explore the ways in which the author offers a productive means of overcoming the corporate memetic amensalism described to in my previous chapters. By restricting value to the meme rather than the artifact, Doctorow enables the expression of individual identity. He accomplishes this, I will argue, by offering his books to the

reader as palimpsests for inscribing their own memes. Unlike Oprah’s similar tactic of appropriating writers and their books as artifacts for transmitting her own signals, Doctorow’s digital publishing coupled with his Creative Commons license allows and even encourages individuals to copy, re-mix and re-distribute his works as they see fit. I will further explore this phenomenon by tracing its articulation in the content of his non-fiction essays and his novel *Down and Out In the Magic Kingdom* (2003). Incorporating memetic theory provides a viable means by which to account for the way in which Doctorow can effectively overcome this potential paralyzing overabundance of material to achieve a liberating realization of a valuable singular identity that does not come at the expense of another individual.

Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* proves useful in examining how Doctorow’s success challenges the value conferred by institutional consecration of products—such as copyrighted material. Guillory concludes that “[e]ven were such an educational system [as the one he outlines in his book] no longer to regulate access to cultural capital in the grotesquely unequal way it presently does, cultural producers would still compete to have their products read, studied, looked at, heard, lived in, sung, worn, and would still accumulate cultural capital in the form of ‘prestige’ or fame” (339). Meme theory provides a productive method to explore this rearticulated logic of accumulation. Measuring the value of capital according to an evolutionary mechanism—survival of the fittest—which in this context Aunger refines as “those memes that absorb new adaptive qualities over time” (215), would mean that the most valuable ideas are those with the greatest spread both horizontally (across individuals) and longitudinally (across generations).¹⁵ The suggestion that all three nodes “give away” their products euphemistically describes the viral proliferation of their specific memes. The combined ratio of longitudinal to

¹⁵ See Susan Blackmore *The Meme Machine* pg ix.

latitudinal spread forms a more accurate measure of the success of products (as artifacts for memes). Understood in this manner, Doctorow's impulse to transmit his memes and for these memes to be parasitized by other memes becomes clearer. In a sense, Doctorow enters his memes into competition with other memes, allowing the survival of his memes to serve as a measure for their value. In other words, if *his* ideas were not worth spreading, they would not spread. The logic is that since his ideas do spread they must possess some quality (value) that has been deemed by a mass audience to be worth spreading. The same logic can be ascribed to the other figure under discussion. A given artifact—be it an Oprah Book Club sticker, an advert or a collection of words—can relay multiple signals simultaneously, each signal capable of registering a different conception of value. In this way, the various liquid capitals Bourdieu describes can be understood as polyvalent states of mind.

My thesis suggests that by reconfiguring traditional notions of value away from the product and onto the ideas, away from artifacts to memes, both Oprah and Doctorow navigate the explosive profusion of mass media textual reproduction by using this deluge of content to establish their own unique identities. On the cusp of the “culture of [...] universal access” that Guillory describes (paraphrasing Bourdieu), Guillory suggested no less than a reformation of the processes underpinning the regulation of access to forms of capital was required. In this way, he suggested that the game of culture might better be understood as “an *aesthetic* game”, that is, by deferring to “aesthetic judgment” (340). Such aesthetic judgments, meme theory would suggest, are merely a matter of memetic configurations in the brain. As such, the potential benefit to the study of culture provided by establishing a specialized, multi-disciplinary language which allows culture and literature to be modeled as co-adaptive and co-evolutionary products cannot be overstated. However, while meme theory may be “capable of explaining the complexity of

human culture” (Aunger 215), its application remains stymied, in no small part, as Aunger concedes, “because we still don’t know enough about the brain” (215). Meme theory remains trapped in a double bind: theorists cannot adequately study memes by deference to comparative models such as those found in biology and psychology, and yet the only way to study memes currently is to do just that. “Perhaps, then,” Aunger helpfully suggests, “we should return to our comparative stance for clues, since this strategy has proven so productive in previous chapters” (215). My thesis then seeks to demonstrate how incorporating meme theory into the discussion of value might enable new and productive practices of reading texts.

Chapter 1: Using Anomie to Restructure the Field of Cultural Production

Pictogoras clepiþ þe soule armonye, acord of melody. And Paphinonius clepith it ydea, a maner example.

—Bartholomaeus Anglicus *De Proprietatibus Rerum*¹⁶

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*

The case of Taschen’s publication of *Stanley Kubrick’s Napoleon: The Greatest Film Never Made* succinctly demonstrates how the digital shift has challenged three major ideas underpinning the pre-digital paradigm of literary publication. Published in print in late 2009, the tome is a comprehensive collection of over 40 years of material culled, organized, and created by Stanley Kubrick in preparation for his ambitious but unrealized film about the great dictator. The publisher’s interest in producing a book about a film that was never made reveals an awareness of the liquidity of the values associated with a given idea. As Taschen’s press release noted, “Tucked inside of a carved-out book [are] all the elements from Stanley Kubrick’s archives that readers need to imagine what his unmade film about the emperor might have been like, including a facsimile of the script.” It was limited to a print run of only 1,000 copies, each copy retailing for \$3,000. Lest it be said no one buys books, let alone expensive ones, the title soon sold out, and to this day remains so exclusive it is unavailable even on eBay. Despite the book’s 3,000 page length, editor Alison Castle was unable to include reproductions of over 17,000 images, photographs, reference materials and works of art that Kubrick had accrued over the course of preparing the film. Instead, buyers were provided with an ID card that would allow them to access the material from a virtual database. A little over a year later the title was republished as a

¹⁶ Found on the OED website under the first entry for the term “idea”

1,000 page edition (condensing the original 3,000 pages to fit) while still including the same voucher for the digital material. This edition, however, retails for 0.023% the price of the original edition, at only \$70, despite containing the same print material (albeit in a smaller format) and the *exact* same download voucher.

Taschen's difficulty in ascribing an economic value to a given idea speaks to a broader problem of value underpinning the literary market. Because of the unique and unprecedented ability for complex clusters of information (entire books) to be reproduced *ad infinitum* and transmitted across the globe instantaneously, digital publishing has effectively ushered in the age of literary post-scarcity. That Taschen struggles to ascribe an economic value to their digital goods suggests print-based notions of value—things like sensation, title exclusivity and market perceptions (how a reader perceives these values)—do not entirely transfer to values like symbolic and cultural capital. The problem, of course, is one of perception.

In the original edition, for example, collectors and aficionados were buying the information as much as they were the exclusivity and the facsimile reproductions—which showcased the unique craftsmanship of the publication—as well as the bibliophilic commodities like the unique smell of the paper and the physical texture of the pages. (Taschen even produced documentaries extolling these virtues.) It is curious, then, that the digital archive, itself a labour and cost-intensive product for the publisher, forms a negligible part of their assessment of the book's value: when Taschen republished the book in a condensed format they offered the very same archive, if not the same book, but at 1/43 the price. This impulse towards placing value on the book rather than the digital product represents the core issue at the heart of the print to digital paradigm shift. Faced with the looming and potential threat to the market of selling books,

publishers and authors alike have needed to confront the concept of the value contained within the concept of the book.

A potential solution to the problem perception poses to this question of value can be glimpsed in the conclusion of John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*. On the cusp of the "culture of [...] universal access" that Guillory describes (paraphrasing Bourdieu), he suggests no less than a reformation of the processes underpinning the regulation of access to forms of capital is required (340). In this way, he suggests that the game of culture might better be understood as "an *aesthetic game*", by deferring to "aesthetic judgment", and that "[s]ocializing the means of production and consumption would be the condition of aestheticism unbound, not its overcoming" (340). It is precisely this socialized dimension of aesthetic judgment concerning the distribution of capital (the assignment of value) that I want to explore further vis-a-vis the function of the cultural critic in the field of cultural production.

On 7 February 2008, Benjamin Zander was giving a TED talk to sixteen hundred people about "the transformative power of classical music". A famed composer well aware of the vertiginous state of his profession—as orchestras and record companies downsize or close outright—Zander suggested that it was a lack of understanding in classical music and not any incompatibility between it and contemporary culture. In order to demonstrate his point aurally, he sat down before the piano on stage and played the same notes of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 16 in C major nearly a half dozen times, with changes in the emphasis each time: first plodding, then mechanically precise, then powerfully expressive, and finally a nuanced performance with a logic of expression not dictated by the limitations of skill. The difference between the performances, Zander noted, was dictated by skill and by impulses. In the earlier versions the fictional student he channeled was merely trying to master the instrument by practicing with the

sonata. By the final incarnation, Zander demonstrated a student who had mastered both the instrument and the song and was able to use the sonata to express his own unique idea of the oft-performed sonata.

To reiterate the importance of impulses, he then played a piece of Chopin. The first version was—by Zander’s own admission after the performance—sonorous and plodding, with a distinct emphasis on every note. Dull, he admitted, if technically perfect. After deconstructing the song, and explaining Chopin’s programmatic intent with the piece (a song intended to evoke a journey home), he also noted that the only way to play the song was to focus on the overall theme of the song, rather than each individual note. Armed with this explanation, he then proceeded to play it a final time, and it was that final performance that had the audience on its feet applauding. It would not be too far of a speculation to suggest that the applause served as a confirmation of their appreciation of the value of the piece; they applauded the Chopin piece because they believed that performance was worth the applause. It held that symbolic power which Bourdieu writes about, and which Randal Johnson describes in the introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*¹⁷ as that “symbolic power based on diverse forms of capital which are not reducible to economic capital” (7).

Yet questions abound from this performance. How was the audience able to determine which version was the more valuable? They couldn’t have been applauding simply to be polite, or else they would have done so after his each of his performances. No, they understood or at the very least *believed* that this was a unique expression of Chopin. They sensed a distinct interpretation to these notes, even if the intent governing this expression wasn’t entirely clear (why emphasize the notes that he did?). Unlike the arbitrary impulses included in the earlier pieces—an interpretation of the work by the artist devoid of any overriding structure of meaning

¹⁷ Referred to hereafter in the citations as *FOCP*.

(other than the intent to perform the piece); an interpretation which Zander noted was motivated by the struggle of the student with technique and the complexity of the piece—the impulses in the Chopin piece were dictated by Zander, a consummate professional who has mastered both the technique and the music of Chopin. (Indeed, if I may insert my own response: the performance drove me to tears.) And although both performances of Chopin were played with technical precision, only the latter had any palpable effect. But how can we sense this distinction—sense enough to know which rendition to applaud (and which not to)? Turning to Bourdieu again might provide some clarification, for as again explained by Johnson, Bourdieu argued that “the specific economy of the cultural field is based on a particular form of *belief* concerning what constitutes a cultural (e.g. literary, artistic) work and its aesthetic or social value” (*FOCP* 9). Palatable then, if not palpable. We see this belief manifest in the applause of the audience for this second performance of Chopin, and we feel it in the chills which radiate down our spines as we listen. But only for the second performance. Yet isn’t each performance merely a reiteration of the same song? The notes are the same, and surely the player remains the same, so what then drives these responses to manifest only in the second performance?¹⁸ The point is not whether they should or should not have been applauding and when, but to explore our relationship with this belief that Bourdieu places at the heart of value. What motivates our belief in an absolute value—the kind that produces emotional affect in a work? And how might this form of value function in a field of cultural production? How, for example, does belief render into value?

¹⁸ While it might be argued that Zander gave some indication to the audience that the final version would be the one worthy of applause, the audience didn’t know that it would be his final performance in the talk, didn’t know whether this final version was what Zander considered to be the ideal version of the song—and indeed he hadn’t bothered to foreground his previous performance of the piece in that manner. He didn’t say, for example, “don’t applaud this version, but do so for the next”. Nor, for that matter, did he even ask for or seem to expect applause.

While perhaps the simplest answer would be to say that value, like beauty, remains in the eye of the beholder, incorporating new theories about the mental processes occurring in the minds of these beholders—the players and the audience in the field of cultural production—offers new means of exploring this problem of how value functions in the age of digital reproduction.

A more conclusive answer to this problem of value is provided by turning again to Bourdieu, and his theories about the operation of the field of cultural production. Bourdieu argued that the genesis of the artistic field required “constituting the artistic field (which includes art analysts, beginning with art historians, even the most critical among them) as the locus where the belief in the value of art and in the artist’s power of valuable creation is continually produced and reproduced” (*FOCP* 259-60). If there can be no absolute authority on the value of the text, and no absolute value to the text, Bourdieu argues that it falls to the constituents of the artistic field to both determine and ascribe value to the products in the field, which include both works and artists.

He does not, however, propose an aesthetic free-for-all for determining value. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu argues that “scientific analysis must work to relate to each other two sets of relations, the space of works or discourses taken as differential stances, and the space of the positions held by those who produce them” (xvii). His argument essentially advocates a theory which “has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work” (37). In order to do so, his theory invokes an incommensurable particle of the belief in the value of a work. Johnson goes on to clarify Bourdieu’s argument in that “this belief involves the autonomy of the work from [both] external determinants and an essentialist notion of the absolute value of the work *per se*” (9). In

other words, Bourdieu argues that there is no inherent value to any work; value can only be determined *a posteriori* by examining the operation of the work in relation to the field of cultural production.¹⁹

The unparalleled success of Oprah in the field of book production makes her a prime means of exploring the production of a symbolic value of the book. Oprah represents a social agent of popular culture. Oprah's unique achievement is her success in translating this cultural knowledge (of "what [she] knows for sure", an aperçu she employs to close each edition of *O Magazine*) into social recognition, and, more importantly, into economic success. Oprah's value comes from the conjunction between her knowledge (in the sense of Bourdieu's *savoir*, an instinctual understanding) and her capacity to see (*voir*). As Bourdieu clarifies this process of consumption, "the 'reading' of a work of art": "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded" (*Distinction* 2). Oprah functions as cipher of popular culture, and it is the belief conferred by her audience in this role (as the one who possesses the code, what contemporary pundits might anthropomorphize as *the pulse* of whatever sphere) which grants Oprah her power and authority to confer various forms of capital.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, runs the common epithet, "and information is in the head of the receiver," adds Fred Dretske (vii). What needs to be examined is the influence of the receiver over a given network (and an infinitely small parcel of the total sum of information is all

¹⁹ Further note:

Just as the oppositions which structure aesthetic perception are not given *a priori*, but are historically produced and reproduced, and just as they are inseparable from the historical conditions which set them in motion, so it is with the aesthetic disposition. The aesthetic disposition which establishes as works of art objects socially designated for its use and application (simultaneously extending its activity to aesthetic competence, with its categories, concepts and taxonomies) is a product of the entire history of the field, a product which must be reproduced, by each potential consumer of the work of art, through a specific apprenticeship.

(FOCP 264)

anyone can ever reasonably deal with), which I shall examine further by examining how Oprah's manner of reading becomes a technology for rewriting information.

Making Sense of Information

At one of the earliest cybernetics conferences in March, 1950, a young Viennese physicist named Heinz von Foerster declared that “Information can be considered as order wrenched from disorder” (Gleick 248). Faced with the same difficulty of information overload at each technological epoch (from the invention of the printing press to modern information fatigue),²⁰ the solution remains the same: the need for an engine. In the case of Google, for example, Gleick reminds us that its founders Brin and Page “visualised the internet as a graph, with nodes and links” as the foundation for their search algorithms. Furthermore, “they considered each link as an expression of value—a recommendation” (423). Most importantly, “they recognized that all links are not equal” (423), in the same way that the value of Oprah's recommendation is weighed differently than the recommendation of other book clubs of her era such as The Richard and Judy Book Club²¹. Brin and Page's recursive formula for determining this hierarchy of value can be more broadly mapped to the field of production, for “the rank of the page depends on the value of its incoming links; the value of a link depends on the rank of its containing page” (Gleick 423). Google's search algorithm represents the liquidity of capital as a vast network of nodes and their linkages.

While an incipient solution to information fatigue remains the designation of an engine—be it writer or search algorithm—the problem remains a question of value: what is worth writing and reading? Returning to the example which began this chapter, the TED website gives some

²⁰ See Gleick, *The Information*, 233-268.

²¹ See Thompson, 271-285. Thompson identifies Oprah and Richard and Judy (to an extent her British equivalents) as examples of “recognition triggers”, agents operating in the field who confer a work “accredited visibility”. The recognition must be confirmed externally, Thompson declares, since “[l]iterary agents, publishers and booksellers cannot produce the kind of recognition upon which recognition triggers depend” (277).

clue to deciphering this problem. Zander's profile describes him as "a leading interpreter of Mahler and Beethoven". Interpreter? This seems like an odd turn of phrase, at least when considered in the context of other classical arts. After all, there are no leading interpreters of Emerson or Eliot. (The closest approximation would be leading interpreters of performative works, like those of Shakespeare—which would include men from as early as Richard Burbage up to Laurence Olivier, while it should be noted that actor and director Kenneth Branagh has so far made five adaptations of Shakespeare's plays.) Exploring this term 'interpreter' in greater detail, however, we can see that it has a great deal of relevance not only to classical music, and not merely to music in general, but to all of modern culture, and in particular literary culture. Zander's multiple performances bear out the value of interpretation: the symbolic power of an individual to influence the perceived value in the minds of others. Leading interpreters—ciphers—of this information; charismatic search engines.²²

What makes Oprah unique is the self-reflexivity with which she organises her archive of material, her Oprah network (of value and of products) and the way in which she invites and indeed requires her readers to do likewise to their own networks, to achieve some measure of commensurability with her own network. The value remains with Oprah's conception of what constitutes value, and for millions of readers worldwide that's a valuable concept indeed.

Oprah's unique power as a cultural critic, one vested with the authority to assign and confer value in popular culture, stems from her ability to project what Bourdieu labels *anomie*. As Bourdieu argues in relation to the function of the field of cultural production, "the constitution of a field is, in the true sense of the word, an *institutionalization of anomie*" (*FOCP*

²² The study of charisma is of course not a new phenomenon in literary theory, and Bourdieu makes special emphasis of its power to restructure the field of production. These studies, however, whether they seek to restrict or refine the authority and power of the author in the creation of meaning, nonetheless take as an axiom that which meme theory complicates: namely, the function of the artist.

252). One of the definitions provided by the OED for anomie is “Absence of accepted social standards or values; the state or condition of an individual or society lacking such standards.” However, Bourdieu employs the term in a more rarified sense, one in which individuals (and societies by extension) are capable of governing their own standards of value. “As it ceases to operate as a hierarchical apparatus controlled by a professional body,” Bourdieu also explained, “the universe of the producers of art-works slowly becomes a field of competition for the monopoly of artistic legitimation. From now on no one can claim to be an absolute holder of the *nomos*, even if everyone has claims to the title” (*FOCP* 252). Rather than marking the destruction of the laws of the market, Bourdieu instead described the means by which those laws might be refashioned in the wake of this cultural apocalypse. He writes, “[t]his is a truly far-reaching revolution which, at least in the realm of the new art in the making, abolishes all references to an ultimate authority capable of acting as a court of appeal: the monotheism of the central *nomothete* gives way to a plurality of competing cults with multiple uncertain gods” (253). Turning to Oprah, the question becomes: is Oprah a false god or emerging *nomothete* of value? Turning to another notable *nomothete* in the history of book production, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, might provide some definition to this question.

Oprah as Rousseau 2.0

Though perhaps jarring, the comparison between the two figures articulates the function of Oprah’s anomie, and thus a further exploration is required. Oprah, like Rousseau, gained distinction on account of a paradoxically cultivated anomie. As Robert Darnton reminds us, “the most sophisticated men of letters, sticklers for correctness like Voltaire and Grimm, found [Rousseau’s] style overblown and the subject distasteful” while “ordinary readers from all ranks

of society were swept off their feet” (242).²³ For Oprah, self-styled “serious” writers like Franzen (to use the author’s own words) publicly denounced her simple readers, comprised of an equally diverse spectrum of society, while cultural critics have taken Oprah to task for her perceived lack of literary selections.²⁴

Though Darnton cautions that this “Rousseauistic variety [of reading] should be recognised as a distinct historical phenomenon and should not be confused with reading in the present, for readers of the Old Regime lived in a mental world that is almost unthinkable today” (252), the corollary of Rousseauism is maintained in Oprah’s attitude towards the word, while her relationship to that word typifies what I will argue is a new attitude towards authorship.

Just as Rousseau demanded that “the most suspect form of literature, the novel, [be read] as if it were the Bible” (Darnton 232), Oprah treats novels as simulacra of reality, as “potential site[s] for reader identification” (Jones 102). She succeeds in the same manner that Rousseau did, by which one would read Rousseau in order to know the truth of life. As Darnton reminds us, Rousseau, fearful of the corruptive influence of the culture of the Old Regime, rejected literature to “invent another cultural form, an antiliterary literature, in which he could defend the cause of virtue by appealing directly to the unsophisticated” (231). It would not be much of a leap to describe Oprah’s peculiar style of reading as an unintentional rebranding of Rousseauistic reading. This style of reading, it is important to remember, “revolutionize[d] the relation between reader and text, and open[ed] the way to romanticism” (Darnton 232).²⁵ Rousseauism “expressed

²³ As Darnton elaborates, sentiment played a large factor in their evaluation of Rousseau: “They wept, they suffocated, they raved, they looked deep into their lives and resolved to live better, then they poured their hearts out in more tears—and in letters to Rousseau” (242).

²⁴ Notes Ted Striphas: “the televised book club discussions have admittedly tended to shy away from even the most basic vocabulary of literary criticism” (118).

²⁵ Reading remains for Rousseau an activity akin to eating. Perhaps it’s merely a coincidence, but Oprah channels the maxim of Rousseau’s character Saint-Preux that “To read little and to meditate a great deal upon our reading, or

a new attitude toward the printed word” (241), more specifically, the use of literature as a therapeutic guide.

Moreover, Rousseauistic reading “revive[d] a way of reading that seems to have prevailed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: reading in order to absorb the unmediated Word of God” (Darnton 232). The only change was that Rousseau himself, as author and creator, transposed himself as “a prophet of divine truth” (232), and used literature as the conduit for his word. “He initiated a new conception of the author as Prometheus” (234), a position to which Oprah returns while maintaining a conflicting valence between herself as prophet and author as the same.

Oprah was no doubt enthralled by the venerated cult of the author. At one point in her DVD retrospective on her show she expresses astonishment to learn an author like Wally Lamb would be doing his own laundry. “He’s an author, and he’s doing his laundry?” she exclaims, likening the revelation to leaning “your fourth grade teacher had a first name.” It may be this veneration Oprah holds for these authors that leads her to focus on their works. “Authors are like gods to me,” she confides, “small ‘g’, but gods.” If not exactly God, authors are at least then for Oprah an unassailable entity divorced from the text itself, and which may be jettisoned from a reading of the book in like manner.²⁶ Though Oprah may claim the authors are gods, which would in a sense make her their prophetess, Oprah effectively coopted the “new cult of the

to talk it over extensively between ourselves, that is the way to thoroughly digest it,” by often staging her book club discussion around candle-lit meals between readers and authors. Texts are like meals, providing intellectual nourishment, to be ‘digested’. The commensurability between reading and living extends further for Rousseau, for as Darnton notes of Rousseau’s response to reading: “Living cannot be distinguished from reading, nor loving from the writing of love letters. Indeed, the lovers teach one another how to read just as they teach one another love” (GCM 227).

²⁶ Indeed, Oprah has been known to disagree or even ignore completely authorial intent. In her summer 2004 selection of *Anna Karenina* she described the book as “The Harlequin Romance of its day” (“Your Guide”), a declaration which disregards both Leo Tolstoy and his intent with the novel.

writer” Rousseau first began (Darnton 248) through a rhetorical divorce, or disconnect, between author and book, by maintaining a paradoxical binary between treating the texts as fiction but their therapeutic effect as an undeniable fact. The authors aren’t inventing anything so much as confirming what Oprah already knew to be true about reality.²⁷

No doubt ironically given her veneration for them, Oprah channels Foucault’s rejection of the privileged position of the author. In “What is an Author?” Foucault writes that “the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation” (BHR 290). Oprah strips the author from a given work, making reference only as a means of correlating her opinion of the work. This allows Oprah to establish herself as both a somatic and spiritual gestalt in the field of literature. The text, meanwhile, written by a god (small g), is inherently possessed with a quantum of value, a conviction which Oprah inspires others to share. Oprah maintains no valence between “good” literature and “bad” literature, masterpieces and trash novels—her seemingly schizophrenic selection bears this point out. All books are similarly possessed of value, the only question she concerns herself is whether it’s worth the time to read it.

The worth of the book corresponds to Oprah’s ability to use it as instantiations of ideas she’s previously already known to be true. “That the purpose of reading literature is to augment and enrich one’s self is repeatedly stressed by Winfrey,” Peck notes, explaining how “[i]n announcing each new book club selection, she typically tells viewers what to look for in the

²⁷ Referring to Oprah’s analysis of the character Kathy, from *The House of Sand and Fog*, Lofton explains that “Winfrey’s degradation of a fictional character reiterates a broader programming ambition [whereby] reading is always confirmation of what she already knew and what others need to learn” (184).

novel and how they will benefit from reading it” (186).²⁸ Yet Oprah does more than just a reproduce culture; she’s not simply a copyist. Nor does she does simply use cultural products as therapy. Oprah creates new modes of cultural expression, and generates new cultural products in the process. Kathryn Lofton describes how “one of the great success stories of Oprah’s years has been the complete conversion—the conversion of a nation—to consumption as the adjudicating determinant of our relative freedom” and that “the results of that consumption have acquired an axiomatic valence, for the makeover has become mandatory” (210). The prime way Oprah seems to achieve this makeover of a capitalistic ideology is through books. According to Lofton, “the *idea* of a book is [for Oprah] scriptural,” to be used only ever as a vehicle for discussing ideas, and never as the prime location for these ideas (155). “Nothing stops an Oprah conversation more than the invocation of a book, either in its literary effects or in its material manifestation,” she notes (155). Instead, “[b]ooks are decoration” for the Book Club (156). The books are to be read, as one *O* magazine editor reminds readers, “because they speak to the private you, the one who understands that life, in all its rapturous, sorrowful variety, can be contained within a page, a paragraph, a sentence, even a single, perfect word” (Lofton 156). Oprah is thus composer and conductor, coordinating her hybrid symphony that borrows notes and movements from various other artists in her own cultural production of self-hood. Just as in the example of audiences applauding Zander’s ideal interpretation of a Chopin piece, audiences seem to likewise respond to an implicit belief in the value Oprah possesses as an interpreter of

²⁸ On Oprah’s use of culture as a form of therapy, Kathleen Rooney bemoans Oprah’s tendency towards self-improving therapy throughout her book *Reading with Oprah*, noting that “[b]y encouraging her readers to sympathetically impose their own stories over the ones they encountered in books, Winfrey caused OBC to have less to do with the books and more to do with the self-help narrative of her show itself” (28). Though this prompts Peck to refute Rooney’s estimation, stating that “it could not have been otherwise” (186), the topic worth pursuing is not what Oprah could or should have been doing, but rather what she achieved and the means by which this was achieved.

the works she selects. Oprah's distinction in the field might be explained using Zander's explanation for the power of the conductor. "The conductor of an orchestra doesn't make a sound," he explained to the audience, "my picture appears on the front of the CD, but the conductor doesn't make a sound. He depends, for his power, on his ability to make other people powerful."

Oprah's power likewise depends on this ability to make other people powerful, and to have that power ratified by the acquisition of capital for both herself and the products she incorporates into her Empire. Yet Oprah is not silent. Her voice is heard through her unique reading of the product, and with the unique combination of products she incorporates within her empire.

The value remains not on the book, but on the author, which Oprah overwrites. The books on her reading list function as a literary evidence of her ontology, and not as sites of potential correspondence with her views. In her discussions, the value is conferred upon the individual (herself), not the economic status of the book (the number of copies sold or the dollar value such sales represent). Indeed, Oprah has never picked a book based on publishing stats (whether high or low), nor indeed critical reception (though critical renown and Oprah's selection often coincide, the correspondence is coincidental). Oprah shifts the focus from the book as a product tied in a field of production (cultural or otherwise) to a manifestation of her ideas.

Moreover, and more importantly, Oprah's interpretation is sanctified within the field of production with the consecration of capital. Her Book Club in effect becomes like a text, a site for readers to inscribe themselves within like a code within a matrix of values Bourdieu described as essential in the authority of a *nomothete*. Oprah uses books as antiliterary

manifestations of her ideologies. She constructs a broad tapestry of culture in the same way that Rousseau himself found the use of cultural materials as an unavoidable starting point.

That Oprah is successful there can be no doubt, but what exactly about Oprah is so successful is only hazily alluded to and rarely explained sufficiently. The only cogent account is that Oprah is intractably bound up in each of her products. Peck explains, for example, that “because the brand’s core content is Winfrey herself, or more accurately, the persona of ‘Oprah’ [that] every facet of the enterprise must express, reproduce, and validate that aura” (209). The same claim can be made of every other extension of the Oprah brand, that each such extension is an “endless reiteration of the core message of the Oprah brand” and that “the continued fortunes of the Oprah brand depended on seeking out new platforms and partnerships through which to distribute its core content” (Peck 192). This assertion remains, however, something of a causality dilemma. Essentially the prevailing wisdom for Oprah’s success repeats the doctrine that proliferation led to increased dissemination—which inherently and automatically conferred value; as if distributing the Oprah brand far enough and wide enough inherently imbued it with value. However, if the success and power of Oprah was simply the measurement of how many media platforms her empire reached, and if her empire gained power and authority accordingly, then theoretically the digital domain would have made everyone with a blog, a Youtube channel and an online catalogue a contender for the distinction of Oprah. Clearly this is not the case. The saturation of Oprah in the media is a by-product of her success, and not constitutive. In order to explain this claim further, an investigation into just what precisely is meant by success in this context is necessary.

The Success of Oprah's Habitus

Media analysts and cultural commentators have studied and scrutinised the success of Oprah, and frequently find themselves unable to effectively account for it. They certainly know how to describe it, since the facts make the situation apparent. For example, magazine industry experts were quick to count the figures and note that “[a]fter six issues, *O* had 1.6 million subscriptions and newsstand sales of 1.2 million”—a feat which had taken the *Martha Stewart Living* magazine nearly 10 years to achieve (Peck 204). Publishers were baffled. Advertisers were baffled. Media pundits were baffled. When it was revealed that “one in three who did pick up the inaugural issues decided to become subscribers,” magazine industry watchers were apoplectic, since “a 33% return is unheard of” (Wilson). Their difficulty could no doubt be attributed to their frame of reference. The *O Magazine* transcends the medium, not in the sense that it’s particularly innovative, but in the sense that the media is, as McLuhan so often pointed out, an extension of the self. With Oprah’s empire it is her mind, or more particularly, her memes, which are extended through the use of technology.

Oprah herself has tried to account for her unprecedented success, often turning to modes of discourse popularized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by New Thought theology. The central premise of New Thought remains, according to Beryl Satter in her book *Each Mind A Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement*, the “power of thought to alter circumstances” (6). This ideology finds its correspondent in Oprah’s claim that “intention is the single most powerful energy in our lives” (Peck 195). Thoughts are for Oprah more powerful than actions. Thoughts dictate the interaction between reality and the individual. Peck notes how in one telling episode “Winfrey assured viewers they could overcome financial hardship and ‘have the money you want and deserve’ if they would just change the way

they th[ought] about money” (195).²⁹ By this New Thought logic, reality remains and is entirely constituted by sheer will. In that same episode where Oprah suggested viewers needed to change the way they thought about money in order to overcome hardship (whatever that entails), she continued: “How many of you understand now that your thoughts create reality? Does everybody get that? ... That you have the life you have right now because of everything you thought and then said and then did” (Sept. 10, 1998). Here Oprah sets out the causality of her existence, from thought to expression and finally into action. Perhaps not so ironically then, it is this same chain of being which underpins the structure of her empire, centred around a governing thought—in this instance the idea of Oprah—which manipulates and controls the real conditions of existence by extension. So too does this structure underpin that of the Book Club, in which all products are centred around the governing principle of Oprah, and whatsoever subsidiary clusters of thought this idea of Oprah might entail. The goal is focus, to make all seemingly irreconcilable discontinuities move into a structured accordance with one another.³⁰

Oprah’s continued success stems from an acute sensitivity and self-reflexivity regarding the efficacy of this encoding. When *Change Your Life TV* faced an overwhelming level of backlash against it and, more importantly, against “Saint Oprah [...] sermonizing from high atop a billion dollar bank account” (Adams)—unsurprising given the patronising tone and faulty logic of its message—Oprah made sure to keep the New Age philosophy in the periphery of her subsequent “Lifestyle Makeovers” series she launched on the show in 2000. However, Oprah’s success depends on her particular habitus, and so the episodes nonetheless articulated the same

²⁹ McDonald’s recently attempted to apply the same logic to address growing complaints by their employees regarding their low salaries. McDonald’s suggested breaking food into smaller pieces to create the impression of eating more—nevermind the caloric or nutritive practicality of the reality.

³⁰ In another segment just days prior to the conversation about money, Oprah advised her viewers to do as she does: to meditate in a bathtub surrounded by prayer books, quotes, poems and candles and for fifteen minutes to repeat the words “O glorious future, my heart is open to you. Come sit in my heart”. By doing so, Oprah contends, “your day will undoubtedly be more focused, more centered. Things tend to fall into line” (Sept 8, 1998).

meme of self-help, expressed in products less confrontational, condescending and religiously charged. The recountings of transformative experiences remained, but the candles and meditation were downplayed or scrubbed entirely. Oprah's habitus is not so much an intrinsic understanding of the field of cultural production as it is an awareness of her relation to the field.

The argument under discussion is not whether Oprah is right or wrong, morally justified or not, but rather how this structuring might enable us to understand how Oprah's Book Club maintains a vital role in pop culture literature. As rhetorically inert as Oprah's New Age spirituality may have been (which predictably and unquestionable equates spirit with love (Peck 200)), this idea of a governing thought was nonetheless the same approach which she brought to bear over the style, content and operation of the Book Club.³¹

Substituting Credentials

For Oprah, anomie appears to be the root cause of her cultural success. Lofton describes how Oprah's success as "a most recognizable process of modern commercial reformation" is the way that "the laity is lifted to interpretive authority" (188). As many critics have pointed out, Winfrey has no corporate affiliation with any of the publishers, agents or authors for any of her Book Club selections. She has no endorsements. More pressing to the discussion of cultural production, she has no official recognition of her qualifications to judge literary works. Indeed, as Lofton points out, "Oprah is rhetorically adamant about the disintegration of authority" (154). Oprah does not rely on the sanction of any organizing body save her own. Oprah's only credential when it comes to recommending books seems to be that she is Oprah.

³¹ Here again I must stress that the purpose of this study is not to offer an academic critique of the Book Club. Kathleen Rooney provides a succinct account of her frustrations and misgivings about the Club's literary ambitions, and other writers and commentators have offered similar critiques, often circling the literary and intellectual merits of Oprah's discourse (if not the actual titles themselves).

Oprah asserts herself through media products, constructs herself through the bundling of countless other products, and establishes a seemingly cohesive text. Oprah subverts and substitutes elements of fiction and non-fiction, the lives of authors and their work, in order to create a singular vision of life that is then codified by the Oprah Empire. Lofton articulates this process when she describes Oprah's reading practice as one in which "[t]he solipsism of the reader is emphasized over the aesthetic of the text or the potential social critiques offered within the texts" (189). Oprah arranges life into a structure to create meaning, if only for the way she understands things to mean (exemplified by her Whitmanesque "What I know for sure" column at the end of each issue of *O*) and this order is presented in the diverse output of products across a broad spectrum of media collected under the banner of the OBC.

The product in question is not so much an object as it is an idea. Lofton isolates it as a therapeutic one, noting that "In Oprah's Book Club, social change and literary eloquence are appendages to the primary duty of any text: to make the reader feel better" (189). Kathleen Rooney would seem to agree with her, noting that Oprah's Book Club (OBC) treats its selections "as stepping stones to a better lifestyle" and concluding that Oprah "treat[s] [her selected books] as corollaries to her program's doctrine of mindless American optimism, a doctrine that seems to suggest that via pluck and forgiveness, everything can be worked out for the best" (142). But how can an idea be treated in an economy of tangible goods?³²

Invoking the Meme as a Quantum of Value

Deferring to a memetic theory first proposed by Richard Dawkins and refined by Robert Aunger in his book *The Electric Meme* provides a productive means of understanding the

³² Even Oprah herself, when promoting her online supplement to the Book Club on her show, was quick to mention that the supplement (as well as membership to her Book Club) was "absolutely free" ("The Return").

complex ecosystem of ideas that Oprah operates within and which she herself works to maintain and refine. As Aunger contends in his book, the more appropriate question to ask when dealing with memes and their expression is “cui impello?” or “Who’s in control?” (62). Without abandoning the first question, which aligns with a discussion of the relations of the field of production, this chapter then will graft current understanding of the science of memes to Bourdieu’s theories of the field of cultural production in order to sufficiently explain these otherwise ambiguous interactions between Oprah and the text, the author, and the ideas all three conduct.

Oprah treats the ideas of the text as protean, while the tangible paraphernalia of the text (such as the author, or, ironically, the material embodiment of the book itself) are treated as products in service of Oprah’s mode of reading. Oprah enables readers to overwrite the texts as she has overwritten them. Lofton describes the various ways Oprah treats the idea of the book on her show: as decoration, as inspiration, as gifts, as sources for reflection. Books, as Winfrey presents them, “are worth the work of their acquiring; they are worthy of Winfrey’s sacrifices” (Lofton 156). What Oprah has done is to make this value liquid, transferring it from the book to fuel the success of her empire.

Oprah’s moral life lessons, or “little epiphanies” as Oprah describes them on her show (Jan 24, 2002) are the capital backing all her currency. Watch her show, heed her lessons, do as Oprah says, and you too will experience these moments. Winfrey defined the process on her show:

Well, over the years, I know you’ve heard me talk a lot about lightbulb moments, and thousands of you have written to us after experiencing little epiphanies of your own. That’s what a lightbulb moment is. In the magazine, I call it “aha moments,” that moment when you go, “Aha,” while watching the show. I have them all the time. Lightbulb, aha moments, happen when you hear something that suddenly clicks for you. What’s exciting about a lightbulb moment...—or one of those aha

moments—is that you feel in that moment you know you discovered something new and important that can change your life. (quoted in Lofton 185)

Lofton sees “[t]he entire trajectory of the *Oprah* show episodes [as] designed to quicken the occurrence of such instances” (185). Lofton explains how Oprah uses the book selection to coax out these “aha moments” from her guests, where Oprah will ask leading questions and “[w]ith this quizzical encouragement, book club participants happily contribute their lightbulb breakthroughs” (186). These moments, Lofton notes, are absorbed by Oprah into her program. “The message is here summarized and underlined,” she notes, “with Winfrey framing these disparate tales of triumph with her own pedagogical ambition” (186). Lofton’s point is that Winfrey’s book club functions as self-improving therapy using books as tools, and that “Oprah transforms this commercial practice into ritual enterprise” (188).³³ My own point is that this ritual goes beyond capitalistic self-aggrandizement to function instead as Oprah’s unique habitus, her unique way of interpreting a world of information to arrive at valuable products; that is to say, products which she believes to be valuable. The success of her media networks and the increased sales of the books she recommends function as confirmations of her evaluations. As Zander’s unique interpretation of Chopin is conferred with value by an audience, Oprah’s audience consistently affirms her unique interpretation of contemporary pop culture, her perspective of what she believed to be valuable, in essence believing in her belief about the value of a given product.

The value derives then not from the belief itself but by the sharing of this belief. In her monthly column for *O Magazine*, *What I Know For Sure*, Oprah describes her idea of the road to

³³ Oprah reinforces this interpretation in the inaugural issue of her *O* magazine, for “[i]n that premier issue, Oprah Winfrey proclaimed her desire to guide her readers toward personal empowerment while linking their success to her own self-empowerment” (Gibbons 277).

self-actualization as a product of relationships with others. Oprah isolates sites of connection like “Whose life did you touch? Who did you love, and who loved you back?” as integral to the manifestation of selfhood.³⁴ Oprah’s concept of “self-actualization” finds a curious analogue in a familiar source. The authors of *Understanding Bourdieu* provide a useful definition of

Bourdieu’s term *habitus*:

[A] concept that expresses, on the one hand, the way in which individuals ‘become themselves’—develop attitudes and dispositions—and, on the other hand, the ways in which those individuals engage in practices. An artistic habitus, for example, disposes the individual artist to certain activities and perspectives that express the culturally and historically constituted values of the artistic field. (xii)

Oprah’s artistic habitus warrants further investigation to describe these questions of how value is conferred and confirmed.

Oprah’s form of reading is different from historical modes of reading that predate Rousseau in that she defers to authors when their function suits her intent. Though she accords authors the status of divinity, on occasion she deigns to refute their holy writs. The intention of the author is altogether irrelevant to Oprah, and only employed when it corresponds with her own belief. As Lofton points out in her book *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, “Winfrey consistently argues that books can act as lessons in compassion, yet her own moral compass remains apparently unaltered by her readings” (184). In that way then, Oprah functions as an anti-Rousseau. She is not the first to disregard, disempower or otherwise dispossess the author from the work, but Oprah is unique in that she successfully substitutes herself for the author, like Prometheus stealing the invention of fire from the gods and giving it to the masses. Her conception of the book’s value functions as a guaranteed credit that enters into the field of

³⁴ I have used an electronic version of the remarks published online at Oprah.com

cultural production. What she values becomes valuable (or more valuable through the addition of new streams of capital) in a broader spectrum of fields. She is Bourdieu's *nomothete* incarnate.

The cult of the author and Oprah's Book Club present a paradigm whereby information is encoded in the process of writing, like information encoded by the transcription of DNA. A homologous analogy would be the printing of money. The OBC captures only the bibliographic representation of the values it codifies. And so, like money, the value of its imprimatur can shift according to the conditions of the marketplace of ideas. Yet digital reminds us that the page is just a page, the word just symbols, and that nothing is inherent to either. In effect, digital disabuses us of the logocentric model of consciousness that posits the word as the immanent construction of information.³⁵ The word is the extension of the idea, not its point of origin.

This confusion about substrate specificity might account for the difficulty Taschen encountered in determining a price for digital content (a difficulty faced by the entire publishing industry in the wake of the ereader boom in early 2006 and again in 2009). The page is considered valuable in the minds of readers because it seems more permanent. The way Oprah reads a book (which I would argue more or less corresponds to the way many others read), the information is locked in the page and made material by the substrate. In contrast to this brand of reading, meme theory removes any conflation between ideas and their artifactual embodiment in space and time and instead refers to them as discrete units. The ideas are not solidified in the text, merely embodied. Belief is similarly made apparent in the distribution of capital.

So a meme in this situation could be 'Oprah's taste', and, even more complex, 'Oprah's taste is valuable'. This idea of this meme is then disseminated through a variety of media

³⁵ The readers of Rousseau demonstrate perfectly the logocentric power of the word to affect and restructure consciousness. Readers believed the value to somehow be encoded on the page, to be accessed and even absorbed (downloaded in a sense) by interested readers instructed by Rousseau. Notes Darnton, "Jean-Jacques opened up his soul to those who could read him right, and his readers felt their own souls elevated above the imperfections of their ordinary existence" (249).

networks, Oprah's media empire chief among them, while sales of books branded by the OBC serve as confirmation that this meme has successfully replicated in the minds of others (since if the meme wasn't propagating, there would be no correlation between the OBC selection and the guaranteed increase of sales).³⁶ A more complex meme would clarify the value ascribed to Oprah's taste: economic, symbolic, or cultural, or a combination thereof. The more complex the meme however, the more likely it is to encounter errors in transcription or competition from other memes. So the meme 'Oprah recommends book X' disseminates within the network of all other tastes (other book clubs, book lists, other celebrities that espouse tastes), while the meme that Oprah's taste is valuable does likewise. Furthermore, the more complex meme that Oprah's taste confers symbolic or cultural capital can be contested using competing memes (for example, "Oprah's taste *does not* confer symbolic or cultural capital"—a possibility which I will explore further with the Jonathan Franzen debacle in chapter 2).

Memes help to reveal the value of value, especially value not connected to an economic signifier. Some memes can replicate because the host believes they are valuable, and thus worthy of reproduction.³⁷ For an example of conscious meme replication: Oprah (and, as I have argued, the Harpo Empire by extension) recommends a book because she believes the book is valuable in delivering her own idea of what constitutes value. The idea that this book is valuable replicates in a field of cultural production. The idea is made immanent by a republic of readers vis-à-vis a substantial increase in book sales, thus ratifying Oprah's taste and providing value to the idea

³⁶ There can be little doubt that the Book Club served as the "cornerstone of the Oprah brand" (Peck 191): in the May 1998 issue of *Success* magazine, Stephen Rebell estimated that by 1998 the Club had accounted for \$160 million in book sales (64-66). Furthermore, in chapter 7 of *The Age of Oprah*, Janice Peck provides a thorough and complete history of the various successes wrought by Oprah's Book Club. It also largely deals with Oprah's self-help TV evangelism, as sort of neo-liberal wish fulfillment of becoming the best self and spirit that one can be.

³⁷ Certain memes however seem to operate at the level of instinct, see Stephen Pinker *The Language Instinct* and Robert Aunger *The Electric Meme* pages 38-39, his discussion of memory (page 194) and his discussion of behaviour (pages 218-220).

(the phenotypic expression) of Oprah's taste as a signifier of value. The host can either be an individual or a collection of individuals governed by a common idea or purpose (a publishing firm, for instance, which will sometimes print as many as one million copies in a single run with the rebranded Oprah logo adorning the book's cover in anticipation of the OBC announcement). The information became digital: either an OBC selection or not; worth reading according to Oprah or value of reading unknown (indeed there are many readers who noted they only read OBC selections). Similarly, Taschen may not be able to ascribe a definite dollar value to their digital archive of Kubrick/Napoleon material, but the digital archive is nonetheless considered valuable, as are the images which comprise it, even if this value isn't necessarily denoted with a monetary signifier. The value of the Taschen book is exclusive neither to its exponentially rarer, more expensive, specially produced original edition nor to its \$70 second edition. The value remains with the ideas that are not contained within a single, specific substrate, be it a digital book, physical book, or even a spoken word. This value is ratified by the sale of the book (indeed, the 1,000 copies of the \$3,000 edition sold out in minutes, and the mass-market edition continues to sell copies), but it is not exclusively determined and described by it.

The question remains however, in what sense Oprah has reconstituted the field of cultural production. Turning again to Bourdieu perhaps provides some means of answering that question. "The autonomy of a field of restricted production," he writes in *The Field of Cultural Production*, "can be measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products" (115). He goes on to explain, more crucially for this investigation of Oprah's work, that this definition "implies translation of all external determinations in conformity with its own principles of functioning" (Bourdieu 115). In other words, autonomy is the power of a system to define its own interpretation, in this instance marked as a "translation of

all external determinations in conformity with its own principles of functioning” (Bourdieu 115). It is the bricolage of the artist, rendering all statements in accord of their own unique, autonomous interpretation of the world. In short order a collection of autonomous artists create a sphere of autonomy. “Thus, the more cultural producers form a closed field of competition for cultural legitimacy, the more the internal demarcations appear irreducible to any external factors of economic, political or social differentiation” (Bourdieu 115). As this chapter demonstrates, Oprah as artist places works unconditionally subservient to her art. Oprah represents the creation of a new art, an impersonalized personal art of personality, where the materials are the artworks of others, consecrated to the flame of fashioning individual identity.

Chapter 2: The Scope of O

In my previous chapter I argued that Oprah's taste functions as a meme which disseminates and competes for survival within a memepool—in this case, the field of cultural production. I also suggested that the more complex the meme, the greater the chance for competition from rival memes and the chance for transcription errors. In this chapter I want to explore this concept of memetic selection further by examining the now-famous debacle involving Oprah Winfrey and author Jonathan Franzen.

Franzen's initial concerns regarding Oprah's taste, which he expressed in various newspaper outlets after the OBC selection of his book *The Corrections*, soon metastasized into an imbroglio thanks to Franzen's subsequent mordant explanations and Oprah's taciturn response. Given Franzen's earlier eristic writings about American culture—and to whom he thought it belonged (himself)—Oprah quickly emerged to the spectators as a secular Luther, reclaiming literature for the masses, taking a defiant stand against the academic oppression of high-class literary genius (read: snob) Jonathan Franzen. As more opinions entered this maelstrom of competing ideologies, what soon seemed at stake was more than just one author's perception of Oprah's cultural merits but the struggle for dominion over cultural capital and the future of American Literature. Or so the incident was inflated to seem. Coming as it did just days after 9/11, and pregnant as the cultural space was with a sadomasochistic propensity for fear-mongering, the situation offered the media a readily available non-issue that could be spun into a twisting maze of cultural rhetoric without anyone's ever needing to invoke international politics or painful reminders of the attacks.

I discuss the incident at length for two reasons, one more strenuous a connection than the other in regards to digital publication, but both nonetheless intractable from the issue of the digital paradigm that I've sought to explore and sketch (if only hazily) with my thesis.

To begin with the more tenuous claim, the Franzen debacle represents a modern koan: a seemingly paradoxical scenario which is explicated by a turn to memetics, as it helps to explicate meme theory.

As to the more direct point with digital media, the incident bears further reflection for the way it was conducted exclusively through various media channels. The dialectic between Franzen and Oprah which ensued from some impolite remarks the latter made in the press, was unlike the pamphlet wars of the late eighteenth century (as between, for example, Burke and Paine). It was comprised of a transmediated dialogue of 'he said', 'she said', and run out over a protracted period of months in tabloid print, in frequently rebroadcasted soundbites, in anything but the published words of either party. Franzen was noted in the press for his rambling digressions into the state of American culture, and Oprah was noted for having decidedly little to say on the subject, except perhaps expressing a reticence to discuss the difference of opinion. And while nothing about the exchange of ideas is remarkable to the world of literature—that is to say, nothing about it obviates either the word or its publication—the event is notable for being conducted exclusively through media. Neither party ever took to either penning or publishing responses. Instead, they issued statements—often personally in the case of Franzen, or through her publicists in the case of Oprah—which addressed the event as an objectified instance, as a sort of cultural touchstone—that Franzen thing. Critics discussing the event are keen to close things off with Oprah's disinvitation of Franzen, assuming her rejection of the author from the honour of an appearance the final say on the matter. But there is a great deal more to be gleaned

from their exchange, and from what this exchange meant for the identity of both parties within the broader cultural field. Though the contretemps was sparked by one remark made in the press, Franzen's deeper ideology is far from careless. Franzen's remarks and Oprah's responses, both initially and over the years, are like a fractal of contemporary culture, containing an instance which participates in a system of exchange as it exposes the manifold instantiations of that system.

Moving From Gender to Memes

After it was discarded by media pundits and dissected by scholars of all varieties, Jonathan Franzen's dismissal of the OBC selection was rendered down to an issue of gender roles. Women read, Franzen allegedly argued in his early interviews after he learned of his selection, and men play sports, a bias Franzen felt Oprah's selection of his book confirmed.³⁸ Sarah Robbins, for example, argues as much in her essay "Making Corrections to Oprah's Book Club: Reclaiming Literary Power for Gendered Literacy Management". Taking her cue from the *Chicago Tribune's* October 29, 2001 article by Julia Keller and Mark Caro, which laid out the Oprah-Franzen conflict along gender lines, and drawing on Judith Fetterly's 1978 manifesto *The Resisting*

³⁸ Supporting this conclusion is that among his ramblings, Franzen said the following to Terry Gross on NPR about Oprah's selection of *The Corrections*:

So much of reading is sustained in this country, I think, by the fact that women read while men are off golfing or watching football on TV or playing with their flight simulator...I continue to believe that, and now, I'm actually at the point with this book that I worry...I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience, and I've heard more than one reader in signing lines now in book stores that said, "If I hadn't heard you, I would have been put off by the fact that it is an Oprah pick. I figure those books are for women and I would never touch it." Those are male readers speaking. So, I'm a little confused about the whole thing now.

Illinois based Tawni O'Dell mirrored Franzen's gender rhetoric in her own concerns over the OBC seal of approval on her own book, *Back Roads*, in 2000:

I didn't know what to think. The image I had was that Oprah's books were fluffy. After it happened, most people said, "This is great, this is wonderful." But some people did say, "your book was a serious book. This will alienate male readers." And they were concerned that critics would write me off with, "Oh, it's an Oprah pick." (Keller and Caro)

Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction,³⁹ Robbins claims that with her Book Club, Oprah moved the realm of literature, traditionally represented as intellectual and masculine, into the realm of the popular, coded by mainstream society as feminine. It was this shift that Franzen attempted to rectify. More than simply “almost always select[ing] books with a female protagonist and with a plot focused on women-centered issues” (234), Oprah liberated female readers and feminine readings of texts while championing “feminized sentimentalism” in her discussions of the books (238). Robbins charges Franzen with attempting to maintain the status quo by rejecting this literary sentimentalism “with the use of rhetorical flourish such as ‘schmaltzy’” (241).

The argument also ignores Franzen’s other, less incendiary remarks given to Terry Gross in an NPR interview; despite being less overtly provocative, his comments to Gross are no less saturated in gender distinctions. Franzen describes how his mother knew how to read his books, whereas his father did not. “[M]y mother had, by that point, long since learned how to read my books without reading them,” he explained, “and how to skim the cream of my experience of being a writer without having to down the milk underneath it”. If not perhaps a whole-hearted endorsement of her critical capabilities, he holds his mother’s mode of reading in higher regard than that of his father, whom Franzen describes as “a stricter person, and more prone to make moral judgments”. In fact, it was his father who erroneously, as Franzen sees it at least, read his second novel as an indictment of religion. So it is the female in Franzen’s life, and not the male, who fares better in the reading dynamic, and precisely because, as Franzen declares, women read while men do anything but. The issue then is not that women read too much, or that men should be reading instead of women. Franzen’s claim is that men don’t read enough, and it is because

³⁹ Robbins notes that Fetterly’s book “asserted that American literature in particular was troublingly ‘male,’ consistently cast in ‘designs’ that encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted’ a male vision of social reality” (233).

they feel threatened to enter what has become a female-dominated and a female-centric domain—which Oprah’s selections up to that point had ratified.

Forming the incipient premise of this chapter is the argument that Franzen’s initial concerns were not motivated by gender. I disagree with the assertion that Franzen’s remarks were a matter of gender politics since the critique disregards the source of the recommendation as it seeks to impose an arbitrary cipher upon that otherwise unique source. To label Oprah so narrowly as a woman is to disregard the whole range of cultural signifiers she has cultivated and embodied, as it is to disastrously oversimplify the issue. Given that Franzen bemoaned in an interview with NPR the loss of his ability to reach a male audience because of Oprah’s selection, it would be difficult not to frame their debate as one about gender. And yet, to cast the issue in such narrow terms as it has been, as a disagreement between a man who writes and a woman who reads, is to miss a more salient aspect of the debate.

Using the issue of gender as only a starting point into the broader politics of power Oprah’s discussion of books instigates, Edith Frampton claims that the OBC trades “literary” value for a different kind of value, “a new literary prize”, one which “repossesses a piece of the literary sphere for middle- and working-class women by creating its own analytic mode and alternative literary prize, in which the domestic and maternal—including the intercorporeal and breastfeeding relationship—are valued as worthy of critical study” (156). In other words, the success of the OBC demonstrates a move by pop culture away from the traditional literary to the non-literary modes of discussion. As Frampton notes, “the informal, collaborative nature of their analysis, situated in the domestic sphere of Winfrey’s home, represents an anti-authoritarian critical approach that subverts traditional, monologic, patriarchal discourse” (148). More than a dispute between genders then, the conflict turns on Oprah’s position as the anti-literary, a

position which undoubtedly clashes with Franzen's self-described position "solidly in the high-art literary tradition" (Kirkpatrick), as an author (and a reader) tasked with its preservation and cultivation.

Leaving gender aside, and moving the discussion deeper into the issue of culture and class, Lofton offers a productive analysis when she argues that Franzen's rejection articulates a desire to resist incorporation "into the system of disseminations and products circled by the same O, ringed and wrung by Winfrey for purposes beyond the control of any solo actor" (161). I would add, as I have previously argued in my first chapter, that Oprah remains herself a solitary actor; though she is of course not alone in the dynamic of relations in the field, she is nevertheless a prime agent in a position of control and authority. Oprah is the one who initiates the incorporations and who herself does not become incorporated.

Franzen himself seemed wary of this voracious feature of her persona. In an interview given shortly before the Oprah fiasco exploded in the media, he expressed his reservations about featuring the OBC logo on the book's cover:

I see this as my book, my creation, and I didn't want that logo of corporate ownership on it. It's not a sticker, it's part of the cover. They redo the whole cover. You can't take it off. I know it says Oprah's Book Club, but it's an implied endorsement, both for me and for her. The reason I got into this business is because I'm an independent writer, and I didn't want a corporate logo on my book. (quoted in Rooney 44-5)

Franzen's remarks effectively characterize Oprah's Book Club and its seal of approval more as corporate branding than personalized recommendation or benevolent sharing of capital. His concern renders recommendations in virological terms, with books as vehicles parasitized by competing values (for example, Franzen's idea of his book's phenomenological value versus Oprah's). When he laments that he "had some hope of actually reaching a male audience," for

example, the past participle (“had”) conveys the contamination Oprah’s selection enacts on the public perception of the book.

It’s important to note that no other recommendation has ever quite captured this level of hyperbolic media saturation and sustained interest from a general public. Perhaps because of its unique position, coming as one of the most frequently referenced cultural events after 9/11, and its sustained presence in the excerpted biographies of both Franzen and Oprah, the controversy has left a lasting residue on the public personas of both parties. It seems inevitable that whenever the former is mentioned the latter is soon to follow, and vice-versa. When Franzen was featured as *Time* magazine’s cover story in August of 2012 (the first author to merit the distinction since Stephen King over a decade earlier), the article afforded three paragraphs to his encounter with Oprah.

The important aspect of this selection concerning the perceived artistic quality of a work—and a feature which returns to the memetic theory addressed in my first chapter—is that in this instance the aesthetic judgement is entirely motivated by the overriding identity of one person: Oprah.

This chapter seeks to explore the processes of cultural exchange underlying this critical moment in the history of not only Oprah’s Book Club but Franzen’s literary identity as well. Examining Franzen’s discordant reflections on his two most successful novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, reveals the means by which he constructs his identity through media, and the way in which media might construct his identity. These two books are the most useful not only for their mass distribution in the field of literary publication (both were massive successes), but also because their reception in the public consciousness is intractable from Oprah’s media machine

(which I explored in my first chapter). I do not mean to suggest that Franzen's books sold because of Oprah, or that Franzen wrote books so that Oprah could promote them, but that Oprah left more of a mark on Franzen than her O sticker on the cover of these two books. The purpose of this chapter is not so much a syntactic and grammatical examination of Franzen as a writer, but an examination of the impact various forms of capital exert over the production of cultural goods.

Though her taste had once been anathema to all that Franzen valued,⁴⁰ Oprah seems to have exerted enormous influence over the ideology of Franzen in the intervening years between his two novels. The literary ambitions of the Franzen who wrote *The Corrections* are markedly different than those of the one who wrote *Freedom*. The types of capital he sought to accrue with his literary career had shifted. Where the Franzen who wrote *The Corrections* expressed a resistance against mainstream culture (which became personified in the OBC selection), the Franzen who wrote *Freedom* actively sought the approval and validation of none other than Oprah herself. It was he who sent a copy of *Freedom* to Oprah for her enjoyment—and not the Franzen who less than a decade before had publicly denounced her literary taste. It was, I will argue, the strength of Oprah's symbolic and cultural capital—which derived from her anomic presence in the field of large-scale book production and literary production—that lent credence to her anti-literary, anti-academic taste. In order to sufficiently explain this strength of her capital I turn once again to memetics.

In the way that Franzen has described his distaste for Oprah's branding influence the discussion already finds itself on the cusp of memetics. I intend this chapter, then, as an unconventional examination of an unfamiliar avenue of studying identity: the memeplex. The

⁴⁰ Indeed, he claimed as much in his awkwardly phrased rebukes in the months following her selection of the *The Corrections*.

suggestion is not without precedent. In his book *The God Delusion*, Dawkins suggests the possibility for a link between meme theory and literary criticism. The suggestion comes in a footnote in his scientific study of memetics, the entirety of which bears repeating here:

Different schools and genres of art can be analysed as alternative memeplexes, as artists copy ideas and motifs from earlier artists, and new motifs survive only if they mesh with others. Indeed, the whole academic discipline of History of Art, with its sophisticated tracing of iconographies and symbolisms, could be seen as an elaborate study in memeplexity. Details will have been favoured or disfavoured by the presence of existing members of the meme pool, and these will often include religious memes. (200)

The memeplex is, at its most fundamental concept, a cartel of cooperating memes that constitute a mind: “A memeplex is a set of memes which, while not necessarily being good survivors on their own, are good survivors in the presence of other members of the memeplex” (*GD* 230). In order to be considered part of a memeplex, and not simply a meme within the meme pool, these memes must be mutually compatible, and not in competition with each other.

Though memeticists remain divided on the precise nature of the meme, they all agree with Dawkins’ initial premise that the meme serves as the root of cultural exchange. Memes are expressed by ideas that artists embody through artifacts (which can then be copied depending on their perceived value). Aunger takes an artifact to mean “the *embodiment* of an idea” (original emphasis, 278). Underpinning my thesis has been the lability of the term ‘artifact’, concurrent with the ambiguity of the term “embodiment”. Though the OED defines the term ‘embodiment’ as the concrete expression of an otherwise abstract idea, another definition is “the process or state of being embodied” (OED). This etymological precursor (‘embodied’) is defined as the incorporation of an idea into a system of forms, either concrete or immaterial. With these two terms at the ready, artifact and embodiment, I want to explore the ramifications of Oprah’s

treatment of the author as the artifact,⁴¹ as the idea embodied by the text, within the field of large scale cultural production.

In order to do so, I will make use of a term which I will call the memeome (corresponding in memetics to the function of the genome). I am certainly not the first to coin this term; Eric Berlow and Sean Gourley have notably used it in a 2013 TED talk to mean “the mathematical structure of an idea.” In their case the idea was TED itself; my intent is to provide a definition to this term which offers delineations in the complex structure of ideas. The memeome is a theoretical term to express the collection of memes which constitute the identity—the idea—of an individual (to be clear, I am not suggesting that the memeome has a physical structure in the way that Dawkins and others have advocated for a physical structure to memes). The memeome is examined not by studying the memes, since they remain hidden (as memeticists have noted with growing frustration in each new publication), but by examining the ideas which constitute them, embodied by artifactual products. In the case of the author, the memes are culled from the corpus of work: the book, the word, the image; any medium of exchanging ideas. In this bundle of links, each link is analogous to a meme.

Dawkins also describes the ways in which memes might proliferate, communicated as either digital or analogue information;⁴² however, his description overlooks the fact that each message may contain layers of complexity. For example, the O sticker on the cover of a book is a succinct example of a digital message, given that either the receiver understands that it denotes “Oprah has recommended this book for her book club”, or the receiver does not. Yet, as the incipient source of the entire Franzen debacle, that single letter, ostensibly a digital bit of information, can carry with it a whole range of analogue meanings—meanings which only

⁴¹ By embodied author I mean the author’s literary corpus, the body of work.

⁴² See *The God Delusion* page 225-230.

become sufficiently realized by invoking memplexity, and more specifically the concept of the memeome. It was not simply a matter of taste that Franzen disputed; it was a matter of identity.

Given the confusion that resulted from Franzen's frequently misinterpreted, always truncated and begrudgingly elitist words, Franzen's ideas were more multifaceted than he anticipated. In the case of Franzen, the seemingly digital memeome of the "serious" author is actually comprised of a collection of memes and possibly even other memeomes, the main components of which are expressed throughout his entire corpus of writings, such as his thinly veiled apology to Oprah and her readers in the introduction to his collection of essays entitled *How to Be Alone* (which I will examine further in the conclusion to this chapter). When Oprah's memeome encountered Franzen's, the resulting recombination of both memeomes produced marked changes in the ideologies of both parties.

Unlike sexual reproduction, with memetic replication there is no genetically recombined product external to the parents; instead, the memetic recombination occurs within the minds of the hosts. Nor does the memetic transmission accord to a perfect 50/50 transference of memetic material, as is the case with genes during conception. If any offspring are to be claimed, they are the relaunched Book Club and Franzen's literary output post-Oprah.

In the same way that DNA might change and mutate, a meme might evolve from one idea to another iteration. The idea is not itself the meme, it is instead only the phenotype of the meme, and a given meme may share information with older forms in much the same way our own DNA does.⁴³ As I described in my previous chapter, memes are not the cultural goods but rather the structure for explaining their production.

⁴³ For example, we share over 200 genes with archaea bacteria, three-billion-year-old organisms, and these genes even perform the same functions in both species ("The Gene Code").

A review seems necessary at this point: the artist can be understood as a memeome which then is expressed as ideas. These ideas can influence other artists, who are similarly capable of provoking duplication in the minds of other recipients through the transmission of ideas vis-à-vis products. These ideas spread both horizontally (across players in the field) and longitudinally (across time).

Given this description, the main question (at least as it concerns this thesis) is where the value resides. We can't simply say that value belongs to the artist since we can no longer be entirely certain which artist we refer to. How can we pinpoint who produced what idea? How does one partition value in this way?⁴⁴ In the case of Franzen and Oprah, the problem is especially complicated since their relationship represents a restricted set of linkages: Franzen inspired Oprah with his book, and Oprah then inspired Franzen (an argument which I will develop more fully as the chapter progresses). The process is not a feedback loop, however, since Franzen is not the sole source of Oprah's inspiration, nor vice versa; both are instead only a means of stimulating cultural production.⁴⁵ The process is instead better understood as one of reciprocal altruism, what Dawkins colloquially describes as "you scratch my back, I scratch yours" (*God Delusion* 247), whereby Franzen scratches Oprah's back by furnishing her material (the book), and she then scratches Franzen's back by giving him a platform.

⁴⁴ To return to the question which began my first chapter, is Benjamin Zander somehow less valuable as an artist because he's chiefly known as one who interprets the music of other composers, rather than creating his own unique compositions? Is any artist less valuable in their given field after the influence of major artists which have preceded them? Is the art of every composer influenced by Mozart less valuable than Mozart's art? And what of the artists themselves? This chapter attempts to provide some measure of understanding to these problems.

⁴⁵ A more simplistic example of this issue would be the distribution of value in the context of a something like Alan Lui's *The Laws of Cool*. It would be illogical to give credit for the production and dissemination of the book to Shakespeare for coining the word "cool". And yet if we understand artists as artifacts themselves we understand the dilemma this syllogism presents. The distinction then pertains to the degree of memetic assimilation between artifacts. In other words, distinction is concerned with the volume of ideas derived from a particular source that are embodied by a given artifact.

The key to untangling this complicated network of production and interactions is to treat the page as only substrate, the ink on the page only a configuration that incites a node to fire, a cumulative process allowing the information to be processed in the brain. The page is not the site of the meme, since memes are substrate specific, and can exist only in the brain. The page is only a blueprint for memes. So too are the ideas only a blueprint for memes and memeomes.

For Oprah's memeome to proliferate, she needs to 'sell' her ideas, in this case the prescribed value of a selected book. I use the term 'sell' loosely since Oprah does not trade with her viewers in the typical sense of commodity exchange. Though the reader's acquisition of the book is not a confirmation of the book's value (because there have been cases where many readers did not enjoy the book, despite having acquired it per Oprah's recommendation), the sale is nonetheless a confirmation of the value of Oprah's taste. The sales of books stemming from Oprah's recommendation provide a quantifiable figure of memetic infection. What is being tracked is not so much the value of the book as it is the value of a particular idea, in this case, Oprah's recommendation.

In his 1996 essay "Perchance to Dream" (predating his OBC selection), Franzen wrote about the prime source of cultural authority for his father in the 1950s Midwest—undoubtedly a form of cultural authority familiar to countless other fathers in America at that time:

I can report that my father, who was not a reader, nevertheless had some acquaintance with James Baldwin and John Cheever, because *Time* magazine put them on its cover, and *Time*, for my father, was the ultimate cultural authority... The dollar is now the yardstick of cultural authority, and an organ like *Time*, which not long ago aspired to shape the national taste, now serves mainly to reflect it. (38)

Rooney mirrors that economic sentiment when she reflects that "even though numerous artists, commentators and the so-called general public seem reluctant to admit it—cultural capital and economic capital are increasingly becoming one and the same" (57). The market of value thrives

because of a fundamental belief by the participants involved about the value of the ideas the agent produces.

In order to understand this concept of value more concretely, given its importance in the successful dissemination and replication of memes, it seems useful to refer to Marx's economic writings—*Das Kapital* specifically—in which he distinguishes between the use value and exchange value of the commodity. The former, he argues, is conditioned and constituted by physical properties, “the utility of a thing” (221). The “physical body” of the product is the use-value, “the material content of wealth”; this value is “independent of the amount of labour required to appropriate its useful qualities” (221). Most importantly, “use-values are only realized in use or in consumption” (221).⁴⁶ It is this feature that designates exchange value, that is, the temporal relation between commodities. According to Marx, the very idea of value represents that “common element” which enables exchange-value (222). Since Oprah trades primarily in the exchange-value of commodities, her labour is the cultivation of already cultivated products. Without value provoked by exchange, Oprah's Empire would not exist. But if Marx is correct that the labour contained in the article, “the quantity of the ‘value-forming substance’” is the true measure of value (but not the sole kind—use-value being the other), this would seem to complicate the value of labour of intellectual property. In such instances there is no set standard of skill, and digital reproduction has fundamentally altered the conditions of production, in effect redistributing the value of labour. Yet Marx noted that the value of productivity in labour is inherently variable, “determined amongst other things by the worker's average degree of skill, the level of development of science and its technological application, the social organization of the process of production, the extent and effectiveness of the means of

⁴⁶ To repeat Marx's own footnote: “‘Nothing can have an intrinsic value’ (N. Barbon, op.cit., pg. 6); or as Butler says: ‘The value of a thing / Is just as much as it will bring’.” (221)

production, and the conditions found in the natural environment” (224).⁴⁷ Value, Marx explained, “does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic” (234). The key to its decipherment is the social production of commodities. As such, Marx’s description of the social component of commodities bears repeating:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. (232)

Given what I have previously argued in my first chapter regarding Oprah’s method of rewriting books as her own, each book selection and each selected book thus represents a commodity to be traded through the multimedia empire of exchange Oprah has established and grafted into the existing field of large-scale cultural production.

This idea of social commensalism is examined in the context of digital media by Cory Doctorow as “positive externalities”: a “network effect” in which value for one person translates to value for others in the network. Doctorow explains this process further: “The most famous example is Google’s PageRank algorithm, which began when the company’s founders realised that every time a web creator added a link from one site to another, there was a kind of implied vote for the linked-to site – when I link to you, I’m implicitly saying that you have something I think others should see”. Oprah achieves the same effect through spoken recommendation (using

⁴⁷ These conditions which effect the value of labour find an accord with Richard Dawkins’s conditions which effect the value of analogue skill. In the case of drawing, for example, he notes that “the accuracy of the copy,” which is to say its means of being successfully copied (and thus exchanged), “depends [...] on the amount of time and care devoted to it, and these are continuously variable quantities” (*GD* 227). Variable these quantities may be, but given what the study of memetics affords, and which I am trying to show by way of Oprah and her Book Club, not unquantifiable.

declarations such as “*My next book is...*”), which becomes ratified and codified by the Oprah sticker. The book becomes Oprah’s book, much as Franzen initially feared when his novel *The Corrections* was selected. Applying a sort of citation analysis to accounts for these linkages delineates, in Doctorow’s words, “an invisible mesh of authority that could be made visible with the right kind of analysis”. For example, though Oprah may not directly benefit from the success of the books she selects, her status does; as Franzen infamously remarked in an October 2001 interview with Jeff Baker in the *Portland Oregonian*, “we feel [the OBC selection] does as much for her as it does for us” (quoted in Rooney 40).

In this way we see the merit of Marx’s claim that value is only achieved through the “medium of exchange” (225), especially as it might be applied to the nebulous understanding of value in memetics. So an idea, and by extension the meme which it signifies, becomes valuable only insofar as it is expressed and received (if not entirely understood—which is only a benefit to propagation, not its prime contingency). The commodity does not contain the labour of its manufacture, it contains the idea of its labour, for “if the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value” (225). It is in this paradoxical feature of value noted by Marx that the danger to Oprah’s empire lay. Her value remains only inasmuch as her ideas remain “object[s] of utility”, regardless of their labour value; and since Oprah’s empire is founded on intellectual property, its fetish value is all the more precarious—especially given what I will argue is the integrated structure of the Oprah memeome, one which corresponds to the Oprah Empire.

To understand how this Empire functions, we must turn to the Empress herself, and consider her in all her manifold forms, her memome—as Oprah the brand, Oprah the image, and even Oprah the person. The most useful site of excavation would be an earlier juncture in

Oprah's career than her encounter with Franzen: one that began in 1996 with the formation of the OBC. With each early recommendation, Oprah not only bet her capital as a media mogul, but the value of her habitus in the field of large scale cultural production, made all the more precarious by her presence as an anomic figure. While books mentioned on her show before the formation of OBC had seen phenomenal success as a result of a mere mention, the unprecedented success of the club's selections emboldened Oprah⁴⁸ and increased her various forms of capital.

The field of restricted production progresses towards autonomy, Bourdieu notes in *The Field of Cultural Production*, by criticism "providing a 'creative' interpretation for the benefit of the 'creators'" (116), but not, however "instruments of appropriation" (116). Yet Oprah enacts the contrary, providing creative interpretations which serve as instruments for mass-public appropriation of cultural goods (goods which may have been before limited to the field of restricted production—like Franzen's earlier novels). The most obvious of Oprah's interpretations is the author biopic videos her empire crafts for each new OBC title, and which Franzen disparaged in his essay "Meet Me in St. Louis". Oprah seems interested in the author insofar as she can craft a compelling narrative that corresponds to the broad and always obeyed Oprah ideology. "It's a broad mission," Oprah herself explained in a Harvard Business School case study, "to transform the way people see themselves, to uplift, to enlighten, to encourage, to entertain" (Koehn and Helms). The instrumentation reaches its totemic apotheosis in the fetishistic icon of the Oprah Book Club.

The blue O of the Book Club sticker, which adorns the covers of books selected by Oprah, and which caused Franzen such discomfort for its potential to obviate the original authors as it

⁴⁸ A boldness that some critics have suggested is more accurately described as impudence. Regarding Oprah's silence on the matter of Franzen's remarks, Rooney observes that "she came across as arrogant and ignorant herself when she appeared to expect foot-kissing gratitude as the only possible emotional response her notice might evoke in an author" (51).

installs Oprah in their place, functions as the sign which signifies the sum total of Oprah's complex network of values. Imprimatur suggests imposition or obedience with codes, and an idea of commensurability between disparate products. The subjects of the books may be diverse and broad-ranging in scope, theme, setting, genre and milieu—like instruments in an orchestra—but they are nonetheless brought into accord with, and in a sense transformed by a unifying vision—Oprah's.

The Book Club is essentially a confidence game, one that relies on an implicit trust on behalf of Oprah's audience in the trustworthiness of Oprah. This trust stands as a confirmation of her habitus in the various fields she operates within, which is ratified by the economic and cultural success of her O label. The Frey scandal threatened to collapse this structure like some terrible Ponzi scheme. As Diana B. Henriques explains in her book *The Wizard of Lies: Bernie Madoff and the Death of Trust*, the charismatic banker Madoff was able to perpetrate the largest Ponzi scheme in history precisely because clients were so willing to trust him with every dollar they had, satisfied that Madoff would provide a return on investment. "As a result," she writes, "tens of thousands of trusting victims believed that Madoff's genius could defy markets, year in and year out" (346). Though Oprah was herself tricked by Frey's book, her unique status in the field of book production—important enough that publishers, agents, writers and readers alike signed petitions begging Oprah to revive her book club in 2002—nonetheless places her as a similarly vital node capable of exerting extreme influence over a whole range of markets. Moreover, Oprah's failure to catch Frey reveals the extent to which trust forms an essential component in the structure of the field of cultural production. As Oprah herself noted in her follow-up interview with Frey, she simply believed that the publisher had told the truth, and that Frey had told the truth, even when the so-called facts they espoused, like root canal without

anaesthesia, were too impossible to be believed (“Oprah’s Questions”). Though this understanding of the field is hardly a revolutionary revelation (at least, not to anyone familiar with Bourdieu’s work), never before had the whole process been so intractably bound up within the literary tastes of a single figure. What was at stake with this one instance of trust was not simply the fate of Frey’s book, but ostensibly the inception of an irrevocable shift in the field of book production. “[T]his wizard behind the curtain—pumping the bellows and pushing the buttons and working the microphone to create his utterly convincing illusions, even after the prison doors had clicked shut behind him—was able to build his Emerald City only because such an extraordinary number of people decided to believe him,” (347) Henriques explains of Madoff in a statement that could, with marginal revision, serve to describe Oprah’s cultural Empire. Without the negative connotations, Oprah nonetheless served a similar function to Madoff in her own fields of cultural production. Despite her detractors (or perhaps as a result), Oprah was and still remains the prime agent in the field of book production. Oprah funnels the capital around, and if she is removed from the field, the effects on the market of cultural production could be disastrous.

Rebranding Texts, Coopting Memes

Oprah’s interest in the authors typically extends as far as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* can format (read: reduce) their stories into three-minute snippets for mass consumption (as Franzen scoffed in his essay “Meet Me in St. Louis”). The process speaks to an interpretation of each author’s novel as binary constructs for relaying the truth that Oprah seeks to communicate. Either one interpretation (Oprah’s) or no interpretation. Either understood or “way over our heads” (as she described Nobel laureate Toni Morrison’s fourth OBC selection, *Paradise*, during a televised master class led by the author herself). Rooney observes that Oprah prefers a ‘me-

centric' approach to criticism, rather than an exploration of the novel's literary features. In the case of *The Bridges of Madison County* (which Oprah only briefly mentioned—and did not, it should be noted, make an official book club selection), “Winfrey’s approach to the novel was problematic [...] in large part because she rarely bothered to examine any of these so-called finer growths, but rather contented herself with the most basic what comes next and how does it relate to me lines of interpretation” (146). Leaving aside the question of whether she ought or ought not to approach a book in this manner, let’s focus instead on how she not only rebels against the traditional institutions of value by admitting in her praise of *The Bridges of Madison County*, “I know it wasn’t literature, I just loved the idea of the story. Give me that, O.K.? Just give me that” (quoted in Johnson 56), but that she is rewarded by her viewers for doing so. Her reward is distinction, marked as an especially potent taste for what her viewers want. After Oprah’s recommendation of *Bridges*, her audience began “buying the book in droves and making *Bridges* one of the first works of fiction mentioned on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to garner such a response” (145). It becomes especially interesting, then, when the Oprah Empire chooses to endorse and brand a literary figure who embodies all these revolutionary tendencies and more. Because it’s the ‘and more’ of James Frey that requires further investigation. The question I’ll be concerned with is not whether the Book Club propagates ideas *worth* spreading⁴⁹, but rather the manner by which this propagation is accomplished.

With her Book Club operating within the realm of Internet, Television and print, Oprah effectively repurposed media for the benefit of another.⁵⁰ While Robert Morgan describes the

⁴⁹ To be clear, however, this section is not a posthumous defence of Frey, nor an ex post facto attack on Oprah.

⁵⁰ Perhaps this funneling from television to books explains why the process has struggled to operate since Oprah ended her daytime talk show. Eighteen months after her daytime talk show ended in September 2011, Oprah’s audience began to diminish. “Her magazine, in particular, has experienced a decline in advertising revenue and newsstand sales since the talk show finished,” a *New York Times* article reported. “And without a regular presence

process as “Oprah [having] found a way to focus television viewers on books” (Rooney 142), the more appropriate sentiment, given what I’ve previously argued in both this and my first chapter, would be to declare Oprah has found a way to focus media users on her identity. Oprah’s own reflections to her book club selections were televised, and never written (except as transcripts for perusal on the website after the fact), allowing for an ironic mode of discourse in which a fan need not be literate to participate in the OBC.

The show is the primary platform for delivering the main product (Oprah’s ideas about the selected book), while the website features additional suggested readings in the same literary vein as the Book Club selection.⁵¹ Oprah becomes the cult item for her viewers, in place of the product she fetishizes, which becomes only an accessory. Oprah controls her own image, unlike say a film star, whose image—or to put it as brusquely as Walter Benjamin does “the phony spell of a commodity” (27)—emanates from the studios (or, in more modern times, from the agents and publicists of the film studio and star tasked with selling the star’s figure to the public). That is not to say she does not also employ agents and publicists, but to emphasise that she has final say over her identity. In fact, Oprah champions her resistance as a mark of distinction. As she explained to *Fortune* writer Patricia Sellers in 2002: “If I lost control of the business, I’d lose myself.... Owning myself is a way to be myself” (54). This connection which Oprah articulates in this statement between memeome and product, between Oprah and her Empire, is an

on daytime network television, she cannot steer traffic to her other products as easily as in the past” (Haughney 2012). The many-headed hydra of Oprah’s empire works best with the TV medium as its momentum.

⁵¹ As well, “[e]very edition of *O, The Oprah Magazine* includes the ‘Reading Room,’ which selects nonfiction and fiction highlights from publisher’s recent releases” (Lofton 154). Lofton further describes the differences in the content between the various media: “The magazine details subplots and literary creativity, whereas the show largely endorses celebrity revelation, domestic advice, and nonfiction reportage” (155). Essentially, “[t]he magazine seeks the tiny graceful detail while the *Oprah* show explodes it into tabloid stereotype” (155). Yet both impulses, she concludes, are driven by the same ideological imperative: to read.

important area of study. The value of Oprah and her Empire is generated by the access of both reader and viewer to this connection. This access is granted through multiple media channels, of which the OBC has been the chief subject of investigation in this chapter. In the rare moments that disrupt the machinations of the Oprah Book Club machine, a valuable glimpse into the underlying operations of the field of cultural production is provided. The incident with Franzen in 2001 was one such occurrence, and Oprah's encounter with James Frey undoubtedly serves as another.

For Oprah, whose mediated identity remained the hub in her own Empire, there was no retreat from the systemic infection caused by endorsing Frey's book—no way to simply rebrand herself as she had following Franzen's critique—since her multi-medium platform, an interwoven system of media, had necessarily saturated itself with the product.⁵² Indeed, it's important to recall the success her imprimatur had on his book: Oprah's recommendation “helped the book to sell more than two million copies” in 2005, “making it the second-highest-selling book of 2005, behind only *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*” (Rooney 216). This might help explain why Oprah, of all people, felt compelled to “take James Frey out to what critic Virginia Heffernan called ‘the televised woodshed’ for a serious whipping because of the rampant falsehoods in his so-called memoir *A Million Little Pieces*” (Rooney 214).⁵³ The fact

⁵² The incident with Frey typifies the danger of transposing the information from a node into an existing system. Frey's self-described mistake was that he constructed his identity around a blatant lie. Frey described the error in his “Note to the Reader”, penned after his confession on Oprah's couch and displayed in all subsequent editions of his book: “My mistake, and it is one I deeply regret, is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience.”

⁵³ Journalists for *The New York Times* like Virginia Heffernan render Oprah's hostile interview with Frey down to a pithy search for the truth, making her out to be a misguided Don Quixote on a quest for the truth of fiction. After Oprah apologized for having, in her own words, “left the impression that the truth does not matter”, Heffernan wrote in *The New York Times* the day after the interview with Frey that “Ms. Winfrey gave the audience, including us, what it was hoping for: a demand to hear the truth”. And yet, it was Oprah's understanding of truth as an empirical claim unrestricted by non-empirical information that began her troubles in the first place. It was the claim to truth that Oprah had first confirmed with her authority, by acknowledging on the show that Frey's book was a true story.

that she even ‘took him to the woodshed’, when she merely ignored Franzen is important distinction and one which helps clarify this issue of memeplexity.

Truth and “Truthiness” as Valuable Memes

Oprah even initially supported Frey’s book after doubts regarding its veracity were first expressed, claiming that “his ‘underlying message of redemption’ still resonated with her”, albeit with the caveat that “she relied on his publishers ‘to define the category that a book falls within and also the authenticity of the work’” (Davis 169). Once she learned that the publishers had not vetted Frey’s work, Davis claims that Oprah “had to assume the role of advocate for her readers” (169). Oprah could have issued a simple statement cutting ties with Frey, as she had done with Franzen in 2001. But instead of canceling further invitations to her show—as she had done with Franzen—Oprah *invited Frey back*.

In this televised interview of January 26, 2006, Oprah confronted Frey, and, inadvertently, what remains the central identity crisis of the digital paradigm: the nature of reality. “I acted in defense of you,” she scolded him, “and as I said, my judgment was clouded because so many people seemed to have gotten so much out of it” (Oprah.com). But the axiomatic value of truth remains troubling. Why does whatever people ‘got out of the book’ depend on the veracity of the story which provided whatever ‘it’ was? What does it say that “Winfrey at first wanted to cling to the idea that Frey’s book was basically true, as did millions of others”? (Rooney 227). Perhaps the only way to contextualize it is to notice a distinctly Rousseauian mode of reading returning in this epoch, as “[r]eaders who identified with Frey’s problems called the book their lifeline and embraced his ‘just hold on’ message as their mantra” (Davis 168). Andrew Potter suggests as much in his justification for Oprah’s inclusion of Frey’s novel, arguing that “[i]n Oprah’s world, authenticity is nothing more than a contemporary version of Rousseau’s original idea that one’s

true inner self is not so much discovered as it is invented, which makes the distinction between fiction and nonfiction essentially irrelevant” (Potter 138). Rousseau’s readers, for the most part, knew the story of *La Nouvelle Heloise* to be a fabrication, but nonetheless refused to believe it, or at least to admonish it for being fictional. “Many readers of *La Nouvelle Heloise* believed and wanted to believe in the authenticity of the letters,” Darnton recounts (233). Oprah’s statement on the Larry King Show, that “the underlying message of redemption in James Frey’s memoir still resonates with me, and I know it resonates with millions of other people who have read this book,” mirrors the reconciliation the readers of Rousseau achieved with his fiction, whereby “they knew his novel [*La Nouvelle Heloise*] was true because they had read its message in their lives” (Darnton 246). This resonance is conveyed by Oprah’s own explanation for why she decided to offer her continued support of Frey during his 2006 appearance on *Larry King* (made after she rebuked Frey and his publisher on her show): “I called in because I loved the message of his book. At the time, every day, I was reading e-mail after e-mail from people who were inspired by his story. And I have to say I allowed that to cloud my judgment” (“Oprah to Author”).

Frey’s cheat provided an uneasy reminder of the tenebrous structure of the cultural field, the proliferation of his lie unveiled the game of confidence that underpins the operations of the field of cultural production, the underlying truth that the position of Oprah is one conferred and not inherent to the force of her persona. The ontological difficulty this scenario engendered was that a false memoir can deliver a “true” revelation to someone without the memoir itself containing truth.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ From a memetic standpoint it becomes apparent that words are not forms that contain the essence of truth; rather, words are forms that allow truth to be determined in the mind of the receiver.

Yet, this appeal to the subjectivity of the reader raises several questions about the assignment of value. Why, if the quality of the book was lacking, could the book's language and style manage to overcome any criticisms and be sold to rabid commercial success only after it was touted as non-fiction? If the book was 'bad' as a novel, why did it suddenly become publishable (nevermind an Oprah Book Club selection) when touted as non-fiction? Though arguably the apparent truth of the work outweighed its redundant and awkwardly phrased prose, why does the appeal for truth matter in a book? In an article appearing in *The New York Times* February 2006, Richard Siklos asks a similar question, "a disturbing question [that] lurks behind the literary scandal that won't die: Does authenticity still matter? It is a quality that most people say they admire and value — revere, even — in people, in products and in information. And it is something to which media brands and marketers alike pay homage, with adjectives like 'real,' 'genuine' and 'trusted.'" Why does the truthfulness or non-truthfulness of the book have any impact over its reception whatsoever? It may seem like an obvious question, and one not worth asking, but the answer illuminates this abstract fractal that is the modern digital dilemma.

Indeed, it was 'the word *truth*', as Deborah Davis claims in *The Oprah Winfrey Show: Reflections of an American Legacy*, "that won over a million fans, and 'truth' was the word that confused and alienated them" (168).⁵⁵ My purpose is not to explore the value of truth in literature, but rather to draw attention to the value of truth as capital, and examine the ways in which it is traded beyond mere economic gain (though Frey certainly made a tidy profit off the sale of his supposedly true book).

⁵⁵ The fixation of critics who study Oprah on this element of "truth" is an understandable issue as it pertains to Oprah: Frey's minimal use of truth directly contradicts the Harpo mission statement 'to be a catalyst for transformation in the people's lives, to help them see themselves more clearly and to make the best choices they can using stories, real people's experiences, information and ideas' (Koehn and Helms 16).

“Truth,” Oscar Wilde stated with his usual trademark pith, “in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived”. Whether he’s correct or not is beside the point, what matters is that the statement has survived, either by virtue of its wit, its sentiment, or indeed simply the celebrity of its speaker—and such is the same with ideas. What is this implicit value that an idea like “truth” exerts over a product? As I argued in my previous chapter, nothing is inherent to the product. The only values a product contains are those ascribed by individuals, and which are then consecrated in a broader network of relations and opinions (a field or multiple fields).

The truth factor somehow renders the sentiment underlying it more valuable by extension; it represents the quality of something being genuine. The book itself as a product may not be unique (since it can be reprinted as needed), but the sentiment contained can be both unique and genuine, that is to say, approaching a sense of reality. As James Gleick notes in his discussion of memes, “truth may be a helpful quality for a meme, but it is one among many” (312). In the short term it seems memes that offer appealing and apparent truths as they disregard actual truths are more equipped to survive in the memepool. Common misconceptions, for example, become common not because they are true, but because they seem true enough to offer a useful correspondence with the reality to which they seem to describe.

The importance of subjective reader response in constituting the value of the work is also contained within Franzen’s worry that Oprah’s selection meant *The Corrections* would be branded as a book for women. In his infamous interview with NPR, which I have mentioned already, he provides one telling anecdote in which a man approached him at a book signing and explained how he would not have bought the book, given that it was an Oprah pick, had he not

heard Franzen speak. The incident seems less a matter of gender difference, of a man choosing to ignore what a woman prefers, as it does a matter of aesthetics.

Together, these incidents suggest that identity is an act of group effort. The concept is not new: Rousseau spoke of the general will in his 1762 book *The Social Contract*, stating that man must choose to enter social contracts with others, for “[s]o long as a number of men gathered together consider themselves as a single body, they have a single will also, which is directed to their common conservation and to the general welfare” (134). His ideas in effect echo Hobbes’s *Leviathan* from a century prior, which argued that the second law of nature is that man must choose to submit his rights in order to establish covenants with others.

The parallel between the two works is important in that for both writers these social contracts would inevitably give rise to governments—who, for the purposes of this chapter it should be noted, are the sole issuer of legitimate money. Though there are numerous examples of alternative currency (not the least of which is the capital Oprah trades in), their use is limited because they are not sanctified by governments. My point is that similar covenants occur in discussion of value, and they give rise to equally credible bodies as governments, with similar functions, only fulfilling different purposes.⁵⁶

Anomie only penetrates so far, however, and counterculture is not ratified by governing institutions precisely for the threat this anomie introduces to the system. Bitcoin, for example, will never be declared as a fiat currency (indeed, the alternative currency is banned in some

⁵⁶ When *Broadcasting and Cable* noted that “Oprah is such a profitable enterprise that it rivals the cash flow of a small country” (Albiniak 2004) they neglected to mention whether they were referring to Oprah the brand (which would’ve taken the italic *Oprah*), Oprah the media guru (“it” being constituted by the various media which comprise the idea of Oprah), Oprah the person (which seems least likely given the absence of “she”, unless the androgynous third person subjectivity was intended as a move towards a sort of royal “we”) or Oprah the Empire (most likely). And yet, that conflation between all these various instances of Oprah seems rather the point, doesn’t it?

countries, and regulated in others, including Canada) in part because it is constituted by an intangible medium of exchange. Be it gold, wooden exchequer tallies in Medieval Europe, or giant stone discs in the case of the Yap culture, currencies have traditionally been constituted by a physical medium.⁵⁷ Even in the last instance, the Yap stones, which Felix Martin singles out in his recent book examining the invention of money as both a system of currency and of thought, given that the wealth of the richest family in the Yap culture was purely ideological—their massive stone having been lost at sea—the currency is nonetheless backed by the pretense of a physical commodity. Not so in the case of digital currencies—nevermind that the current issuance of US currency far exceeds its actual gold reserves. Bitcoin cannot be printed since it was created digitally and is intended to exist only as digital information. I wish to put forward that cultural capital exists in a similar manner, what I would call a currency of the zeitgeist. It does not exist except as a mutually agreed credit, and is regulated accordingly—that is to say subjectively. The regulating institutions of this capital, defined by Bourdieu as the academies and salons, and which we could expand to include the university, have seen their capital mitigated by cultural forces, which seemed to become a prevalent trope in cultural commentary in the early 1990s. The sentiment crystallized in 1991 with James Davison Hunter’s dramatic term “Culture Wars”, a meme that carried over into Gerald Graff’s 1992 book *Beyond the Culture Wars*, which argued an embrace of the dialectic for the politics of interpretation and canonicity, while John Guillory’s seminal *Cultural Capital* framed the literary debate in much the same terms as Franzen did in his early interviews in the fall of 2001, as a distinction between high and low culture. However, while Franzen is careful to deposit himself firmly on the pedestal of high art, Guillory is ambivalent in his discussion of the shift in the legitimate authority of cultural capital,

⁵⁷ See the first chapter of Felix Martin’s *Money: An Authorized Biography* for a more thorough account of this necessity.

eroded as this authority is by the concupiscence of those in charge of the canon towards the inclusion of previously unrecognised artists, theories and artistic forms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when anomie is ratified, as in the case of Frey's book, the effect is initially a way of mitigating and qualifying the difference (in a manner similar to how *The Catcher in the Rye*, once a divisive and frequently censored text in high schools and libraries in the United States, loses much of its rebellious attitude when it's assigned by modern-day grade school teachers to their students). Counterculture swiftly and visibly turns mainstream—or the culture eddies just enough that the artefact is no longer in a position of opposition. And yet Frey's anomie, amounting as it did to an outright contempt for the value of truth, was too severe, swirling in entirely the opposite direction. Frey's contempt for the czars of tradition, including the value of being truthful, proved too overwhelming for even a bypass like the Oprah Book Club. The difference is perhaps explained by the mandate of each respective agent. Oprah wasn't attempting to subvert authority with her book club, merely to bypass it and supplant her own into a pre-existing field of relations. Frey's actions were, however, nothing less than anarchic.

In the effort to mitigate the damage, Oprah could have simply dropped the book from the label. Instead, she embarked on a resounding rebranding of the book. Her actions insisted and maintained that the problem wasn't with the book (otherwise she would be disputing her own taste by extension), but with the external configurations of the product. The shell was cancerous, yet the meme within remained a panacea. If Oprah seems conflicted by the truth of the message balanced against the content of the message, it is because "Oprah's overall approach toward literature," as Potter notes, "is to use writing as a vehicle for therapeutic self-understanding" (139). The book may have been a collection of fabrication, distortions and exaggerations, but the

positive impact the message had on its readers remained undeniable since it was measurable (if only by the testimony of Oprah viewers on her show).

With each recommendation, Oprah unavoidably and necessarily involved her book club's credibility. This credibility relied on the book club's foundational role in the psyche of Oprah viewers, a role much like that played by *Time* at one point for Franzen's father. The book club was a point of entry for Oprah's recommendations, and the Frey scandal required Oprah to go into damage control beyond a mere disinvitation. The parallels between the two situations, Franzen and Frey's, are revealing if only for the stark difference in the way Oprah chose to handle the two controversies. In the former, it was the author's image that was damaged, and Oprah refused to let this damage bleed into the perception of the book. Though she offered only one statement throughout the whole affair, Oprah made it clear that the book remained untainted by the actions of the author. Oprah's dismissal of Franzen's remarks, however, points to their immiserating effect. "Jonathan Franzen was not even a blip on the radar screen of my life," she said shortly after she had decided to cancel the book club in 2002. She went on to claim that she "didn't think one day about it" (Wyatt). That may be true, but it is curious the way in which the Book Club had only one more selection before Oprah announced she was canceling it. The disavowal is also ironic given that despite claiming how unimportant Franzen was to her she still knew exactly to whom the question referred. In effect, Oprah offered more information than was put to her. A more fit wording of the sentiment would have been to respond with something approaching the befuddlement of "Jonathan who?" Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was this very authorial absence that would come to characterize Oprah's second phase of the Book Club.

When she eventually did relaunch the Book Club, the selections focused exclusively on books with deceased authors.⁵⁸ Oprah's recrudescence of her relaunched Book Club made sure to address the very criticisms Franzen levied against her and her club. Thus despite Oprah's claims that Franzen was a blip, the opposite seems true. Using relevant scholars and academics to discuss each book, some of them Pulitzer Prize winners, Oprah grafted the symbolic and human capital that Franzen had noted she, and her club by extension, lacked. Oprah "shifted her individual book choices from contemporary texts that she found worthy on a personal level," remarks Robbins, "to recognized classics whose literary value was unassailable" (245). The majority of books in Oprah's revived book club weren't so much "her" discoveries as they were canonically identified masterpieces—ranging from Dickens to Faulkner. Franzen had, in effect, reversed the rebranding, and seared canonicity onto Oprah's second wave of selections.

When Oprah did attempt to import the cultural and symbolic capital that had eluded her earlier, often rambling discussions of her selections—even when conducted with the author (Oprah prides herself on never using cue cards, or preparing questions in advance)—she turned to experts in the field of the revered novels she picked. With the relaunch of the Book Club in 2003 with John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Oprah selected Margo Jefferson as her resident Steinbeck expert—who "fielded such questions from OBC members as the historical, 'What new meanings can be read into this book that weren't possible when it was published?' the sociological, 'Why can't people just read for the sake of a story?' and the multicultural, 'What is the reason for Steinbeck's harsh description of non-white groups in the book?'" (Rooney 202). Without the accusations levied by critics (and crystallized in the issue with Franzen), Oprah's turn to the canon and the academics would seem odd, especially since Oprah had proven with her

⁵⁸ Kathleen Rooney suggests that Oprah may have returned to living authors as a response against a noticeable decline in Book Club participation (Wyatt).

original Book Club that she was capable of leading the discussion (much to the disbelief of her critics), so why bring in the experts? Rooney describes the effort as Oprah “cover[ing] her intellectual bases” (203), but there is more to it than Oprah merely trying to seem smart. By enlisting in resident experts for each of her new selections, Oprah defers to their expertise while also assimilating their symbolic and cultural capital into her own.

More relevant to my discussion of digital publication than the fact that Oprah turned to the experts is the way in which she incorporated them into her network of value. Her answer to Franzen’s charge of cultural inferiority could only have been undertaken with the paradigm of information dissemination offered by digital publication.

Time remained a valued commodity on a television show that had already taken a risk by deciding to devote even one episode per month to the subject of books (which frequently ranked lowest in the ratings compared to other Oprah episodes), and the idea of taking even more time away from the focus of Oprah to feature an academic discuss the book selections at length may have seemed one step too far into erudition. (The practicalities of curtailing a lecture not only to the dictates of Oprah’s diverse audience, but also to the dictates of commercial television editing would prove daunting for any scholar.) Oprah’s solution represents the modern day version of having one’s cake and using technology to ensure one gets to eat it too. Oprah and her team hit upon a technological solution available to her with the advent of the World Wide Web, where the concept of time and space are secondary if not entirely irrelevant. The function of the web material is entirely supplemental to the main discussion of the book on the show⁵⁹. Oprah wisely loads the website with the bulk of the literary criticism and information, allowing her to jettison the need for such discussion on her show. For example, with her dual selection of Dickens’ *A*

⁵⁹ See Rooney *Reading With Oprah* for a detailed analysis of these discussions.

Tale of Two Cities and *Great Expectations*, she turned to Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist and Charles Dickens expert Jane Smiley, and offered her critical discussions of the novel solely through webcasts featured exclusively on Oprah.com. In one deft, technologically-mediated gesture, Oprah was able to allay the concerns of critics without sacrificing more than the briefest parting mention on her primetime television slot.

All of these materials, it bears mentioning, were offered for free, and exclusively online. Indeed, it would have been cost-prohibitive in the print space otherwise, if not technically impossible to organize effectively. (In 2008, for example, Oprah.com boasted that the Club included 2 million on-line members worldwide, “who are offered [digital] in-depth study guides, and expert Q and A”.) With her announcement of the reading club’s online supplement, “Winfrey institutionalized her literary management of American literacy to capitalize upon multiple media support networks” (Lofton 153). The most telling example of this capitalization is to be found in the OBC online membership. Kathleen Rooney describes being an on-line member of the OBC⁶⁰:

If you do sign up for updates yourself, I strongly encourage you to consider doing the same, because believe me, once you join, you will soon be the proud recipient of a heck of a lot of OBC-related e-mail. And I don’t mean spam. I don’t mean junk mail or advertisements or exhortations to watch *Oprah* every single weekday or anything of that nefarious sort, oh no. I mean step-by-step section-by-section study guides pertaining specifically, edifyingly, excitingly to the great books at hand. (201)

The boons of this membership are, in no small way, a deluge of informational material to counter even the faintest trace of the Club’s intellectual inferiority. This exclusive digital publication duplicates Taschen’s solution for dealing with information that is too much for general

⁶⁰ For a comprehensive overview of the on-line book club experience, see Rooney *Reading with Oprah*, Chapter 6, 185-212.

consumption and which resists economic evaluation. The on-line supplements of the OBC are yet another digital archive, which like the Kubrick/Napoleon archive.

Franzen's Memeome Rewritten

The final part of this triptych in the Oprah Book Club examination will be to examine how Franzen's latest book *Freedom* so readily slots into the OBC doxa. In my previous chapter I already described the capacity of a memeome to alter the field of production, and in this final section I wish to explore the capacity of an individual's memeome to alter another memeome. To do so, I will explore the way in which Franzen went from rejecting Oprah's imprimatur (precisely for what he viewed as her anomie) to actively seeking (albeit quietly) her validation with the content of his latest book.

After Franzen's remarks appeared in the Portland *Oregonian* in October of 2001, he was reproached for his conduct by his publisher and especially his agent, Jonathan Galassi. As Franzen recalls, the overall idea was "*There's no need for you to be so angry anymore. You have a chance to reach lots of people. Don't alienate them*" (Kachka). After Franzen's appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show was canceled, Jeff Seroy, VP-director of publicity at Farrar, Strauss & Giroux (which published *The Corrections*) hired a media coach to teach Franzen to love the idiot box" (Kachka). The incident with Oprah seems to have formed an irrevocable split between Franzen the literary genius enamoured with perpetuating Flaubert's "Status" model, and Franzen the writer concerned with the aesthetic imperatives of a novel-reading public, whatever those imperatives might be. Franzen would explore this very dichotomy (between Flaubert and the general novelist, the Status and the Contract models of authorship) in his 2002 essay "Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the problem of hard-to-read books", published approximately

eleven months after the Oprah controversy. The introduction announces its intent as a protracted apology letter for “some impolitic remarks [that] [he]’d made in the press.”

The declaration of Franzen’s shift in personality is perhaps best documented by Franzen himself in his 2002 essay collection *How to Be Alone*. “I intend this book, in part, as a record of a movement away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance—even a celebration—of being a reader and a writer,” he announces in the introduction (5). The anger he felt, he notes, stemmed from his cynical nihilism about the future of American culture: “I used to be the kind of religious nut who convinces himself that, because the world doesn’t share his particular faith (for me, a faith in literature), we must be living in End Times. I used to think that our American political economy was a vast cabal whose specific aim was to thwart my artistic ambitions, exterminate all that I found lovely in civilization” (4). This perhaps explains his reservations towards Oprah, who must have appeared to Franzen at the time to be in league with the American *illiterati*, one intent on devouring whatever culture Franzen had to provide. And yet this viewpoint, he makes clear, belongs to a past self, indicated by his use of the past tense in his confession that “In the five years since I’d written the essay, I’d managed to forget that I used to be a very angry and theory-minded person” (4). Though he had managed this feat, he neglects to isolate its prompting. Though perhaps a confession may be gleaned from his remark that “Oprah Winfrey’s disinvitation of me from her Book Club makes the descriptive word ‘elitist’ fluoresce in the several essays where it appears” (6). He defines a decidedly cooler approach to the agents in the field of cultural production post-*Corrections*.⁶¹

⁶¹ In terms of capital success, though *Freedom* was an unabashed critical and commercial success (arguably surpassing the praise of *The Corrections*), it fell well short of the accolades that Franzen’s previous novel had amassed (which included winning the 2001 National Book Award for Fiction and placing as a finalist for the 2001 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, the 2002 PEN/Faulkner Award and the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction).

This shift also reformed his compositional style, for so too did critics describe a decidedly more accessible tone in Franzen's work.⁶² As Sam Tenanhaus noted in *The New York Times* review of *Freedom*, "This idyll, related with brilliant economy, establishes the themes explored over the course of a narrative that moves at once backward, forward, inward and outward — with hypnotic force -and with none of the literary flourishes that faintly marred 'The Corrections.'" Might these alterations to Franzen's style represent the maturation of an author, one emboldened by years of success and adulation to soften his literary edge—in effect, to make the work more accessible to non-literary readers like Oprah and the hundreds of thousands of readers in her book club? Though I don't intend to overinflate the importance of the gesture, it was Franzen himself who sent a copy of the novel to Oprah, along with a personal note—the contents of which Oprah did not disclose. Regardless, Franzen seemed no longer the angry literati.

With the publication of his next novel, *Freedom*, Franzen liberated himself from his typical eristic fashion. Its very title seemed to allude to this uncharacteristic amendment to his ideology, trading as it does subtlety for sentimentalism and universalism. I don't mean to disparage the book by declaring that it panders to the lowest common denominator of book readership, but to instead suggest that the title is the calculated product of obsequious populism by providing the embryonic meme of the book as its very title. The placating gesture ensures that even the most obtuse OBC reader will have something to grasp about the book. One need not go into speculation to notice that the changes so closely align with Oprah's taste: a propensity for humanism and sentimentalism⁶³ without a surfeit of literary flourish. *Freedom* crystallizes the

⁶² To be clear, I am not suggesting Franzen sold-out his ambition for critical acclaim in order to make money. As he explained in an interview on October 22, 2013 with *Scratch Magazine*: "The money really only mattered all along as a token of fame, a token of recognition."

⁶³ It was sentimentalism which Franzen admitted in his 2001 NPR interview he had long disdained and sought to avoid in his literary career, but with which he was beginning to come to terms.

underlying aspiration of Frey's anti-literary literary book. Whether Franzen wrote *Freedom* to cater to Oprah's taste or whether the work and her taste happened to align for this particular work is not the issue that animates this exploration into authorship. There can be no denying that Franzen's *Freedom*, appearing so swiftly as it did on Oprah's reading list *and her show* points to an altogether different Franzen than the author who once bemoaned with self-described elitist contempt the reading taste of Oprah and her entire book club.

Oprah's absolution of her offenders gestures towards this salient feature of meme theory: the idea is temporal and only exists so long as we give it credence. Both Oprah and Franzen exist to the reader insofar as both are read. By this act of reading, they are conferred with meaning (implicitly the meaning they and their entrusted agents have supplied), and valued accordingly. They are themselves texts to be digested as Rousseau would advocate for his literary works (as I described in my previous chapter).

One of the analogies McLuhan transiently employs, and which ultimately proves useful to the study of memetics, is that of the maelstrom. Drawing from a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, McLuhan likens culture to a maelstrom. "It's inevitable that the whirl-pool of electronic information movement will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea," he explained in an interview with *Playboy*, "but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process as it happens... we can get through". Though McLuhan applies the maelstrom analogy only to the processes of culture in total, this analogy might also be applicable to any cultural agent. Thus the vast ocean of culture is filled with these swirling maelstroms, each governed by a unique Charybdis, all of them interacting, intermixing, and redistributing power, capital and products. I agree with McLuhan that we should study the maelstrom, but where I differ is in the initial premise that there is only one maelstrom with which we might contend.

Indeed, if we apply the concept of the maelstrom to that of the memeome, an ocean of identities requires our navigation.

Our understanding of these two memeomes, Oprah and Franzen, and indeed the very concept of the memome itself can be further enhanced by turning to Edward Said's theory of the Orient, especially his description of its construction—given that the concept of the Orient itself is an example of a memeome:

[Orientalism] is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what “we” do and what “they” cannot do or understand as “we” do). (12)

The only Oprah we encounter is the constructed Oprah, manufactured by the countless assemblages constructed throughout her multimedia empire, an intertextual maelstrom of activity, which when it encountered the textual ship of Franzen, *The Corrections*, devoured its persona and appropriated its forms of capital. Franzen's critique then is the cry of the woe-begotten sailor caught in the maelstrom's maw. Yet so too is he his own maelstrom, a similar work of assemblages churning in his own sea of literature. We have then in Franzen and Oprah two massive weather systems colliding in the media—the Occident and the Orient (though I must stress it wouldn't serve any use to take that correlation further than as an example). The two forces irrevocably altered one another in their crossing. In the case of Oprah her very way of reading and interacting with books, and with Franzen the very ideological impetus of his writing—despite having never met. It was an intimate interaction between cultural giants

conducted entirely via media, through print, television, relays upon relays. Yet some form of memetic recombination demonstrably occurred between the two agents.⁶⁴

In “What is an Author?”, Foucault postulated that “as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced” (291). This matrix of texts finds its first traces in the OBC: a catalog designed by an authorial figure which includes works stripped of their authorial identity. A mode in which *Anna Karenina* is billed, packaged and disseminated via multi-media networks as the prototypical Harlequin romance with marginal media reference (and deference) to its original author; and authors of no repute like Frey share listing with Pulitzer prize winners.

Oprah inadvertently confronts the fundamental questions posed by Foucault in his examination of the post-author function state—“What are the places in [the discourse] where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? [...] What difference does it make who is speaking?” (291)—and offers a burst of definition to an ocean of data: the discourse exists as a text in the eye of the beholder, and the text is beholden to Oprah.

⁶⁴ Despite any disagreements she may have had with either author, Oprah never removed either of their books from the list (nor did she ever remove any book from the list). She retracted her offer to have Franzen on the show, certainly—Oprah clearly wasn’t interested in engaging in what would amount to a petty dispute about class and corporate branding from a man ironically willing to be published by a large corporation which also maintains its logo on the jacket—but to retract the book from the list would be to somehow suggest that Oprah’s taste was in error. It would have implicitly acknowledged that the book is a living, evolving entity that morphs in our consciousness as its reception shifts. Taking the book off the list would be to imply that the ideas contained by the book had somehow changed and become less valuable as a necessary consequence of the author’s actions, while keeping it implies that the value of the ideas remains fixed and unchanged regardless of however much others’ ideas about the book might change. The point remains that in both cases Oprah responded to the book, and not the paratextual materials suffusing its production. For Oprah, incidental details like the author and his opinions can be separated and restrained from tainting the book. In the case of *A Million Little Pieces*, the veracity of the claims in the text are dismissed by the insertion of a quick explanatory note which prefaces them. In the case of *The Corrections*, Franzen’s symbolic capital as a literary genius was never in doubt. In both cases, a potentially debilitating book can be salvaged for Oprah’s Book Club by the application of some mediating barriers. In both instances, however, the author proved little more than a liability for Oprah, rather than a valuable addition to the book.

Oprah embodies these works, as the works are an embodiment of Oprah's ideas. As Lofton observes of the whole OBC enterprise of reading texts, "[Oprah] never claims to have the answer; what she has is *her* answer" (209). The willingness to submit to the precepts of Oprah is a belief in the validity of Oprah's claim to have found her answer, the answer that allows one "to connect your best you with the life you deserve to have" (209), and to believe that something about Oprah's answer might be applicable to one's own "answer".

Given the above, we might conceive of Oprah as a memetic engineer, splicing in and recombining memes as she sees fit. Like a genetic engineer, she has proven capable of altering the complex dynamics of information and its expression, be it through the simple alteration of a book's cover to include an 'O' sticker, or, in the case of Franzen, the revision of an artistic credo.

Oprah conceives of the text as hypostatic union between substance and substrate. The idea is for her made immanent in the publication (perhaps not surprisingly, pages were once conceived as flesh, manufactured as they were from animal hide). The page soaks up more than just the ink: it contains the machinations of the author's mind. The idea is for Oprah and her fellow readers contained within the ink, and the page itself becomes a substrate for conducting the idea. To be sure, the union of two units, one abstract and the other tangible (idea and the printed page) provides a constructive method of interpreting the text (indeed, it sustained the OBC for fifteen years), given that the text becomes a fixed structure inserted into an otherwise evanescent field of cultural production.

The question that remains after everything I've said here in these last two chapters is to what extent any of this has to do with the problem which began my thesis, that of ascribing value

to digital content. The struggle is encountered not solely by publishers, so too do readers struggle with the logic of value when it is ascribed to digital content. Contemporary attitudes towards digital material is an issue of ascribing and articulating value. (Remember, both Oprah and Taschen give their digital content away free of charge). The means of overcoming this problem which I've sought to emphasize in these two chapters is the concept of functional equivalence. Capital is fluid, its forms are exchangeable with one another (between symbolic, cultural and economic). The meme transfers from brain to brain through products just as symbolic and cultural capital do, through the exchange of products (a broad term here used to designate any object which embodies ideas). Thus, I submit, any and all capital is at root a meme. This declaration requires further explication: the value of any capital remains in the minds of its issuers and users--it is not intrinsic, as Marx reminds us--and this value is only expressed through the exchange of products which embody this capital. This solipsistic concept of value enables us to understand the digital paradigm as a frontier that is still bound by products.

Chapter 3: Penny for Your Thoughts; Doctorow and Digital Authorship

Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.

—John Milton, *Areopagitica*

To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement. To condense the diffused light of a page of thought into the luminous flash of a single sentence, is worthy to rank as a prize composition just by itself...Anybody can have ideas—the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph.

—Mark Twain

I begin this chapter with the above quotation from Twain because in one lapidary sentence (nestled in-between two aphorisms) the famous author demonstrates a model of conceiving the page akin to the modern conception of the page held by an author like Corey Doctorow. For both authors “the page of thought” is the real object of value, since it reflects that “luminous flash” of cogitation. Though Twain’s remarks unintentionally describe the page as the expression of the idea, and not its embodiment, Doctorow’s works, in particular *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, seem to purposefully address this very issue. Twain’s remark also offers a cogent criterion for ascribing value to literary products that becomes useful when describing the conditions of Doctorow’s noteworthy success in the field of digital publication. The object to be valued is not the idea (since, as he points out, anyone can possess one) so much as it is the refined expression of that idea—the product. Twain’s apercu makes no nevermind about the material instantiation of this product—be it in print or other. This leaves the product to be valued by the recipient of the idea by criteria abstracted from the physical conditions of an idea’s expression.

Continued rumination on this quotation invokes the same question which Bourdieu himself asked about the value of the refined expression of the idea: “who is the true producer of the value

of the work—the painter or the dealer, the writer or the publisher, the playwright or the theatre manager?” (76). Turning to Doctorow proves useful since he suggests an answer to this problem of value by placing the consecration of the work’s value within the control of the reader. As Robert P. Fletcher describes Doctorow’s work, “[h]e treats his own texts, in other words, as what [N. Katherine] Hayles terms ‘assemblages’ to be instantiated over and over again in different configurations of the story, whether that means an individual reader’s experience of the story, an email serialization, a comic book version, a Brazilian Portuguese translation or a podcast dramatization” (84). Though the use of fandom to spread one’s works and increase one’s success is not unique, nor even a new phenomenon—indeed, Rousseau reveled in his community of Rousseauian readers recruited by his writings to read what he wanted them to read and how he wanted them to read—Doctorow’s engagement with his fans extends beyond their recognition as passive spectators of his works, or even “intrepid promoters” as Fletcher describes them (84). Doctorow publishes his work under a Creative Commons licence that stipulates readers are entreated “to Share—to copy, distribute and transmit the work”, as they are equally entitled “to Remix—to adapt the work”.⁶⁵

It is this latter injunction that complicates the notion of an original producer. By virtue of the Creative Commons licence, readers are conferred with authority over the text equal to that of Doctorow as author. They are invited to become authors of their own interpretations of Doctorow’s words, and especially his ideas, reshaping and restructuring them as they see fit. The text is fluid; its value is fluid. Seemingly aware of this complication, and perhaps in an effort to reinstall the authority of the author, Doctorow’s licence also enforces attribution. Indeed, it is the first inviolable condition his licence decrees: “You must attribute the work in the manner

⁶⁵ The same preamble is found in all versions of his downloadable titles.

specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).”

Doctorow contests the notion of property that treats products themselves as unique objects of value. His rejection of this epistemology of value for being systematically flawed is similar in tone to Twain’s remark regarding the ubiquity of ideas. While Doctorow concedes that “[t]his stuff [intellectual property] is similar to property in some ways: it can be valuable, and sometimes you need to invest a lot of money and labour into its development to realise that value” (“Intellectual Property”), he disagrees that value is generated or conferred by virtue of the property’s exclusivity (or by the exclusive access to this property). Rather than enhancing the value of the work, Doctorow argues that the process of imposing exclusivity only limits its value. He does not advocate piracy, merely the access to information. He appeals to technology manufacturers to trust the better natures of their clients.

Engrossing Value

The value of both exclusivity and authenticity is neither to be diminished nor dismissed as the key source of contention and difficulty in the politics of digital. To draw a hyperbolic but nonetheless apt example: the Declaration of Independence was only declared official once engrossed in a legal hand, that is to say, inscribed on parchment and signed by its declarants. The word engrossed, it should be noted, literally means to be occupied exclusively (OED), and it is that turn to exclusivity that digital complicates by its very nature. And yet, in the recourse to engrossment, so too must it be considered that the declaration as a physical document confirmed, and did not confer, “rights inherent and inalienable” to all men (the phrasing Jefferson initially used before the more vague “certain unalienable rights” was adopted by the Continental

Congress).⁶⁶ Indeed, if these rights be inherent they cannot be given by men to other men, only liberated. Value occupies a dialectical valence in that, quite unlike rights, it is not inherent to any product, and is only conferred by its declaration. And yet, just as the rights of man are not inherent to any document which declares them, being instead inherent to the minds of men, so too has value always remained a certification emanating from the same minds that are inherently free. Certainly the engrossment seems a necessary constituent of legitimacy and authority. It is in the engrossment, the transfer from thought to text—and a specific and unique kind of text at that it seems—that confers authority to the text.

How might the representatives of a modern age, wary of the diminution effected by the loss of a material weight I have just described, *engross* their digital declaration? The recourse of the publishers has been the turn to Digital Rights Management, or DRM, in an effort to capture the essence of that exclusivity. But the containment comes at the exclusion of digital's quintessence. Digital rights management obviates digital as it prioritizes a pseudo-digital hybrid that is neither print nor digital, but rather an ephemeral yet intransient hybrid. In sum, DRM makes a paradox of the very subject it seeks to simplify. At least, so runs the modern argument against DRM—Cory Doctorow being one of the chief proponents of this argument. His railings against DRM feature prominently in his writings for *The Guardian*, as well as underpinning his overall literary career. Though I would resist the suggestion to equate Doctorow's literary trajectory in the realm of digital theory to Jefferson's discourses on democracy, there is a similitude to be noted in that Doctorow's works, taken as a corpus, do as much to articulate the digital paradigm as they do to cogently advocate a reformation of its conditions of existence. As such, Doctorow's writings offer a cursory but productive opportunity to explore the incipient

⁶⁶ See his original draft in Jefferson's *The Autobiography*.

emergence of a dialectic regarding the forms of value in a digital economy. Indeed, since any notion of value cannot be justified *a priori*, it becomes necessary to turn to *a posteriori* discussions concerning the various forms of capital associated with the value of digital products.

Determining an Equal Measure of Value

However, if I've spent this whole thesis arguing in an oblique manner that the rise of digital products has enabled the erosion of the dominating authority of traditional namers of capital (like the academies and academia) while conversely allowing for the elevation of the cultural legitimacy of alternative (and typically anomic) sources—like Oprah—are we not left in a state of aphasia when discussing value? Yet the very phrasing of the problem hints at its answer: digital production is a tool, not an agent. It enables the exchange of information without imposing an aesthetic imperative for its exchange. That remains with the agents in the field of cultural production, and it is to them that I turn to confront directly the question that has underpinned my preceding chapters: What is the definition of value in a digital economy? Given his conspicuous relation to the subject of digital publication that prompted this thesis, it seems not only useful but necessary to explore Cory Doctorow's engagement with the politics of digital publication. What does he make of value in the digital economy, and what might his success in this economy tell us about any reconfigurations in value that may have taken place in a digital economy?

In order to effectively address these questions, the discussion must encompass more than the content of Doctorow's fiction writings. Doctorow's literary identity is as much comprised of his fierce opposition to DRM, which he denounces throughout his non-fiction corpus. Indeed, as I will show in this chapter, the latter often informs the content of the former. It becomes necessary at this point to set out the many facets of Doctorow's literary career, contrasting his

nonfiction writings to his fiction writings, and then to examine how even the manner in which he publishes fiction is motivated by the ideals which he sets forth in his expository writings.

Following the publication of his debut novel, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, which helped to introduce the then-nascent Creative Commons license developed by Richard Lessig, Doctorow's next influx of capital came from his work on the blog *Boing Boing*. Though it dated back to the 1980s as a print magazine founded by Mark Frauenfelder, *Boing Boing* grew in popularity and relevancy with its shift to an all-digital web format in 2000. It was "[i]n short, unceremonious posts, [that] Mr. Frauenfelder and Mr. Doctorow charted the Web's blossoming at the turn of the century, dispensing links to sites they found clever and articles they deemed worthy" (Read). To describe Doctorow's reception as a blogger, I turn to Fletcher, who writes that "[a]s a blogger, Doctorow's own 'augmented' identity depends on a postmodern, networked, cut-and-paste textual practice, especially in what he terms his 'knowledge grazing'" (82). According to Read, "[t]he site has turned Mr. Doctorow into an influential figure in the copyright wars". He went on to declare that Doctorow, who Read noted at the time did not possess an academic degree⁶⁷, "earned his reputation not through scholarly work but through a blog"; a statement which was true when Read made it in 2007, but which oversimplifies Doctorow's reputation now. Doctorow's blogging activities may have allowed him to "infiltrate the academe", as the title to Read's article suggests, but it was these positions in academia⁶⁸ which invested his arguments with symbolic capital.

Doctorow's methodology emerges from what he enumerates throughout his writings as the difficulty that post-scarcity poses for value. After all, what remains of an object's value when it

⁶⁷ A distinction that Doctorow maintains as of this writing.

⁶⁸ He taught courses in copyright law at the University of Southern California from 2006 to 2007 and at the University of Waterloo in 2009.

is divorced from its labour value; when one object can be duplicated *ad infinitum*? How does an economy based on infinitely reproducible goods function without a maxim of necessity? If all things are mere reproductions, how can a work be valued if it cannot be deemed authentic?

Real vs. Digital Value

Doctorow examines this equivocal relationship of digital publication to value through the depiction of a post-scarcity economy in his books and isolates it in a subjective aesthetic impulse. The first sentence of his debut novel, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, presents a world of post-scarcity that extends beyond physical products to corporeal bodies, where members of society have “lived long enough to see the cure for death; to see the rise of the Bitchun Society” (2). Fletcher provides as cogent description of the novel’s scenario as might be attempted, such that it bears repeating:

In the late twenty-first century, the Bitchun Society has eliminated death and scarcity (thanks to that unspecified nanotechnology, the “backing-up” of consciousnesses, and the ‘decanting’ or downloading of consciousness into ‘force-grown clones’) and has replaced governments and corporations with a reputation economy (based on a currency of network-registered, constantly updated esteem called ‘Whuffie’) and ‘ad-hocracies,’ spontaneous cooperatives (such as today’s peer-to-peer networks) dedicated to pursuing the interests of their members in benefiting others (by, for instance, running Walt Disney World for the tourists). (89)

Whether we ever reach the post-scarcity economy of physical goods imagined in Doctorow’s book, where material exists in perpetual greater supply than use (hence post-scarcity) is immaterial to my discussion. Judged on practical terms, the system Doctorow offers in the book cannot function, if only because Doctorow fails to give an accurate description of its nuances. Doctorow remains vague (perhaps intentionally) on the specifics of how Whuffie is given (though there does appear to be a finitude of Whuffie an individual might grant or reduce for a

given action⁶⁹), and he doesn't, for example, explain what procedures exist to stop anyone from sabotaging the economy by increasing or reducing someone's Whuffie for no reason at all—except to note that the system keeps a record of how each person's Whuffie was accumulated, and categorizes this Whuffie as either right-handed (given by those who share opinions) or left-handed (given by those who don't). The novel does not differentiate any types of Whuffie beyond this vague division. Doctorow's facetious name for the society—Bitchun is phonetically similar to 'bitching', slang for excellent, which is perhaps the author's thinly veiled appreciation for post-scarcity—suggests he also approaches the practicality of this society with a wide degree of skepticism. Nevertheless, Doctorow's work—his ideas about ideas—functions as a useful entry point for a discussion about the role of memes in relation to literary culture, particularly as a means of modeling the digital paradigm shift.

The implausible economy presented in *Down and Out* is perhaps best explicated by deference to the meme. This meritocracy of the "Bitchun Society" functions on a Darwinian model of survival of the fittest—one not simply of genes and people, but of memes as well, in which "[t]he best stuff survives, everything else gets supplanted" (36). "Best" in this instance doesn't mean the most expensive, while "stuff" doesn't mean simply physical goods. Indeed, in this world virtual products abound, and money as we understand it is non-existent, having been supplanted by a reputation-based currency called Whuffie. At its most basic, Whuffie is a measure of a person's esteem; it represents credibility and authority, since "[s]omeone without any is automatically suspect" (8). Whuffie is as much credit as it is a measure of capital. "Whuffie recaptured the true essence of money: in the old days, if you were broke but respected, you wouldn't starve," Julius, the novel's protagonist, explains, "contrariwise, if you were rich

⁶⁹ Early in the novel a character notes that "when [missionaries] convert a whole village [to the Bitchun society], [they] accumulate all the Whuffie they have to give" (2).

and hated, no sum could buy you security and peace” (5). It is, in other words, a measure of success, for “by measuring the thing that money really represented—your personal capital with your friends and neighbors—you more accurately gauged your success” (5). It can be accumulated from a mere piggy-back ride (25), or for scraping a corpse off the floor (26). Write a symphony and the Whuffie accumulated can be used for goods and services, as well as access to technology and information. And yet, scrub enough toilets and a person can accumulate the same amount of Whuffie—thoroughly negating the notion of any exclusive value inherent to a work of art. Whuffie can be used to quickly measure esteem, since its total can be pinged without the consent of the holder. It fluctuates depending on the market, and more importantly, the players in the marketplace.

In the post-scarcity economy depicted by Doctorow, anything is free for the taking, as are the few scarce luxuries—provided one has the reputation to do so. Whuffie cannot be spent—it cannot be given or taken away. The act of giving Whuffie does not deplete that giver’s Whuffie amount. It is instead a measure of respect that fluctuates according to subjective perception. Instead of using money to measure value then, the Bitchun society measures all value by the success of the idea—whether that idea is a work of art or the idea to scrub a toilet—determined in real-time by the amount of Whuffie a given idea generates (or fails to generate). Whatever idea accumulates the most Whuffie is generally the idea that survives and propagates over all similar ideas, since the goal of each member in the society is to gain the most Whuffie. This homogeneity represents the central struggle of the novel—between the humanist Julius, with his dreams of personalizing the experience of each and every guest of Disney World, and the monocentric Debra, who would turn all of Disney World into a homogenous experience of attractions if she could wrestle control away from the other ad-hocs (fellow workers in this society). It is in

embryo the dichotomy between print and digital, between personal copies of a prime source (variations on the experience of the Haunted House ride, for example) and instantiations of the source itself (flashbaked experiences ensuring perfect, one to one transference of the prime text to the mind of the user). Doctorow ostensibly complicates support for one side of the debate over the other by placing Debra and everything she represents as the antagonist to Julius and his idealistic quest for individuality. However, Doctorow's own ideology seems to align more with Debra's than it does with that of Julius. Indeed, he lets Debra declare his own feelings on the matter of digital production in her final encounter with Julius. She scolds Julius for his "little fixation on keeping things the way they are", adding "You need some perspective, Julius. You need to get away from here: Disney World isn't good for you and you're sure as hell not any good for Disney" (101). To this logic Julius can only assent: "It would have hurt less if I hadn't come to the same conclusion myself, somewhere along the way" (102). In a moment of self-defeating anagnorisis, Julius himself appreciates the maxim of a post-scarcity economy: innovation, in whatever form it may take, is the only source of value. It is this value that Doctorow himself seems to prize above all others, and which allows him to leave the considerations of individuality and exclusivity to the ideological wayside, given that these concepts are themselves hyponyms to innovation.

The dichotomy of *Down and Out* paraphrases the division between print and digital publication. The digital book isn't really valuable, so the argument goes, because it isn't real; it doesn't exist; it's just a copy. This logic can be found to a degree in Doctorow's own evaluation of the digital editions of his books: "This is why I give away digital copies of my books and make money on the printed editions: I'm not going to stop people from copying the electronic editions, so I might as well treat them as an enticement to buy the printed objects" ("Happy Meal

Toys”). However, the value of the digital book remains in its exchange as a commodity. In other words, a use-value is ascribed through its confirmation in a social field of exchange. However, as Doctorow effectively demonstrates, publishers have sought to limit the means of exchange with DRM.⁷⁰

When Tor Books announced in April 2012 that it would be eliminating digital rights management (DRM) from all of its e-books, Doctorow wrote a strongly worded article in *The Guardian* praising the move. The response might seem odd coming from a writer, especially one published by Tor. After all, the prevailing rationale offered by publishers regarding the need for DRM is precisely to protect the author’s financial and intellectual property. However, Doctorow has maintained his disdain for DRM throughout his career, and in many ways this sustained hostility has been foundational in his wide-spread recognition by the public. DRM remains the chief antagonist throughout his writings—its logic finds conspicuous parallels with the ideologies of the antagonists in many of his books—and is the subject of his ire in numerous articles for *The Guardian* (on more than one occasion he has referred to DRM proponents as “junk peddlers”). Opponents of Doctorow’s stance claim that he simply doesn’t understand the need for and the function of DRM (Helienne Lindvall even declared it ironic that a man who advocates giving work away for free should charge money for speaking engagements), yet Doctorow’s rebukes acknowledge the need to secure the capital of authors and publishers from

⁷⁰ It seems both fitting and useful to quote from Marx’s own footnote to this assertion:

All the phenomena of the universe, whether produced by the hand of man or indeed by the universal laws of physics, are not to be conceived of as acts of creation but solely as a reordering of matter. Composition and separation are the only elements found by the human mind whenever it analyses the notion of reproduction; and so it is with the reproduction of value’ (use-value, although Verri himself, in this polemic against the Physiocrats, is not quite certain of the kind of value he is referring to) ‘and wealth, whether, earth, air and water are turned into corn in the fields, or the secretions of an insect are turned into silk by the hand of man, or some small pieces of metal are arranged together to form a repeating watch’ (Pietro Verri, *Meditazioni sulla economia politica*--first printed in 1771—in Custodi’s edition of the Italian economists, *Parte moderna*, Vol. 15. pp. 21, 22). (227)

unscrupulous copywriters, granting that DRM is “used by hardware manufacturers and publishers to limit the use of digital content after sale” (“Death”). The process works by “locking down” (to use Doctorow’s words) content within a digital shell: “Like all DRM systems, ebook DRM presumes that you can distribute a program that only opens up ebooks under approved circumstances” (“Death”).

In the process of attempting to lock content away from pirates, Doctorow argues that DRM instead threatens to stifle the creativity of both the artist and the spectator. Doctorow conceives of the spectator as a fluid position vacillating between consumer and producer, artist and receiver. He wants others to read and be able to use his works freely because he wants to be inspirational. DRM disrupts not only the distribution of products, Doctorow claims, but also the distribution of ideas—it impedes innovation, the only value that remains in the post-scarcity economy of *Down and Out*.

Aside from his claim that DRM impedes innovation, his other main argument against DRM is its futility. Indeed this was the first point which began his anti-DRM talk to Microsoft executives (published in his 2009 collection of essays *Content*). The technology is doomed to fail, he argues, because the sender must send the cipher along with the encrypted information. Once the cipher is released (an unavoidable necessity if the message is ever to be decoded) it is always only a matter of time before it is cracked, hacked and proffered on the internet for others to procure and proceed to circumvent DRM. The problem then with DRM is that it is only ever a temporary impediment to the hacker, if that, while it can become detrimental to legitimate users, who become victims of their own technology as their legally acquired material becomes imprisoned by technology manufacturers and content publishers seeking new means of overcoming digital pirates. The problem then is that what was once a fortress for content, the

DRM copy of a book, becomes its own prison: “since there’s no legitimate market for DRM – no readers are actively shopping for books that only open under special approved circumstances – and since the pirated ebooks are more convenient and flexible than the ones that people pay for, the DRM-free pirate editions drive out the DRM-locked commercial editions” (“Death”). The pirates merely adapt like a virus, while the legitimate users are like healthy cells bound up by a zealous immune response. The difficulty posed by DRM is, to continue the analogy, that this immune response cannot discriminate between healthy cells (legitimate users) and infected cells (pirates), and instead functions like an autoimmune disorder—destroying both and leaving the system in disrepair.

Doctorow’s problem with DRM is not simply that it damages the economic value of the work; his main concern is that DRM “fails completely at preventing copying, but it is brilliant at preventing innovation.” He argues that “DRM is backstopped by anti-circumvention laws like the notorious US Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 (DMCA) and the EU Copyright Directive of 2002 (EUCD), both of which make it a crime to compromise DRM, even if you’re not breaking any other laws” (“Wish”). It is to this question of innovation that this essay turns since the meme underpinning this word is, in the digital economy Doctorow champions, the prime producer of capital. Consider this meme as a stereotype, the prime source from which capital is produced.

His rallying cry against DRM was expressed in the title to his famous 2006 essay which appeared in *Forbes*: “Giving it Away”, when the more apt injunction might read “Giving digital content away for free” since it was only the digital editions, and not the print editions of his books that he offered readers for free. The use of digital content as ancillary streams of value abounds in the subjects analyzed throughout my thesis. It forms the crux of Oprah’s reinvented

online book club. It is the two separate editions of the Taschen Kubrick book, however, that provide some valuable insights into the contemporary evaluation of digital content. Not only does the reduced price between the two editions (\$3,000 vs. \$70) suggest the value Taschen assigns to the same digital archive included in both, the greatly reduced price also implies that Taschen doubts readers would pay a premium for the inclusion of the digital content (\$70 is a midrange suggested price compared to the rest of their catalogue). Taschen offers the digital content as a throw-in offer, and not as an object of esteemed value in itself. This concept of diminished value is reflected more broadly in the publishing industry in the pricing structure of e-books, which always retail for less than the cost of their print counterparts. A large factor in this reduction is undoubtedly explained by the reduced price required for digital publication. Bits are cheaper to produce than paper, they're exponentially cheaper to distribute than paper, and they are not subject to the mark-up that chain bookstores imposed upon publishers to help cover their property costs.⁷¹

If any author before the advent of digital printing had attempted what Doctorow has undertaken, 'giving it away' for free, that author would have either reduced himself or his publishers to penury. The key difference is an ideological one however: he is not giving material away so much as he is allowing others to access it (in the same way that Taschen is not giving away the Napoleon archive so much as they are allowing readers access to it). Readers are drawing from the well rather than the author or publisher distributing water bottles. The distinction is an important one to make from the standpoint of value. When Doctorow makes a claim like "700,000 copies of the book have been downloaded from [his] site", as he does in that

⁷¹ See chapter 2 in Ted Striphas' *The Late Age of Print*, particularly the section "Things to Do with Big-Box Bookstores" (page 70-77) for an account of how physical book prices were raised in tandem with the rise of chain book-stores, which called for increased prices to cover the cost of building overhead.

Forbes article, what he really means to say is that 700,000 times people went through the effort of downloading his book. I emphasize this distinction since, as John Perry Barlow notes in his introduction to Doctorow's first collection of essays, *Content*, the problem facing all participants in this new era is attention—the sole object of scarcity (13). This notion is echoed in Doctorow's own words given in a 2010 interview with Jessica Griggs: "Obscurity, not piracy, is the biggest problem writers face in the 21st century" (Griggs).

The importance of attention cannot be understated in a digital economy. Attention in this sense goes beyond mere noticing, a passive notice, to something more akin to an active acknowledgment—a connection to and recognition of—the substance of the object. By this nebulous substance I mean more specifically the memes which the product reflects; the acknowledgement in effect establishes a relationship between spectator and object. Since the memes are not inherent to the object, but extend back to their author, the acknowledgement of these memes is implicitly a connection formed between spectator and artist—a relationship, if we take the OED's description of this term. Barlow isolates the "role of relationship as the driving force in an information economy" (11). Essentially then, recognition forms value by establishing a relationship—a connection—between spectator and artist that allows for the exchange of information. This notion finds an analogue in what Bourdieu distinguishes as a crucial value in the field of cultural production. For example, Bourdieu notes that authority is only ratified by connections: "This 'authority' is nothing other than 'credit' with a set of agents who constitute 'connections' whose value is proportionate to the credit they themselves command" (78). This authority functions as fluid capital which may be exchanged for other capital (like economic) without negating one capital for another. This paradox underlies Bourdieu's theory of 'profit from disinterestedness' (75), whereby economic capital is disavowed in favour of the symbolic.

The irony of the attempt to eschew economic capital in favour of symbolic is found in Bourdieu's description of symbolic capital: "economic or political capital that is disavowed, mis-recognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a 'credit' which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees 'economic' profits" (75). Applying this profit from disinterestedness to Doctorow's methodology we see the validation of the theory. Ostensibly, he doesn't care if readers buy his books, only that they read his books. Readers in turn respond by buying his books—or by recommending the books to others who may also buy them. While this accounts for the fluidity of capital, it does not explain its accumulation—Doctorow does not accrue capital because he claims he doesn't want it. Something else is at play here in his success—the value of attention.

If the preceding paragraph has stressed anything it is the concept that the allocation of attention can be understood as a value. Indeed, Doctorow considers it as a credit. Per Doctorow, "if I give away my ebooks under a Creative Commons licence that allows non-commercial sharing, I'll attract readers who buy hard copies. It's worked for me – I've had books on the *New York Times* bestseller list for the past two years" ("Real Cost"). Since he gives away his books digitally, he argues, his print sales are successful accordingly. But what is the nature of the accord between the value generated between free online distribution and value generated by the sale of print books? It is not because his books are freed from economic capital that they are invested *ipso facto* with symbolic and cultural capital; it is because readers invest the idea of the book with capital. Doctorow himself hints at this when he claims that "[m]y fans' tireless evangelism for my work doesn't just sell books—it sells me" ("Giving It Away"). There seems to be more behind this assertion than a pithy sales pitch. It prompts several questions. What is the

correlation between Doctorow and his books? How can selling one sell the other? What is even meant by selling oneself? What precisely is being sold?

To answer this, I return to the subject of the memeome which I introduced in my previous chapter. Like the genome—the complete set of DNA instructions in an organism—the memeome represents the catalogue of information of a given subject. This invocation of information is obviously broad, and moves the discussion away from precision, so turning to information theory might better clarify the extent of this information. Describing the work of Russian mathematician Andrei Kolmogorov and his seminal work on information transmission, James Gleick put the issue of information succinctly when he explained that the complexity of an object is represented by “the size, in bits, of the shortest algorithm needed to generate it” (Gleick 337). “This is,” Gleick notes, “also the amount of information” (337). We might thus conceive of the memeome as the algorithm for replicating the identity of an individual. Though this sounds fantastical, given that at present the idea of cloning an identity remains firmly in the realm of science fiction (a fiction that Doctorow employs in *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, for example), I am not referring to a perfect one-to-one transference. The point is not that the memeome need be entirely replicated in the memeome of another (it would be impossible for the sheer amount of competition these newly introduced memes would encounter from the prior memome—it would be akin to displacing the entirety of one populace with that of another overnight, ala *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*). Rather, what remains important for the purposes of ascribing value is that the meme of this memome is transmitted.

Regardless of the nature of the message, be it digital or analogue transmission, the concept of digital transfer underpins the transmission of the meme. Either the information from one neuron will cause another neuron to fire, thus replicating the meme in a new state, or it won't;

the process is digital and entirely within the mind of the receiver. Though there are means of ensuring successful replication, of which simplicity of the message is one (since it reduces chances for errors in transcription), the final success of the meme is ultimately determined by its replication.⁷²

The prime example of these existential quandaries facing digital publication is echoed in the famous Turing Test. While writers and futurists like Ray Kurzweil see the test as a spur to innovation, theirs is the goal of beating the test—and in the case of Kurzweil achieving singularity, the total fusion of mind and body between man and technology, I want to take a step back and examine the conditions of the test. The question it poses is not whether the artificial intelligence is real or not, but whether the interrogator thinks it is. Thus reality itself is rendered into a value judgment, on par with any other capital. The quality of being real (or at least seeming so) is an abstract value, subject to individual accreditation. The difficulty of dealing with consciousness, much less acceding to its value judgments, is the rapidity with which one changes. “We used to think that in the brain — the physical part of us most closely associated with our identity — cells change very slowly, but it turns out that the components of the neurons, the tubules and so forth, turn over in only days,” Kurzweil explained in an interview by Cory

⁷² Understanding how memes replicate is vital in articulating this refined concept of value. Memes can be transferred by either digital or analogue means. In processes that are “self-normalizing”, where it is quite clear what the sender intends to convey whether the message was relayed perfectly or not, the signal is digital. A book, for example, is understood to be transmitting something, even if its specific content is not. In the latter part of the example, the signal is analogue. Drawing skill is one example of an analogue process that Dawkins uses, noting that “everybody can have a go, but some people copy a drawing more accurately than others, and nobody copies it perfectly” (227). It is that last addition that bears further reflection given its usefulness in the field of literary study. If the meme is relayed using digital processes, the meme as it remained in the mind of the sender stands a good chance of being perfectly replicated in the mind of the receiver while a meme relayed using analogue processes—like by way of drawing skills or, more relevant to my study, writing skills—may copy, but always with the potential for corruption in the original meme because the nature of the transmission precludes perfect accuracy.

Doctorow in 2005 (“Literary Device”). The necessary anchor by which to assign value becomes the product. Value judgments are enabled by the product, which is the embodiment of the idea.⁷³

Doctorow confronts this very issue of embodiment in *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, and in so doing offers some productive means of understanding value. The main conflict in the novel is between the democratic artifacts that Julius and his people maintain, and the singular versions Deborah and her camp champion. The difference between these two products is described by Julius:

“The rides [at the Haunted House] are human. We each mediate them through our own experience. We’re physically inside of them, and they talk to us through our senses. What Debra’s people are building—it’s hive-mind shit. Directly implanting thoughts! Jesus! It’s not an experience, it’s brainwashing! You gotta know that.” (64)

However, Julius’ logic doesn’t quite sustain itself—and this seems to be Doctorow’s point. Since The Haunted Mansion is an effort of collective will, it is to Julius “human”, a term which seems to establish it as equal or analogous to real, and therefore valuable, especially when compared to the flashback rides and their implanted visions. But does this then make these other rides non-human? In what way does it make them any less real than the equally fabricated experiences offered by The Haunted Mansion? How does the idea of the “human” function as a value in an era where consciousness is digitally mediated, the human brain is essentially treated as an organic hard drive, and the human body can be exchanged at will? What is the value of the “human” in a society that enables one to utter, with postmodern alacrity, a phrase that demolishes the sanctity of the human body: “Sure, I’d been murdered, but what had it cost me?” Addressing this same issue posed by the book, Fletcher offers his email correspondence with Doctorow, in which the author claims “that with the adoption of new technology we get not less

⁷³ An investigation into the aesthetics of memetics is beyond the scope of this study, but Richard Dawkins addresses the subject tangentially throughout *The God Delusion*.

human but different kinds of human” (92-93). The corollary then seams with the adoption of new technology we get not less value but different kinds of value. This very logic seems to underpin Doctorow’s Creative Commons licence since the licence allows each user to mediate their relationship to the text, to experience and alter it—to engage with it—as they so choose.

These questions of embodiment are similar to those which John Perry Barlow asked in the introduction to Doctorow’s collection of essays, *Content*:

But the chances are excellent that you’re reading these liquid words as bit-states of light on a computer screen, having taken advantage of his willingness to let you have them in that form for free. In such an instance, what “contains” them? Your hard disk? His? The Internet and all the servers and routers in whose caches the ghosts of their passage might still remain? Your mind? Cory’s?

Though he prefaces his answer by announcing, rather oddly, that “to [him], it doesn’t matter”, he nonetheless isolates meaning as the necessary object of inquiry. His discussion inevitably retreats, as it must, to one of information, which he describes as “simultaneously a relationship, an action, and an area of shared mind”. Perhaps the most useful claim to isolate is his insistence that information “isn’t an object”, since I’ve been arguing quite the opposite throughout my thesis. Here in Barlow’s remarks we glimpse the ontological dilemma posed by digital products, and the extent to which this dilemma complicates definitions.

Rather than summarize my preceding chapters on this point, I turn to the venerated Rolf Landauer, who spent his career arguing in no ambiguous way that information is physical (indeed, his most famous essays are “Information is Physical” and “Information is Inevitably Physical”). Perhaps his most famous aphorism (it is the one that Gleick introduces to the reader in his own book *The Information*) begins his essay “The Physical Nature of Information”:

“Information is not a disembodied abstract entity; it is always tied to a physical representation”

(188). The terms by which he described this physical embodiment was through the representation of information “by engraving on a stone tablet, a spin, a charge, a hole in a punched card, a mark on paper, or some other equivalent” (188). Though wildly different in form, the page and the bit are by this logic equivalent in function. Any product (be it printed book or digital text) is a vessel for information—an object. Neither Doctorow nor the publishers dispute this (indeed, to do so would be to negate digital publication). Where they differ, however, is in their valuations of these products.⁷⁴

Traditionally, publishers treat each copy of a given text as an object of value, while Doctorow treats each copy as a reflection of the memes which the prime text conveys. Though he never expresses it in these terms exactly, he does nonetheless offer a rough approximation to memetics when he announces his reason for ‘giving it away’: “This is why I give away digital copies of my books and make money on the printed editions: I’m not going to stop people from copying the electronic editions, so I might as well treat them as an enticement to buy the printed objects” (“Happy Meal Toys”). By contrast, DRM attempts to impose fungibility on the product by making one copy of an e-book interchangeable in value with the printed book. Each individual copy of a DRM e-book is subject to the same physical conditions of a print book—there can only be one copy of each purchased title. For Doctorow, however, the printed books of a given title may be fungible, but the e-book version of a given title is not because there is only one unit—the text itself. The DRM book is thus an abstraction of an abstract entity. Any attempts at fungibility expose the operation underpinning the valuation of the book. Doctorow’s Creative Commons license enables each book to be valued according to a matrix ascribed by the reader.

⁷⁴ Ironically, though he misunderstands the nature of information, Barlow redeems himself slightly when claims that information “doesn’t have a market value that can be objectively determined” (11).

Though Doctorow argues against the fungibility of products, his argument seems motivated by his belief that every product and every form of value is liquid. Products and values are exchangeable but not interchangeable. Though I've already argued that his gains in cultural capital are capable of ensuring him new sources of symbolic capital (for example, his continued crusade against DRM has made him an expert in the field, ratified by his publication history in various respected print and on-line sources), this cultural capital can also enable him to make money from speaking engagements, for instance. Though one critic placed the running figure at \$25,000 in 2010 (Lindvall), Doctorow rebutted that he'd never received that sum for any speaking engagement (the going rate, he claimed, was about £300), and that "the vast majority of lectures [he] give[s] are free" ("Real Cost"). He did not deny, however, that his "stock response to for-profit conferences and corporate events is to ask for \$15,000 on the grounds that almost no one will pay that much [...] but if anyone will, [he]'d be crazy to turn it down" ("Real Cost").

With Doctorow emerges a unique phenomenon in which Doctorow examines post-scarcity economy in his books, his non-fiction writings contribute to its dialectic, and his publishing method of "giving it away for free, online" (a wording that prefaces each downloadable file Doctorow offers on his website *Craphound*) contributes to its emergence. Fletcher describes Doctorow's methodology as a belief that "richer and more complex understanding of the world" stems from "users' control over the network", the ability to create, maintain and sustain multiple versions of the text (95). That conclusion could be extended further, for as the conclusion of *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* suggests, the text can serve as a substrate for preserving identity. "I write out my life long-hand," Julius narrates in the novel's penultimate sentence, "a letter to the me that I'll be when it's restored into a clone somewhere, somewhen" (114). Within the very grammar of the sentence the self is rendered as object—*I* becomes *it*—while neither is

more valuable than the other. More importantly, the value of individuality is not reduced by its status as a product—as an artifact in and of history and culture—only rewritten.

As such, Doctorow’s impulse goes beyond Fletcher’s conclusion (of a richer understanding of the world), and extends to describing a richer and more complex mode of being embodied in the world. To wit, Doctorow’s publishing ideology goes beyond the likes of Taschen and Oprah, who also ‘give it away for free, online’, and enables and entreats others to make copies and alterations to his work. In several of his articles and essays (collected in his anthology *Content*) Doctorow describes how this free access to his work has directly benefitted his sales (his books outperform his publisher’s arguably modest expectations) as well as indirectly benefited him through “foreign rights deals, comic book licenses, speaking engagements, article commissions”, which he notes have made him “more money in these secondary markets than [he has] in royalties” (“Free(konomic) E-books”). However, his argument reaches the same inferential syllogistic fallacy encountered by proponents of Oprah’s success. (Since she distributes her brand through multiple media networks, especially digital, for free, they argue, she is successful accordingly.) He’s being modest about the impact of his memeome, essentially, especially as it pertains to his successful accumulation of capital. The exchange value of his digital products is entirely dependent on an economy of ‘pay what you will’ subjectivity. In the way he accumulates and sustains his capital, Doctorow is like any governing body, any force of authority—from which the term author derives its meaning. His products enter the marketplace and are traded according to a matrix of value, a memeplex.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ This fluidity mandated by subjectivity reaches its apotheosis on the creation of the Wikipedia page of Cory Doctorow. Given the site’s policy of open collaboration the page courted some disagreement in the veracity of the details chosen to represent the author and his accomplishments. The disagreement grew so heated that it eventually prompted Doctorow to commit a Wikipedia social faux-pas and edit his own page. Writing of the incident, Fletcher noted that “[t]hough [Doctorow] f[ought] strenuously to present his version of himself on the page (or screen), he

The problem of ascribing value to digital content is inadvertently addressed (inadvertent because he was writing before the advent of digital publication and e-books) by John Guillory when he summarizes the problematic of political economy. “To put this in the simplest terms,” he writes, “the use of an object can be represented as a kind of ‘value’ only if there is *already* a discourse of exchange values, that is, an economy of generalized commodity exchange” (original emphasis, 301). When earlier political economists engaged with this problem, he notes, they were “forced to construct, as [their] first order of business, a theory of value, a hypothesis about what it was that was actually measured or expressed in the exchange value of an object” (301). Their response, he explains, was “to propose that the exchange value of an object expresses the quantum of labor expended to *produce* that object for the market (the “labor theory of value”) and not the quantum of energy expended to *acquire* the object in the market” (301). When subjective use value is allowed to enter the discussion, it is “bracketed” (301). “Thus political economy relegates use value to a domain of subjectivity,” Guillory explains, “which it cannot enter into the equation of exchange value” (302). Political economy could overcome this potentially paralyzing condition by negating ‘personal economy’, a “hypothetical ‘intrapersonal exchange [that] could be expressed as a quantum of value” (301-2). Though this logic may work in an economy based on the structure of supply and demand, it is fractured in a post-scarcity economy, one in which the only exchange value of an object is expressed as the desire of an individual for that object.

does not react against the textualization of his identity per se or the freedom contributors have to edit it” (87). His reactions against the changes are reduced in his own words to a desire for truth. Defending his actions of editing his own Wikipedia page, Doctorow claimed “It may be that a person is incapable of being neutral on the subject of his own bio; nevertheless when it comes to factual there should be no question of bias: either the book sold or it didn’t (87). What emerges from the countless revisions and alterations over a period of many months as a product of genuine consensus—a marked difference from being true, however. Problems of subjectivity will always be presented by the trolls of this world (internet speak for antisocial members intent on anarchic contributions), be they authors like James Frey with fabricated stories billed as memoirs or anonymous Wikipedia contributors altering entries to fit their prejudices. But as my thesis has sought to demonstrate, when armed with a collectively conferred notion of value participants are indeed capable of regulating the system of value; in whatever forms it may take.

It is this logic which Doctorow argues publishers and technology manufacturers have further complicated and in the process compromised by negating individual ownership of digital products. In the case of content purchased on iTunes, for example, users are not purchasing the song, they are instead purchasing the right to access the song. For this reason purchases are account specific and non-transferable between users. When a user dies, or forfeits his or her account for whatever reason, the right to access whatever songs may have been purchased on that account are nullified. Books purchased through major e-book sellers like iTunes or Amazon are likewise account specific and non-transferable. The purchase is only a lifetime rental, and not the right to the product in perpetuity (nevermind the memes it reflects!). Digital publication is the distribution of evanescent content, fragile and impermanent. Collectors of this content are become like McLuhan's electronic man, "no less a nomad than his Paleolithic ancestors" (*Understanding Media* 283).

Fluid Value in Equivalent Mediums of Exchange

The question that remains is to what extent any of this has to do with the problem which began my thesis, that of Taschen's grossly discrepant dollar value for digital content. The struggle is encountered not solely by publishers; readers also seem to struggle with the logic of value when it is ascribed to digital content. Contemporary attitudes towards digital material reflect an ongoing process of ascribing and articulating value. (Remember, Doctorow, Oprah and Taschen give their digital content away free of charge—though, as I have hoped to demonstrate, they do so for entirely different reasons). The means of overcoming this problem which I've sought to emphasize in this thesis is the concept of functional equivalence. Capital is fluid, and its forms are exchangeable with one another (between symbolic, cultural and economic).

The alteration in value between print and digital publication is not exclusively the difference between physical and electronic products—books and e-books. The difference in prices between two print editions for ostensibly the same material, Stanley Kubrick’s *Napoleon*, stresses this. The paper is only worth what all parties agree upon. If you want the information you have to accede to the economic demands of the publication. This remains the only logical conclusion—any attempt to enumerate and substantiate the difference in price between the two print editions, for example, is impossible. How can one edition be worth \$3,000 and the other be worth only \$70 if the information remains the same?⁷⁶ An objective evaluation can’t be attempted simply because under no circumstance does the price refer simply and solely to the value of its information—which is precisely what Doctorow has expended his entire career trying to articulate. Guillory’s remark proves true, “the use of an object cannot be *expressed in*, or *measured by*, its exchange value, its money price in the market” (original emphasis, 301), because in the digital realm the exchange value of a product can be entirely negated. The choice to buy the book is ultimately a personal decision, a set of value judgements held within the mind of the beholder about the value of that object. It is the same process at work with Doctorow’s readers who choose to buy his books despite having access to free digital versions. Indeed, much can be gleaned about the contemporary concept of the value of digital products from the fact that even with a digital copy available to them readers still choose to seek out and purchase the print version. Information is treated as a fluid property, and not constricted to a material instantiation.

Even the mediums by which this information is transmitted seem to abide by this logic. As McLuhan reminds us, all new media is the intensification and extension of that which came

⁷⁶ Breaking the set down as 10 separate volumes, \$300 a book still seems excessive, even if they offer full-colour photos. By way of rough comparison, Doctorow describes the current status of books on demand publication thusly: “Brewster Kahle’s Internet Bookmobile can convert a digital book into a four-color, full-bleed, perfect-bound, laminated-cover, printed-spine paper book in ten minutes, for about a dollar” (Content).

before in exchange for the fragmentation and/or obsolescence of the older form (the global village is both “fission and fusion”, after all, “discontinuity, division and diversity”). Each successive medium contains within it the expression of memes of the media which came before. From spoken word to written word, radio to television, photograph to motion picture, all of these media are consumed by the digital medium and reproduced within it. The historic break of this media shift is, however, the lability of the digital medium’s technologies of dissemination. Where before in the print medium, for example, the page is a page is a page, the digital medium is the computer is a tablet is a phone is even a strand of DNA, and all of which may be rendered on the page *and* converted back to digital information. The information and its exchange remains fluid. This notion is echoed in remarks made by scholars Paul Dourish, Johanna Brewer and Genevieve Bell (the latter being the new Vice President of Intel no less) regarding the transformation of the concept of information from a verb to a noun—from information as an object to be received to the notion of information as an object in itself.⁷⁷ So too has its exchange transformed from a passive act to an interactive experience between users. Information is defined as much by what is received as it is by what is sent. Doctorow and his products are themselves constantly in a state of being inscribed and rewritten in the minds of those who receive his ideas.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ See “Information as a Cultural Category” in *Interactions*, Jul-Aug. 2005 p.31.

⁷⁸ Memes are obviously not needed to explain the fact that Doctorow is transmitting *something*. Communication has done quite well since the invention of language without requiring any recourse to the emerging field of memetics. In the case of Oprah, so too have scholars managed to study and describe the effect of Oprah without mentioning memes. Yet to do so they have turned to the fields of psychology and philosophy to explain in ambiguous and often contradictory terms the complex set of processes Oprah is utilizing for and which are produced by her transmission of information. In effect, they use something abstract to describe and explain an abstraction. Memetics, meanwhile, offers a cogent and concrete language to articulate the processes of this transmission that does not involve ambiguous or abstract terminology. As such, the science of memes is valuable to the humanities in that it provides a sound and elegant language for describing its own processes, a language that will only evolve into a more refined vocabulary as neuroscience and biology progresses. The value of memes, in other words, is in the parsimonious explanation of otherwise vague and nebulous processes. That it currently lacks

The meme transfers from brain to brain through products just as symbolic and cultural capital do, through the exchange of products (a broad term here used to designate any object which embodies ideas). Thus, I submit, any and all capital is at root a meme. This declaration requires further explication: the value of any capital remains in the minds of its issuers and users—it is not intrinsic, as Marx reminds us—and this value is only expressed through the exchange of products which embody this capital. This solipsistic concept of value enables us to understand the digital paradigm as a frontier that is still bound by products.

Conclusion

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.

—Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”

Speaking at a TED conference in April of 2010, the Director of Penn Libraries’ Special Collections Center and Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies, Dr. William Noel, argued that “The web of ancient manuscripts of the future isn’t going to be built by institutions, it’s going to be built by users, by people who get this data together.” His argument was that “releasing data” from restrictions and “allowing users to cultivate their own collection” would “increase the beauty and the cultural significance of the internet.” The sentiment can be taken beyond the realm of ancient manuscripts and applied to the future of all digital content.

Returning to the Digital Archeology Exhibition which began my thesis, the question of an artificially imposed scarcity and restricted access to the content negates the central ambition of the Exhibition. I can’t, for example, access the collections of the Digital Archaeology Exhibition online. I have to actually go to New York to experience the sites, and on “historically accurate monitor[s]” no less. And as it stands I’ll need a time machine to do it since no similar Exhibition has been featured at Internet Week New York since 2011. If the emphasis of curator Jim Boulton and the rest of the team working on the Exhibition remains on the individual experience, and the engagement of the individual, and to champion the unrestricted freedom of experience, why impose an artificial scarcity such as they do? The scarcity is not only entirely contradictory to the original purpose of the web as an information resource, which Boulton and his collaborators

so frequently stressed in interviews,⁷⁹ it constricts the very investigation Boulton seeks to foster with the Exhibition. That the Exhibition would choose not to feature reproductions of the websites on its own site, or even to provide links to those sites, the majority of which are currently inaccessible in any form, seems curiously antithetical to Boulton's stated desire to preserve the experiential nature of web. And yet Boulton clearly sees an artistic and cultural value to these pages. As he explains of the value of his project: "just because it's recent history, doesn't make the early web experiments any less important than the first cave paintings, Muybridge's first experiments with the moving image or the first works of literature created by the Sumerians in the 18th century BC." However, one can google any of these works and explore them in greater detail, the same cannot be done for the works collected by the Digital Archaeology Exhibition. If the intent is the proliferation of data, it seems counter-intuitive to lock this data within its "historically accurate" shell.

The other internet history initiatives and projects which I briefly alluded to at the beginning of my thesis also have limitations. Of the 42 initiatives I referenced, most are dedicated to web content produced by the host nation. There's is not the task of selection, merely of preservation. In the case of the Wayback Machine, no pages prior to October 1996 have been archived, many of the media are missing, and links are often dead. It is in a sense like studying illuminated pages torn from their respective manuscripts, and, to a greater extent, their collective history. In the same way that only 10% of the plays produced by Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus survive to us, only a small fraction of early websites remain extant. As the Digital Archaeology project reminds us:

The story of the first web page, created by Tim Berners-Lee on August 6th 1991, is typical. Its significance wasn't obvious to its creator, who over-wrote it with the second web page

⁷⁹ See their Youtube channel "DigitalArchaeology"

the following March. No copy of the original web page, not even a screenshot exists. A record of that monumental point in our culture has been lost forever. (Boulton)

If we are indeed seeing the emergence of a diachronic cannon, one in which the vital works of yesterday may not be the same as those of tomorrow, then it is that gesture towards the future which must give us pause. For if these are the works preserved today, what becomes of these sites if the institutions preserving them (like the Exhibition) decide they're no longer valuable? Indeed, Internet Weeks have come and gone since 2011 without the Archaeology Exhibit, or any similarly themed efforts.

The natural corollary to this argument may be glimpsed in the rapid deterioration in the quality and scope of Library and Archives Canada (LAC) since the initiation of the Library and Archives of Canada Act in May 2004. Despite affirming in its Preamble the necessity of preserving Canada's documentary heritage "for the benefit of present and future generations", the Bill only conceded the need for an institution that "facilitate[s] in Canada cooperation among the communities involved in the acquisition, preservation and diffusion of knowledge", and made no provisions towards the implementation of such an institution.⁸⁰ Despite placing emphasis on "facilitating access" between Canadians and their "documentary heritage" (defined by the bill as "publications and records of interest to Canada"), the bill makes no provision towards facilitating any measure of access to these collections or the other new term introduced by the bill, "Government record", which "identifies records under the control of a government

⁸⁰ The repercussions of this loosely termed bill on the nation's access to information were made apparent as recently as March 2013, when Ancestry.ca began "offer[ing] paid access to more than 410 million Canadian names in records, including such sources as: U.S.-Canada border crossings (1895 to 1956), Canadian passenger lists (1865 to 1935), Quebec vital records (1621 to 1967), Census of Canada records (1851, 1891, 1906, 1911, 1916), and Ontario and B.C. vital records" (Gregory). This form of semi-privatized, for-profit marketing complicates the notion of democratic access to information while it compels a more thorough investigation into the mandate and conduct of the LAC, stemming as the issue does from the partnership begun in November 2008 between Ancestry.ca and LAC for the digitization of its records, which included "80 million voter registrations, including names, addresses, occupations, and electoral districts of anyone who was registered to vote in Canada between 1935 and 1980" (Gregory)—provided to the LAC by Elections Canada.

body or institution”. The Ex Libris Association has tracked the Bill since its inception and notes a consistent decline in operations (see “Ex Libris Association Timeline on Library and Archives Canada Service Decline”). Among the many problems Ex Libris identifies with LAC is its reduced staffing and budget for digital operations as of 2012, with no specified mandate for accomplishing its policy towards digital archiving. Perhaps more egregiously, since 2007 “LAC has deliberately reduced direct public reference access at 395 Wellington Street despite repeated protests from groups and individuals and its own ‘advisory’ groups”, shuttled about 90 archival projects in Canada and in 2012 “withdrew from the Association of Research Libraries, North America’s premier organization for large research organizations, e.g., Library of Congress and principal Canadian libraries” (“Position Statement”).

Special attention ought to be given to the newly appointed officer of these collections, “the Librarian and Archivist”, in particular since clause 8(2) enjoins the Librarian and Archivist to gather “at the times and in the manner that he or she considers appropriate, a representative sample of the documentary material of interest to Canada that is accessible to the public without restriction through the Internet or any similar medium” while clause 9 empowers this person to “dispose of any publication or record under his or her control, including by destruction, if he or she considers that it is no longer necessary to retain it” (albeit with the weakly worded provision in clause 12 that “No government or ministerial record, whether or not it is surplus property of a government institution, shall be disposed of, including by being destroyed, without the written consent of the Librarian and Archivist or of a person to whom the Librarian and Archivist has, in writing, delegated the power to give such consents”). Collation thus remains in the eye of the beholder—the modern-day Janus, both Librarian and Archivist, beholden to a paradoxical mandate to preserve and destroy at his or her discretion or, most troubling of all, to “carry out

such other functions as the Governor in Council may specify” (8(1)(j)). It is, in effect, the Government’s consecration of a *nomothete* of aesthetic values, like Oprah with a broader corpus from which to establish a Book Club. Much like the Digital Archeology Exhibition, LAC’s archive is conspicuously curated by an individual purview, Jim Boulton in the former case, the Librarian and Archivist in the latter. The question both face is much the same that Oprah and Taschen face: what to do with what they consider an overload of information. All figures follow the same tendency to elect themselves as the cultural authority, and all have found their aesthetic dispositions ratified by influxes of capital.

Curiously, the Librarian and Archivist of Canada from 2009 until May 2013 was neither a professional librarian nor archivist, but rather an economist: Daniel Caron. His interim replacement, Hervé Déry, graduated with both a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in economics from the University of Montreal. Like his predecessor, Déry leads a roster of senior management conspicuously devoid of professional librarians and archivists. Given this, Caron’s remarks made in October 2011 concerning the development of “explicit and rigorous methods for establishing value propositions” are unsurprising. However, despite declaring the need to establish a measure of value for managing the overwhelming deluge of information the LAC is tasked with archiving, Caron then suppresses any correlative by declaring only a few sentences later that “one of the core-essential components” for the LAC will be to prioritize the preservation of material considered to have “business value”, as well as undertake the “systematic elimination of all other information through authorized and documented disposal processes”. Essentially the LAC takes as its mandate the right to retroactively rewrite, reduce and refashion Canada’s archives according to a narrow purview of what constitutes value in a digital age. Faced with the glut of information endemic to the digital paradigm, the LAC’s solution is the unabashed

swailing of a national history in need of an altogether more refined method of digital ecology. Otherwise the future work of the humanities may very well become the recovery and excavation of what was once deemed non-valuable.

In his updated introduction for the 25th anniversary of *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes a political crisis in terms that, with minor alteration to the subjects, could apply well to the current state of digital humanities, predicated as it is on the fragility of a globally interconnected system of information and exchange. Writing in the dawn of what he declared “the illegal and unsanctioned imperial invasion and occupation of Iraq by Britain and the United States” (xii), and bemoaning the “looting, pillaging and destruction of Iraq’s libraries and museums” (xii), Said writes:⁸¹

In the process the uncountable sediments of history, which include innumerable histories and a dizzying variety of peoples, languages, experiences, and cultures, all these are swept aside or ignored, relegated to the sand heap along with the treasures ground into meaningless fragments that were taken out of Baghdad’s libraries and museums. My argument is that history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and re-written, always with various silences and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated, so that “our” East, “our” Orient, becomes “ours” to possess and direct. (xii-xiii)

Consider then the destructive power digital content makes available to any agency with enough power and authority: the irretrievable loss of artifacts that can be achieved with the click of a single keystroke, without even a ‘sand heap’ upon which to weep. My conclusion then broadly circles much the same perspective that Said expressed in his introduction; I share his desire to “open up the fields of struggle” and “to be able to use one’s mind historically and rationally for the purposes of reflective understanding and genuine disclosure” (xvii). Though value may remain in the eye of the beholder, as the reconfigurations of the field of cultural value enacted by

⁸¹ Overlook, however, what the late Christopher Hitchens repudiates in Said’s introduction as “the fantastic allegation that American forces powdered the artifacts of the Iraq museum in order to show who was boss.”

Oprah, Doctorow, the Digital Archaeology Exhibit and the LAC have suggested, value cannot be constrained by so singular a vision. That is, not if the purpose of ascribing value is to facilitate the preservation of information more than it is pure data. As Said explains, “Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority” (xviii).

Sterling’s vision of a synchronic society (mentioned in my introduction) becomes useful here. Such a society would recognize value judgements as “temporalistic” (52), and the artifacts which permit the expression of such judgements would be understood as “informational resources” (45), rather than being confused with capital resources (as seems to be the case with the LAC). More to the point of the preservation of information, Sterling writes:

Consuming irreplaceable resources, no matter how sophisticated the method, cannot mean “progress,” judged by a synchronic perspective. Because to do so is erasing many future possibilities; it is restricting the range of future experience. (52)

Writing about the increasing dislocation between objects and their information fomented by the rise of digitization (which Caron was keen to isolate as the main reason for the LAC’s change in archive management), Chris Speed offers a lucid aphorism for this digital migration:

As we move to a time when objects are individually tagged through their production, we can assume they will accrue more forms of data. Unlike the old adage “a rolling stone gathers no moss,” artifacts within the Internet of Things will gather moss. As they move from one place to the next, they will gather locative data; as people interact with them, they will gather social data; and even as they sit idly on a shelf, they may well be gathering data about the objects that are around them. This data will exist in virtual form even when the actual object has been broken, lost, or thrown away. Stored safely in the cloud and accessible for eternity, the object lives on as a ghost in the machine, waiting for a chance to be exorcised. (20)

If the future really is set in such flimsy material, a renewed focus on the collation and dissemination, in other words the *exchange* of this material, more so than its mere collection is required, and not solely by governing institutions but by the very people with the stake in its history. If we can’t know what will be valuable (which Déry admits in so many words in his

remarks in May 2011), it seems counterintuitive to restrict the future range of materials from which to draw value.

Returning to the efforts of the Digital Archaeology Exhibit may perhaps offer some clarity on the problem, for what is captured by these slices of the boundless structure of the web is an intrinsic reliance on the user to create, shape, govern and give value to the content. Despite the Exhibition's insistence on the medium in conveying the message, these pages come to their users not in hermeneutically sealed containers like holy relics, or bound and sealed in a canonical text, but rather as fluid, dynamic and still-living sections of a broader project that continually fulfills Tim Berners-Lee's articulated vision of "a wide-area hypermedia information retrieval initiative aiming to give universal access to a large universe of documents" (Berners-Lee). The history of the web defies definition then precisely because that history is itself constantly in a process of being redefined. The same might also be said of the question of value.

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