

Encyclopaedic Fiction, Cultural Value, and the  
Discourse of the Great Divide

By

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## Abstract

Recent postmodern work on cultural evaluation, such as Barbara Smith's *Contingencies of Value* (1989), argues that cultural value cannot be treated as an inherent or objective quality of cultural products. Instead, cultural value must be understood as "value *for*": relative, that is, to the identities and interests of particular cultural consumers and producers. Theorists (for instance, John Frow in his 1995 study *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*) have employed similar relativist logic in their analyses of the putative "structures" or institutions that supposedly give shape to Western culture-as-a-whole: "high" culture, "popular" culture, "mass" culture and so on. This "post-axiological" strain of cultural theory undermines the real-world integrity of those categories by suggesting that they (the categories) are merely contingent effects of critical / evaluative discourse.

Other archetypically "postmodern" arguments in literary and cultural studies have focused on charting or advocating both the demise of the modernist "great divide" between "high" and "low" culture, and its replacement, in cultural production and criticism, with more permissive and socially egalitarian modes of interplay between "high" and "low" culture.

Some critics and critically aware cultural producers have treated these two projects as though they are complementary facets of a general "postmodern" turn. Yet contesting or reversing obsolete hierarchies of cultural value does not necessarily lead critics to contemplate the status of "high" / "low" categories themselves. A meaningful refusal of the *logic* of the modernist "great divide" would obligate critics and producers to reflect on the contingency of those categories and their own interests with respect to those categories.

Juxtaposing an "encyclopaedic" modernist text renowned for its interspersions of "high" and "low" cultural elements (James Joyce's *Ulysses*) with a postmodern text that seems knowingly to do the same (David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*), two case studies illustrate the inseparability of readings or narratives that are couched in "high"/"low" terms from the particular interests of cultural producers and consumers.

# 1. Introduction

An obscure article published by Edward Mendelson in 1976, “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon,” provides an apt point of departure for this thesis; and an opportunity to explain the connection I propose between the terms that make up its title. Mendelson’s immoderate objective in his short essay is to “identify a genre that is of central importance in western literature, but one that has not yet fully been recognised” (1267); the criteria he adduces for the genre<sup>1</sup> are singular:

Each major national culture in the west, as it becomes aware of itself as a separate entity, produces an *encyclopedic author*, one whose work attends to the whole social and linguistic range of his nation, who makes use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen, whose dialect often becomes established as the national language, who takes his place as national poet or national classic, and who becomes the focus of a large and persistent exegetic and textual industry comparable to the industry founded on the Bible. [...] The encyclopedic works they produce take on, after publication, a status their authors could not have anticipated. Only after an encyclopedic narrative has taken its place as a literary monument, surrounded by curators and guides, can it be recognized as a member of its small and exclusive genre. (1268)

Though we might wish to distance ourselves from the chauvinist and nationalistic implications of this definition,<sup>2</sup> and, as Mendelson grudgingly admits, no book or author can in fact succeed in representing an entire “national culture” (even if there were universal agreement on what the constituents of that culture would be), Mendelson’s musings are suggestive of the rhetoric of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> “I know of only seven,” the author confesses, “Dante’s *Commedia*, Rabelais’ five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and now, I believe, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (1267).

<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Herr is another critic who makes use of this term (*Joyce’s Anatomy of Culture*, 2); and Hugh Kenner invokes a similar idea in *Stoic Comedians*, the title of which refers to three writers (Flaubert, Joyce, Beckett) who are similarly resigned to the belief that “the field of possibilities available to [them] is large perhaps, or small perhaps, but closed” (xiii).

inclusiveness and cultural value that is common to the literary works this thesis considers: James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996).<sup>3</sup> These enormous texts draw from, and draw together, discursive forms synonymous with diverse cultural strata—from forms typically referred to as “high” cultural (including for example the use of demanding, self-consciously “literary” language; or a range of alluded-to texts associated with, or metonymic of, the traditional university humanities curriculum), to “low” cultural texts and practices like “popular” literature, theatre, television and film. They both have the look, though perhaps only the former has the status (among university-educated westerners), of cultural monumentality.

Noteworthy in the fragment of argument quoted above is Mendelson's evident confusion about whether the elusive quality shared by specimens of the “encyclopedic” genre is, in fact, internal to the works themselves or a historically determined fact of their absorption into “high” cultural institutions. All the books he refers to have been thoroughly, and perhaps irreversibly, canonised, and bear the marks (scholarly annotations; mass reproduction *as* classics) of having been appreciatively consumed, analysed, fetishised by the literary academy. Readers coming to those books for the first time have no choice but to encounter them *as* monuments of Western culture: the books' institutional status inevitably colours readers' experience of them (this is the “canon effect” in action). But if “literary monumentality” is ultimately a label bestowed by institutions, Mendelson also suggests that the behaviour of institutions is to a large extent determined by particular qualities possessed by “encyclopedic” novels themselves, which texts seem to *embody* the logic of monumentality.

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<sup>3</sup> Page references for *Ulysses* relate to Hans Walter Gabler's corrected edition, *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*. London: The Bodley Head, 1986.

My main interest throughout this thesis is contemporary thought on cultural value: theorists who are interested in exploring the kinds of questions that perhaps lie behind Mendelson's confusion. What can be said to distinguish recognisably "great," "high cultural" texts from "culture at large"? Do certain texts or cultural products possess qualities that make them objectively "better" than others? In contrast to Mendelson's search for "encyclopedic" novels' essential characteristics, the theorists whose work I examine in my first substantive chapter do not allow the possibility of texts having meaning, characteristics, or *value* in isolation from the discourse communities and institutions in which they are imbedded. Throughout this thesis I accept the plausibility of relativist account of cultural value (the subject of Chapter 2).

Yet, without endorsing Mendelson's claim for essential or generic similarities, over time and across cultures, between novels that claim to represent an extraordinary proportion of their authors' respective cultures, it does seem fair to allow that such novels are peculiarly fertile starting places from which to explore questions of cultural value. For quite apart from the question of the value *of* those novels themselves, the notion of culturally all-inclusive representation—which critics like Mendelson usually elaborate as the representation/incorporation of both "high" and "low" culture—also lends itself to analysis from a perspective informed by recent literature on cultural value, which has subjected terms like "high," "low," "popular," and "mass" culture to thorough critique.

My interest in *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest* thus stems primarily from the questions they might raise (and have raised) for critics concerned with questions about value—including the categories and hierarchies into which cultural institutions have traditionally divided cultural products.



This thesis does not, for the most part, undertake a literary “compare and contrast” exercise.

The choice of two texts that are institutionally defined as modernist and postmodernist, respectively, adds a further level of complexity. For Andreas Huyssen (and the narrative is a critical commonplace), modernism “constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” (vii); and conversely, “To a large extent, it is by the distance we have travelled from this “great divide” between mass culture and modernism that we can measure our own cultural postmodernity” (57). Is it possible to discern traces of this “great divide” or its erasure in the manner in which these “high” texts represent “mass” or “low” culture? The least subtle versions of this narrative certainly imply this to be the case.

This narrative of the “great divide” being overtaken, in contemporary academic art and criticism, by a sensibility less inclined to position “mass” culture as other, might be linked with other institutional developments—the ascendancy of cultural studies, for instance, with its close attention to, or valorisation of, “popular culture.” Together, these are often thought of as heralding something of a new beginning for artists and critics: an avenue, perhaps, for contesting the equation of university-mediated culture with snobbishness or indefensible forms of social privilege. (The title of Huyssen’s study, *After the Great Divide* (my emphasis), perhaps suggests a measure of triumph or relief.) These moves, however, do not necessarily involve substantive reflection on the status of the categories (“high,” “low,” “popular,” “mass”) through which both past and present understandings of cultural value are described.

By contrast, the arguments I consider in my first substantive chapter (“Cultural Value”), concerted attempts to move beyond the evaluative logic synonymous with, for instance, literary studies or art history as traditionally practised, seek to undermine the integrity of the categories themselves. But pointing out, with John Frow, that those categories “in theoretical terms lack all homogeneity” (*Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* 20)<sup>4</sup> is not to suggest that they can be readily abandoned by literary producers or critics. However, throughout this thesis I argue for the intellectual utility of maintaining a self-conscious awareness of the status of these categories—particularly when assessing appeals to “high”/ “low” discourse. What particular needs, values, anxieties, and interests lie behind, or are masked by, appeals to a critical discourse that understands culture (or, simply, texts) through a single high/low structural opposition?

My chapters that centre on *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest* explore this question in contrasting ways. Chapter 3 does not perform any substantial reading of Joyce’s text; my subject is the work of the (self-named) “Joyce industry”—Joyceans’ recent focus on the incorporation of “popular culture” in Joyce’s monumental work, and the meditations on cultural value that this leads them to. In Chapter 4 I treat David Foster Wallace himself as a knowing participant in similar debates, and take *Infinite Jest*’s invocation of “high”/ “low” terms to invite a reading/critique of Wallace’s own evaluative assumptions.

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<sup>4</sup> All references to John Frow’s work are to *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, unless otherwise indicated.

## 2. Cultural Value

This thesis is an exercise in understanding the consequences of the collision of literary and cultural studies. Partly this is a function of the texts I shall focus upon: there is a sense in which these fictions could be considered works of “cultural studies” themselves, with each text seeming to require discussion in terms of its representation of the social organisation of culture—culture’s stratifications or institutional characteristics. More fundamentally, though, I am interested in the changing assumptions about cultural value such a collision might be expected to result in.

For literary and cultural studies, as usually understood, are based upon distinct definitions of “culture” that are not easily reconciled. On the one hand, literary study is implicitly founded upon the identification and study of inherently valuable cultural artefacts. Literary canon formation has traditionally been thought of as the assembly of a syllabus, thought complete in itself, of texts, verbal artworks, thought worthy of serious scholarly attention and, consequently, institution-aided preservation; maintaining a hierarchy of cultural value is central to the discipline. Cultural studies, conversely, was founded on implicitly non-evaluative principles (even if, as John Frow argues, it has subsequently established its own cultural hierarchies). Steven Connor describes this disconnection as a friction between anthropological and critical senses of the word “culture”: “In the first definition, value is relative, dynamic and under transaction; in the second it is fixed, concentrated and affirmed as absolute. The anthropological account, which ... identifies culture with the play of value, makes no attempt to impose evaluative hierarchies on its material ... The critical definition of culture, on the other hand, is orientated

towards evaluation, which is to say, around selection, preference and judgements of quality” (Connor 234).

Here Connor identifies an important tension: between an idea of culture (and thus value) as embodied in objects (the sense in which we speak of *Ulysses* as a “high cultural” work), and culture conceived as something located in the dynamics of human interaction, in “the play of value.” For Connor, adherents to the first definition treat cultural study as means of becoming “cultured,” and see critical practice as a process of immersion in valuable texts and practices; those who hold to an anthropological definition of culture, on this account, make no claims about the value of the culture(s) they study.

While this opposition is put as one between different ways of approaching what is neutrally described as “material,” it is also obvious that anthropological and critical ways of reading are typically applied to different “material”: to cultural practices and products of unequal social status. The critical definition of culture is usually associated with (or applied to) materials from “high culture,” “legitimate culture” or “school culture”; anthropology typically takes as its object of study practices and texts that do not have the same legacy of being taken as self-evidently valuable – localised group customs and subcultures for example, or, in the case of cultural studies (which I related, above, to the anthropological definition of culture), “popular culture” and its various synonyms. Although it seems that, of logical necessity, the anthropological definition (as put here) would claim to undermine the critical definition (that is, by attributing critical “selection, preference and judgements of quality” to the relative, dynamic “play of value” disallowed by the second definition), the notion of cultural value as “fixed” and “absolute” can have the effect of structuring cultural study

so as to minimise the likelihood of cultural academics needing to confront this disjunction.

This thesis explores some of the ways that recent criticism (and, perhaps, literature) has attempted to bring together these two definitions of culture and the fields of inquiry (types of texts) with which they are associated. Of these two tasks, the latter has caused the least difficulty for literary critics. Recognising that *Ulysses* incorporates much content that would not typically be treated as high cultural in its own right does not always lead critics to reconsider the abstract categories “culture” and “value” themselves. As arguments like Mendelson’s demonstrate, texts that disclose their authors’ mastery over a diverse field of cultural texts and practices—mastery of something approaching cultural studies’ inclusive understanding of culture—may be highly critically valued as a result. Tom LeClair’s exaltation of the American “systems novel,” or of “prodigious fictions,” is one recent argument to locate a literary work’s value in the degree of its cultural inclusiveness and encyclopaedic reach.<sup>5</sup>

For other critics, describing texts like *Infinite Jest* and *Ulysses* as somehow representing conglomerations of “high” and “popular” culture raises more wide-reaching questions. What do these novels suggest about what holds these cultural “strata” apart, or logically prevents such a distinction? We see the beginnings of such a line of thought, for instance, in John Guillory’s account of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, where “The literary language and its other, what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia, are defined relationally and contextually at the moment of their contact” (67):

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<sup>5</sup> See Tom LeClair’s 1996 article in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, “The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace.”

The novel, for Bakhtin, is the non-canonical genre, which means it never develops generic rules (canons) even as it accumulates a repertoire of works. The novel as noncanonical genre is privileged for Bakhtin as the genre which welcomes the heteroglossic: “The novel senses itself on the border between the completed, dominant literary language and the extraliterary languages that know heteroglossia” ... What is important for Bakhtin in the valorization of the novel as genre is the recovery of a determinable mechanism of change in literary history from the vertiginous domain of social relations. (*Cultural Capital* 67)

Thus, while both *Ulysses* and (to a lesser extent) *Infinite Jest* seem already to occupy a “literary” cultural position – in the sense that these are books one might now adduce if asked to provide examples of “literary novels” – they might interest Guillory (via his understanding of Bakhtin) in the way that, by representing so much of the “sub-literary,” they draw attention to the provisional, relative status of “literary” as a category.

This thesis is not concerned with Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, but more generally with the understandings of cultural value, and of “high” and “low” culture, disclosed by novels in their own right, and revealed by critics in their engagements with novels. Although I confine my attention to literary works that might, on some accounts, be put forward as possessing qualities that have traditionally been linked to critical affirmations of “absolute value,” throughout this thesis I instead accept the plausibility of a relativist account of cultural value, which it is the task of the remainder of this chapter to elaborate. This understanding of cultural value, it should be immediately noted, problematises the very terms (“high culture” and “low culture,” “popular culture” and so on) that I have used to describe the most pertinent common feature of the two novels under consideration. My use of speech marks around these phrases should thus be read as highlighting their provisional status. Indeed, a squeamishness over the use of these terms is common in much contemporary critical writing, largely irrespective of the extent to

which those critics accept the relativistic tenor of postmodern thought on the subject of cultural evaluation. While the phrase “high culture” is still commonly used to refer to a discrete set of cultural products, enclosing it in speech marks, denying the descriptive validity of a phrase that critics nevertheless seem reliant upon, is an equally common strategy.

The centrality of high/low categories in this thesis makes this terminological confusion untenable. Both *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest* seem to represent the relationship between “high culture” and “culture at large” or “low culture” in microcosm, and with each book, a case can be made for the author’s deliberate thematic treatment of this relation. Further underlining the centrality of high/low categories to this thesis is the disjunctive nature of the comparison I undertake: placing novels from either end of the twentieth century alongside one another raises further critical assumptions about the move from a modernist to a postmodernist sensibility, which is also commonly discussed in terms of the changing relationship between “high” culture and “mass” or “popular” culture. Before considering this periodising narrative, a more thorough investigation is required into contemporary thought on cultural value, and why it finds binaristic models of cultural production and consumption so inadequate.

### **Value *For***

The terms high and low culture connote two self-enclosed groupings of cultural products differentiated by value, with an intrinsic connection between the social status of a text (its presence on the university curriculum, for instance) and its objective value (not economic value, in the usual sense, but value in itself, “for its own sake”). Historically, to refer to a work as “high cultural” was to identify its social status, but would also invoke (as it still does) a number of properties thought to be

exhibited by such works (structural complexity, a concern for form, and an avoidance of cliché are three examples); in the traditional language of literary criticism, these features could be called on as indicators of intrinsic value. In the same way, while a work's "low cultural" status might be gleaned simply from the context of its circulation and consumption, its identity and disvalue could be justified by referring to its lack of structural complexity, its clichéd representations, and so on. Although the links between high and low culture and social class have always been pronounced, a focus on cultural works "in themselves," without considering the socio-historical context in which works were consumed, meant that the implications of this could be overlooked or suppressed by defenders of high culture.

To accept a high/low cultural distinction as natural and inevitable (and to use the terms without embarrassment) thus relies on allowing the possibility of speaking of the value of cultural forms, as if value was an objectively existing property of an object. As the subtitle of this section intimates, this thesis takes the impossibility of this enterprise as its starting point. For this reason, it is not my purpose here to thoroughly demonstrate the implausibility of inherentist accounts of cultural value; it is, however, important to give a brief taste of the logic with which the necessity of received high/low distinctions was traditionally asserted. For Pierre Bourdieu, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, John Frow, and Steven Connor, this is an outmoded axiological reasoning, classically stated in Kant's aesthetic theories, and reproduced by the specialised disciplines that took his description of the "aesthetic experience" as a founding tenet (art history and literary criticism being two good examples).

Axiological arguments, as Smith is the most ruthless to observe, typically begin by placing in question the legitimacy of established evaluative authority, for the purpose of reasserting it – not as *de facto*



authority, but as logically necessary. The problem becomes one of reconciling the real-world diversity of tastes with a reasoned argument for the rightness of one particular (high cultural) set of cultural preferences. Complicating this task is the disputed status of value judgements *per se*: cultural tastes do not sit easily as an object of philosophical inquiry, as the proverb *de gustibus non disputandum* (matters of taste are not open to argument) announces. Any argument for the validity of certain tastes over others must account for, and overcome, problems of personal fickleness and other contingencies that seem to lend support to the *de gustibus* view held by axiological sceptics. Arguments in favour of an objective “standard of taste,” Smith notes, are thus frequently based on a search for a set of conditions under which the apparent diversity of human interests and identities might, effectively, be refined out of existence. David Hume’s attempt to derive a “natural standard” against which tastes themselves could be evaluated (as correct or aberrant)<sup>6</sup> is, for Smith, an exemplary instance of this kind of axiologic logic. Classical descriptions of the “aesthetic experience” were similarly geared towards defining “correct,” supposedly disinterested judgment.

This understanding of aesthetic value as *sui generis*, a type of value that, unlike other manifest preferences, could not be attributed to particular interests, needs, or culturally specific values, has had a great impact on the study of literature. Steven Connor puts this well: “If the Kantian claim was that art and literature possessed a special and intrinsic kind of value which was not to be measured in anything but its

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<sup>6</sup> Positing a “standard of taste” provides Hume with a way of explaining away the apparent diversity of value judgements: “Whoever would assert an equality of genius and elegance between Ogilby and Milton, or Bunyan and Addison, would be thought to defend no less an extravagance, than if he had maintained a mole-hill to be as high as Teneriffe, or a pond as extensive as the ocean. Though there may be found *persons*, who give the preference to the former authors; *no one* pays attention to such a taste; and *we* pronounce, without scruple, the sentiment of these pretended critics to be absurd and ridiculous” (qtd by Smith 56).

own terms, then the claim of progressively more specialized disciplines such as literature, art history and even philosophy was that they alone could provide the competence to recognize and reproduce these forms of intrinsic value” (10). In the twentieth century, this “competence” manifested in the development of increasingly sophisticated scholarly discourses of interpretation and appreciation, designed to turn the critical enterprise of value recognition into a “progressive” discipline. Like the classical axiological arguments from which literary critics drew inspiration, New Criticism aimed to establish methods or conditions under which cultural evaluation could free itself from charges of subjectivism. The methodology of “close reading” was one way that criticism sought to do this, ostensibly enabling the value of canonical works to be “revealed” as scientifically as possible (scientific analysis being another supposed bastion of the value-free). Although values (of the benign, humanistic stripe, as Smith notes) were often said to be transmitted over the course of a humanities education, the value of the “materials of criticism” was the given on which the entire process was founded.

While canonical culture is only one part of what is usually meant by “high culture,” the vociferousness of debate over the canon (a sense of which is implicit in the term “culture wars”) makes it an obvious place to begin an analysis of the problematisation of high/low categories in the twentieth century. The culture wars saw the “universal value” of what had been hitherto institutionally sanctioned come under attack; what could once be described unproblematically as a collective high-watermark of “Western civilisation” was vilified on the basis of what it excluded. Literature departments had to respond to vehement demands that the canon be “opened” to include works by women, gays, ethnic minorities – not to mention cultural products whose value was thought to be compromised by their associations with mass or popular culture.

While John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* dismisses the logic of many arguments mounted in favour of canon revision,<sup>7</sup> his belief that the critique of the canon "amounts to a terminal crisis, more than sufficient evidence of the urgent need to reconceptualize the object of literary study" (Guillory 265) still resonates strongly within a discipline whose founding assumptions have been decisively undermined.

As described here, however, canon revision does not mount a direct challenge to the underlying logic of a high culture/low culture divide. For the idea of culture and value being embodied in a representative assortment of texts and practices is common to both the defenders of the canon and those who advocate its reformation (this observation forms the basis of Guillory's dismissal of the "pluralist tradition" of canon critique). A more significant critique of the structure of these categories comes from a reconsideration of first principles, and a displacement of interest from "high" and "low" culture as discrete (though contested) groupings of texts, to discourses and practices of value. This move involves an integration of the two definitions of culture broached above – a willingness to submit socially exalted texts and behaviours to critique from a perspective that is indifferent to the maintenance of a privileged, "universally representative" domain of cultural value.

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<sup>7</sup> Guillory's main objection to these arguments is that they are premised on a flawed understanding of what canonical texts (or indeed any texts) "represent". The perception that the canon represents "Western culture" or white middle-class hegemony is a misreading produced by the way certain texts have been institutionalised and taught, rather than anything inherent in the texts themselves. Revising the canon by including works by minority writers involves accepting the wrongheaded idea that texts are transparently representative of social groups or class experiences. Furthermore, the pluralist argument relies on a paradoxical assertion that the newly elevated texts will be of equal value to the existing canonical works, while at the same time wanting to view those texts as oppositional to or disruptive of the values transmitted by the canon. See *Cultural Capital*, Chapter 1.

Of foundational importance in this regard is the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose understanding of the high/low divide stems from a reassessment of cultural evaluation itself. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* forcefully argues against the Kantian ideal of aesthetic judgment as disinterested and autonomous. Instead, Bourdieu suggests, “aesthetic value,” traditional touchstone of defenders of a strict high/low divide, can be shown to obey a very *interested* social logic.

In a move that prefigures the rise of cultural relativism in the humanities, Bourdieu sees institutionally legitimated modes of regarding cultural products (the “aesthetic disposition”) as “the area par excellence of the denial of the social” (11), and exposes this denial as “fully bound up with the struggle for social power” (Frow 28). While aware that the grounds on which different people manifest a preference for different cultural products usually remain implicit,<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu and his collaborators, unfazed, seek to explain how, in John Frow’s words, “differences in cultural preference become socially functional” (Frow 29). In a phrase reminiscent of that with which I stated the rift between cultural and literary studies, Bourdieu declares that the social operation of the “aesthetic disposition,” which is virtually synonymous in *Distinction* with “the Kantian aesthetic” (5), cannot be understood “unless “culture”, in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is reinserted into “culture” in the broad, anthropological sense and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is brought back into relation with the elementary taste for the flavours of food” (1). The taste for “high art,” limited (as Bourdieu’s surveys demonstrate it to be) to

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<sup>8</sup> This is one way in which Bourdieu’s argument might be questioned: his construction of how people respond to art works or cultural products is dependent on their making explicit something that is incredibly difficult to articulate. Indeed, John Frow takes the common strategy in cultural studies of divining “popular” reading strategies from the administration of survey material as one of the key problems afflicting theoretical accounts of “the popular”. See especially his comments on Michel de Certeau’s work, at 53-59.

those possessed of the discourses that make such cultural products meaningful, is demystified by Bourdieu as being “inseparable from a specific cultural competence” (4): a learnt behaviour that functions in effect as a marker of (actual or aspired to) social status. The sting in Bourdieu’s argument is that, because these learnt preferences manifest as “natural,” taste for cultural products also comes to be seen as justifying social inequality. Smith summarises Bourdieu thus: “the tastes of the dominant for those objects and practices are interpreted as evidence of their own natural superiority and cultural enlightenment and thus also their right to social and cultural power ... [T]his doubly legitimating interpretation is accepted and reproduced not only by those who benefit most directly from it but by everyone, including those whose subordination it implicitly justifies” (Smith 76).

What, then, are the hallmarks of “legitimate culture”? To begin answering this question, Bourdieu’s work usefully lays bare the (intuitively obvious) fact that not all sectors of society consume the full spectrum of publicly accessible cultural products, and offers a sociological explanation for this disparity. For example, although in theory every sector of French society could access public art galleries, Bourdieu’s surveys showed that galleries’ attendees were in fact largely made up of the monied and educated elite. Here we encounter the phrase “value for” for the first time. In Bourdieu’s schema it is used to explain this disparity in cultural consumption: he attributes to the artworks galleries display a demarcative function. Because such works, Bourdieu argues, demand to be interpreted in formal rather than functional terms, the experience of these works as valuable is available only for those who are schooled in the appropriate interpretive methods (or cultural history):

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. The

conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes pictorial or musical culture is the hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of a period, a school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. (2)

Thus, “the ‘naïve’ spectator cannot attain a specific grasp of works of art which only have meaning or value—in relation to the specific history of an artistic tradition” (4). Such a spectator, typically “working class” according to Bourdieu’s interpretation of his own survey material, responds to artworks instead by making use of mere “everyday perception”; he or she is incapable of interpreting the artwork adequately (in such a way that will demonstrate, or generate, social distinction, a form of symbolic capital). Confronted with “legitimate” works, the working class audience experiences not value, but exclusion. The preferences of a “popular cultural” public reflect this lack: in the case of the novel, the “popular aesthetic” Bourdieu posits “refuses any sort of formal experimentation and all the effects which, by introducing a distance from the accepted conventions (as regards scenery, plot etc.), tend to distance the spectator, preventing him from getting involved and fully identifying with the characters” (4). The “aesthetic disposition” is thus synonymous with an awareness of formal conventions, which is what allows an object to be interpreted and valued as autotelic (“form rather than function” (3)); the “popular aesthetic,” conversely, adopts evaluative criteria that are innocent of such learnt codes.

Ultimately, for Bourdieu, the aesthetic disposition is reducible to an expression of freedom from economic necessity, a symbolic confirmation of socio-economic status. Whatever pleasure is experienced on the part of the “legitimate” interpreter of “legitimate” culture is in the end inseparable from the pleasure that accrues in feeling socially distinguished. And, while the display of

“disinterestedness” thought by Bourdieu to generate or affirm cultural capital is most easily relatable to the interpretation and evaluation of artworks—forms of cultural expression that exist, supposedly, “for their own sake”—it can also manifest in the interpretation of any cultural product (even food) as “form rather than function”:

[N]othing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even ‘common’ (because the ‘common’ people make them their own, especially for aesthetic purposes), or the ability to apply the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing or decoration, completely reversing the popular disposition which annexes aesthetics to ethics. (5)

The “aesthetic disposition” thus equates to a generalised “capacity for sublimation” (6), which can be exhibited solely by consumers from the higher social classes, by virtue of their having acquired institutionally legitimised discourses of evaluation and appreciation. Indeed, this final point makes it clear that the key to Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural hierarchies is *discourses* (rather than cultural products in themselves), the uneven distribution of which predisposes cultural tastes to function in this classificatory way.

That Bourdieu’s study is framed as a direct rejoinder to Kant makes the post-axiological thrust of his study especially clear. The interest traditional axiology had in defining conditions under which people’s particular, socially differentiated values could be factored out of evaluative theory is turned completely on its head. But Bourdieu’s argument is polemical in its attack on the “high aesthetic” disposition to an extent that, from a contemporary perspective, causes argumentative problems. Not least of these is that, by positioning “high art” solely as the domain in which the culturally powerful express their status, Bourdieu seems to disenable any possibility of such art performing a socially important role of critique and opposition—of it functioning, in

fact, to undermine the legitimacy of the “legitimate” classes. John Frow sees this as one instance of a more pervasive problem in Bourdieu’s argument: an essentialised understanding of what can count as a “high” or “popular” aesthetic. Most fundamentally, by portraying a legitimate aesthetic as one which involves a high degree of attention to “form,” and a popular aesthetic limited to ‘content’ and use value, Bourdieu’s argument relies on a form/content binary that critical theory has long found problematic (for one cannot be considered independent of the other).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Frow notes, by couching his definition of the “popular aesthetic” in negative terms (even while he proceeds as one of its most enthusiastic defenders), Bourdieu risks positing a cultural domain devoid of formal experimentation, and of intertextual rather than traditional mimetic practices of representation.<sup>10</sup> Recent critical attention to texts traditionally referred to as “popular culture” stresses that this is plainly not the case. Although Bourdieu’s analysis is firmly post-axiological in intent, attributing both high and low cultural preferences to a social logic of group demarcation, there also seems to be an asymmetry in Bourdieu’s explanation of high and popular cultural pleasures: only “legitimate” tastes are discursively mediated (hence their apparently “artificial” character).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Guillory has also drawn attention to the inadequacy of the form/content binary Bourdieu employs; he uses this observation, however, to defend the possibility of aesthetic pleasure as a category, independent of the play of social distinction: see *Cultural Capital* pp 325-336.

<sup>10</sup> For Frow’s critique of Bourdieu, see *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, pp 27-47.

<sup>11</sup> Frow also stresses that, for Bourdieu, only “legitimate” tastes are seen as “fully relational” (based on choice rather than limitation), which seems to equate the “popular aesthetic” with cultural disadvantage (this, Frow notes, only necessarily holds true from a self-privileging high cultural perspective). Barbara Herrnstein Smith alludes to the asymmetry noted by Frow, but is seemingly less troubled by the essentialised understanding of “high” and “popular” culture that it points to. Smith argues (in an endnote) that “[a]lthough he is not altogether evenhanded in the tone of his analyses, describing working-class practices rather sympathetically and reserving his most elaborate satire for the self-privileging *grand bourgeois*, hapless *petit bourgeois*, and ‘mis-recognitions’ of intellectuals and academics, Bourdieu neither privileges nor pathologizes any practices theoretically and accounts for all cultural preferences symmetrically by reference to general sociological dynamics” (198 note 20).



Thus, while the institutional uptake of this sort of sociology of taste may have contributed to the rise of self-critique among cultural intellectuals (especially a sensitivity to the ideological effects of promulgating high cultural tastes), it does not on its own explain the recent trend in critical theory to refuse the descriptive validity of high/low categories themselves. A theoretically robust basis for this refusal has, however, been developed within the confines of the literary academy, as a consequence of extending post-structuralist thought on interpretation to evaluation. Such developments can be thought of as an extension of Bourdieu's emphasis on discourse in structuring the interpretation and evaluation of cultural forms; Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1987 study *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* remains the clearest statement of this understanding of evaluative behaviour.

Smith's stated aim in *Contingencies of Value* is to "outline an alternative conception of literary evaluation, one that is in accord with the view of literary value as variable and contingent but that also recognizes the considerable social force and significant social functions of all forms of evaluative behaviour" (13). While Smith discards the possibility of inherent value, her emphasis on evaluation as a necessarily social activity means that the relativist stance on questions of cultural value that she develops is not the same as a subjectivist one, which would equate to stating that "value is in the eye of the beholder." (Such an argument would be irreconcilable with the many sociological accounts of cultural taste, notably that of Bourdieu.) Far from being another example of Bourdieu's vilified "denial of the social," then, Smith's account of the phenomenon of shared value judgements, seeming "constancies of value" that might seem indicative of the inherent value of certain texts, depends on allowing that, despite

evaluation being a radically contingent practice, these contingencies will tend to coincide in ways that have a limited, but no less real, predictability. Thus, in her study Smith typically speaks of value for particular consumers or communities of consumers. The attribution of cultural value to an art object (and here Smith is writing primarily about literary art, taking the example of Shakespeare's sonnets) is never a fait accompli of a work's inherent properties; value must instead be thought of as a result of the complex interplay between variables:

in accord with the changing interests and other values of a community, various potential meanings of a work will become more or less visible (or "realizable"), and the visibility—and hence value—of the work for that community will change accordingly. The problem here can be seen as the interlooping of two circles, the hermeneutic and the evaluative. Our interpretation of a work and our experience of its value are mutually dependent, and each depends upon what might be called the psychological "set" of our encounter with it: not the "setting" of the work or, in the narrow sense, its context, but rather the nature and potency of our own assumptions, expectations, capacities, and interests with respect to it—our "prejudices" if you like, but hardly to be distinguished from our identity (of *who*, in fact, *we are*) at the time of the encounter. Moreover, all three—the interpretation, the evaluation, and the "set"—operate and interact in the same fashion as the hermeneutic circle itself: that is, simultaneously causing and validating themselves *and* causing and validating each other. While these circles are no doubt logically vicious or at least epistemologically compromising, they are also, I believe, both psychologically inevitable and experientially benign. (10-11)

Cultural value, then, (and for Smith the example par excellence is the idea of "literary value") "is not the property of an object or of a subject but, rather, the product of the dynamics of a system" (15). More specifically, Smith understands cultural value to obey an economic logic: to speak of a cultural object's value is to impose a moment of arrest upon a system that is in constant flux; norms of cultural practice change drastically over time, as can individuals' prejudices.<sup>12</sup> The system becomes still more complicated when it is remembered that

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<sup>12</sup> Although as I have mentioned, Smith is careful to avoid the reductive position that finds value to be entirely the product of an individual's capricious whims.

each of the inputs to this system (the “interpretation” and the auditor’s “identity”) are equally, and simultaneously, outputs: an individual’s interpretation of a cultural product is both what leads to an ascription of value and an effect of that ascription. Texts can thus be thought of as both totemic markers of distinction (an individual’s appreciation of certain texts *does* function as a marker of their social status), and as actively shaping both the apparent hierarchy of cultural products that they are received into (in the process of being read, interpreted and valued) and the very identity of the auditor. This idea of a “feedback loop” also helps explain why what can count as “literary” writing (for example), as defined by those in positions of cultural authority, may change over time.

The economic model Smith proposes has many theoretical advantages. It can account convincingly for the apparent stability of a text’s value between auditors, over time and across cultures (Homer being one traditional example, in axiological arguments, of timeless value) by pointing to institutional processes whereby a work’s value is reproduced and sustained; a text’s “reevaluation” may be explained, on the same economic logic, as contingent upon the emergence or disappearance of institutional values to which the text in question may be configured as responsive or unresponsive. Scaled down, the economic model provides a compelling account of individual cultural preferences: for Smith, “our experience of ‘the value of the work’ is equivalent to our experience of the work in relation to the total economy of our existence” (16). Because individual identities/economies are not uniformly shaped by institutions or collective social identities, cultural preferences are not solely attributable to class position, as Bourdieu’s analysis seems to imply. Smith points instead to the many possible versions of utility or advantage that have traditionally been masked by the operation of

aesthetic discourse (from “hedonic, practical, sentimental, ornamental” (33) interests, to the possibility that a general tendency to find pleasure in cognitively challenging tasks could be explained as a “by-product of our evolutionary development” (34)), concluding that the “essential value” of an artwork “consists in everything from which it is usually distinguished” (33).

For Smith, then, the move from “value of” to “value for” is not a meek refusal to engage in evaluative debate; relativism is instead stripped of its pejorative sense (in traditional axiological arguments: “anything goes”) and comes to be understood as the only plausible explanation of evaluative behaviour *per se*.

A little further explanation is needed of the interaction between cultural products and readers/consumers in Smith’s model. The best way to explain this is, once again, to give a sense of that which post-axiology aims to move beyond. Even if a doctrinaire New Critic would have conceded that cultural value is relative in the sense that “not everyone values literature as I do,” this would typically be put down to a failing on the part of other interpreters of the artwork—the idea that not everyone is possessed of the sensibility or the reading required to distinguish valuable art from dross. In this conception, the features of the artwork that are presumably generative of value (verbal complexity; the integrity and consonance of meaning and form) were assumed to remain constant, innate, awaiting learned explication. (This is also implicit, to some extent, in Bourdieu’s discussion of a high cultural public’s capacity to discuss a work’s inherent formal properties.) The “parable of Shakespeare’s sonnets” with which Smith opens her study exposes gaping holes in such an argument. If literary scholarship is to be thought of as the identification of various “traits” common to great works of literature, how can one account for the “extraordinarily

variable” reputation of the sonnets over the 400 years since they were published? The answer for Smith does not lie simply in the development of taste (and especially not in a progression towards the evaluative rigour of New Criticism and related endeavours), but in the intricate relationship of value to meaning. That Romantic critics, for instance, condemned the sonnets—now firmly entrenched in the literary canon as instantiations of high art—for their “labored perplexities and studied deformities,” or for being written in a verse form “incompatible with the English language” (4), indicates for Smith not only a change in tastes, but, more significantly, that the identification of the formal properties of a work, usually assumed to remain constant (an inert element of the written artefact), is itself historically variable. “The texts were the same,” Smith concedes, “but it seems clear that, in some sense, the poems weren’t” (4). Any effort to attribute value to stable features of prized works comes to look suspect:

The attempt to locate invariance in the nature (or, latterly, the *structure*) of the works themselves is, I believe, no less misguided than the search for essential or objective value—and is, in fact, only another form of that search, though often presented in contradistinction to it as a matter for “empirical” or “inductive” investigation. It is misguided, however, not only because different features or properties will be valued differently by different audiences, and so on, but, more significantly, because the very *perception* of those presumed properties will itself vary. (15)

This move, from thinking of intrinsic structures to viewer-specific structuration, is the key post-structuralist element in Smith’s thinking. Here cultural evaluation is categorically a discursive process, not in the mere sense that evaluations are typically worked out and expressed in language, but in the sense that this process in itself determines the perception (and hence value) of the work in question. This is the classic deconstruction of the traditional binary of production (what’s in the text) and reception (the active interpretive work done by readers). Throughout her work, Smith embraces a principle of undecidability: no

cultural product has a singular, essential meaning independent of subjective (or intersubjective) configuration; nor is there any way to delimit the possible interests or uses to which an artefact may be configured as responsive. Importantly, it is this line of thinking—a refusal of the possibility of treating cultural evaluation as anything other than a complex effect of discourse—that ought finally to allow us to move decisively away from thinking of high and low culture as coherent cultural domains.

There is a need here to square this mode of self-critical, unapologetic relativism with the language of “cultural domains” – with attempts, that is, to think nebulous terms like “high culture,” “low culture,” “mass culture” and “popular culture” into graspable concept-hood. The “domain” metaphor is particularly important, suggesting bounded, definite structures that exist prior to, and independently of, evaluation. (We have moved, then, from the question of literary texts possessing intrinsic structure, to considering the status of “structures” discerned by cultural academics in what John Frow calls “the social organisation of culture.”) The emphasis so far on evaluative communities helps to give real-world substance to this metaphor; a “domain” or “structure” here might refer to a recognisably distinct set of collectively held values and ways of reading, which influence the production and circumscribe the reception of certain cultural forms. As such, the metaphor is most precise when the communal boundaries in question can be very precisely defined (as might be the case for localised customs in feudal societies, for example). Turning to the example of contemporary “popular culture,” then, it will be readily apparent that the “domain” metaphor is stretched to the point of breaking: can a phenomenon whose audience, by any contemporary definition, cuts across classes, regions, demographics and nations, and which can, in common

parlance, encompass everything from *The Simpsons* to Andrew Lloyd Weber musicals, be theorised as any sort of unity?

John Frow's 1995 study *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* analyses a wide range of attempts to do this, before answering in the negative. The central complication for all such attempts derives from the conditions under which popular cultural texts have been produced and consumed since the development of mass media "culture industries". Under these conditions, the texts that are widely designated "popular culture" do not simply emanate from "the people," but are produced and distributed by corporate media, which have an interest in ensuring the circulation of both commodities and ideologies. This model of cultural alienation lies behind some of modernism's most vehement denunciations of popular culture: Andreas Huyssen observes that for Theodor Adorno, "The manipulative praxis of this culture industry—Adorno thought mainly of record, film, and radio production—subordinates all spiritual and intellectual creation to the profit motive" (Huyssen 144). However, the model of top-down manipulation can be easily reversed, or at least mitigated, by reasserting the audience's agency—their active role in determining the meaning or value of a given text, structured in opposition to its intentional meaning. This has been the approach taken by many affirmative definitions of popular culture, most obviously those developed by practitioners of cultural studies. Here the focus shifts from texts in themselves to the uses those texts are put to, emphasising the (paradoxically) productive work of consumers.

It is apparent that both of these positions claim to have hit upon the essence of "popular cultural" experience. Frow, however, consistently refuses this either/or scenario:

There is no simple way (apart from straightforward reductionism) of squaring a methodological concentration on the productive working of

texts with a methodological concentration on the productive work of the system. They are not complementary, and the effect of this tension is a kind of necessary indeterminacy principle. Both positions are 'correct', but there is no way of reconciling them in a single perspective. (70)

In line with Smith, Frow favours a far more complex understanding of textual evaluation, whereby text and audience each have the capacity to influence (even "reconfigure") the other.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in the case of "popular culture," where the "audience" I have spoken of is necessarily an expansive category ("the people" not being necessarily limited by specific location, demographic or class), one function of texts so targeted is to appeal to, and thus construct, that audience as a "popular" totality.

This point, that "'the people' are constructed in being spoken for" (85), becomes a familiar refrain throughout Frow's analysis of "the popular" as a category. Of more direct significance for Frow's argument than the construction of "the people" by the popular media are the definitional efforts on the part of cultural intellectuals, which must inevitably, according to Frow, involve a "politically fraught" substitution of voices. Because "the popular" is never more than a discursive representation, formed from a particular, interested, social position, the problem of the "representation of a theoretical object" (60) is inseparable from the problem of "speaking, or claiming to speak, on behalf of someone else" (60). (Specifying the exact nature of the social position from which cultural intellectuals speak is thus one of Frow's major theoretical interests in this book.) However sympathetic one might be to political arguments positing a "popular" cultural domain in necessary antagonism to an official or hegemonic culture (Bourdieu's argument can be considered as one version of this sort of thinking), Frow considers all such arguments—as made by both conservative and leftist critics—to be vulnerable to the same criticism: however inclusively

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<sup>13</sup> See especially Frow's analysis of John Fiske's arguments, pp 60-64.



described, positing a single structural opposition between two blocs functions to homogenise the actual diffusion of both cultural values and, indeed, entire economies of value, in contemporary, de-stratified<sup>14</sup> societies. “The untenable core of the concept of the popular (or of the “mass”-cultural),” Frow writes, “is its structural opposition to high culture: a binarism which at once unifies and differentiates each domain. The category of popular culture has a unitary form, however, only as long as it is derived from a singular entity, “the people”; otherwise it breaks down into a bundle of very heterogeneous forms and practices” (81-82).

Frow’s eventual refusal of both “high” and “popular” culture (and their variant terms) as descriptively valid categories stems from an understanding of cultural domains as contingent rather than “real” structures, and from a disinclination to derive from his own competence in both “popular” and “high” cultural discourses an objective authority to describe “the social organisation of culture.” It is, for Frow, “no longer either possible or useful to understand cultural production in terms of a general economy of value, and thus ... we can no longer imagine ourselves into a vantage point from which conflicting judgements of value could be reconciled” (131). The only given of cultural analysis is its contingency; the interpretation and evaluation of cultural oppositions depends entirely on one’s own position in relation to that “culture” (or indeed, “those ‘cultures’”). Frow thus sets himself the task of imagining “the dispersal of cultural authority” (22), recognising the possibility that, for many contemporary cultural

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<sup>14</sup> “Whereas in highly stratified societies culture is closely tied to class structure, in most advanced capitalist societies the cultural system is no longer organized in a strict hierarchy and is no longer *in the same manner* tense with the play of power” (85). Although Frow frequently notes de-stratification of this type in describing “postmodern relations of cultural value,” it is important to stress that his refusal of high/low categories stems more from a theoretical refusal of objective evaluation than from the emergence of contemporary social structures.

consumers and producers, high cultural practices, including the cultural analyses of academics, will carry no prestige or authority whatsoever.

In light of all this, what status can the terms “high” and “popular” culture now retain? It should be noted here that the arguments wielded by Frow and Smith are particularly salutary in stressing what does *not* follow from a relativist account of cultural value. Smith’s dismissal of the argument equating cultural relativism with the necessary demise of evaluative distinctions (she dubs this the “egalitarian fallacy”) is perhaps the most important of these provisos, and it is a version of this dismissal that allows Frow to recognise the continuing force exerted by the terms “high culture” and “popular culture,” both for cultural intellectuals and for cultural consumers at large, even as he dismisses the “expressive unity” (84) of the concepts. “[T]he category of value does not disappear with the collapse of a general economy” (131), Frow writes, but

it continues to organize every local domain of the aesthetic and every aspect of daily life, from the ritualized discussions of movies or books or TV programmes through which relations of sociability are maintained, to the fine discriminations of taste in clothing or food or idiom that are made by every social class and every status subculture ... There is no escape from the discourse of value, and no escape from the pressure and indeed the obligation to treat the world as though it were fully relational, fully interconnected. (131)

While high/low terms are removed of their normative status as coherent “levels,” their continuing currency indicates, for Frow, that they are still widely retained, in a variety of settings and by a variety of publics, as discursive tools with which to organise (or map) relations of cultural value. Any of these high/low maps / evaluative hierarchies might purport to be all embracing; but there can be no reason to accept any one as objective, “accurate”, or evaluatively neutral.

Frow suggests the concept of *regimes of value*, a further involution of the (already complex) relationship between discourse and evaluation, as a way of acknowledging the continued importance of high/low categories, while resisting the “domain” metaphor’s simple grounding of “economies of value” within definite, bounded groups. “Regimes of value” are “semiotic institution[s] generating evaluative regularities under certain conditions of use, and in which particular empirical audiences or communities may be more or less fully imbricated” (144). There is no necessary imbrication, however; “high” and “popular” regimes (Frow retains the nomenclature),<sup>15</sup> for instance, have “no directly expressive relation to social groups” (145), but are sustained and distributed by higher education institutions and the mass media, respectively.

One consequence of this, for Frow, is that there is nothing surprising nor necessarily duplicitous in the “high” cultural academic’s move (common in cultural studies) to position themselves as fans of the popular cultural text they are analysing (a member of a “popular cultural” public); this merely highlights that “apparently identical texts and readers will function quite differently within different regimes” (145). This is not to suggest, however, that contemporary critics, by immersing themselves in cultural products and evaluative discourses that were not traditionally the provenance of universities, thereby free themselves of the problems associated with their institutional position.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “This is not to revert to a use of these categories as *substantive* or internally coherent categories; it is merely to accept the fact that the concepts of a ‘high’ and a ‘popular’ regime continue to organize the cultural field and to produce ideological effects of cultural distinction” (Frow 150).

<sup>16</sup> Frow emphasises this point by strenuously resisting any temptation to forget the imaginary status of “popular” and “high” culture, urging his readership (of cultural intellectuals) to accept

the impossibility either of espousing, in any simple way, the norms of high culture, in so far as this represents that exercise of distinction which works to exclude those not possessed of cultural capital; or, on the other hand, of

“[T]he distinction between culture and high culture is the product of our own culture, and so must itself be partly the expression of our own cultural needs, values and anxieties, rather than any kind of ‘value-free’ representation of the really existing state of things” (Connor 231). The project of post-axiology is to frame cultural analysis with a self-critical acknowledgement of the “needs, values and anxieties” or the “regimes of value” that determine any reading or evaluation of texts “in themselves.”

### *After the Great Divide*

So far I have assembled a selective narrative of the progression, in criticism, from the self-privileging acceptance of a necessary high/low cultural divide, to its rejection, which I have associated with post-axiology. One of the dangers of this sort of narrative is that it tends to imply universal agreement: a collective shedding, by cultural intellectuals, of the axiological logic of their predecessors. That Frow is able to highlight the repetition of essentialist modes of thinking among practitioners of cultural studies – who, as we have seen, typically state their evaluative assumptions in direct opposition to those of traditional literary criticism – should immediately qualify this impression. An analogy could be made with the emergence of postcolonial criticism, which, while drawing impetus from the political process of decolonisation, does not imply a definite end to colonialist thought or practices of representation. The use of the present tense in the epigraph to Frow’s final chapter is all-important: “The privileging of the self through the pathologizing of the Other *remains* the key move and

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espousing, in any simple way, the norms of “popular” culture to the extent that this involves, for the possessors of cultural capital, a fantasy of otherness and a politically dubious will to speak on behalf of this imaginary Other. (158-159)

defining objective of axiology” (Smith 38, qtd Frow 131, emphasis added).

Similar dangers lurk in the deployment of another narrative of the gradual muddying of high/low categories – this time one based on developments in representational art. By this I am referring to the critical narrative placing *Ulysses* (1922) and *Infinite Jest* (1996) within distinct literary periods (modernism and postmodernism, respectively) and making claims, either from this categorisation or in support of it, about the ways in which each work represents (or enacts) the relationship between high culture and popular culture. R. B. Kershner, one of Joyce’s critics whose work I shall discuss in the next chapter, puts the problem this way:

To say modernist art rejects popular culture while postmodernist art embraces it is, of course, to offer a reductive simplification of which few critics would be guilty. Nevertheless, much recent critical writing does *suggest* this kind of reductiveness; “high” modernism is thus politically demonized, made the whipping boy for a postmodernism newly conceived as somehow populist. (*Joyce and Popular Culture* 7)

Kershner’s approach to this, as the following chapter explains, is to seek to disprove the narrative by counter-example. My own approach, further to the preceding section of this chapter, is to consider the problems of structuring a narrative in and through categories that, as critical theory has long shown, lack all homogeneity. Before explaining what I take to be the key risks in working with these terms, it is important to give a somewhat less reductive account of the narrative that Kershner alludes to.

Andreas Huyssen’s 1986 study *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* is one distinguished example of a line of critical works that place great stress on understanding the evolving

relationship between high culture and mass culture as a way to give substance and meaning to the ubiquitous literary-critical categories, modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, as the title of his book suggests, Huyssen sees the Great Divide<sup>17</sup> between high art and mass culture, posited and rigorously patrolled by the flag-bearers of modernism, as the feature of modernist artistic self-definition; the decline of this sense of absolute division is “more important for a theoretical and historical understanding of modernism and its aftermath than the alleged historical break which, in the eyes of so many critics, separates postmodernism from modernism” (viii). Whereas literary historians traditionally privileged modernism’s rejection of “the traditions of romantic idealism and of enlightenment realism and representation,” Huyssen maintains that mass culture was modernism’s more significant Other. “Mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project” (47), a project which “constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture” (vii).

Huyssen does not have to look hard to find evidence of modernist critics’ and artists’ hostile construction of mass culture. In his schema, Theodor Adorno becomes the leading theorist of modernism, standing for the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, whose views on “mass culture” are notorious (a notoriety aided by the fact that their complex ideas on the subject of mass culture are often reduced to simple hostility). For Adorno, high art could be described as the antithesis of mass culture, and the difference could be elaborated as that between the authentic and the inauthentic:

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<sup>17</sup> Huyssen capitalises this phrase throughout his study, using it to designate any cultural discourse that aims to establish an absolute and necessary distinction between valid art and mass cultural practice. He commonly refers to the “discourse of the Great Divide”; see for example viii.

The authentic cultural object must retain and preserve whatever goes by the wayside in that process of increasing domination over nature which is reflected by expanding rationality and ever more rational forms of domination. Culture is the perennial protestation of the particular against the general, as long as the latter remains irreconcilable with the particular. ("The Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique*, 6 (Fall 1975), p 6 quoted in Brantlinger 227)

As Richard Brantlinger explains, "'Particularity' here denotes the opposite of 'mass-ness,' or of those processes of social rationalization which produce mass culture" (Brantlinger 227). Although the enlightenment of the "masses" was, for Adorno, the only hope in bringing about widespread political and cultural enlightenment, he and other Frankfurt theorists were pessimistic as to the possibility of this actually occurring, or of the proletariat coming to have revolutionary agency. (Walter Benjamin stands as the most prominent exception to this rule, especially in his sanguine essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.") Instead of this, mass culture or the "culture industry" seemed to Adorno to promise only continued top-down domination of the many by the few. The pessimistic strain of Frankfurt School thought adopted an essentialist view of mass culture as a phenomenon geared to perpetuating fascistic cultural homogeneity, and disabling the possibility of popular resistance.

Writing from a self-consciously postmodern vantage, Huyssen is aware, of course, that this other ("mass culture"), if thought of as an enclosed, devalued cultural domain, was an historical invention, attaining its specious totality only through the exclusionary judgments of high cultural practitioners.<sup>18</sup> As John Carey puts this point, constructing as other a nebulous "mass" (and "their" culture) was effectively to deploy "a metaphor for the unknowable and invisible" (20); the construction of

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<sup>18</sup> This point is belaboured by John Carey in the introduction to his study *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, which covers similar ground to Huyssen's work in a more sensationalised tone. See especially page 20 and following.

a rigid high culture/low culture distinction, and modernism's gendering of one side of this divide as feminine, tells us more about the prejudices of leading modernist artists than any real Great Divide in cultural production.<sup>19</sup> Although comparisons of individual works of "high" and "mass" culture, by readers then and now, may suggest a great disparity in something akin to (subjectively assessed) literary quality, Huyssen sees that the idea of an objective Great Divide, an absolute distinction, manifest in cultural objects, between commodity and non-commodity art (as suggested by modernist theorists) is unsupportable. The strata of "disinterested" art vaunted by Adorno and others, one entirely removed from the workings of commodification, never existed. Huyssen ingeniously (and somewhat subversively) reads from Adorno's early analysis of Richard Wagner the corrective principle, that "In the vortex of commodification there was never an outside" (42).

Adorno is well known for his critique of the "culture industry"—the mass-produced and -consumed cultural products he saw, in contradistinction to formally ambitious, non-representational art forms, as being reducible to a vehicle for ideology (as Huyssen stresses, "culture industry" was, for Adorno, synonymous with fascism). But when in an early essay Adorno criticises Wagner—whose lengthy operas hardly originated, *prima facie*, as works of commodity art—for yielding to the demands of the marketplace (by concealing any trace of the means of the work's production; or for his use of the leitmotiv, from which, he speculates, Hollywood's simplistic formula of one-musical-refrain-per-character would eventually evolve), it becomes clear to Huyssen that Wagner, self-styled high art practitioner, is being subjected to the same "culture industry" mode of critique. Adorno himself shows that "high" art's separation from commodity art is always already compromised; it is permeated by the same (mass)

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<sup>19</sup> See Huyssen's chapter "Mass Culture as Woman," pp. 44-62, especially 47.



cultural logic it seeks to distance itself from. Wagner's music could be co-opted by Hitler's fascism precisely because elements congruent with its populist appeal were latent in Wagner's work. Adorno thereby suggests that "the social processes that give shape to mass culture cannot be kept out of art works of the highest ambition" (35).

Thus, via a reading of Adorno "against the grain," Huyssen questions the validity of traditional bases from which divisions of cultural production—into disinterested vs mass/commodity culture, or high culture vs low culture—have been constructed. He identifies two major problems with traditional accounts of modernism: (i) they have tended to downplay the importance of mass culture as the defining "other" in modernists' self-definition, emphasising instead the pervasive hostility to 19th century high-artistic norms; and (ii), consequent upon (i), such accounts have not been capable of allowing the extent to which modernist works depend upon, and are infiltrated by, the same cultural developments (the development of a mass culture) that they seek to distance themselves from. Huyssen's argument is thus one of many that serves to undermine Adorno's model of cultural production, which Steven Connor aptly describes as positing "'torn halves' of art and mass culture" (Connor 235), by pointing out the ways in which these "halves" are co-implicated.

But Huyssen's is also a periodising argument, intent on constructing a schematic understanding of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in art, on the basis of how thoroughly these movements posit clear limits between art and mass culture. Huyssen demonstrates that the evaluative stance adopted by the likes of Flaubert or Eliot toward mass culture is just that: an evaluative stance, saying nothing about the objective interrelation of cultural "levels". By engaging in a "discourse of the Great Divide," modernist artists and critics deployed a

defence mechanism against social reality (which reality is nevertheless detectable, to the present day critic, in modernist texts' weighted high/low dialectic); this was an evaluative attitude directly contradicting the extent to which cultural "spheres" were (the logic is: always already) imbricated. In light of this, Huyssen's characterisation of what constitutes "postmodernity" is interesting.

Although Huyssen is wary of venturing a positive definition, postmodernism manifests, in his argument, as both a self-adopted critical stance, allowing him to retrospectively explode the modernists' self-constructed myth of high-artistic autonomy, and an artistic movement similarly opposed to treating high art and mass culture as mutually exclusive realms. If modernism is seen as a reaction formation to the encroachment of mass culture, then "To a large extent, it is by the distance we have traveled from this "great divide" between mass culture and modernism that we can measure our own cultural postmodernity" (57).

It also seems clear that the uses high art makes of certain forms of mass culture (and vice versa) have increasingly blurred the boundaries between the two; where modernism's great wall once kept the barbarians out and safeguarded the culture within, there is now only slippery ground which may prove fertile for some and treacherous for others... At stake in this debate about the postmodern is the great divide between modern art and mass culture, which the art movements of the 1960s intentionally began to dismantle in their practical critique of the high modernist canon and which the cultural neo-conservatives are trying to re-erect today. One of the few widely agreed upon features of postmodernism is its attempt to negotiate forms of high art with certain forms and genres of mass culture and the culture of everyday life. (57)

It is difficult to reconcile the two central strands of Huyssen's argument. On one hand, Huyssen's agitation for the necessity of abandoning two-track models of culture clearly draws on relativist ideas. On the other hand, the terms Huyssen uses to stake out the "great divide"'s demise call into question the distance he has in fact travelled

from the arguments of his modernist antecedents. For every metaphor Huyssen uses in the excerpt above (and more widely throughout the book) tends to reinstate the objective (though waning) reality of a meaningful distinction between two discrete, internally coherent structures: high art and mass culture. Huyssen's formulation is determinedly anti-conservative, but the question remains: can his suggestion that the "great divide between high art and mass culture" could be "intentionally dismantled" by a privileged few cultural producers (and, implicitly, cultural academics) be aligned with the (postmodern) arguments for abandoning the notion that "high" and "low"/ "mass" / "popular" culture are or ever were discrete cultural structures?

I would suggest that Huyssen's commitment to the relativist basis for declaring "the great divide" to be outmoded is tempered by his commitment to the continuance, after modernism, of an authoritative mode of cultural criticism that purports, like his Frankfurt School forbears, to diagnose and evaluate what is happening in European/American culture as a totality. Retaining the terms "mass" and "high" culture as points of reference is necessary for such a critic: an impossibly expansive object of study ("culture") is divided into manageable pieces, meaningful opposites *for the art-consuming public*<sup>20</sup> that are, *for* that public, becoming less oppositional, less mutually exclusive. Using these categories, Huyssen is able to offer insightful suggestions about what, *for a high-culture- educated eye*, most clearly distinguishes contemporary "progressive" art (especially in its relationship with "culture at large") from its modernist equivalent.

But Huyssen is not inclined to dwell at length on the sorts of contingencies italicised in the previous paragraph. Moreover, it is clear,

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Smith might use the phrase "canonical audience".

on the rare occasions when Huyssen's writing on postmodern cultural production becomes prescriptive, that he remains committed to some sort of meaningful distinction between "progressive" culture and sheer "mass" culture, and to the idea that contemporary artists have a role to play in bolstering that distinction. For Huyssen, "Capitalist culture industry inevitably produces a minimum of art and a maximum of trash and kitsch" (152); and for artists, though the obligation to integrate "art into the material life process" (156) persists, being "progressive" still necessitates an attempt to avoid "the aesthetization of commodities [...] which totally subjugate[s] the aesthetic to the interest of capital" (158).

It is not the task of this thesis to argue against Huyssen. It does, however, seem useful to point out that it will always be difficult for such university-culture-centric narratives as Huyssen's to fully acknowledge the "dispersal of cultural authority" that follows from post-axiological accounts of cultural value. Historically real "high"/"low" categories will persist in and through critical discourse that treats "high" / "low" terms as meaningful opposites—as an effect of critical discourse. It does not follow from an awareness of the "illusory" basis of those categories that it might be possible or desirable to find a way of doing without them; indeed, my own subject matter, itself "university-culture-centric," means that the use of high/low discourse remains, for me, to some extent valuable and descriptively necessary (part and parcel of the literary discourses I shall focus on). It does follow, though, that contemporary deployments of "high"/ "low" discourse (however vestigial or problematised) might be subjected to the same sort of analysis as is commonly applied to modernist writers (and this can be self-conscious, self-implicating)—leading to a consideration of the critic's/writer's/consumer's interests and, perhaps, evaluative anxieties.



### 3. *Ulysses*, Popular Culture, and the Joyce Industry

This chapter takes James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as its central text. More accurately, *Ulysses* is the departure point for the various critical arguments I shall discuss, and which are my real focus: attempts to position Joyce's work in relation to high/low cultural categories. A narrative account of modernism's "discourse of the great divide" figures prominently in these arguments, most notably in considerations of the evaluative attitude to "popular culture" disclosed by Joyce's oeuvre. I do not seek to offer any final resolution to that question; this chapter has no interest in "discover[ing] grounds for the justification of critical judgments or practices" (Smith 28).

Instead, the following is best considered as an attempt to follow Barbara Smith's suggested "alternative project" for evaluative investigation: I aim to "account for the features of literary and aesthetic judgments in relation to the multiple social, political, circumstantial, and other constraints and conditions to which they are responsive" (Smith 28). What distinguishes my project from the numerous "metacommentaries" of Joyce criticism<sup>21</sup> is its narrow focus on the sort of criticism where questions of value—of cultural categories and hierarchies—are explicitly raised. Because, as Barbara Smith stresses, the literary academy's core work of interpretative criticism (which characterises the vast majority of critical responses to Joyce) has, for the greater part of the twentieth century, been premised on the "exile of

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<sup>21</sup> I shall refer to Joseph Brooker's metacommentary throughout this chapter. Justin Beplate's review article "No mistakes: are Joyce's failings merely failures of discovery?" in the *Times Literary Supplement* considers the rise of the "metacommentary" in Joycean criticism. The sheer amount of critical material published by the "Joyce industry" means that such metacommentaries have become increasingly indispensable for professional critics.

evaluation,” a deliberate refusal to engage with “one of the most venerable, central, theoretically significant, and pragmatically inescapable set of problems relating to literature” (17), my focus is practically confined to two moments in which the relationship of *Ulysses* (now institutionally established as “high” cultural) to “culture at large” has been called into question.

The first of these moments comes in the book’s early reception, when critical readers located within modernism’s self-definition sought to establish the work’s aesthetic value, the essential qualities that would establish its absolute distinction from the devalued cultural forms that it incorporated (represented) and, for some readers, resembled. The second moment comes much later, in an era when Joyce’s work has emphatically attained the consecrated status his earliest supporters hoped for: *Ulysses* has been legitimised as cultural capital by becoming an object of study and professional expertise within the university. In this context, the problematic of value is, to some extent, reversed: I consider the results of recent efforts on the part of the “Joyce industry” to attend to recent, post-axiological thought on cultural value, and as a consequence, ostensibly move from traditional literary studies towards cultural studies.

This move is not problematic in itself, for as John Frow writes, “The opposition set up here between cultural and literary studies is a phoney one. Cultural studies is a way of contextualizing texts, of any kind – of analysing the social relations of textuality; and there’s no reason why it shouldn’t include literary texts and literary regimes amongst its proper objects of knowledge” (“Literature, Culture, Mirrors” 2). However, insofar as this move involves a refusal to engage *in* discourses of value, there are significant barriers to the adoption of such an approach within a critical “industry” that specialises in one institutionally privileged

oeuvre. Steven Connor, as we have seen, draws a marked distinction between critical and anthropological definitions of “culture” and suggests that “If it is rare to find these two alternative accounts of culture in their pure or ideal form, it is also the case that there is a certain, residually stubborn opposition between them” (234). The following aims to explore this opposition, highlighting the persistence within Joyce studies of traditional evaluative habits which belie the numerous claims, made by scholars interested in describing the relationship between “Joyce and popular culture,” to have moved definitively beyond modernist assumptions about value, or to be unencumbered by discourses of “the great divide.”

One further introductory remark is required. As a general proposition, it is uncontroversial to suggest that a cultural product’s social status has little if anything to do with what it represents. However, in each of the moments of *Ulysses*’ reception I consider, questions of the book’s relationship to “popular culture” (as a broad category) operate in tandem with characterisations of the book’s incorporation and juxtaposition of high and low cultural elements – its representation of other texts. Recently, one prominent Joyce critic has suggested that, together, “mass” and “popular” culture constitute the book’s “primary world of allusion” (Wicke 2004, 235). The constant presence in *Ulysses* of popular song (the refrain “Those lovely seaside girls,” for instance, which resurfaces throughout the book), advertisements (“What is home without Plumtree’s Potted Meat? Incomplete. With it an abode of bliss” (61), Bloom’s politically charged ad for Alexander Keyes’ wine shop), mass market fiction (the *Titbits* number Bloom reads, the erotic novel, *Sweets of Sin*, that he (pointedly) buys for Molly), and innumerable other cultural products that, from the evaluative perspective of the literary academy, can be grouped together as “non-literary,” makes it easy to agree with this estimate (although there are surely numerous



other contenders). *Ulysses*' evident juxtaposition of texts that are institutionally defined as either "high" or "low" cultural makes it infinitely reconfigurable (as Smith would say) in accordance with readers' existing high/low assumptions; and it is in this act of configuration that critics' evaluative assumptions are most plainly revealed.

### **Modernism, Canonicity, and High-ness**

The account of cultural value I put forward in chapter two stipulates that value is never simply a function of properties that a text displays; and in the case of a work like *Ulysses*, which contemporary readers usually encounter as a set university text, this situation is particularly glaring. For today's readers, the "complexity" of *Ulysses* (which is partially a function of what I have been calling its "encyclopaedism") does not simply, in an Adornean sense, signify its difference from 'culture at large,' for that differentiation has already been performed—its "transubstantiation" into high cultural capital already determined. *Ulysses*' institutional entrenchment determines, rather than reflects, its value and symbolic prominence. As Barbara Smith writes, "the canonical work begins increasingly not merely to survive within but to shape and create the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted and, for that very reason, to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing" (50).

This means, too, that I may now speak of *Ulysses* as a "high" cultural work in a pragmatic sense, rather than an inherentist one: axiological arguments justifying *Ulysses*' supreme artistic merit now seem both redundant and passe. Yet *Ulysses*' notoriety as a high cultural monument is such that it is synonymous, for many, with axiological discourses of cultural elitism, the idea being that *Ulysses* somehow embodies the logic of cultural distinction. Because this idea has been

vehemently contested in recent Joyce criticism, it is worth specifying its two most prominent versions.

The first justification of this view takes *Ulysses* itself as, in effect, a discourse of value; an active and historically time-limited “warding off” of devalued modes of representation. Here the work of the Frankfurt school becomes important.

Although Walter Benjamin’s focus in his famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) are the plastic arts and film, not print media, he does at one stage pause to offer a “comparative look at the historical situation of contemporary literature” (225). “With the increasing extension of the press,” Benjamin suggests, “an increasing number of readers became writers”—so much so that “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character” (ibid.). Where limited access once ensured that the authority of print carried its own prohibitive aura, “Literary licence is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training and thus becomes common property.”<sup>22</sup> Benjamin’s famously utopian argument for the liberative potential of mass art represents one strand of the Frankfurt School’s response to the rise of mass cultural production. Literary modernism, on the other hand, is usually understood, along with the pessimistic Frankfurt School arguments, as a “reaction formation” to this historical situation, producing works antithetical to

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin’s sanguine analysis of film hinges on a recognition of its potential to become a uniquely democratic medium, consequent on its ability to foster a “progressive” rather than “reactionary” response in a mass audience. Film had the potential, even more so than the democratized press, to dissolve the status divide that ensured mass indifference or hostility to aesthetic products (a problem befalling progressive artists who worked in more traditional media, like Picasso). “The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide” (227). Hence, art produced *for* mass reproduction could more readily become political, and so held greater potential to transform everyday life.

mass consumption (in their prohibitive difficulty) so as to reinscribe authentic “literary licence” as the preserve of a cultural elite. For good reason, *Ulysses*, Joyce’s “usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles” (FW 179) is often thought of as an eminent example of such deliberately “unconsumable” literature, a work which, on its publication, implicitly marked both its author and its readership off from the cultural homogenisation mass printing and literacy seemed to promise.

As we have seen, this conception of modernism has been compellingly put by Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide*, which takes Adorno as modernism’s premier theorist, the critical spearhead of a “reaction formation which operated on the level of form and artistic material” (57). Adorno’s aesthetic is based on an understanding that “progressive” art’s tenability is contingent on its capacity to resist co-option by the “culture industry”; the artists Adorno praised were those who deployed formal opacity as a declaration of autonomy—as a barrier, however temporary, to the political appropriation of cultural expression. Indeed, it is the sense of historical flux in Adorno’s “dialectic of enlightenment” that most clearly distinguishes it from other essentialist understandings of culture as divided into unitary and oppositional high/low blocks. For positioning “high culture” as a “reaction formation” involves conceding that what can function as oppositional will change over time; formalist experiments may be co-opted by the culture industry, losing their capacity to shock, becoming obsolescent.

On this logic, it is important to note, “high culture” is not the same as “canonised culture”—indeed, a work’s absorption into the academy, its legitimisation, is complicit in the inevitable demise of a work’s

provocativeness.<sup>23</sup> Yet, turning to the second reason why cultural “highness” is, in the case of *Ulysses*, commonly treated as a textual property rather than an historically determined fact of reception and reproduction, this distinction readily gives way to a simplified idea of high culture as “that which has value for cultural institutions.” Thus, while Adorno certainly did not see bourgeois “cultural legitimacy” as the goal to which modernist art should aspire, his ideas can be seen as broadly congruent with Bourdieu’s descriptions of the axiologies of “legitimate” consumers. (In both instances, for example, the cultural status of an art object is said to be inscribed at the level of form rather than content).<sup>24</sup> What may have served a demarcative purpose in the early twentieth-century (keeping “the masses” out) plays out rather differently today: *Ulysses*’ linguistic complexity and “encyclopaedic” breadth of reference now mark it as a book seemingly custom-built for the literary academy. This calls to mind Joyce’s famous dictum, quoted after the title page of Don Gifford’s *Ulysses Annotated*: “I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality” (quoted by Gifford). (Although, as Joseph Brooker points out, this comment is probably apocryphal, its perseverance in lore is testament to a widespread perception that this is something that Joyce could or ought to have said.)

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<sup>23</sup> As Richard Brantlinger emphasises, for Adorno, “high culture” is premised on a relentless forward momentum: “[P]ast culture is ... the source of present injustice” (224). Frow also notes more generally that “[w]ithin a modernist aesthetic the *old* and the *low* become equated” (18).

<sup>24</sup> This similarity is especially evident in Bourdieu’s consideration of post-Impressionist art. After Impressionism in the visual arts, Bourdieu suggests, the “legitimate” cultural producer “asserts the primacy of the mode of representation over the object of representation” (*Distinction* 3). We might compare Huyssen’s list of literary modernism’s widely-agreed attributes: “the rejection of all classical systems of representation, the effacement of “content,” the erasure of subjectivity and authorial voice, the repudiation of likeness and verisimilitude, the exorcism of any demand for realism of whatever kind” (54).

That *Ulysses*' "high-ness" now seems so overdetermined goes some way to explaining why recent critics have taken the prominent place given to "low" culture (the debased, the particular, the local) in Joyce's vast novel as the book's most "paradoxical" quality, somehow jarring with its status as the epitome of high international modernism. Ruminations on this paradox often lead to an opposition between ("high") form and ("low") content, enacted most clearly, perhaps, in what Mark Currie calls the "myth-fact paradox" (59): "the movement that allows the wealth of authenticating detail in *Ulysses* to achieve an extreme of naturalism while functioning simultaneously in an intertextual system which assigns symbolic or metanarrative value to that authenticating detail" (59). While the affinities of this type of logic with traditional discourses of value (form vs content) are obvious, the absence of genuine evaluative conflict within the literary academy means that such observations are now unlikely to be made in explicitly evaluative terms.<sup>25</sup>

Historically, however, when *Ulysses*' cultural status still seemed a subject worth disputing, the binary was invoked with some urgency by Joyce's supporters, who in many cases found the myth-fact paradox to be a convenient enactment of just this separation. Joseph Brooker's study *Joyce's Critics: Transitions in Reading and Culture* notes that initially, arguments vaunting *Ulysses*' supreme artistic merit were often made in the face of legal moves to have the book banned, on the grounds of its "obscene" content. Brooker helpfully divides early responses to *Ulysses* into two categories, using criteria borrowed from Stephen Dedalus's "disquisition on aesthetics" (Brooker 21) in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

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<sup>25</sup> Few would deny that, however flawed current writers find Bourdieu's description of an "aesthetic disposition," and however artificial contemporary thinkers agree it is to pretend that form and content can be readily separated, this binary remains widely invoked by cultural consumers, especially when justifying why a particular cultural product ought to be considered "valid art."

“The feelings excited by improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The esthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing” (*Portrait* 172).

Could *Ulysses* itself be an example of such “improper art”? Citing representative examples, such as the review of *Ulysses* by “Aramis” in *Sporting Times* (dubbing Joyce a “perverted lunatic who has made a speciality of the literature of the latrine” and *Ulysses* a “stupid glorification of mere filth” (Brooker 26)), Brooker’s description of the early response to *Ulysses* provides contemporary readers with an important reminder of the urgency with which debates over Joyce’s “artistic merit” were once carried out, before they retreated, for better or worse, to the more innocuous setting of the university. Early readers frequently called attention to the particular “bodily” effects the book seemed to produce; and, as Brooker describes them, the obscenity trials that delayed the mass distribution of *Ulysses* (while at the same time greatly increasing its notoriety) really did engage in a level of argument that sought to establish what bodily effects Joyce’s work might be capable of generating in the “typical reader” (19-22). Legal arguments hinged on a binaristic analysis of form and content: in the first legal challenge to the publication of *Ulysses* in the United States, arguments that the obscene content of “Nausicaa” (in which Leopold Bloom masturbates while spying Gerty MacDowell’s exposed knickers) was mitigated by its artful form failed to impress the presiding judge. (His refusal to allow the passages in question to be read aloud in the presence of women, among whom were the editors of the magazine that published “Nausicaa,” gave a strong hint of the verdict that would follow.)

Concluding his introduction to *Distinction*, Bourdieu takes obvious delight in quoting a theatre review that seems to lay bare the mechanics of cultural consecration, which process “confer[s] on the objects, persons and situations it touches, a sort of ontological promotion akin to a transubstantiation” (6): ““What struck me most is this: nothing could be obscene on the stage of our premier theatre, and the ballerinas of the Opera, even as naked dancers, sylphs, sprites or Bacchae, retain an inviolable purity.””<sup>26</sup> The critic here posits an aesthetic domain that is immune to charges of obscenity; to make such allegations would be to commit a category error. The same style of argument, Brooker notes, “positing an uncrossable border between literary and other discourses” (19), eventually prevailed in the Woolsey trial of 1933, legalising *Ulysses* for sale in the United States. What the Bourdieu example suggests about this turnaround is that whether a text is considered “obscene” or not will depend on extrinsic, institutional factors. The priority of aesthetic form over content is not simply a quality of the aesthetic object, but of the viewing subject; the form/content binary can be invoked so as to vindicate the perception of an object as “legitimate” that is, more importantly, a function of its perceived social status.

The most famous statement of the myth-fact paradox, T. S. Eliot’s essay “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth” (1923), can be seen as an attempt to bulwark this social status. If the evaluative logic of high cultural consumers stipulated that the preeminence of form could be put forward

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<sup>26</sup> Bourdieu brings this into telling contrast with a disdainful review of a more ‘commercial’ production:

‘There are obscene postures: the stimulated intercourse which offends the eye. Clearly, it is impossible to approve, although the interpolation of such gestures in dance routines does give them a symbolic and aesthetic quality which is absent from the intimate scenes the cinema daily flaunts before its spectators’ eyes ... As for the nude scene, what can one say, except that it is brief and theatrically not very effective? I will not say it is chaste or innocent, for nothing commercial can be so described. Let us say it is not shocking, and that the chief objection is that it serves as a box-office gimmick.... In *Hair*, the nakedness fails to be symbolic.’ (*Distinction* 6)

as a guarantor of inherent value, then any suggestion that a work failed to fulfil this requirement would demand refutation. Hugh Kenner reminds us that these were the circumstances behind Eliot's essay: he meant to counter "Richard Aldington's finding that *Ulysses* was chaotic" (*Joyce's Voices* 1). Eliot proposes that, faced by a world progressively losing its supposed "form" (and a cultural terrain becoming ever more dominated by the "formless" energies of mass culture), *Ulysses* is an attempt to arrest this cultural entropy. Indeed, "entropy" seems an apt term, for Joyce's discovery, according to Eliot, "has the importance of a scientific discovery":

No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: it has never before been necessary. I am not begging the question in calling *Ulysses* a 'novel'; and if you call it an epic it will not matter. If it is not a novel, that is simply because the novel is a form which will no longer serve; it is because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter [...] In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (Eliot, 270)

The process of legitimating *Ulysses* (for sale, and eventually for academic study) thus involved making claims for the work's value in spite of its content, extricating it from the low cultural milieu that the work represents. Stuart Gilbert's intricate "authorized" account of *Ulysses*' structural indebtedness to the *Odyssey*, first published in 1930 (and cited in the Woolsey trial) took the 'taming' of the 'obscene' text as its explicit goal. In the updated preface to his study, published in 1963, Gilbert reflected that, "[W]e who admired *Ulysses* for its structural, enduring qualities and not for the occasional presence in it of words and descriptive passages which shocked our elders, were on the defensive, and the pedant's cloak is often a convenient protection against the cold blasts of propriety" (quoted by Brooker, 64).



Here, describing the interplay of high and low culture within *Ulysses* (as form and content, respectively) is fully bound up with asserting the value of *Ulysses*. If there is a sense of high/low conflict in the arguments made by Eliot and Gilbert, it is a conflict that their work seeks to resolve: stressing *Ulysses*' classical parallels became a way of asserting its 'high-ness'—that it could (and ought to) be consumed as a work of “legitimate” culture. Such readings are premised on a clear-cut, inherent opposition between high art and low culture, which their criticism is designed to assert, while at the same time (as Bourdieu would point out) establishing their own credentials as “legitimate” consumers (the select group capable of admiring *Ulysses* exclusively for its “structural, enduring qualities”). Modernists like Eliot “emphasized time and again that it was their mission to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of urbanization, massification, technological modernization, in short, of modern mass culture” (Huyssen 163); modernist readings of *Ulysses* attributed to the book a similar purpose. Whether these arguments are considered in light of the modernist pas-de-deux with mass culture, or more generally as arguments in favour of *Ulysses*' inclusion within a canon of intrinsically valuable cultural products, it is obvious that they are unapologetically axiological in nature. For reasons I set out in my previous chapter, the understanding of “high”/“low” terms (as categories used to understand “culture” as a totality) that these arguments rely upon should no longer have any purchase for cultural intellectuals.

### **Cultural Studies**

I turn now to the contemporary context in which *Ulysses* is read, interpreted, and valued. Steven Connor writes that “‘James Joyce’ ... now names a peripatetic global institution, a whole hermeneutic culture,

a vast and ever-expanding enterprise of exposition and interpretation” (Connor 1996, 2; quoted by Brooker, 3). “Evaluation” is a notable absence from Connor’s list of the Joyce industry’s activities, for reasons I have already explained;<sup>27</sup> but for one group of Joyce’s recent critics, questions about value, about Joyce’s work’s relationship with the “mass” or “popular” culture it represents, have arisen in the course of their interpretive vocation. Of particular interest here are the recent uses Joycean critics have made of various forms of high/low critical discourse.

*Ulysses*’ incorporation of discourses associated with the mass media and popular entertainment (for example, as specific allusions (Molly’s fondness for the mass market novels of Paul de Kock, for example) and as the stylistic foundation of various episodes) has recently occupied a raft of Joyceans. Cheryl Herr examines the place of newspapers, popular theatre, and sermons in Joyce’s work as “institutional discourses”; Jennifer Wicke and Garry Leonard discuss the status and role of advertisements (the cultural products Leopold Bloom is most professionally competent/confident in dissecting and evaluating); R. B. Kershner considers the relationship between Joyce’s fiction (pre-*Ulysses*) and “popular literature.” Each of these critics is interested in loosely similar questions to those that occupied T. S. Eliot in his early response to *Ulysses*: How can we account for such attention to “low” culture, in a work that has become, and was intended to become, entrenched as a work of “high” or canonical culture? What sort of evaluative intention might be inferred to lie behind Joyce’s efforts to incorporate and aestheticise the whole of Western culture as at 1904?

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<sup>27</sup> This is not to suggest, of course, that merely interpretive criticism has no evaluative implications. As Wayne Booth points out in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, “even those critics who work hard to purge themselves of all but the most abstract formal interests turn out to have an ethical program in mind—a belief that a given way of reading, or a given kind of genuine literature, is what will do us most good” (5).

In asking such questions, Joycean critics have declared their allegiance to ideas about culture and value that derive from the burgeoning academic discipline of cultural studies. Such ideas are presented in direct opposition to the modernist certainties wielded by Eliot and his contemporaries. The discourse of “the great divide” and its dismantlement sits alongside these ideas, and is the backdrop for the Joycean criticism I shall survey. The remainder of this chapter examines the effects of this putative “evaluative seachange” within the academy. These changes can be witnessed in both descriptive/interpretive criticism (subjecting Joyce’s representational strategies to cultural-studies-inflected critique) and in the more self-conscious musings of the “Joyce industry”: considerations of critics’ and Joyce’s texts’ place(s) in the contemporary “social organisation of culture.” First, I shall briefly introduce two arguments from the Joycean literature that typify the critical discourse being applied in these despatches.

In his introduction to the book *Joyce and Popular Culture* (1996), R. B. Kershner suggests that “[u]ntil fairly recently the idea of a book devoted to James Joyce’s relationship to popular culture would have struck most readers as unlikely,” and, moreover, hopes “that it still sounds a note of paradox or at least surprise” (Kershner 1). As implied by the book’s title, that “note of paradox” hinges on the anticipated dual recognition of 1) the canonical, and therefore “high cultural” status of Joyce’s works; and 2) the prominent representation of “popular cultural” texts within those works. It is worthwhile observing here that, as the nature of what is represented is incidental to the cultural status of a representational artwork, the “paradox” Kershner hopes to draw says more about the contemporary currency, within literary academia, of the terms “high” and “popular” than it does about any inherently

paradoxical quality of Joyce's writing. This aside, what I first want to draw attention to in Kershner's introduction is the way he positions the arguments in the book within the cultural studies tradition, and more importantly, the way he understands that tradition with respect to cultural value.

Kershner points to the development of cultural studies as the impetus behind the "recent spate of work attempting to describe the relationship between modernism, postmodernism, and popular culture" (2), a trend that has clearly affected the specialised field of Joyce studies in which he works. The first gesture towards defining cultural studies comes by way of referring to what it, as a movement, sought to move beyond: the (very different) critiques of mass culture offered by the Frankfurt School and Leavisite New Criticism, respectively. These are held up, in implicit contrast to the type of criticism performed in the book, as overtly evaluative regimes. Eliot's essay on *Ulysses* is found to sit comfortably with these conservatisms; Kershner suggests that its influence had an appreciable effect on the interpretation of Joyce's work with respect to popular culture, leading "critics to assume that Joyce's references to popular culture throughout his work were a mode of ironic documentation, like Flaubert's citations of Emma Bovary's reading" (8).

Kershner's essay traces the move away from this evaluative, and hence (as applied to Joyce) "ironic" reading paradigm, pointing to a multitude of intellectual developments, held together less by argument than chronology. Moving from Stuart Hall and Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s, to the Barthes of *Mythologies* in the 1970s, before citing Jim Hall's *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* as a

statement of the new orthodoxy,<sup>28</sup> the narrative takes the decreasing legitimacy of “evaluation” in cultural analysis as its unifying thread. Hence, Kershner suggests, the era in which cultural theorists analysed “popular” or “mass culture” primarily to point out its deficiencies has passed; the hierarchical model of culture such analyses were premised upon has been replaced by a consensus that “high cultural” production is “part of a continuous cultural fabric” (1), which includes those previously devalued genres and traditions. Kershner takes these insights to pave the way for criticism that delves seriously into Joyce’s multifaceted use of “popular cultural” materials throughout his oeuvre (although, as an aside, it is far from clear that literary critics were ever institutionally debarred from doing so). Judging by the essays in Kershner’s edited collection, “popular culture” here includes (but is probably not limited to) mass market fiction, film, advertising, pornography, music-hall, and journalism. As with all attempts to define “popular culture,” the decision to group such heterogeneous texts and practices together under a single banner says more about the evaluative assumptions of this Joycean community than any “natural” connection between those texts/practices.

The second work I would like to briefly mention, to give a sense of the critical idiom that seems to have emerged, in Joyce studies, from the confluence of literary and cultural studies, is Cheryl Herr’s *Joyce’s Anatomy of Culture* (1986).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This orthodoxy consists in a recognition “that all cultural production must be seen as a set of power relations that produce particular forms of subjectivity, but that the nature, function, and uses of mass culture can no longer be conceived in a monolithic manner” (Collins, quoted by Kershner, 5). While this is broadly accurate, it is unclear why the *current* prevalence of this idea should necessitate a revised reading of Joyce’s oeuvre.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Brooker points out that, in its combination of research into particular allusions with a more general interest in cultural theory, Herr’s study proved to be “[o]ne of the most proleptic works of the 1980s” (Brooker 180).

The opening gambit of Herr's book seeks to distinguish the *Anatomy* project from the many traditional literary studies (such as those published by Don Gifford and Richard Ellmann) that take the identification and explication of Joyce's allusions as their main focus. Herr declares her interest to be more in "the relationship among allusion, narrative form, and cultural operations" (3), which leads to a reading of *Ulysses* as "a model of cultural processes" (6)—a text that offers a nuanced account of the way that Dublin's cultural institutions "competed for discursive power over the demotic mind" (4). (The "allusions" she speaks of are not, usually, to other "texts" in the usual sense, but to institutions and real-world circumstances.) If Herr's work is inflected by "cultural studies" ideas, it also seems that, for Herr, so too is *Ulysses*. For although Herr denies that Joyce's works "explicitly advance a theory of culture" (12), the effect of her study quite clearly is to position Joyce's oeuvre as such a theoretical intervention. Herr treats *Ulysses* as a "text of the culture" (a phrase that comes from Juri Lotman),<sup>30</sup> a systematic representation of the devolvement and effects of institutional ideologies; her assertion (in language inflected by New Historicism) that she treats of "the parallel texts of Joyce and of Irish history" (12) must surely be qualified. It would seemingly be more accurate to say that Herr takes Joyce's oeuvre and contemporary cultural theory as parallel texts, each confirming and extending what the other has to say about the object-text (Irish history).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Herr quotes Cesare Segre's description of a "text of the culture," which can be seen as another version of the idea (or ideal) of an "encyclopaedic" novel: "A necessary property of a text of the culture is its universality. Its picture of the world is correlative to the whole world and, in principle, embraces *everything*. Asking what there is outside such a framework is, from the point of view of a given culture, as absurd as if the question were to be posed of the entire universe" (qtd by Herr, 8).

<sup>31</sup> The following formulation, in the context of Herr's analysis of the Irish press circa 1904, will serve as an example: "Although Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality* has come under critical fire, the fundamental notion that censorship both represses and stimulates discourse is more than borne out in Irish culture, and Joyce's works echo the deployments of power that Foucault details" (90-91).

As with Kershner's essay, Herr's examination, via Joyce, of the way Dublin's institutions (the press, the pulpit, and the dramatic stage) structured the perception of its "cultural field," is premised upon adopting the inclusive, anthropological definition of culture associated with cultural studies. "Culture," for Herr, is a set of "operations" or "a mechanism which produces itself in texts—works of literature, newspapers, sermons, and the like" (14). Once more, on this descriptive account of culture, traditional academic evaluation does not enter the picture: "it is clear that (even though for convenience I continue to use the term "popular culture") to distinguish between low and high culture is less than accurate and especially inappropriate in studying Joyce, who did not discriminate in his works between the value of an allusion to the popular and a reference to a work of higher social status" (15).

What is the connection between Kershner's and Herr's work and the arguments they claim as their theoretical foundation? What Herr and Kershner plainly share with the writers I discussed in chapter two is a belief that there are problems with high/low categories as they have traditionally been applied in literary criticism. Beyond this, the connections are less plain—indeed, the connections both Joycean critics claim between their endeavours and post-axiological thought on cultural value are fraught with problems. I intend these brief samples of argument simply to introduce the critical idiom that seems to be in the ascendancy among at least one sub-group of Joyce's current professional critics, and raise some preliminary questions about the ways that recent thought about cultural value has been put to work by the Joyce industry.

My main issue with arguments of this ilk is that, although both Kershner and Herr offer statements to the effect that high/low categories can no longer be seen as valid or useful concepts with which

to analyse culture (in general) or Joyce's works (in particular), both critics use the terms "high" and "popular" (or "mass") culture in ways that seem to undercut this premise. For example, both Herr and Kershner continue to refer to "high" and "popular" culture as though these were real-world cultural domains or groups of texts, even as they raise incipient doubts about the basis of such a distinction. Kershner, in particular, confidently predicts that readers will find the title *Joyce and Popular Culture* paradoxical, which prediction points to a widespread view that Joyce / "high culture" and "popular culture" remain mutually exclusive categories (or at least produce a frisson of irony or disjunction when placed, somehow, side by side).

Contra the two Joyceans' more dogmatic statements of everything-is-equivalent relativism, post-axiological arguments do not announce an end to evaluative distinctions per se, but merely point to a need to understand evaluative hierarchies, cultural domains and so forth as the product of evaluative discourses and regimes.<sup>32</sup> (A side effect of this, for Barbara Smith, is that the study of those discourses/regimes comes to be seen as a more interesting / revealing / valuable avenue of inquiry than literary criticism's traditional inquests into the value of particular cultural products.) Kershner's and Herr's various statements seeking to describe "culture" in evaluatively neutral terms (whereby the distinction between "popular" and "high" culture simply no longer matters) would, if taken to their logical endpoint, compel critics to abandon evaluative inquiry as Smith defines it (it would become redundant).

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<sup>32</sup> Even if critics now adopt an inclusive definition of 'culture,' recent thought on cultural value stipulates that there is no position from which cultural production can be objectively evaluated (and judging all cultural production to be of "equal value" would itself merely be one, particularly disingenuous, evaluation). As Steven Connor writes, "The non-evaluative or the value-free will always be a particular suburb in the domain of value, never a space outside it" (8-9).



The categories, though, plainly continue to have meaning for these Joycean critics. In one sense this is simply inevitable: John Frow notes that, regardless of the post-axiological critique of high/low categories, “the concepts of a ‘high’ and a ‘popular’ regime continue to organize the cultural field and to produce ideological effects of cultural distinction” (Frow 150). Furthermore, in this context, the concepts provide the very grounds for the debate being staged (and “high”/“low” discourse remains of central importance).

A further reason for retaining the categories might stem from the importance these academics (and the institutions that support them) place on critical novelty – demonstrating the ‘inexhaustible richness’ of Joyce’s work by arguing against the readings of their predecessors. Construing those predecessors’ lack of lengthy scholarly attention to the place of popular fiction, advertising, etc, in Joyce’s novel as a deliberate, ideologically driven decision based on a distaste for “popular culture” provides much scope to blend scholarly fastidiousness with ostensibly argument-driven criticism. This is particularly evident in Kershner’s writing: his account of the development of cultural studies is adduced as a way around the institutional prejudices that afflicted New Critical engagements with “popular culture,” rather than simply a new set of assumptions that will themselves inflect critical interpretation and evaluation. The effect of this is to imbue the collection *Joyce and Popular Culture* with a revisionary gleam: if *Ulysses*, and literary critics, were once thought of as hostile to “popular culture,” then, with Joyce’s place within a “continuous fabric of culture” firmly in mind, contemporary Joycean critics, suggests Kershner, are in a position to expose the erroneousness of that evaluation, and in the process, to more accurately infer the intention behind Joyce’s writing.

This emphasis on authorial intention, on locating evidence of Joyce's attitude to "popular culture" within Joyce's oeuvre, is where these Joyceans' commitment to the "cultural studies" theory they draw on can most clearly be seen as superficial. In the previous section, I associated the view that *Ulysses*, as a modernist text, is necessarily "hostile" to "popular" or "mass" culture, with the institutional processes that have seen *Ulysses* entrenched in the university curriculum as "high" cultural: "hostility" as *non*-essential (that is, springing from, and/or contributing to, the work's overdetermined "highness"). Cultural studies-inflected arguments could, then, be vital tools for Kershner and Herr, given their intention to argue against modernist understandings of *Ulysses*' essential/necessary place in the cultural field. The starting point for this project would be to declare, with John Guillory, that "Literary works must ... be seen as the vector of ideological notions which do not inhere in the works themselves but in the context of their institutional presentation" (ix).

Instead, however, recent Joycean criticism has tended to accept that *Ulysses*' evaluative set towards "popular culture" or "mass culture" is an inherent property of the work itself. The stripe of criticism typified by Kershner and Herr has found Joyce's evaluative attitude to "popular culture" to be remarkably congruent with cultural studies' celebration of "the popular": indeed, in many cases Joyce's work itself comes to be seen as a work of "cultural studies." The evident need Joycean critics feel to discern evaluation (or non-evaluation) of "popular culture" within the Joycean text can be understood as contingent upon the critical discourse being brought to bear – one in which modernism and postmodernism, high and low culture, are the key binaries through which understandings of Joyce's relationship to the cultural milieu he represents may be constructed.

### Irony and evaluation

In *After the Great Divide*, Huyssen provides numerous case studies, readings of film and literature, that aim to trace the processes of cultural demarcation (defining the spheres of legitimate and illegitimate culture) in modernist aesthetic products. Through irony and performative distancing (making their work “unconsumable”), Huyssen suggests, modernist authors sought to reify and other a “mass cultural” domain.

Does this mean that every representation by modernist writers of “popular” or “mass” cultural texts, practices, or ways of reading was intentionally ironic? Neither Huyssen nor other writers who understand modernist culture primarily as a “reaction formation” to mass culture would make so sweeping a generalisation. However, beginning from the default position that modernist texts’ incorporation of popular cultural texts is a form of “ironic documentation” (in Kershner’s words), many Joycean critics have recently published criticism condemning this premise. Joyce’s complex treatment of popular cultural texts, they suggest, cannot be understood as sheer intentional irony. It is not hard to agree with this proposition; indeed, Huyssen himself (briefly) acknowledges, in his chapter “Mass Culture as Woman,” that Joyce seems at best to be a partial fit within the account of modernism he is advancing.<sup>33</sup> What interests me here, though, are the (problematic) approaches Joycean critics have taken to arguing this point.

John Carey’s book *The Intellectuals and the Masses* is an apt place to begin in this, as it re-poses the problem of moving from the generalised understandings of literary modernism to the particular case of Joyce. Carey’s work covers similar ground to Huyssen’s, albeit in a more sensationalised tone, and like Huyssen finds Joyce’s treatment of

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<sup>33</sup> See the chapter “Mass Culture as Woman,” especially p 46.

“mass” or “popular” culture to be, *prima facie*, difficult to square with the general understanding of modernism vis-a-vis mass culture that he subscribes to. For if intercultural (or inter- cultural strata) antagonism is detectable at the level of representation, by what (or whom) an author portrays, and by the author’s implied attitude towards their fictional subject, then Leopold Bloom, early twentieth-century literature’s “most sympathetic portrayal of mass man,” a notable exception to the “dismal” norm (Carey 19), is at the very least an interesting case:

Can we say, then, that in *Ulysses* mass man is redeemed? Is Joyce the one intellectual who atones for Nietzschean contempt of the masses, and raises mass man, or a representative of mass man, to the status of epic hero? To a degree, yes. One effect of *Ulysses* is to show that mass man matters, that he has an inner life as complex as an intellectual’s, that it is worthwhile to record his personal details on a prodigious scale. (20)

But Carey’s identification of Bloom as “mass man” carries its own freight. For Carey, episodes like “Aeolus,” in which Bloom is “pointedly embroil[ed]” in “newsprint and advertising, which were, for intellectuals, among the most odious features of mass culture” (20) are indicative of Joyce’s intention (however sympathetic) to mark Bloom with a synecdochic function. This established, the nature of Joyce’s portrayal of Bloom becomes irrelevant, for the reification of “the masses” has already occurred in the act of representing a character who is “distinctly not a literary intellectual” (19):

Bloom himself would never and could never have read *Ulysses* or a book like *Ulysses*. The complexity of the novel, its avant-garde technique, its obscurity, rigorously exclude people like Bloom from its readership. More than almost any other twentieth-century novel, it is for intellectuals only. This means that there is a duplicity in Joyce’s masterpiece. The proliferation of sympathetic imagining, which creates the illusion of the reader’s solidarity with Bloom, operates in conjunction with a distancing, ironizing momentum which preserves the reader’s – and author’s – superiority to the created life. The novel embraces mass man but also rejects him. Mass man – Bloom – is expelled from the circle of the intelligentsia, who are incited to contemplate him, and judge him, in a fictional manifestation. (20-21)

The terms Carey uses here are, of course, those proposed by the discourse of literary modernism/postmodernism. It is this discourse that organises Carey's brief reading of *Ulysses* into such clear oppositions: mass man vs intellectuals; Bloom vs (in Huyssen's term) the *impassibilite* of the text.

We might note that in order to claim Bloom as "mass man" and Joyce as an "intellectual," Carey's sifting of evidence—his reading practice—has become very selective. Why should Bloom simply stand for "mass man", rather than any of the other possible identities Joyce provides for his protagonist? Does this not slight the many ways in which Bloom is portrayed as a pariah, consistently falling outside the borders of group membership, whether of Irish nationhood, religion, or class, erected and patrolled by the Dublin milieu he inhabits? Bloom's status as a producer of mass culture (advertisements) might be seen to further complicate his status within the field of cultural consumers. Similar objections could be made with regard to claiming Joyce for the "intellectuals," for in Carey's argument, this term clearly designates a set of class interests as much as it does an educational pedigree. Carey in fact cites Virginia Woolf's dismissal of *Ulysses* in classist terms as the work of a "self-taught working man" (20),<sup>34</sup> before claiming Joyce for the modernist vanguard. Overall then, despite his study's reliance on a late twentieth-century scepticism in analysing modernist artists' identity politics (Carey stresses that the "mass," in contrast to what Eliot et al would have had their readers believe, was in fact a "fiction," a "linguistic device" (i)), Carey's adherence to the discourse proposed by the title of his study (another variant of the "discourse of the great

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<sup>34</sup> On the "self-taught" Joyce, Woolf continues: "we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking and ultimately nauseating ... I'm reminded all the time of some callow board school boy" (quoted by Carey 20).

divide”) has the effect of compressing this complex web of possible identities into a single, evaluatively charged opposition.

This is not to dismiss Carey’s central point (which is telling), that although *Ulysses* takes the Dublin quotidian as the subject of its “created life,” it is written in such a way as to render it an unlikely candidate for mass consumption. Carey is right that “Bloom himself would never and could never have read *Ulysses* or a book like *Ulysses*.” This is not to claim *Ulysses* as inherently the preserve of the cultural elite (i.e. in 1922, now, and for all time), or to question the “mass” appetite for formal experiment; it simply acknowledges that twentieth century cultural history has played out in such a way that *Ulysses* presents (still) as a significant departure from the norm of readily consumable texts (which category has probably become broader as access to higher education has expanded). Whether this amounts to “duplicity” is an interesting question. It seems that, for Carey, representing non-intellectuals in a book that, in its narrative discourse, is overtly for intellectuals, ought to lead to a presumption of irony, an attitude of “superiority to the created life,” consequent less on authorial intention than an inequality in cultural capital. Carey’s claim that *Ulysses* is an example of modernist irony is thus based on accepting that irony does inhere in Joyce’s portrayal of “mass man” and, by extension, mass culture.

Something is amiss here in this inherentist assertion of irony. Before considering this matter further, though, I want to contrast Carey’s assertions with those of another Joyce critic, assertions that also flow from a reading based on the contrast between “high” literary context and “low” created life. The context here is the “Nausicaa” episode of *Ulysses*, which features another character of considerable interest to the Joyce/popular culture academics – Gerty Macdowell. The events

depicted in this episode, as the sun sets on Joyce's representation of 16 June 1904, have been read by many critics as suggestively drawing together ideas associated with mass cultural consumption, interpellation, and gender politics.

"Nausicaa" follows from "Cyclops," Bloom's encounter with xenophobic nationalism in Barney Kiernan's pub, circumstances that, if not described by an unnamed "I," are filtered through language often redolent of nationalistic reportage or chronicle. The scene is set for "Nausicaa" in language that similarly alerts those attendant to narratorial shifts in *Ulysses* that there is, once more, no unambiguously "authorial" presence in the text; readers are confronted with yet another variant in the text's seeming commitment to exhausting every extant mode of written expression:

The summer evening had begun to fold the world in its mysterious embrace. Far away in the west the sun was setting and the last glow of all too fleeting day lingered lovingly on sea and strand, on the proud promontory of dear old Howth guarding as ever the waters of the bay, on the weedgrown rocks along Sandymount shore and, last but not least, on the quiet church whence there streamed forth at times upon the stillness the voice of prayer to her who is in her pure radiance a beacon ever to the stormtossed heart of man, Mary, star of the sea. (284)

The scene is soon focused on "three girl friends ... seated on the rocks", which, the narrative voice informs us, is a "favourite nook to have a cosy chat beside the sparkling waves and discuss matters feminine" (284). Cissy Caffrey and Edy Boardman's attention is firmly locked on the Caffrey twins, two boys named Tommy and Jacky, and their baby brother. Gerty MacDowell, the girls' companion and the central character in "Nausicaa" (apart from the ever-present Bloom) is not described at all until an altercation between the boys forces Caffrey and Boardman to exercise their "motherwit" (285). A teasing suggestion that "Gerty is Tommy's sweetheart" prompts in Gerty an inner monologue that has often been read as self-deluded and tragic; the long

series of assertions through which readers learn of her inner consciousness is inflected both by mass market publications (from which she derives the ideal of “winsome Irish girlhood” that she strives to see in herself), and by the demographic realities of 1904 Dublin, where the chances of a young woman marrying well had diminished to almost nil.<sup>35</sup> Gerty’s reading habits present a way of overcoming these grim realities: both her strict adherence to the dictates of the “Lady’s Pictorial” (287) and the romantic narratives she imaginatively implicates herself in (first with schoolboy Reggy Wylie, later with Bloom) suggest elements of escapist fantasy.

This combination fits very neatly with Huyssen’s paradigm of the “great divide” in action. For in defining their low cultural Other, Huyssen suggests, modernist artists defined their own cultural domain as a thoroughly masculine one; the typical woman is portrayed as an “avid consumer of pulp,” while the male producer/consumer of “genuine art” is at all times “objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means” (46). This divide is not, of course, merely observable in the different ways modernist writers construct male and female characters, but is a performative divide between the male writer’s judgement (an aesthetic control on display in the text itself) and that of his female subject, whose cultural choices (usually works of mass culture) the modernist work, by making use of a complex, severe mode of writing antithetical to mass consumption, implicitly devalues. This is the very “ironising momentum” Carey identifies. Huyssen’s primary example of this strategy in action is Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, in which “woman (Madame Bovary) is positioned as reader of inferior literature—subjective, emotional and passive—while man (Flaubert) emerges as writer of genuine, authentic literature” (46); the “impassibilité” of his writing is seen as an act of masculine self-

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<sup>35</sup> See Jennifer Wicke, “Joyce and Consumer Culture,” p 243.



assertion. Huyssen thus suggests that the mass cultural is represented (and personified, feminised) in the modernist text as an act of masculine self-assertion: “Warding something off, protecting against something out there seems ... to be a basic gesture of the modernist aesthetic” (47).<sup>36</sup>

Can we confidently declare Joyce’s representation of Gerty Macdowell to be, in the sense proposed by Huyssen, evaluative? Considering the following passage, in which Gerty MacDowell is introduced in clichéd language borrowed from her reading diet, there would seem, to my eyes at least, to be plenty of material available to sustain such a reading:

Gerty MacDowell who was seated near her companions, lost in thought, gazing far away into the distance was, in very truth, as fair a specimen of winsome Irish girlhood as one could wish to see. Her figure was slight and graceful, inclining even to fragility but those iron jelloids she had been taking of late had done her a world of good much better than the Widow Welch’s female pills and she was much better of those discharges she used to get and that tired feeling. The waxen pallor of her face was almost spiritual in its ivorylike purity though her rosebud mouth was a genuine Cupid’s bow, Greekly perfect. Her hands were of finely veined alabaster with tapering fingers and as white as lemonjuice and queen of ointments could make them though it was not true that she used to wear kid gloves in bed or take a milk footbath either. (286)

The dynamics of Joyce’s writing here have been well described by critics. Hugh Kenner understands the narrative discourse of the first half of “Nausicaa” as “Gerty Macdowell’s very self and voice, caught up into the narrative machinery” (17),<sup>37</sup> and sees Joyce’s narrative

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<sup>36</sup> But does the text *necessarily* judge Emma Bovary? Hugh Kenner cites the response (in the book’s obscenity trial) of Imperial Attorney, Mons. Ernest Pinard, discomfited by the fact that judgement is not, seemingly, brought to bear upon “this woman”: “There is not one character in the book who might condemn her. If you find in it one good character, if you find in it one single principle by virtue of which the adulteress is stigmatized, I am wrong” (*Joyce’s Voices* 10).

<sup>37</sup> Hugh Kenner’s understanding of literary modernism, expounded in all his books (most notably for my purposes, *The Stoic Comedians*, *Ulysses*, and *Joyce’s Voices*) centres on its antagonism to classical realism, most clearly evident in its commitment to “Objectivity” – rendering concrete detail without an authorial narrator passing judgment on characters or events. Kenner’s close reading of Joyce’s narrative technique is geared to establishing this difference: in *Joyce’s Voices*, Kenner prefaces

technique here as exemplary of a broad modernist shift away from direct authorial pronouncements on characters (of the type found in classical realism), which strategy was replaced by what we would now term free-indirect discourse: “[T]he normally neutral narrative vocabulary is pervaded by a little cloud of idioms which a character might use if he were managing the narrative” (17). David Lodge’s consideration of Joyce’s narrative technique follows Kenner’s lead, but augments description with evaluation, suggesting that Joyce’s narrative method is honed so as to “convey a sensibility pathetically limited to the concepts and values disseminated by [*Lady’s Pictorial*]” (*After Bakhtin* 36). Lodge clearly does not simply “read off” the fact that Gerty MacDowell’s reading diet is “pathetically limited,” but makes an evaluative inference based on his understanding of literary modernism.<sup>38</sup>

What could “cultural studies” possibly add to this mix? Jennifer Wicke’s contribution to the 2004 edition of *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, “Joyce and Consumer Culture,” offers a “revisionary” reading of the importance of mass commodities in Joyce’s writing, in which a consideration of Gerty MacDowell occupies a central position. “[M]any analyses of her character,” Wicke notes, “disdain her or pity her for her so-called entrapment in what they see as an inevitably oppressive web of consumerist images of female beauty, fashion, and romantic fantasy” (243). Wicke quickly links this “castigation” with a

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his close attention to Joyce’s uncompromising “Objectivity” with an explanation of the marked difference in narratorial strategies between Dickens (in *Oliver Twist*) and the Flaubert of *Madam Bovary*. Whereas Dickens “stamp[s] his sarcasms on every phrase” (6), Flaubert’s Objectivity “eschews nudges” (8). Objectivity is also closely related to the modernist penchant for drawing attention, self-reflexively, to the process of signification, highlighting that reality effects were the product of “Multiple illusion”, “mirror on mirror mirroring all the show” (11).

<sup>38</sup> Although, from the evidence readers are presented with, the idea of deprivation would seem to be implicit: “[H]ad she only received the benefit of a good education Gerty MacDowell might easily have held her own beside any lady in the land ... and [had] patrician suitors at her feet” (286).

particular (and implicitly outmoded) view of the commodity, and offers in its place the revelation that although Gerty might be “penetrated” by an advertising lexicon” (244), she in fact “recontextualizes” this lexicon, and the mass produced accoutrements she cherishes, so as to stage a (limited) overcoming of her apparently hopeless situation. What interests here is not the analysis in itself, which contests moralistic readings of “Nausicaa” by simply offering another in its place, but the way that Wicke presents her findings as the natural product of an evaluative sea-change within the literary academy.

Wicke’s entire critical oeuvre is framed as a response to this move. Her first book (the argument of which underpins her later essay), *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (1988) was published in a series entitled *The Social Foundations of Aesthetic Forms*; it divides its attention between the work of literary heavyweights (Dickens, Henry James, and Joyce) and the development of the modern discourse of advertising, aiming to prosecute a series of “mutually interpenetrating readings” that stress both the novel genre’s indebtedness (not sheer hostility) to advertising discourse, and, in effect, the “literariness” of advertising. With Marshall McLuhan, she dismisses the Leavisite theory that advertising and popular culture retarded the “emotional vocabulary” of the masses (9); on the contrary, Wicke claims, advertising is not reducible to a single purpose (whether that be seen as impelling consumption, or disseminating ideology) but can float free from its commercial origin, and, in the social milieu it enters, be put to multiple, unpredictable uses. (At times Wicke seems simply to reverse the Leavisite formula, seeing ads as augmenting the emotional vocabulary of “the masses” emotional vocabulary.) Wicke finds that this theory maps onto *Ulysses* with astonishing ease; she can point out, for example, that numerous characters are “constellated in and through advertisement” (149).

When applied to *Ulysses* in the later essay, Wicke's cultural-studies-inflected criticism becomes focused on the dubious task of demonstrating that Joyce's treatment of Gerty Macdowell is, in fact, *unironic*. Despite acknowledging that her interest in "commodity culture" is the result of "critical fashions," her argument rests on a series of appeals to authorial intention: Joyce's works are "spaces with privileged access to mass culture" (235); "Joyce and by extension his writings understand things about the mysteries of mass culture and of how consuming works that we still haven't completely figured out" (236); "Joyce by no means deplores commodity culture, just as he does not repudiate mass culture" (236). Thus, Gerty "is not taken advantage of by a misogynist Bloom across the strand, she takes advantage of the possibilities for escape and fulfilment, meagre as they are, categorized for her by the allure of the consumer goods she both incorporates and also rearranges" (244-45).

Both Wicke and Carey, then, offer partial readings of *Ulysses* that take the modernist "discourse of the great divide" as their backdrop. Irony is an important concept for both of these critics: in the absence of explicitly evaluative statements, it is the one "mode of the unsaid" that necessarily has an evaluative dimension.

Linda Hutcheon's recent consideration of the vast body of literature on irony adopts a stance that stresses the active role of the interpreter (as opposed to the "ironist") in giving rise to irony: "The interpreter as agent performs an act – attributes both meanings and motives – and does so in a particular situation and context, for a particular purpose, and with particular means. Attributing irony involves, then, both semantic and evaluative inferences. Irony's appraising edge is never absent and, indeed, is what makes irony work differently from other

forms [such as metaphor and metonymy] which it might structurally seem to resemble” (12). Irony may thus be intentional or unintentional; but the active role of the interpreter means that the identification of irony cannot be thought of “simply as one of decoding or reconstructing some “real” meaning” (11)—indeed, “identification” is, in this context, an inapt term (in describing the play of irony, Hutcheon prefers to say that irony “happens”). For irony, as Hutcheon understands it, will like all interpretation depend on the identity of the interpreter at the time of the encounter with a text or speech act: “irony happens because what could be called “discursive communities” already exist and provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony. We all belong simultaneously to many such communities of discourse, and each of these has its own restrictive ... but also enabling communication conventions” (18). Intentional irony is possible for precisely the reasons offered by Barbara Smith in pointing out that the contingency of value judgments does not make them meaningless or “subjective”: contingencies, or “discursive communities,” will tend to coincide, or at least partially overlap.<sup>39</sup>

This position points up obvious problems in both Carey’s and Wicke’s respective attempts to implicate Joyce’s work in, or distance it from, the modernist “discourse of the great divide”. The definitive performance of cultural evaluation both critics seek is not a property of the text itself, as they both claim, but is instead a product of the evaluative discourse being brought to bear: irony happens or fails to happen for those critics in accordance with their own particular interests, agendas, identities. Carey’s book is framed as something of an exposé of modernist artists’

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<sup>39</sup> “It has been said ... that there are books about irony ... and books about interpretation ... but for me the two cannot be separated: irony isn’t irony until it is interpreted as such – at least by the intending ironist, if not the intended receiver. Someone attributes irony; someone makes irony happen. For the examples offered here, that “someone” is me, but *your* reading is likely to be quite different, either in its general decision about the attribution of irony or in its specific sense of where and how the irony comes into play” (6).

“disturbing” attitudes towards “mass culture”; artists must conform to this type to qualify for inclusion in the study. Wicke, by contrast, sees in Joyce’s work a reflection of her own cultural studies-derived beliefs – namely those (critically) characterised by John Frow (quoting Simon Frith) in the essay “Cultural Studies and the Neoliberal Imagination”: cultural studies’ tendency

to accept the Frankfurt reading of cultural production and to look for the redeeming features of commodity culture in the act of consumption ... In British subcultural theory, this reworking took on the particular form of identifying certain social groups with what we might call “positive mass consumption.” ... The value of cultural goods could therefore be equated with the value of the groups consuming them—youth, the working class, women, and so forth. (qtd 426)

Going further, we can ask whether the play of “popular culture”/ “mass” culture / “commodity culture” (etc) and “high” culture, located by both critics within the novel, can be thought of adequately as a property of the text itself? I have suggested that the necessity felt by Wicke and Carey to read *Ulysses* in terms of a “high” / “mass” binary is better thought of as the product of the critical discourse that proposes this opposition, rather than anything intrinsic to *Ulysses*. These readings are necessarily affected by contemporary understandings of the terms “high” and “popular”/ “mass” culture—both Carey and Wicke explicitly acknowledge this. When we consider that both Carey and Wicke are literary intellectuals, those who are, in the contemporary milieu, perhaps most readily identified with the “high” side of this discursively constructed divide, it is tempting to speculate as to how these literary readings might be intended to work, rhetorically, in the present.

For it seems that, in both of these instances, *Ulysses* is simply the totem around which these critics seek to display their own ‘enlightened’ understandings of cultural value. Carey’s book sees an Oxford

intellectual flay the wrong-headed modernists for their misguided attitudes to the “masses”; the difference between “intellectuals” then and now is underscored by the fact that Carey’s book is designedly middle-brow, written for a wide audience. Wicke, by contrast, identifies with Joyce, but to a similar end: when she suggests that “Joyce does not repudiate mass culture,” is the unconcealed subtext not: “I do not repudiate mass culture” and therefore “literary critics do not repudiate mass culture?”

### **Popular Joyce?**

If the “reintegration of culture and Culture” announced by the ascendancy of cultural studies has provided the “Joyce industry” with new theoretical grounds from which to launch novel readings of Joyce’s oeuvre, it has also raised disquieting questions for that “industry”. For if one accepts that “high cultural” texts, or those works embodied as such in the university curriculum, are not inherently more valuable than works institutionally defined as “popular culture” – and, moreover, that traditional cultural hierarchies are the stuff of class protectionism (among other things) – then where does this place those who specialise in the study of canonical authors?

John Guillory’s point that extant canonical texts cannot, in themselves, be understood as representing the interests of a discrete section of society provides a ready defence from the type of attack on the canon obliquely referred to above. That Joyce’s work is now canonical, “high” culture, modernist (etc) has more to do with processes of institutional transmission/reproduction than with the text itself.

As I have argued, though, in the case of a text like *Ulysses*, where there is much (as Carey suggests) to suggest inherent elitism, ‘hostility to mass culture’, and so on – and, perhaps, an equal amount to suggest the

opposite – it is tempting for critics to stage debates about the cultural value and values of the book as if the text itself was the central protagonist.

One example of this attempt to strip away institutional processes and get at the “real” text comes in a recent review article in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Joyce scholar Justin Beplate. As emblematic of the mood within Joyce studies, Beplate cites Patrick Kavanagh’s poem “Who Killed James Joyce?” which, on his account, “indicts the shallow careerism of American academic culture – the “Harvard thesis”, “Yale man”, and “broadcast Symposium” – for cutting Joyce off from his cultural roots and confining him with all the pomp of a state funeral” (4). (For its part, then, the “Joyce industry” acknowledges its complicity in, and discomfort with, the “canon effect” through which *Ulysses*’ “high-ness” has become entrenched and essentialised.) Beplate continues: “Ironically enough, [...] universal deference is one of the big problems facing Joyce studies today, for if bringing him within the pale of the literary canon makes him both grist for the academic mill and safe for the tourist trade, it also diminishes the immediacy of his challenge to us as readers” (3). Here Joyce’s “high”-ness, in the Adornean sense of irreducible challenge, is implicitly defended, while canonical “high”-ness (the appropriation of Joyce’s works as “legitimate” cultural capital) is seen as an obstacle to be overcome if his works are to be read and valued appropriately.<sup>40</sup>

The activity that seems to most unite the contemporary “Joyce industry” is reasserting Joyce’s provocativeness, drawing attention to *Ulysses*’ humour and energy, its “chaotic” quality that Eliot and others sought to downplay. Brooker’s account of the rise of “theory” among

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<sup>40</sup> I note here that this view has affinities with John Guillory’s defence of aesthetic pleasure in *Cultural Capital*, which I discussed briefly above (note 8 supra).



Joyceans focuses on a shift in academic criteria of value: “poststructuralism finds in Joyce a countermodernism: the stasis promoted by Eliot, Gilbert, and [Harry] Levin is dissolved into mobility and kinesis” (178). The recent turn to history, politics, and Irishness in Joyce studies,<sup>41</sup> announcing the demise of approaches to the study of literature that stress the self-enclosed monumentality of literary art, may be viewed in a similar light. For if all of these moves reflect broadening interpretive methods and assumptions within the literary academy, I would suggest that they can also be seen (especially in their explicit opposition to modernist reading practices) as implicitly responding to those recent developments in critical theory, detailed in my previous chapter, which question the evaluative and ideological implications of literary (canonical) study itself. Literary critics now clamour to position themselves “after the great divide.”

This provides the backdrop for the final argument I would like to consider at length – one that, revealingly, places cultural-historical questions about Joyce’s relationship/evaluative set towards “popular” culture alongside a consideration of where this places contemporary critics and readers of Joyce. I refer to prominent scholar Derek Attridge’s contribution to Kershner’s collection, *Joyce and Popular Culture*.

Like the present chapter, Attridge’s essay “Theoretical Approaches to Popular Culture”<sup>42</sup> is occasioned by “the development of new ways of talking about the issues involved in the notions of “popular” and “elite” culture” (23), and seeks to draw out the implications of cultural studies arguments for the activity of Joycean criticism. Because “discussions of

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<sup>41</sup> See Marjorie Howes’ and Derek Attridge’s introduction to the collection *Semicolonial Joyce* for a detailed summary of this “turn” in criticism. 1-17.

<sup>42</sup> This essay was reprinted in Attridge’s recently published book *Joyce Effects*, under the title “Popular Joyce?” pp 30-34.

popular culture in this century have tended to entail discussions of modernism” (23-24), Joyce’s works can be seen as central documents in the development of such arguments, which in turn have interesting implications, Attridge suggests, when applied to the widespread perception of Joyce’s works as “arcane, obscure, and of interest only to students of English literature” (23). After noting briefly that disparate relations to “mass culture” among early 20th century artists are often brushed over in generalised accounts of modernism, Attridge turns to a discussion of one of the elements of *Ulysses* most frequently cited in assertions that the book is designedly forbidding:

It is clearly true that some writing has a built-in resistance to wide appeal; it *depends* on the detection of learned references and esoteric allusions, the ability to process highly complex syntax and unusual vocabulary, the possession of an extraordinary verbal memory. (24)

“[A]t first blush” (24), Attridge agrees, Joyce’s works would seem to fall into this category. However, the real congruence of Joyce’s writing with cultural studies arguments, as Attridge understands those arguments, is in the work’s *refusal* to privilege the “learned” reference:

the distinguishing feature of Joyce’s use of *recherché* material is that it does not constitute the key or the core of the work; it is only taken to be such by those who assume that the more learned or “high-cultural” the reference the more central its place in the work’s scheme. In *Ulysses* and the *Wake*, the shards of elite culture mingle with the orts of popular culture, and there is no principle of hierarchy to govern them. The reader of *Finnegans Wake* who is unfamiliar with “Humpty Dumpty” loses as much as the reader unfamiliar with the *Scienza Nuova*. And if you don’t know either, there is still plenty more to get your teeth into. (24)

For Attridge, then, the appreciation of Joyce’s works does not depend on the reader’s capacity to identify (“high cultural”) learned allusions. This proposition alone would be sensible enough, in the sense that today’s first-time reader of Joyce would not be directly familiar with most of the real-world cultural products Joyce’s texts refer to (the link between “high cultural” and “esoteric” is thus not as straightforward as

he claims it to be). But Attridge's claim is complicated by an idea that, by dint of the sheer multitude of references Joyce assembles, "Joyce builds a principle of accessibility into his work; or, to put it another way, there is a whole series of minority audiences, each of which has access to special knowledge that will illuminate one aspect of his writing, but no one of which occupies a privileged position vis-à-vis the text's meaning" (24).

Poststructuralist thought generally understands interpretation to involve the interplay of a text with a reader's existing values and assumptions about texts—a (potentially) unique set of cultural competences that are the accretive consequence of prior textual encounters, the 'already read'. At the most general level, Attridge's argument is simply a rehearsal of this orthodox perspective on the contingency of evaluation. Yet welding this line exclusively to an argument about allusion, as if the constitution of a text's audience depended on the nature of the other texts incorporated by that work, leads to some unlikely conclusions (which Attridge himself recognises as such). *Finnegans Wake* becomes uniquely suited for mass consumption, the epitome of the 'open work', allowing "any reader to recognize familiar items and begin to construct a narrative chain or a thematic network out of them" (25).

This proposition is not, he concedes, borne out in the real world of readers and books, for reasons having to do with what he sees as a more universal assumption about reading any text: "the fundamental presupposition that reading is an attempt at textual mastery" (25). These sentiments, which culminate in Attridge recommending that readers "shed a number of ingrained preconceptions about what it is to read—expectations and assumptions about linearity, transparency, directness of plot, singularity of meaning, and so on" (25), derive from an

engagement with French thinkers (especially Derrida),<sup>43</sup> and their work to expose any totalising interpretation as simply a moment of textual arrest, the product of an impulse to fix relations between signifiers which are in fact always in motion. What Attridge recommends, then, is not an end to interpretation per se, but to the idea that an interpretation of a Joycean text that brings considerable learning to bear is any more valid, or exhaustive, than one by a reader who makes the most of whatever content manifests to him or her as familiar:

The reader who does not have access to the learned tomes produced by the Joyce industry and has not internalized the cultural encyclopaedia constantly raided by Joyce is not thereby an inferior interpreter, failing in the face of an elite cultural product, but is one reader among millions, just as capable as any other—in principle—of careful and responsive attention to the words and of the understanding and enjoyment that follows, though always differently, from such attention. (25)

“popular” access to Joyce’s works is at the same time the goal Attridge’s admittedly “utopian thinking” aspires to, and the precondition for that utopia to come into being. Compounding this circularity, the best way to achieve “freedom from totalizing interpretive assumptions” (25) is to read Joyce’s work, “to undergo the training that Joyce offers in nonmasterful reading” (26).<sup>44</sup>

It is worthwhile isolating how Attridge is using the term “popular” here. Its primary meaning seems to stem from its opposition to “high,” “elite,” “canonical.” Texts can be “popular”; it is Joyce’s interspersing of those texts with other texts of more “elite” provenance that Attridge

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<sup>43</sup> Attridge has published interviews with Derrida, and co-edited the collection of essays *Post-structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French* (1984).

<sup>44</sup> Attridge stresses that this training “is not an experience available only to an elite, whether this be construed as an elite of class, of education, or of intelligence. [...] There is no *intrinsic* reason why the pleasurable labor of the “difficult” text should not be open to the majority of the population” (26). This is true—however, it is also true that there is no “intrinsic” reason that reading Joyce should provide an education in “non-masterful reading.”

initially focuses on. Then we have Attridge's singular take on what makes texts Joycean, and therefore valuable (their ability to teach us nonmasterful reading): what does this have to do with the "popular"? The following suggests a tangled connection:

The techniques that [Joyce], above all, introduced into Western verbal "high culture" have now permeated much wider reaches of the cultural domain – along with the iconoclastic approach and the destabilizing humor that they serve. It's not too far-fetched to claim that the most interesting and most worthwhile productions of popular culture are, in the very specific sense I've been arguing for, "Joycean." So it may be that the generation growing up with postmodern music and video will find Joyce more accessible than their parents did – at least if the aura that surrounds his work can be punctured by the kind of irreverence and exuberance that he himself displayed so brilliantly. ... Joyce is already part of what is most valuable in popular culture; our task is not to deny or smother that congruence, but to learn from it and build on it. (26)

Joycean techniques are thus imbricated with the "popular"; and both Joyce's work and "popular" culture are hostile (in a good way) to the ideologies associated with the creation of elite, inaccessible, canonical monuments. In one step, Attridge removes the problematic taint of "high"-ness from both Joyce and Joycean academics, both of whom are recast, in the name of the "popular," as agents of cultural progress.

The unlikely conclusions Attridge reaches result from the binaries he works with – readable vs unreadable, "high" vs "popular" – as if a text, in itself, must fit one or other of these categories. What Attridge wilfully misses is that regardless of what allusions or representations *Ulysses*, for example, contains, the mode of literacy possessed by those predisposed to esteem *Ulysses* as a valuable cultural text is, as Bourdieu (and Carey) would stress, transmitted overwhelmingly through institutions of higher education. It is true that the congruence of Joycean techniques with cultural forms now elsewhere found in "postmodern music and video" may work in favour of *Ulysses* continuing to be valued and esteemed by new generations of the

university-educated (whose sensibilities are also shaped by, and shape, the development of this “popular” culture). But this is very different from what Attridge proposes: that the cloak of monumentality that has been foisted on *Ulysses* might now be removed, and the text’s essential congruence with “popular” culture revealed. Attridge attempts to contest an essentialist idea of what follows from *Ulysses*’ “high” cultural status with an equally essentialist “popular Joyce,” simultaneously populist and disruptive.

As I outlined in chapter two, John Frow stresses that there is no whole, coherent domain of “popular culture”, and from this premise, suggests that scholarly writings on the differences or congruencies between “high” and “popular” culture can be seen as equally question begging. More than this, though, the discourse of high vs popular culture masks, for Frow, the place of intellectuals in the cultural field. A cultural intellectual’s representation of “the popular” is seen by Frow as the “representation of a theoretical object” (60), an act which Frow ties firmly to the problem of intellectuals “speaking, or claiming to speak, on behalf of someone else” (60).

Frow’s plea for intellectuals to implicate themselves—the particular “regimes of value” associated with intellectual work—in debates that are usually staged in broad “high”/ “popular” terms, is directed squarely at cultural studies academics reading “popular cultural” texts, but is also relevant in this context:

our attention must be turned away from that mythical popular subject immediate to observation, and focused instead on the *relation between* two different kinds of practice: a ‘first-order’ practice everyday culture, and the ‘second-order’ practice of analysis of it conducted by a reader endowed with significant cultural capital. I define this here, and for my present purposes, as a *relation* between intellectuals and their others—whatever those ‘others’ may be, and recognizing that these two groups, and those two kinds of practice, often and perhaps necessarily overlap (‘first-order’ practices are also reflexive; intellectuals are themselves

those 'others'). It is the politics of this relation that must frame any reading of cultural texts 'in themselves'. (87)

This sort of self-conscious refusal to separate “high” and “popular” culture from the (intellectual, institutional) vantage point that brings the categories into being would destabilise much of the “Joyce and popular culture” scholarship traversed throughout this chapter. The claims of Attridge, Kershner, Wicke, and others, to be writing, somehow, on the side of “the popular”, while at the same time writing from an institutionally privileged vantage about a canonical text, are readily deflated. So too are claims that Joyce’s work is definitively part of or separable from, or pro- or anti-, “popular” culture. What is masked by these sorts of arguments, all premised on “the essential coherence of cultural ‘levels’” (Frow 86), is a complex collection of variables that are not tractable in terms of a single high/low opposition. For attempting to chart the relationship of “high” and “popular” culture in *Ulysses* is to invoke the text’s difficulty; its (institutionally determined) canonicity and modernism; the discourse of ‘the great divide’; and contemporary discourses of “high” and “popular” culture—all of this without considering the text “in itself.” Indeed, while it may limit the scope for novel interpretive criticism, refusing to allow the possibility of considering the text’s “high” or “popular” qualities—or the text’s take on the relationship between those domains—in isolation from those discourses and institutional processes I have mentioned, would provide the best chance for literary critics to escape the modernist tendency to treat “high” and “low” culture as definite, real-world structures—or in Huyssen’s words, to demonstrate their “distance from the great divide”.

## 4. *Infinite Jest* and Postmodernism: Relocating Value

This chapter is concerned with another “encyclopaedic” novel—David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996)—and another era of cultural production—so-called “postmodernism”—in which it is broadly agreed that high culture, popular culture, and the relationship between these imaginary monoliths, have been irreversibly altered. Such a view of the postmodern derives its force from numerous cultural developments, including the apparent ascendancy of axiological scepticism in universities (disallowing the easy division of culture according to intrinsic value or disvalue), and the all-encompassing expansion of mass cultural industries, which has conclusively thwarted the modernist fantasy of maintaining a non-commodity domain of high-cultural production. Moreover, many critics treat the prevalence in “postmodern” fiction (and throughout contemporary art) of representational strategies that somehow blur the line between “high” and “popular” genres and traditions as an announcement of the end of modernism’s anxious attempts to exclude and declaim the mass cultural. Combining these various threads, one simplistic narrative of the shift from modernism to postmodernism reads as follows: Whereas modernism aimed to bolster and sustain the category of inherent aesthetic value, complete with the sense of social exclusivity that the phrase now connotes, postmodernism accepts that “high” culture and aesthetic experience are fully bound up with other modes of cultural production and experience from which they were traditionally distinguished.

With reference to *Infinite Jest*, this chapter explores some of the pitfalls of this all-inclusive narrative of the dismantlement of a “great divide.”



In particular, I question the common association of a postmodern literary discourse—the overt fusion of “high” and “low” cultural traditions—with the demise of two-track, inherentist models of cultural evaluation. One does not necessarily follow from the other. As I mentioned in chapter two, that literary discourse’s continued reliance on high/low terms suggests affinities with modernist ideas about cultural value; postmodern relativism/postaxiology would be more inclined to turn its attention to examining the power relations and evaluative discourses that, for particular viewers, give the terms their meaning and relevance.

*Infinite Jest*—an enormous novel, 1077 densely typed pages long—is a particularly fertile text with which to consider the use of high/low discourse in an overtly postmodern literary setting. This is especially true in light of what has already been said on the subject of *Ulysses*, for many of the features of *Ulysses* that have complicated literary scholars’ descriptions of that novel in terms of its drawing together of “high” and “low” culture are echoed in Wallace’s work. *Infinite Jest* attempts to occupy a cultural position that has affinities both with *Ulysses*’ place in the contemporary cultural marketplace, and with the cachet *Ulysses* achieved, for a small but culturally powerful audience, following its original publication. *Infinite Jest* makes use of a wide range of cultural forms and existing texts (including *Ulysses*), declaring itself to be the work of an author of prodigious cultural range (au fait, as Joyce was, with canonical extremes of “high” and “low” culture). In addition, Wallace’s magnum opus is, on a thematic level, overtly concerned with the idea of cultural consecration (and with cultural evaluation more generally).

My focus in this chapter will be on Wallace’s own exploration of ideas about cultural value—especially his evident understanding of “high”

and “popular” culture—in the context of postmodern literary culture. First though, by way of introduction to Wallace’s writing, describing *Infinite Jest*’s ambiguous place in the contemporary cultural marketplace will provide a précis of pragmatic reasons why the straightforward application of “high” and “popular” categories is no longer possible in a contemporary context.<sup>45</sup>

### **“High Culture” or “Mass Entertainment”?**

*Infinite Jest* is the sort of book that would, in bygone days, have been labelled “high cultural” by cultural academics. Numerous aspects of the book seem designed to announce its aspired-to status as prodigious cultural achievement or literary monument; asserting its place in a “high cultural” tradition. *Infinite Jest*’s daunting size plays an important part in this rhetoric of value-assertion, as does its title, which, as well as suggesting some sort of maximum (of value? or fun?) is an allusion to *Hamlet*, a text that, like *Ulysses*, has become so intimately associated with the literary canon that it could be said to stand metonymically for “high culture.” (The phrase comes from the graveyard scene, when *Hamlet* famously holds up the skull of the king’s jester: “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy” (Act 5, Sc. 1, 156-7).) The book is demanding to read; for its intended audience, it is enjoyably “complex.” Much of the early response to *Infinite Jest* hastened to position Wallace as an author who, in the canonical tradition of Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis (and Wallace’s literary lineage is often traced back to James Joyce himself), disclosed a polymathic “high cultural” ambition to out-do his contemporaries.

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<sup>45</sup> A better way of putting this might be to say that aspects of contemporary cultural production seem to lay bare the fact that high/low categories were always imaginary: socially/discursively constructed, rather than coherent “real world” blocs.

Yet considering the way Wallace's "high cultural" book arrived in the marketplace quickly exposes the redundancy, in a contemporary context, of the traditional blanket distinction between the "high" and "mass" cultural. In a recent profile of Wallace's editor, Michael Pietsch, in *New York Magazine*, Pietsch explained the tactics used to ensure *Infinite Jest* achieved "best-seller" status (an achievement that, according to the profile, proved to be "the decisive step of [Pietsch's] career" as well as Wallace's). Making the book amenable to "mass" distribution did not mean playing down the book's size and difficulty; quite the opposite:

Enlisting the help of young writers like his author Rick Moody, Pietsch set out to incite envy among Wallace's peers. "The trick was getting other writers to recognize that this was the guy to beat," Pietsch says.

Then he ruminated on overcoming reader reluctance. "I can show you the place," Pietsch recalls, "up on the hill by my house where I first thought of making this a challenge: Are you reader enough?"

The dare worked. *Infinite Jest* made David Foster Wallace as close to a household name as a jittery, bandanna-headed, run-off-at-the-mouth former philosophy student could ever hope to get.

"It was great for Little, Brown," Pietsch says, interpreting his success first in company terms. "It impressed a lot of booksellers and agents; personally, it was some of the best fun I've had."

Little, Brown is the "quality-book imprint"<sup>46</sup> of Time Warner, one of the corporations most routinely demonised in castigations of the modern culture industries. Wallace's readers constitute a target market for a global publishing conglomerate—readers of "quality books"—whose triggers of cultural value that corporation will attempt to predict and cater to. As John Frow writes, high culture is "now fully absorbed within commodity production" (23); if we retain the term at all, "high

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<sup>46</sup> See Marion Maneker's recent piece in *New York Magazine*, "House Cleaning," <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/columns/culturebusiness/4378/>.

culture” is now best thought of as merely a niche market, not unlike “many, increasingly differentiated, low cultural products” (23).<sup>47</sup>

In 2006 *Infinite Jest* was re-released in a special 10th anniversary edition, a marketing gesture that again demonstrates the inadequacy of traditional “high”/ “low” categories to describe the cultural position Wallace’s literary fiction seeks to occupy. On one hand, the commemorative edition, complete with introductory essay by American writer and publisher Dave Eggers, echoes the format adopted by, for example, Penguin Classics, and is a similar attempt to ensure the work is reproduced as one whose cultural value is no longer questionable. But the way Eggers vaunts Wallace’s “singular” achievement is instructive:

Here’s a question once posed to me, by a large baseball cap-wearing English major at a medium-sized western college: Is it our duty to read *Infinite Jest*? This is a good question, and one that many people, particularly literary-minded people, ask themselves. The answer is: maybe. Sort of. Probably, in some way. If we think it’s our duty to read this book, it’s because we’re interested in genius. We’re interested in epic writerly ambition.

The vernacular appeal to the book’s likely audience is cast very much as a recommendation to a niche market, rather than a diagnosis of essential value (contrast Eliot’s essay on *Ulysses*). Eggers does not refrain from using the term “genius” or “duty” but, tellingly, he goes on to compare Wallace’s achievement to other prodigious achievements in pop music, folk art, film. For the English majors and “literary-minded” people Eggers is targeting, the broad-brush hierarchies often associated with commemorative assessments of cultural achievement seem to be only of nostalgic relevance.

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<sup>47</sup> Frow also argues that “High culture ... is no longer ‘the dominant culture’ but is rather a *pocket* within commodity culture. Its primary relationship is not to the ruling class but to the intelligentsia, and to the education system which is the locus of their power and the generative point for most high cultural practices” (86).

As a commodity/artefact then, *Infinite Jest* might be held up as an exemplar for why “high” / “low” terms, in their traditional sense, are (or should be) obsolescent. “Postmodern” conditions of cultural production may echo past cultural configurations (the “quality imprint” could be seen as an example of this), but attempts now to establish “high” and “low” culture as real, separable categories are readily deflated or deconstructed.

This situation or “social organisation of culture,” in John Frow’s phrase, could be described without close reference to contemporary texts or representations themselves. But contemporary, critically aware fiction is often read as acknowledging this situation – most commonly, at least according to conventional descriptions of “postmodern” literature, by performing such deconstructions, blending high/low genres and so forth. It is in this sense that I first wish to consider *Infinite Jest* as a novel, at the level of representation.

### ***Infinite Jest as a “Text of the Culture”***

The phrase used by several Joycean critics in describing *Ulysses*—a “text of the culture”—seems, at first gloss, readily applicable to *Infinite Jest*. Wallace’s sprawling work discloses a similar ambition to represent characters, dialects/idioms, institutions, and behaviours of cultural consumption and production from diverse social settings. Wallace treats (at great length) of professional sports, literary academia, mass-media advertising, avant-garde film production, home entertainment. ‘Upscale’ households, drug addicts, pharmacological analysis, and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings share page space with representations of high-school rivalries and eccentric family dramas. Also in keeping with the discourse of cultural all-inclusiveness beloved by Joycean critics, *Infinite Jest*, like *Ulysses*, contains a great number of disparate

allusions—from popular music and sitcoms (Beatles song lyrics, for example; M\*A\*S\*H) to *Hamlet* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. One early review announced Wallace’s novel as an “astonishing and vast epic of contemporary American culture”—precisely the sort of response it seems Wallace’s work goes out of its way to elicit.<sup>48</sup>

But Wallace’s book does not attempt, as *Ulysses* does (in one respect), to exhaustively represent a real-world cultural milieu. Instead, Wallace imagines an absurdist and non-realistic United States near future, deformed, in the best tradition of the dystopian novel, by the exaggerated effects of what the author identifies as worrying cultural trends. Chief among these is the archetypically postmodern theme of rampant consumerism: Wallace depicts a society in which, as sociologist Mark Lyon says of “postmodern” society in general, “consumer lifestyles and mass consumption dominate the waking lives of its members” (Lyon 56).

The North American continent has been politically transformed into the O.N.A.N. (Organization of North American Nations), a triumvirate of “interdependent” nations including Canada, the United States, and Mexico. The United States is presided over by a farcically childish and impetuous President—retired Las Vegas entertainer Johnny Gentle—whose “Clean Up America” party sweeps into power by promising a tidy solution to late-capitalist America’s waste problems. (The solution: turn a substantial proportion of New England into a giant waste dump,

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<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting here that, in the tradition of the “encyclopaedic novel” or “text of the culture,” *Infinite Jest*’s rhetorical claim to take the whole of U.S. culture as its subject matter is bolstered by its juxtaposition of extremes. That is, an impossible claim to all-inclusiveness is made plausible by the prominence of culturally exalted and base (high/low) elements (*Hamlet* vs *M\*A\*S\*H*, for instance). Rather than mere disparate (unrelated) cultural forms/behaviours, these can be rationalised (by readers familiar with such appeals) as two poles between which *every* other cultural text or behaviour might logically be accommodated. An impression of all-inclusiveness is thus generated by the symbolic distance between the book’s cultural limits.

and then, in a gesture of continental “interdependence,” forcibly gift that territory to Canada. We can rest assured that the pun on “continent” is intended; the US’s new territorial arrangement is merely a way of managing its excretions.) Corporate advertising has reached new levels of ubiquity, and the resourceful administration’s new source of revenue is to auction off naming rights to each successive year, discarding the Gregorian calendar in favour of “Subsidized Time” (hence “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment,” or “Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar”). Even America’s most sacred democratic symbol is co-opted as a corporate envoy:

NNYC’s harbor’s Liberty Island’s gigantic Lady has the sun for a crown and holds what looks like a huge photo album under one arm, and the other arm holds aloft a product. The product is changed each 1 Jan. by brave men with pitons and cranes. (367)

The O.N.A.N. is assuredly a “bread and circuses” polity (and the phrase is invoked several times in the book). Despite obvious differences between characters’ social standing and educational attainment, each of *Infinite Jest*’s enormous cast of characters gravitates towards discomfort-numbing entertainments, exemplified by television (or its futuristic equivalent) and, more troublingly, pharmaceuticals. Conventional television has been replaced by “Interlace,” a distribution network that provides “entertainments” to the O.N.A.N.’s “Teleputers.” The genteel, non-commodity basis on which “high cultural” production was traditionally founded is thoroughly eroded in Wallace’s O.N.A.N., with all modes of cultural participation typically described as acts of consumption, ingestion, digestion.

However, Wallace does not imagine a future wherein the distinction between high and low culture has ceased to be drawn, or where cultural tastes have ceased to be reliable markers of social status. If *Infinite Jest* is to be thought of as a “text of the culture,” then the culture it portrays

is one founded on a dramatic high/low binarism, a divide that we see is perpetuated by the unequal access to cultural capital (via institutions of “higher learning”). Wallace’s vision of a future metropolitan Boston takes as its focus twin extremes of wealth and pauperism: the culturally privileged (students, or former students, of various academies) and a culturally excluded underclass. This owes much to the demographics of real-world Boston, but in *Infinite Jest* the divide takes an exaggerated form, figuratively expressed in the steep gradient separating the book’s two key locations, Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) and Ennet House, the latter being a halfway house for recovering drug addicts. E.T.A. sits imposingly atop “far and away the biggest hill in Enfield MA. The hillside is fenced, off-limits, densely wooded and without sanctioned path” (197); Enfield House, meanwhile, sits contiguous to this steep hillside, in the elite school’s shadow. The somewhat farcical cultural elitism—the “high-ness”—of E.T.A. is writ large (it is “the only athletic-focus-type school in North America that still adheres to the trivium and quadrivium of the hard-ass classical L.A.S. tradition” (188)), an extreme of rarefaction that finds its apparent opposite in the experiential depths lived through by residents of Ennet House.

In the first instance, *Infinite Jest*’s high/low divide might be treated simply as a socio-economic one: Ennet House and ETA serve clienteles that typically hail from different class backgrounds. Early in the book, *Infinite Jest*’s rapid juxtaposition of seemingly disconnected scenes, which give fragments of various characters’ back stories, including abject details of the pre-recovery lives of “low” characters (who later resurface at Ennet House), is well suited to conveying this disparity. The third-person narrative voice Wallace uses throughout *Infinite Jest* is a particularly effective means through which to mark characters socio-linguistically as “high” or “low” cultural; the extensive use of free-indirect discourse allows Wallace to inflect his essayistic, garrulous



style with characters' distinctive idioms. Early sections of the book switch freely between this mode and fragments of first-person testimony. An example is "Clenette," one of *Infinite Jest's* many peripheral characters, whose voice is heard fleetingly:

Wardine say her momma aint treat her right. Reginald he come round to my blacktop at my building where me and Delores Epps jump double dutch and he say, Clenette, Wardine be down at my crib cry say her momma aint treat her right, and I go on with Reginald to his building where he live at, and Wardine be sit deep far back in a closet in Reginald crib, and she be cry. (37)<sup>49</sup>

As with Joyce's representations of the inner lives of low-culture consuming, educationally limited Dubliners in *Ulysses*, this is not merely a representation of how Clenette thinks or speaks, but of how she might herself be imagined to transcribe her testimony into text. The missing apostrophe in "aint" is just as significant as a marker of social status (and here race) as the idiomatic construction "she be cry".

Such solecisms are especially noticeable in *Infinite Jest* because they are so often commented on in the text: Wallace endows many "high" cultural characters with an exaggerated attentiveness to grammatical propriety. Avril Incandenza, for instance, matriarch of the book's most important family and an administrator at ETA, holds a PhD in "prescriptive grammar" and, along with numerous other academicians, revels in demonstrating her linguistic authority. Avril's son Hal Incandenza, perhaps the leading contender for 'main character' in this

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<sup>49</sup> "Clenette" is not heard from again until she is described from the perspective of the academy: "A couple of the black girls who work kitchen and custodial day-shifts can be seen against the shadowy tree-line, making their way down the steep hillside's unauthorized path back down to the halfway-house thing for wretched people who come up here to work short-time. The girls' bright cheap jackets are vivid in the shadow and trees' tangle. The girls are having to hold hands against the grade, walking sideways and digging heavily in at each step" (633). Again, the narrator (whose voice is here inflected with the evaluative set of the "high" academy) does not miss the opportunity to emphasise the thematically significant steepness of the grade, or to stress that the academicians' indifference to the women's plight is matched by a *distaste* for their "bright cheap" apparel.

densely populated novel, takes after his mother in an appropriately extreme way: by the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, he has read, and has full photographic recall of, the entire Oxford English Dictionary. The contrast between the “high” and “low” idioms used by various characters (impeccable syntax and diction vs crude slang and illiteracy) becomes one of the most obvious ways that Wallace stakes out an ostensible “great divide” between *Infinite Jest*’s two main settings.

Other points of high/low contrast may be quickly noted. Whereas E.T.A. (high culture) is dedicated to the pursuit of sporting and academic excellence, Ennet House (low culture) is an institution of last resort, where residents are “deprogrammed” by submitting to the authority of the institution and the AA recovery programme. E.T.A. students receive a (high cultural) humanities-style education based on the study of culturally valuable texts; Ennet House residents are encouraged to live their newly sober lives according to the clichéd (low cultural) commandments of Alcoholics Anonymous. Wallace’s descriptions of encounters between characters who seem to have a “natural” association with either institution, and their cultural Others, make the role of E.T.A. and Ennet House as bastions of (ostensibly) high and low culture especially evident. Take, for example, the severe aversion of (high cultural) academic and recovering alcoholic, Geoffrey Day, to the AA mantras he is expected to imbibe at Ennet House. “‘So then at forty-six years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés’” (270), Day opines to a fellow resident:

‘One of the exercises is being grateful that life is so much *easier* now. I used sometimes to think. I used to think in long compound sentences with subordinate clauses and even the odd polysyllable. Now I find I needn’t. Now I live by the dictates of macramé samplers ordered from the back-page ad of an old *Reader’s Digest* or *Saturday Evening Post*. Easy does it. Remember to remember. But for the grace of capital-g God. Turn it over. Terse, hard-boiled. Monosyllabic. Good old Norman

Rockwell-Paul Harvey wisdom. I walk around with my arms out straight in front of me and recite these clichés. In a monotone. No inflection necessary. Could that be one? Could that be added to the cliché-pool? “*No inflection necessary*”? Too many syllables, probably.’ (271)

Here Wallace’s academic character swiftly links AA affirmation rituals with thoughtless passivity, and finds a material counterpart to this cultural behaviour in *Reader’s Digest* home décor. One is reminded of the broad links Bourdieu draws between (among other things) taste for food, sporting preferences, and mode of relation to aesthetic texts, all under the banner of a “popular” or “legitimate” aesthetic. Wallace’s invocation of high/low cultural discourses clearly adopts a similarly expansive view of how cultural preferences produce and reinforce social inequality.

Wallace’s intention in drawing attention to such cultural products and behaviours seems broadly congruent with that of Bourdieu, or John Frow: he is clearly interested in the complicities that may be established between “high” and “low” culture, in demonstrating the impossibility of an inherent distinction. Wallace takes a number of approaches to this task, including, at a broad level, demonstrating that the socially constructed line between wretched and exalted that so dominates the Enfield community is permeable. Thus, notwithstanding the lack of “sanctioned path” between the institutions, several characters that appear “naturally” connected with either institution become immersed in the culture of the other, as the novel progresses. Joelle van Dyne, graduate student in the film faculty of a prestigious local college and favoured screen actress of the late James Incandenza, submits to the “banal” teachings of Ennet House in order to overcome a drug addiction; late in the novel Hal Incandenza himself appears (while in withdrawal from marijuana) at the halfway house’s door. The gradual entwining of the two (high/low) sets of characters represents one of

the novel's most significant plot threads. (The other is the search for a master copy of the film "Infinite Jest," about which I will have more to say in the final section of this chapter.)

Wallace's sympathies, moreover, seem to lie largely with the residents of Ennet House, however clichéd their mantras and cultural tastes may be. Like Bourdieu, Wallace (in Barbara Smith's words) "reserves his most elaborate satire for the self-privileging *grand bourgeois*, hapless *petit bourgeois*, and "mis-recognitions" of intellectuals and academics" (Smith 198 note 20). Wallace's academic characters typically put the learned discourses they have acquired in the service of evading moral questions; Ennet House residents, on the other hand, tend to confront such questions head-on—a task for which the AA teachings they imbibe are actively useful. For as Gately reflects, "It starts to turn out that the vapid the AA cliché, the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers" (446). Wallace openly celebrates the utility (or value) of the lachrymose or melodramatic—"stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real" (592)—and highlights the reluctance of "sophisticated" cultural consumers to confront, through cultural texts or otherwise, those elements of human experience.

The interspersed of "high" and "low" allusions in *Infinite Jest* (a strategy much beloved, as we have seen, by Joycean scholars) may also be read as contributing to Wallace's evident desire to deconstruct, or simply deflate, inherentist accounts of high/low categories. *Infinite Jest*'s use of *Ulysses* is especially pertinent in this context.

Just as numerous commentaries on *Ulysses* take Stephen and Bloom as emblematic of "the intellectuals and the masses" (to borrow John Carey's title), two characters in *Infinite Jest* seem particularly

representative of the latter book's high/low divide. For Stephen, we have Hal Incandenza, one of E.T.A.'s star pupils, who possesses traits learned or inherited from two parents of formidable brain power (Avril and James Incandenza), who also happen to be the school's founders (Hal's film-maker father, James, is deceased by the time of the novel's present-day). Everything about Hal—his breeding, his upbringing, his interests and preoccupations, are at age 17 thoroughly implicated in what Bourdieu calls the “value-inculcating and value-imposing operations” (*Distinction* 23) of school culture. His education results not only in an impressive set of tennis skills, but also a generalised, snobbish set towards “legitimate culture” (a flashback to Hal at age ten, for instance, describes him sporting a bow-tie, giving an exhaustive definition of “implore,” and declaring a precocious enthusiasm for Byzantine erotica (27-31)). Hal's representative function is underwritten by a series of unconcealed allusions. Like Stephen, Hal is obstinately mourning for a deceased parent, and seems to be “playing the role” of *Hamlet* (to hammer home this point, we see him reading that text, in the *Riverside Shakespeare* edition (171)). Like many of the canonical allusions in *Infinite Jest*, the verbal slip that explicitly acknowledges Hal's canonical provenance, casting him as a modern day Telemachus, is banal to the point of parody. Hal is clipping his toenails into a wastebasket, when he becomes overwhelmed by self-consciousness:

‘Launching the nail out toward the wastebasket now seems like an exercise in telemachry.’  
 ‘You mean telemetry?’  
 ‘How embarrassing. When the skills go they go.’ (249)

The link between *Infinite Jest*'s other main protagonist, Donald Gately, and Leopold Bloom, is less direct. Twenty-nine year-old Donald Gately is a live-in staff member at Ennet House and a recovering Demerol addict. The product of a disadvantaged background, and a former

professional criminal, by the “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment” Gately is an avuncular authority figure, struggling heroically to stay sober. Gately is the book’s most sympathetic “everyman” character, but as with Joyce’s Bloom, unlikely parallels are drawn between the humdrum character and canonical heroic archetypes. Gately is cast (again through a series of allusions) as something of a modern day Hercules (we learn that both he and Hercules, for example, have perfectly square heads (507)).

Numerous other direct references to *Ulysses* – most of which could be well described as “picayune”<sup>50</sup> – appear throughout *Infinite Jest*. Early in the book is placed a scene describing an interview between a young Hal Incandenza (in this “flashback” scene Hal is ten years old; as the book’s central protagonist, most of the events in the novel take place when Hal is 17) and his father, James, masquerading as a “professional conversationalist” (28). There is no narrator in this section (27-31); the narrative is instead rendered as if it were the transcription of an interview—focused on recording every word that passes between the two characters, and any other sounds that they make. Hence we are given the following description of James opening a can of soda and passing it to his son:

SPFFFT. ‘Here you are. Drink up.’  
 ‘Thanks. SHULGSHULGSPAHHH ... Whew. Ah.’  
 ‘You *were* thirsty.’ (28)

Joyce pays similarly close attention to onomatopoeia throughout *Ulysses* (Bloom’s cat does not “miaow” but “Mkgnao!” (*U* 45)); but this is most acutely the case in “Sirens,” which focuses on *the music* of events unfolding in the bar of the Ormond Hotel. The episode opens with the prose equivalent of a prelude, and, as Jeri Johnson puts it,

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<sup>50</sup> Wallace is extremely fond of using obscure and idiomatic diction; he uses this word frequently in *Infinite Jest*. The OED defines “picayune,” which is of U.S. origin, as “**2. colloq.** A worthless or contemptible person; a trivial or unimportant matter or thing.”

maintains an intense focus on “received sound rather than [...] conventional or standardized morphemes” (875). Interspersed throughout the noise, or aurally mimetic prose (“One rapped on a door, one tapped with a knock, did he knock Paul de Kock with a loud proud knocker with a cock carracarracarra cock. Cockcock” (232)) is a series of one-word lines:

Tap. (231)

This single “Tap” appears five times between pages 231-233; from 234 their frequency and number increases, first becoming

Tap. Tap. (234)

then

Tap. Tap. Tap. (235)

—and so on. The source of this noise is not revealed until page 236: “Tap blind walked tapping by the tap the curbstone tapping, tap by tap.” The identification of the “blind stripling,” whom readers first encountered in the previous episode (“Wandering Rocks”), is, in an elaborate aural gag, preceded by the distinctive noise made by his cane as he wanders the Dublin streets before entering the Ormond Hotel to collect his misplaced tuning fork.<sup>51</sup> We can now move back to *Infinite Jest*, where, as the description continues of Hal drinking, Wallace finds the time for an especially gratuitous allusion:

‘I might have to burp a little in a second, from the soda. I’m alerting you ahead of time.’  
 ‘Hal, you are here because I am a professional conversationalist, and your father has made an appointment with me, for you, to converse.’  
 ‘MYURP. Excuse me.’  
 Tap tap tap tap.

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<sup>51</sup> This identification is made clearer on page 237: “Tap. Tap. A stripling, blind, with a tapping cane came taptaptapping by Daly’s window where a mermaid hair all streaming (but he couldn’t see) blew whiffs of a mermaid (blind couldn’t), mermaid, coolest whiff of all.”

‘SHULGSPAHHH.’  
*Tap tap tap tap.* (28)

Hal continues to “Tap” intermittently on his soda can for the next several pages of *Infinite Jest*’s most onomatopoeic “episode,” leaving at least one reader feeling simultaneously amused and self-satisfied. There are many moments like this in *Infinite Jest*.<sup>52</sup> An anonymous heroin-addict’s first person account of a day of burglary and narcotics has similar canonical resonance, for the knowing reader:

It was yrstruly and C and Poor Tony that crewed that day and everything like that. The AM were wicked bright and us a bit sick however we scored our wake ups boosting some items at a sidewalk sale in the Harvard Square [...] we got the citizen to get in his ride with us and crewed on him good and we got enough \$ off the Patty type to get straightened out for true all day (*IJ* 128-129)

The above fragment of testimony<sup>53</sup> quite obviously harks back to “Cyclops,” Bloom’s encounter with the xenophobic “Citizen” in a Dublin pub:

So then the citizen begins talking about the Irish language and the corporation meeting and all to that and the shoneens that can’t speak their own language and Joe chipping in because he stuck someone for a quid and Bloom putting in his old goo with his twopenny stump that he cadged off of Joe and talking about the gaelic league and the antitreating league and drink, the curse of Ireland. (*U* 255)

What to make of these allusions? Their core function seems to be simply to advertise their status as allusions, and in doing so, visibly satisfy another of the “high cultural” evaluative criteria that are prominently aired throughout the book. That is, *Infinite Jest*’s allusions to (ur-canonical) *Ulysses* seem related to Wallace’s efforts to construct a book that incorporates, in a very deliberate way (barring the device),

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<sup>52</sup> It should also be noticed that Joycean allusions are common throughout Wallace’s oeuvre. For an extravagant example see the short story “Order and Flux in Northampton.”

<sup>53</sup> The opening sections of the book, especially the first 180 pages, consist of a series of fragments of dialogue and novelistic description, which first-time readers have no way of assembling into a coherent narrative.



virtually every characteristic of extant “cultural monuments” commonly put forward as indicative (signs) of their cultural value or literary achievement. “If you want literary allusions,” Wallace seems to say (to his impliedly high-culture-savvy audience) “then here they are.” Roughly the same thing could be said of *Infinite Jest*’s extravagant size; these are both elements of the book’s rhetoric of “high-ness,” of Wallace’s efforts to epitomise the “self-evidently valuable” literary text.

The sense that Wallace’s use of allusions may be motivated more by a desire to de-naturalise, rather than endorse or participate in, “high cultural” evaluative discourses is heightened by another superficial resemblance to *Ulysses* that Wallace builds in to *Infinite Jest*. This final resemblance does not involve a feature that might traditionally impress literary scholars, but instead is based on the books’ parallel layouts, the way they are reproduced for their respective readerships. In Joycean literature, much has been made of the impossibility, for today’s readers, of reading anything other than a highly mediated version of Joyce’s text. Fredric Jameson has famously described *Ulysses* as “always-already read,” while Joseph Brooker writes at length of the “unusual relationship [that] obtains between text, commentary, and reader” (60). The scholarly annotations that inevitably accompany any modern edition of *Ulysses* are the most obvious way that this “unusual relationship” is manifest on the printed page. Together with the simple fact of being published in Oxford or Penguin Classics paperback editions, *Ulysses*’ endnotes are signs of the book’s incorporation into the literary canon; they signify the book’s exalted status, its monumentality.

*Infinite Jest*’s final two hundred pages are similarly devoted to 388 numbered “Notes and Errata,” which contain everything from displaced chapters to chemical formulae. Unlike in *Ulysses*, these endnotes are, of

course, produced by the same writer who completed the main text: readers of Wallace's book are obliged to flip between the main text and the endnotes with some regularity, to access what only occasionally seems to be important information for the overall scheme of the novel.<sup>54</sup> The use of footnotes and endnotes is a common feature across Wallace's fictional and non-fictional oeuvre, but what seems distinctive about their use in *Infinite Jest* is that they give the novel the look of having been already analysed, incorporated within a scholarly discourse of appreciation and canonisation. The heading "Notes and Errata" certainly reinforces this impression, as does the faux-scholarly tone of many of the entries. *Infinite Jest* stands as an absurd simulacrum not simply of *Ulysses* as Joyce first had it printed, but of the *canonised form* in which that book is received by its contemporary readers.

Both of these strategies (blatant allusions; faux-scholarly endnotes) read as instances of laying bare, exposing as such, the evaluative discourses or sociological mechanisms that produce the illusion of a distinct, organically evolving sphere of high/valuable culture. Make no mistake, Wallace's book attempts to enter the university-based cultural economy of contemporary literary value; but the self-conscious way that Wallace both courts and gently mocks his audience of English majors seems very much in keeping with what I have accounted as a postmodern take on cultural value.

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<sup>54</sup> Together, Wallace's "Notes and Errata" constitute the book's "most overtly metafictional device" (Boswell 120), and as such, they have generated a varied critical response. Marshall Boswell, author of the most substantial work of criticism on Wallace's oeuvre, likens the use of endnotes to recent hyper-text fiction (19), stressing their disruptive function—the way they serve to interrupt the flow of an already non-linear narrative. Thematic readings of *Infinite Jest* have taken Wallace's use of endnotes quite differently. Both Catherine Nichols and Tom LeClair read *Infinite Jest*'s distended form as itself mirroring the book's unifying obsession with the grotesque: LeClair's suggestion that "Wallace has deformed his novel to be a gigantic analogue of the monsters—hateful and hopeful—within it" ("Prodigious" 37) is matched by Nichols' estimation that the endnotes, "in the vein of carnival's inversion of "high" and "low" bodily strata, blur the distinction between foot and head, errata and material central to the story" (5).

Returning to Wallace's Enfield, we see that the manner in which Wallace deconstructs the high/low dichotomy he sets up increasingly seems in tune with the mode of cultural critique associated with cultural studies—particularly, perhaps, with John Frow's argument for “canonical (or “high”) and non-canonical (or “popular”) culture” to be understood “as *practices* of value rather than as collections of texts with a necessary coherence” (Frow 150). For the connections between texts and cultural products that Wallace proposes in *Infinite Jest* (between tennis, avant-garde film, mass entertainment and pharmaceuticals, for instance) are flagrantly *incoherent*—they are shown to depend on particular, ludic, ways of reading.

*Infinite Jest*'s treatment of tennis—which takes on, in turn, “high” and “low” cultural associations—is a good place to begin explaining this point.

By literally “elevating” tennis training (Enfield Tennis Academy, recall, is located on an imposing hillside) to sit alongside the modernised “trivium and quadrivium,” the game, in the first instance, takes on high cultural qualities for the academicians; it becomes conducive to aesthetic description and analysis. The head coach at E.T.A., Charles Schtitt, was employed, we learn, precisely for his aestheticised take on the sport that James Incandenza held so dear:

One of the reasons the late James Incandenza had been so terribly high on bringing Schtitt to E.T.A. was that Schtitt, like the founder himself (who'd come back to tennis, and later film, from a background in hard-core-math-based optical science), was that Schtitt approached competitive tennis more like a pure mathematician than a technician. Most jr.-tennis coaches are basically technicians, hands-on practical straight-ahead problem-solving statistical-data wonks, with maybe added knacks for short-haul psychology and motivational speaking. ... [Schtitt] knew real tennis was really about not the blend of statistical order and expansive potential that the game's technicians revered, but

in fact the opposite – *not*-order, *limit*, the places where things broke down, fragmented into beauty. (81)

While at E.T.A., students are encouraged to regard their tennis training in Arnoldian terms, as an exercise in the disinterested pursuit of perfection. Yet the sport's claim to this exalted territory is tenuous, for as the narrator informs us, "students hoping to prepare for careers as professional athletes are by intension training also to be entertainers, albeit of a deep and special sort" (188). The very term students use to describe the professional tennis tour—"the Show"—acknowledges that the goal they all strive for (with varying degrees of seriousness) amounts to their becoming a spectacle for mass-market entertainment; "action photos in glossy print mags" (111). Wallace's fiction shows the distinction between value "in itself" and value *for* a market is not sustainable; the extent to which tennis retains the transcendent, non-utilitarian (or non-entertainment) value preached by E.T.A. staff-members depends simply on which practices of value are brought to bear.

From here it is a surprisingly short distance to *Infinite Jest's* treatment of recreational drugs. Almost every character in the novel is addicted to at least one substance; the various battles with addiction Wallace describes are among the most affecting parts of *Infinite Jest*. Wallace's treatment of drugs is not entirely emotive, however: the consumption of drugs sits alongside other behaviours of cultural consumption submitted to sociological-esque analysis. And while many Ennet House residents—uneducated, unreflective and unappealing—reinforce the stereotype that puts drug taking at one end of a spectrum of valuable consumption (at the opposite end of which could be, say, reading *Ulysses*), other aspects of Wallace's treatment seem to complicate this idea.

The idea of a single, all-encompassing spectrum or economy of cultural value is redolent of traditional axiology—the argument that the innate complexity of a text or cultural product (be it Shakespeare or wine) would determine its cultural value and give rise to the cultural practices surrounding its consumption (aesthetic discourse and various forms of connoisseurship, for example). Central to cultural studies, by contrast, is the idea that the nature of an object or cultural text does not determine how it will be consumed: “low” cultural practices are submitted to (aesthetic) close reading by academics; academic attention is turned upon the evaluative discourses endemic to particular communities of consumers, which discourses come to be seen as functionally similar to high cultural/aesthetic discourse. The traditional devaluation by cultural academics of “low” cultural practices and texts for their “lack of complexity” (Leavisite denunciations of “mass culture” for example) is seen as a function of mis-applying criteria designed for the evaluation of high culture—an approach which also led academic readers to ignore the possible complexities being enjoyed by the audience(s) of those texts. Cultural studies is consequently renowned for correcting the Leavisite idea that associates “mass culture” with sheer audience gratification or mindless entertainment: the cultural equivalent of addictive narcotics.

*Infinite Jest* seems to extend this sort of logic to cover drug consumption itself. For the hyper-educated youths of E.T.A., we learn, drug-taking, on one level, becomes simply another arena in which to display erudition and connoisseurship. Michael Pemulis, Hal’s school-friend and drug-dealer, performs a sort of “close reading” on DMZ, a notorious and untested drug which he and his group of friends, throughout the novel, contemplate ingesting:

The incredibly potent DMZ is apparently classed as a para-methoxylated amphetamine but really it looks to Pemulis from his slow

and tortured survey of the MED.COM's monographs more like more similar to the anticholinergic-deliriant class, way more powerful than mescaline or MDA or DMA or TMA [...] DMZ resembling chemically some miscegenation of a lysergic with a muscimoloid, but significantly different from LSD-25 in that its effects are less visual and spatially-cerebral and more like *temporally*-cerebral and almost ontological, with some sort of manipulated-phenylkylamine-like speediness whereby the ingester perceives his relation to the ordinary flow of time as radically (and euphorically, is where the muscimole-affective resemblance shows its head) altered. (170)

As with the E.T.A. take on tennis, so with drugs: the mode of cultural consumption displayed by various "high cultural" characters in *Infinite Jest* consists in a capacity to break cultural products down into their constituent components, to discuss the relationship between form and content, to revel in complexity.

It is worth mentioning here that many of the annotation-like endnotes in *Infinite Jest* are devoted to providing intricate pharmacological analyses. A passing reference to one character's preference for "Demerol and Talwin" (55) generates this explanatory gloss (which also demonstrates Wallace's hyper-attentiveness to technical jargon):

12. Meperedine hydrochloride and pentazocine hydrochloride, Schedule C-II and C-IV<sup>a</sup> narcotic analgesics, respectively, both from the good folks over at Sanofi Winthrop Pharm-Labs, Inc.

- a. Following the Continental Controlled Substance Act of Y.T.M.P., O.N.A.N.D.E.A's hierarchy of analgesics/antipyretics/anxiolytics establishes drug-classes of Category-II through Category-VI, with C-II's (e.g. Dilaudid, Demerol) being judged the heaviest w/r/t dependence and possible abuse, down to C-VI's that are about as potent as a kiss on the forehead from Mom. (984)

These medical analyses sit alongside other annotations that are more reminiscent of literary scholarship: a "filmography" of James Incandenza's oeuvre, for example, shows an encyclopaedic meticulousness (985-993); we are referred to fictional scholarly articles (note 81 refers us to 'Theory and Praxis in Peckinpah's Use of Red,' *Classic Cartridge Studies* vol. IX, nos. 2 & 3'); very occasionally, the

endnotes suggest allusions the text may be making—endnote 337, for instance, suggests a possible reference to the graveyard scene from *Hamlet*, “namely V.i. 9.” (1076).

Barbara Smith argues that “*pace* the more naïvely ambitious claims of ‘empirical aesthetics’” (52), measures such as “structural complexity” or “information richness” cannot operate as “objective measures of aesthetic value” (52).<sup>55</sup> Wallace’s implicit comparison of aesthetics and pharmacology may be read as an affirmation of this point. Both drugs and texts, he suggests, may be subjected to learned analysis and thereby “monumentalised”; both are consumed/ingested according to personal tastes and, depending on an individual’s identity (in the case of drugs, Wallace frequently refers to individuals’ biochemical “hard-wiring”) produce feelings of pleasure or displeasure, even euphoria or bliss. All this should not be read as an argument by Wallace that cultural texts and pharmaceuticals are necessarily of equal value (Wallace’s depiction of drug addicts dwells on their abjection); but their juxtaposition does, in my reading, amount to a suggestion, broadly congruent with post-axiological arguments, that the evaluative criteria traditionally (institutionally) used to distinguish between “high” and “low” cultural practices cannot provide an objective, ‘reliable’ index of cultural value.

### *The Discourse of the Great Divide*

So far this seems, by and large, to suggest that Wallace’s work is fully congruent with relativist accounts of cultural value—and that Wallace’s project is primarily negative or critical: intent on exposing the social/discursive foundations of canonical accounts of what makes cultural products/texts valuable. We have seen that *Infinite Jest* provides many thoughtful and entertaining considerations (even

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<sup>55</sup> The reasons for this have been well traversed and include the fact that the very perception of “complexity” will vary between particular viewers or communities of viewers; “complexity” cannot be thought of as an intrinsic quality.

deconstructions) of the evaluative categories and discourses cultural consumers employ. Moreover, Wallace's strategies, and the overall style and mood of the book, read as archetypical instances of postmodern artistry: a deliberate fusion of "high" and "low" culture, with the apparent intention and effect (as explained by Andreas Huyssen, among others) of declaring such cultural divides to be outmoded.

In this section I wish to consider another aspect of Wallace's work that jars with the evidently relativistic thrust of what I have so far described. Notwithstanding *Infinite Jest's* pervasive undermining of traditional criteria of value, the book also discloses Wallace's evident determination that evaluative inquiry should not therefore be cast aside: *Infinite Jest* pays serious attention to the question of what constitutes, or should constitute, a *valuable* cultural product, and struggles to elucidate grounds (or criteria) for those evaluative commitments.

I have mentioned that Wallace's attention to drug taking in *Infinite Jest* does not equate to an endorsement of the practice; rather, it serves as an extreme and implicitly *disvaluable* context in which Wallace can observe and comment upon particular practices of consumption and evaluation. Meanwhile, Wallace's drawn-out depictions of addicts in various states of self-destruction or rehabilitation seem to make it plain that there are good, pragmatic reasons for mainstream culture's stigmatisation of the practice (as "lowly").

A similar strategy seems to lie behind *Infinite Jest's* consideration of mass market entertainment, that "stratum" of cultural production with which contemporary (postmodern) fiction has such an ambiguous relationship, and which occupies such a central position in narrative accounts of what makes postmodern literary culture distinctive. *Infinite*



*Jest* depicts, in “Interlace TelEntertainment,” a seemingly self-contained cultural domain in which the features of “mass culture” most often cited by those willing to offer essentialist definitions of “mass culture” as a category are re-aired and exaggerated. Thus, we learn that despite the new media’s potential to expand viewer choice (because rather than being broadcast, viewers can select at will from thousands of possible products), consumers’ *actual* choices remain (the sense is: depressingly) predictable:

No more Network reluctance to make a program too entertaining for fear its commercials would pale in comparison. The more pleasing a given cartridge was, the more orders there were for it from viewers; and the more orders for a given cartridge, the more InterLace kicked back to whatever production facility they’d acquired it from. Simple. Personal pleasure and gross revenue looked at last to lie along the same demand curve, at least as far as home entertainment went.” (417)

The implicit suggestion here, and elsewhere in Wallace’s representation of on-screen “mass” entertainment, is that the nature of the pleasure such products are capable of producing is, if not simply an intrinsic property of that cultural product, then at least quantifiable or predictable (like a drug...). This is problematic for several reasons, not least of which being its apparent consistency with early 20<sup>th</sup> century (very un-postmodern) accounts of cultural value which were designed to denounce the mass cultural in favour of the more complex, civilisation-sustaining experiences that “genuine literature” (etc) could provide.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Take, for example, Steven Connor’s summary of I. A. Richards’ consideration of what constitutes valuable cultural consumption:

Bad art, says Richards, is characterized by its tendency to provide instant gratification and to encourage fixation upon stock responses and received ideas, rather than to encourage the ironic, impersonal play of judgement. In the way of such arguments, Richards’ relative scale of evaluation for good and bad art quickly turns into a way of distinguishing art from non-art, this latter identified paranoically in the forms of mass culture and especially the cinema. The distinctions between immediacy and complexity, childishness and maturity, culture and art, all enforce an absolute distinction between pleasure and value. (36)

Elsewhere Wallace's narrator catalogues the all-pervasive spread of the O.N.A.N.'s digital media:

Half of all metro Bostonians now work at home via some digital link. 50% of all public education disseminated through accredited encoded pulses, absorbable at home on couches. One-third of those 50% of metro Bostonians who still leave home to work could work at home if they wished. And (get this) 94% of all O.N.A.N.ite paid entertainment now absorbed at home: pulses, storage cartridges, digital displays, domestic décor – an entertainment-market of sofas and eyes.

Saying this is bad is like saying traffic is bad, or health-care surtaxes, or the hazards of annular fusion: nobody but Ludditic granola-crunching freaks would call bad what no one can imagine being without. (620)

Wallace is plainly of the view that this *is* bad—that there is a malevolent aspect to this form of “mass” culture (which plainly stands as an exaggerated proxy for real-world U.S. television culture) which contemporary cultural critics are reluctant or unable to attend to. The numerous depictions of O.N.A.N.ites relaxing before “formulaic” entertainments that (apparently) demand little intellection on the part of the viewer, for example, seem designed to point up those entertainments’ potentially insalubrious effects. (A mediascape dominated by “all-in-one consoles, Yushityu ceramic nanoprocessors, laser chromatography, Virtual-capable media cards, fiber-optic pulse, digital encoding, killer apps” (620) is also rife with “carpal neuralgia, phosphenic migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae” (620).)

But *what* is bad? Wallace's apparent willingness to devalue the aforementioned modes of cultural consumption is complicated by (1) his reluctance to repeat the “ludditic” dismissal of those developments alluded to above, and, surely, (2) his evident problematisation of the categories (such as “high art” and ‘mass entertainment’) that would traditionally organise cultural critics’ prosecution of this task.

Ultimately, I wish to suggest, *Infinite Jest*'s consideration of televisual culture is metafictional—targeted at the response of (self-defined) artists *to* televisual culture, more so than at television itself. It is also here that Wallace's work most clearly responds to the critical narrative of postmodernism's dismantlement of a "great divide" between valid art and mass culture. To begin explaining this point, it will be helpful to turn here to an essay published by Wallace in 1993, "E Unibus Plurum: Television and U.S. Fiction,"<sup>57</sup> which represents the author's most direct and prescriptive consideration of contemporary fiction's response to (or fusion with?) "mass" culture, before tracing how that essay's argument resurfaces in *Infinite Jest*.

Numerous critics have treated "Television and U.S. Fiction" as, in effect, a manifesto statement. As is typical for an essay of this kind, it sees Wallace position his work in relation to that of his most significant predecessors, giving a single-strand narrative of developments in 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. literature, for which his own work—with its particular preoccupations and arguments—is presented as a logical 'next step'. The essay is marked by a quasi-avant-gardist belief that the ills of a culture (in this case the impossibly expansive "U.S. culture") can be diagnosed, and that a suitably equipped artist (Wallace himself) might chart a path towards that culture's redemption. At the core of the essay, Wallace posits a complex "pas-de-deux" between television and contemporary U.S. fiction, beginning, in parallel with Andreas Huyssen's narrative, with the post-war American tendency to "open up the realm of high art to the imagery of everyday life and American mass culture" (Huyssen 60):

About the time television first gasped and sucked air, mass popular U.S. culture seemed to become High-Art-viable as a collection of symbols

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<sup>57</sup> The essay was first published in 1993 in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*; I quote from the version published in a collection of Wallace's "essays and arguments": *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997).

and myth. The episcopate of this pop-reference movement were the post-Nabokovian Black Humorists, the Metafictionists and assorted franc- and latinophiles only later comprised by “postmodern.” The erudite, sardonic fictions of the Black Humorists introduced a generation of new fiction writers who saw themselves as sort of avant-avant-garde, not only cosmopolitan and polyglot but also technologically literate, products of more than just one region, heritage, and theory, and citizens of a culture that said its most important stuff about itself via mass media. In this regard one thinks particularly of the Gaddis of *The Recognitions* and *JR*, the Barth of *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, and the Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49*. (*Supposedly* 45)

The opening sections of Wallace’s essay see the author stridently defending the irruption of television/mass media into the world of literary fiction as an inevitable and artistically necessary development; and dismissing out of hand much of the then-published television criticism (which he describes as “often even cruder and triter than the shows the critics complain about” (27)). Driving home this point, Wallace dwells on the complexity and ingenuity (even self-referentiality) of several television programmes.

However, as with *Infinite Jest*’s InterLace, Wallace does not shy away from making forthright value judgements. The following excerpt, couched in explicitly high/low terms, shows Wallace at his least subtle:

It is of course undeniable that television is an example of Low Art, the sort of art that has to please people in order to get their money. [...] TV is the epitome of Low Art in its desire to appeal to and enjoy the attention of unprecedented numbers of people. But it is not Low because it is vulgar or prurient or dumb. Television is often all these things, but this is a logical function of its need to attract and please Audience. And I’m not saying that television is vulgar and dumb because the people who compose Audience are vulgar and dumb. Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests. It’s all about syncretic diversity: neither medium nor Audience is faultable for quality. (37)

The emphasis here on the intrinsic properties of television (“Low Art”)—which is experienced in fundamentally the same way, he avers,

by the totality of that media's audience—would be summarily dismissed by any practitioner of cultural studies. So too would the lengthy exposition of the “passive, addictive TV-psychology” (52) that, for Wallace, lies at the heart of “U.S. culture”.

But Wallace's account of the interaction between television and fiction (as two halves of the high/low divide he posits) is more interesting. His first step is to attribute an evaluative, oppositional motive to the “marriage between High and Low culture” (42) effected by the aforementioned ‘original’ postmodernists: Wallace sees this as an artistic strategy involving the use of intentional irony to comment on contemporary social mores. (Those writers' incorporation of mass-media images and techniques thus comes to be seen as more closely resembling what Joyce scholar R. B. Kershner described, in the context of modernist writers, as “ironic documentation” rather than simply fusion/approval/rapprochement.) Moreover, for Wallace, the *intention* to critique (and, presumably, through that critique, to define/essentialise) “popular culture” persists in the U.S. fiction of his contemporaries: “The use of Low references in a lot of today's High literary fiction [...] is meant (1) to help create a mood of irony and irreverence, (2) to make us uneasy and so “comment” on the vapidness of U.S. culture, and (3) most important, these days, to be just plain realistic” (42-43).

The sting in Wallace's argument comes when he goes on to suggest that contemporary fiction's attempts to critique “popular culture” via time-honoured postmodern techniques (the ironic fusion/interspersion of popular- and high- culture) have become non-viable: both hollow and redundant. The reason Wallace gives for this is thoroughly Adornean: televisual/popular culture has *itself* appropriated those “postmodern” techniques (and especially what Wallace sees as a typically postmodern

mood of jaded irony), rendering impotent fictionists' best attempts to maintain an aloof/superior domain of critical art:

And this is why the fiction-writing citizen of our televisual culture is in such very deep shit. What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution? For this of course is the second answer to why avant-garde irony and rebellion have become dilute and malign. They have been absorbed, emptied, and redeployed by the very televisual establishment they had originally set themselves athwart. (68)

Flippancy aside, the affinities between Wallace's distinctive narrative and more conventional accounts of postmodernism as the 'end of the road' for the Culture vs culture industry saga are very marked. (Huyssen for instance similarly declares the "obsolescence of avantgarde shock techniques" by pointing to "their exploitation in Hollywood productions" which "reaffirm perception rather than change it" (15).) Also obvious here is the extent to which traditional "high"/"low" categories organise Wallace's thinking on cultural value (these are, for Wallace, real-world categories whose comparative value can be the subject of meaningful discussion, even if doubts exist about those categories' integrity). At the same time, Huyssen's view that an absolute distinction between high art and mass culture "no longer seems relevant to artistic or critical sensibilities" (197) is clearly endorsed in Wallace's work. Wallace does *not* seek to resolve the cultural crisis he identifies by reimposing, with renewed severity, the simple hierarchies of the past.

The solution Wallace does offer veers away from the discourse of the great divide and concentrates instead on exposing the obsolescence of irony as a form of social critique. This has been well traversed by critics and is not especially germane for my current purposes.<sup>58</sup> However,

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<sup>58</sup> Marshall Boswell provides a typical example of such criticism, which is directly informed by Wallace's essay:

Wallace's determination to offer *some* way to prevent the total erosion of the distinction between (in inherentist terms) valuable and debased cultural production is all-important, for my purposes. In this regard Wallace might again be compared with Huyssen, for whom the end of "the great divide" (and critics'/artists' consequent inability to call on traditional criteria for establishing cultural value) does not mean the end of critics'/artists' ability (or, indeed, *duty*) to chart a valuable course for culture-as-a-whole.

In accordance with the post-great-divide thrust of his study, Huyssen's valuable culture is neither "high" nor "mass" but results from a "progressive" fusion of the two. But the fusion is fraught with danger: artists must not, for instance, contribute to "the aesthetization of commodities [...] which totally subjugate[s] the aesthetic to the interest of capital" (158). The task seems to be to disclose the continuity of categories "art" and "commodity" while continuing to preserve some ideal of "art-qua-art." But how can a writer possibly hope to achieve the one without eroding the other? Post-axiological thought, as we have seen, is antagonistic to the idea that "mass"ness can be thought of as a definite, objective attribute.

### Relocating Value

Late in his T.V. essay, Wallace suggests, despondently, that no end to the cultural malaise he identifies will be forthcoming "so long as no sources of insight on comparative worth, no guides to *why* and *how* to

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Wallace's work, in its attempt to prove that cynicism and naivete are mutually compatible, treats the culture's hip fear of sentiment with the same sort of ironic self-awareness with which sophisticates in the culture portray "goeey" sentimentality; the result is that hip irony is itself ironized in such a way that the *opposite* of hip irony—that is, gooey sentiment—can emerge as the work's indirectly intended mode. For if irony, as Wallace explains in "E Unibus Pluram," is a means of "exploiting gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are," then Wallace uses irony to disclose what irony has been hiding. (Boswell 17)

choose among experiences, fantasies, beliefs, and predilections, are permitted serious consideration in U.S. culture” (75-76). So far my characterisation of the “guide to value” one might read in *Infinite Jest* has focused on its apparent willingness to devalue particular cultural behaviours (drug-taking and the excessive consumption of on-screen entertainments) on a pragmatic level. In this final section, I wish to dwell on the book’s (metafictional) consideration of what might, in a contemporary setting, constitute *valuable* cultural production. The question is self-implicating: how can *Infinite Jest* itself make a claim to possess cultural value notwithstanding its author’s critical (broadly post-axiological) take on the evaluative verities of the past? (It is noteworthy that this is not couched as *value-for*; I expand on this point below.)

The creative exploits of James Incandenza lie at the centre of this aspect of *Infinite Jest*. Though deceased by time of the novel’s “present day,” Incandenza casts a long shadow over the lives of the inhabitants of O.N.A.N. As a physicist, Incandenza invented the (absurd)<sup>59</sup> energy production system upon which the O.N.A.N.’s viability depends; he also contributed to the development of the technology that lies behind O.N.A.N.’s prolifically successful home entertainment network—Interlace. Incandenza was a competitive tennis player, and founded E.T.A. to institutionalise his idiosyncratic sporting and pedagogical interests. Later in life, quite unexpectedly, Incandenza changed careers yet again to become an art-producer, making “documentaries, technically recondite art films, and mordantly obscure and obsessive dramatic cartridges, leaving behind a substantial [...] number of completed films and cartridges, some of which have earned a small academic following for their technical feck and for a pathos that was

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<sup>59</sup> = annular fusion: “a type of fusion that can produce waste that’s fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion” (573).



somehow both surreally abstract and CNS-rendingly melodramatic at the same time” (64). Like Wallace himself (as described earlier by Dave Eggers), Incandenza is described as a genius possessed of an “epic” artistic ambition—one who operates in maximums, extremes.<sup>60</sup>

We can already see that in Incandenza’s work many of the diverse cultural interests traversed in *Infinite Jest* are brought together—a collision of entertainment, scholarship, the scientific and the aesthetic. The films, which readers encounter primarily through various characters’ accounts of them, seem to dramatise the tensions or disjunctions between the various strands of Incandenza’s creative exploits. Incandenza, we learn, “came at entertainment more from an interest in lenses and light” (1026, note 45) and worked, initially at least, in a filmic idiom that was “self-consciously behind the times, making all sorts of heavy art-gesture films about film and consciousness and isness and diffraction and stasis et cetera” (1027). The resulting films (as described here by anonymous scholarly “filmographers”) are indeed “mordantly obscure,” e.g.:

*Kinds of Light*. B.S. Meniscus Films, Ltd. No cast; 16 mm.; 3 minutes; color; silent. 4,444 individual frames, each of which photo depicts light of different source, wavelength, and candle power, each reflected off the same unpolished tin plate and rendered disorienting at normal projection speeds by the hyperretinal speed at which they pass. (986)

We learn of Incandenza’s aesthetic manifestos, including one for viewer-hostile “anticonfluentiaism.” Here his film-making seems determinedly “high” cultural—that is, designed to be consumed and valued exclusively by a small (non-“mass”) audience, the intelligentsia.

However, if fragments of testimony from the deceased auteur and those who knew him are to be believed, Incandenza also aspired to create

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<sup>60</sup> Hal describes him as “a father who lived up to his own promise and then found thing after thing to meet and surpass the expectations of his promise in” (173).

works that would entertain and move a wider audience. We learn of a “commercial” period in the film-maker’s oeuvre, and that he himself “referred to the Work’s various films as ‘entertainments’” (743). (Underlining the apparent unlikelihood of this, we also learn that “[h]e did this ironically about half the time” (743).) The impression we are left with, through various half-remembered and contradictory accounts of the auteur’s intention(s), is of a cultural producer whose output sits awkwardly (or swings wildly) between academy-art and mass entertainment. There are obvious parallels to be drawn with Wallace’s own situation as an artist seeking to define his output in relation to “high” cultural achievements of the past, while at the same time accepting the necessary imbrication of his work with contemporary “mass” culture.<sup>61</sup>

The tragedy for Incandenza, though, is that neither his rarefied films nor his ostensible “entertainments” succeed at becoming *valued* by their intended audience (at least during the auteur’s lifetime). Accounts of various audiences’ indifferent responses to his films often coincide with details of the auteur’s descent into alcoholism; for example:

soon after the InterLace dissemination of *The Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass*, [...] [Incandenza] emerged from the sauna and came to Lyle all sloppy-blotto and depressed over the fact that even the bastards in the avant-garde journals were complaining that even in his commercially entertaining stuff Incandenza’s fatal Achilles’ heel was plot, that Incandenza’s efforts had no sort of engaging plot, no movement that sucked you in and drew you along. (375)<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> And in Wallace’s case, I would note, feeling unconstrained from publishing in non-”literary” publications (magazine articles for example).

<sup>62</sup> Here readers of *Infinite Jest* are directed to its 145<sup>th</sup> endnote: “E.g. see Ursula Emrich-Levine (University of California-Irvine), ‘Watching Grass Grow While Being Hit Repeatedly Over the Head With a Blunt Object: Fragmentation and Stasis in James O. Incandenza’s *Widower*, *Fun with Teeth*, *Zero Gravity Tea Ceremony*, and *Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell*,’ *Art Cartridge Quarterly*, vol. III, nos. 1-3, Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken.”

Another oft-voiced complaint is that the films' metafictional (or metafilmic) focus prevents them from meeting *most* consumers' expectations of representational art:<sup>63</sup>

More like the work of a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication. Technically gorgeous, the Work, with lighting and angles planned out to the frame. But oddly hollow, empty, no sense of dramatic *towardness* – no narrative movement toward a real story; no emotional movement toward an audience. Like conversing with a prisoner through that plastic screen using phones, the upperclassman Molly Notkin had said of Incandenza's early oeuvre. Joelle thought them more like a very smart person conversing with himself. (740)

All told, Incandenza's filmic output assuredly does not stand as an example, endorsed by Wallace, of successful/valuable artistic endeavour. Instead the films seem to serve as examples of artistic failures, the discussion of which (by various characters) allows space for Wallace to traverse some of his own thoughts on what cultural producers *should* strive to achieve.

Of Incandenza's films, one stands out as being especially central to the overall scheme of *Infinite Jest* and the "guide to value" I take to be imbedded within it. I refer to the film "Infinite Jest," which gives its name to Wallace's book and is the last film Incandenza completes before his suicide. The provenance of the film is shrouded in mystery: readers are presented with several conflicting accounts of the auteur's intention during his final, frenzied, period of creativity. For my purpose, it is important to emphasise that the production of "Infinite Jest" seems to spring from Incandenza's singular determination to silence all his critics, to produce a "perfect" work whose value is unquestionable.

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<sup>63</sup> Wallace has written at length about what he sees as the pitfalls of metafiction; see for example the novella, itself metafictional, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" in his short story collection *Girl with Curious Hair*.

Incandenza's success in this task is thoroughly ambivalent. An important premise of Wallace's book is that, through persistence and technical ingenuity, Incandenza succeeds in creating the *perfect entertainment*. The mysterious cultural artefact he leaves behind is so gratifying that viewing it becomes an ultimately deadly addictive pleasure: the viewer henceforth has no interest in anything other than repeating the experience. If "lowness" is equated simply with audience gratification, then "Infinite Jest" can be seen as the logical apogee of "low" culture: "Too Much Fun for anyone mortal to hope to endure" (238). So potent is the film that throughout the novel a shadowy Quebecois terrorist organisation searches for a master copy with which to hold the U.S. nation to ransom; hoping to thwart them is the U.S. secret service ("the Office of Unspecified Services"). "Infinite Jest" resurfaces (with deadly consequences) several times in the book, but for the most part, readers learn about the nature and content of the film only through rumour. Overheard banter at a graduate film-school party, for example:

'— way it can be film qua film. Comstock says if it even exists it has to be something like an aesthetic pharmaceutical. Some beastly post-annular scopophiliacal vector. Suprasubliminals and that.' (233)

[...] 'See that it's doubtless just high-concept erotica or an hour of rotating whorls. Or something like late Makavajev, something that's only entertaining after it's over, on reflection.' (233)

Joelle van Dyne, who starred in the film (though she has "never seen the completed assembly of what she appeared in" (238)), provides a slightly more definite description:

the camera [was] bolted down inside a stroller or bassinet. I wore an incredible white floor-length gown of some sort of flowing material and leaned in over the camera in the crib and simply apologized. [...] The camera was fitted with a lens with something Jim called I think an auto-wobble. Ocular wobble, something like that. [...] I don't think there's much doubt the lens was supposed to reproduce an infantile visual field. (938-939)

It is not important for me to pin down precisely the nature of “Infinite Jest”’s irresistible appeal. My interest in the conceit instead derives from its relation to the broader discussion of cultural value that runs throughout the book. The monumental film that gives its name to Wallace’s monumental book provides a complex focal point in this respect. For “Infinite Jest” succeeds in crystallising the essence of entertainment—this much, indeed, is perhaps implicit in the shorthand name given to the film by several secret agents (complete with definite article): “the Entertainment.” This premise provides several avenues for Wallace to toy (as is his wont) with received ideas about art vs entertainment, another “high”/ “low” binary; it also shows very clearly the stripe of logic that, in my reading, lies at the heart of Wallace’s thinking on cultural value.

First we might note that the ultimate entertainment Wallace posits bears little resemblance to those products typically adduced as sheer “entertainments”.<sup>64</sup> Incandenza’s film is not “formulaic” or clichéd, but is formally ambitious, accomplished, complex. It is entertaining despite the fact that it is (in line with the peculiarly static type of art-film Incandenza had previously produced) “an olla podrida of depressive conceits strung together with flashy lensmanship and perspectival novelty” (791). All this might be read in light of Wallace’s views (expressed in his T.V. essay, for instance) about the naivety of cultural critics who write off “entertainments” they do not value for their lack of sophistication.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Compare, for example, the type of film being snobbishly dissected at the graduate film school party mentioned earlier: ““You know those mass-market cartridges, for the masses? The ones that are so bad they’re somehow perversely good? This was worse than that” (232).

<sup>65</sup> We could also compare another of Wallace’s forays into (something like) cultural studies, the book-length essay he co-authored with Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers: Rap and Race in the Urban Present* (1989). Wallace suggests that rap manifests to most critics as *lacking* form, as unmitigated content (lyrics, which could often be

Another way of looking at the film, though, is reminiscent of Wallace's take on pharmaceuticals, or television: although it succeeds in some sense as an entertainment, it is nevertheless, we are given to understand, not valuable. "Infinite Jest" thus provides another reminder of Wallace's evident view that complexity/sophistication is not a necessary index of cultural value; at the same time, it seems a case is being made for the necessity of distinguishing *pleasure* from value.<sup>66</sup> The implicit argument seems to run along lines we encountered in Wallace's T.V. essay: the product is sophisticated and undeniably entertaining, but its effect—in the case of "Infinite Jest" an enslaving addiction leading to death by inanition—is such that we as readers are invited to accept the wisdom of labelling it, simply, *bad*.

Positing "Infinite Jest" as a universal maximum of cultural pleasure also demonstrates Wallace's reliance on a type of thinking that comes straight from classical axiology.

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condemned—if taken literally—as exhortations to violence or misogyny), due to ignorance of, or a deliberate refusal to consider, rap's own formal restrictions and generic demands. Quoting T. S. Eliot's "Reflections on Vers Libre" as an epigraph, Wallace emphasises that to be successful, a rap lyric must work against the severely restrictive formal requirement of fitting rhymed couplets into a metric structure dictated by a driving drum beat (97). Throughout, Wallace revels in the paradox of writing a literary essay about an art form socially designated as sub-literary, and points out the social determinants (rather than inherent differences) that distinguish rap from the cultural products made by and for "the cold corridors of Real poetry and Serious Appreciation" (100-101).

<sup>66</sup> Steven Connor's chapter "Pleasure of Value, Value of Pleasure" gives a useful account of the ways in which the quality of the pleasure taken from different cultural experiences has been taken by critics to determine the *value* of the texts that, on this view, produce such experiences. At the centre of Connor's chapter is a distinction between theorists who see pleasure and value as distinct, whom Connor terms "moralists," and "hedonists" who maintain that value and pleasure are directly proportional. Bourdieu's characterisation of Kant's account of aesthetic pleasure—that is, as a denial of sensual pleasure so thorough as to constitute a "pleasure purified of pleasure"—would place Kant firmly in the former camp. Connor, however, is characteristically dissatisfied with this binary (pleasure and value as *either* distinct, *or* the same), noting that all "attempts to distinguish value from pleasure tend to end up with a distinction between fundamentally different forms of pleasure" (35).

At the heart of post-axiological thought on value is a conviction that it is meaningless to speak simply of the value *of* a cultural object, as if value was a property of that object rather than a function of that object's place within a particular economy of value. As Barbara Smith repeatedly emphasises, the recognition of this diversity (or potential diversity) of evaluative practices has, in traditional axiology, usually been treated as a difficulty to be overcome. Rather than accepting and describing evaluative diversity, axiological arguments would attempt to construct an "irrefutable" axiological Venn diagram by locating

some set of interests and perspectives which transcend all particularity, which belong to all human beings by virtue of the fact that they are human, and which, when known and duly acknowledged would necessarily take priority over—subsume, absorb, or neutralize—all otherwise individually different interests and perspectives. (Smith 178)

In Wallace's fiction any individual who views "Infinite Jest" is equally at risk, regardless of constitution, educational background or class membership. Particularity duly transcended, all talk of value being contingent on particular practices and discourses of value can be set aside; and *Infinite Jest*'s evaluative investigations do give way to moral quandaries (if such an entertainment *did* exist, what reasons could be offered for resisting the temptation to view it?—and so on). As a conceit, "Infinite Jest" is a gesture towards constructing an economy of value that is universal in scope—Wallace seemingly attempts, like the numerous failed post-axiologists Smith critiques in her book, to provide "commonsense" grounds for why it ought to be possible to speak of the *value of* particular cultural products (by acknowledging but seeking to transcend—via extreme case study—the relativist critique of such thinking).<sup>67</sup> We can again compare Wallace's television essay, in which the author attributes television's success to its ability to target people's

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<sup>67</sup> "Infinite Jest" as an axiological device could be compared with the arguments for "why relativism must have limits" that Smith examines and dismisses in *Contingencies of Value*.

fundamentally similar “vulgar and prurient and dumb interests”. This echoes modernism’s now notorious comparisons of “mass” and “high” cultural consumption as natural opposites, which Steven Connor puts, aptly, in Freudian terms:<sup>68</sup> “mass” culture’s “instantaneous gratifications, its immediate discharges of unpleasurable tension” (38) are compared with “life-affirming” “high” culture: “the forms of equilibrium it achieves take longer, and involve more delay and resistance” (38).

*Infinite Jest*’s rhetoric of value assertion, its self-implicating “guide to value”, does not consist in a simple rehashing of that traditional distinction. For Wallace’s awareness of something like Bourdieu’s social critique of aesthetic judgement—which would attribute the ability of the socially privileged to “detect” and value “high” culture’s “forms of equilibrium” to the workings of evaluative discourse—is writ large (consider its knowing invocation of the “canon effect,” for example). But the “Infinite Jest” conceit, gesturing as it does towards the idea that the experience and value of a cultural text may *not* be entirely contingent upon culturally specific practices and discourses of value, shows Wallace’s reluctance to abandon the idea that the value of certain cultural products may be thought of as an intrinsic property of those products. *Infinite Jest*’s implicit claim to cultural value is organised in opposition to these exemplars of disvalue (for example: the book is entertaining and complex but, unlike “Infinite Jest”—or television, as Wallace describes it—demands active rather than passive consumption). Self-consciously targeted at English majors though it may be, *Infinite Jest*’s universalising gestures show that the problematisation of “high”/ “low” categories that characterises a certain postmodern literary discourse does not necessarily equate to a happy

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<sup>68</sup> The repeated references to “Infinite Jest”’s success being based on an appeal to the inner (pre-Oedipal) infant clearly invoke this Freudian discourse—but an investigation of this is beyond the scope of this chapter.



abandonment of the evaluative logic synonymous with past forms of “high” cultural production.

## 5. Conclusion

There is no escape from the discourse of value, and no escape from the pressure and indeed the obligation to treat the world as though it were fully relational, fully interconnected. (Frow 131)

This thesis has submitted to critique the narrative of modernism's "great divide" between "high" and "mass" culture (or its variant terms) giving way to postmodernism's dismantlement of the same—especially the notion, implicit in various versions of this narrative, that the evaluative practices, or habits of argument, of contemporary cultural critics and producers are uniformly less problematic than those of their modernist counterparts. The method I have pursued in this task has *not* been simply to attempt to thwart the narrative via case study (i.e. showing that *Ulysses*, institutionally defined as a modernist text, seems to display an enlightened understanding of "mass" or "popular" culture, whereas *Infinite Jest*, a text institutionally defined as post-modernist, seems ultimately to rehearse the other-defining moves commonly associated with modernism). That approach certainly has been taken by Joycean critics—seeking to vaunt the value of Joyce's work by extolling the progressive values it contains—as my third chapter explains. My own approach, by contrast, has been to step back from the discourse of "high" and "low" culture that this narrative depends upon.

The post-axiological understanding of "high"/ "low" terms holds that these cannot refer to objectively existing categories whose value and characteristics can be subjected to meaningful discussion. John Frow's argument for the category of "mass" (or "popular") culture to be thought of "not as a sociological given but as, precisely, a category constructed within a historical system" (19) applies equally to the

category “high” culture; and in both instances, the evaluative discourses that give these categories their illusory coherence can be thought of as the preserve of institutions of higher education: universities. Academics bring the categories into being in their very attempts to understand the relationship between “high” and “low” culture: quite apart from explicitly evaluative statements (“popular culture is good” etc), the perception of the cultural field that such statements disclose is itself the product of evaluative discourse or “regimes of value.” In line with this understanding of cultural evaluation, practitioners of cultural studies may be criticised for seeking to effect simple hierarchy reversals—in Connor’s words, “tak[ing] the negative definitions of mass culture offered by modernism and revers[ing] its valencies” (48)—without considering the status of such hierarchies in the first place.

In their “encyclopaedic” construction, *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest* both respond (or can be configured so as to respond) to the university-centric discourse that divides culture into “high” and “popular” halves. This thesis has demonstrated the persistence of that discourse both in criticism (Joyceans’ readings of *Ulysses* as somehow enacting a particular relationship between “high” and “popular” culture) and representation (my own partial reading of *Infinite Jest* shows the enduring relevance of “high”/ “low” categories for at least one cultural producer seeking to make sense of the culture he is immersed in). The fact of that persistence suggests its continued appeal as a metaphor through which to understand “relations of cultural value”—but this appeal, like that of the enormous, time-demanding, “complex” books themselves, is probably now limited to a particular “niche market” of English majors (or, at least, those with a university education).<sup>69</sup> It is

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<sup>69</sup> That *Ulysses* and *Infinite Jest* now occupy this niche is of course the result of very different processes: *Ulysses* was processed through high cultural institutions, which sanctioned the book, rendered it consumable, and created the market demand and value necessary for it to be viably mass reproduced; *Infinite Jest*, conversely, was

not the task of post-axiological critique to expunge these categories from critical or literary discourse on the grounds that they are “illusory”; only to stress, self-consciously, the critical discourse, and the particular interests, that give this metaphor its value *for* a particular community of consumers.

The failure of the Joycean critics of chapter 3 to submit their musings on the relationship between *Ulysses* and “popular culture” to this sort of self-conscious critique is what lies behind some of their more immoderate claims. Derek Attridge’s suggestion, echoed by numerous other critics, that appealing to the book’s “popular” rather than its “esoteric” allusions ought to provide a rejoinder to broad-brush charges of elitism (directed, impliedly, at both Joyce and Joyceans) stands out in this regard. Contra Attridge, a consideration of factors that may lie behind *Ulysses*’ value for the “niche market” posited above would point to the text’s institutional status, and to its complexity (such that it is likely to be valued by those who possess the sort of literacy taught and rewarded through a humanities education). Being upfront about those specific *interests* would seem to me to be infinitely preferable to the course Attridge adopts, which amounts to an attempt to universalise the text’s value by locating (in its “popular” allusions; and by making it “part of what is most valuable in popular culture” (26)) some “quality” that might appeal to a more expansive group of consumers. Despite the way Attridge and other Joyceans use the concept, “popular” cannot be understood as a synonym for universality—it is instead a category that has a particular, contingent, meaning within a literary/academic discourse.

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conceived, brought into existence, as a work already well suited to thrive in that cultural market.

*Infinite Jest*, as well as demonstrating the persistence of “high”/ “low” categories in contemporary “literary fiction” (which might be defined pragmatically as those works published in the “quality imprints” of various publishing houses), discloses an awareness of critical arguments calling into question the integrity of the categories. For instance, its knowing invocation of signifiers of cultural value (allusions, monumentality, canonisation) sits alongside its satirical treatment of “high” cultural consumers to suggest a certain dissatisfied awareness of the processes through which particular values become institutionalised. But Wallace seems to take that awareness, and his vast cultural range, to authorise a “guide to value” that purports to transcend economy, discourse, “evaluative regime.” Wallace’s efforts in this regard could be understood simply as an attempt to inject moral questions into a modish idiom.<sup>70</sup> However, the search Wallace undertakes is also consistent with the discourse of the dismantlement of the great divide that Huyssen posits—placing “progressive” critics and (implicitly university-educated) cultural producers centre-stage to chart a valuable course for culture-as-a-whole.

Thus, in very different ways (though they do respond to the same discourse of cultural periodisation), my readings of *Infinite Jest* and Joycean criticism show that the rhetorical claims by producers and critics to have moved decisively beyond the self-privileging evaluative logic of modernism (claims often made through discussion or representation of “high” / “low” categories being disrupted) are, if not disingenuous, then certainly contestable at the level of argument.

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<sup>70</sup> Pankaj Mishra’s review of Wallace’s final essay collection, 2006’s *Consider the Lobster*, in the New York Times, is entitled “The Postmodern Moralist.” “Reading David Foster Wallace’s new collection of magazine articles,” Mishra writes, “you could be forgiven for thinking that the author of such defiantly experimental fictions as *Infinite Jest* (1996) and *Oblivion* (2004) has been an old-fashioned moralist in postmodern disguise all along.” Mishra’s suspicion is, in one sense, borne out in my reading of *Infinite Jest*.

It is possible to suggest one further reason why “high”/ “low” discourse typically jars with the edicts of recent thought on cultural value. Making use of such categories to understand cultural value in a post-great-divide context (i.e. where it is broadly acknowledged that the simple hierarchy they suggest does *not* represent a reliable guide to value) creates considerable difficulties for those most likely to be doing so—cultural intellectuals, in the broadest sense of the term. For in contemporary usage, the “high” / “popular” binary seemingly offers numerous opportunities for intellectuals to define that with which they do *not* identify or side with (the idea of “high” cultural experience being elitist and exclusionary, for instance), but no ready way of contemplating their own particular interests and agendas. John Frow writes of “that pretence of universality – the pretence of the absence of position – which lends such a false glow of transparency to academic writing” (131). Defining that position would seem to necessitate a more complex understanding of the “social organization of culture” than much of the “high” / “low” discourse traversed in this thesis would allow. Self-consciousness of this ilk may be the only way of reconciling university-centric narratives of the relationship between “high” and “popular” or “mass” culture with the core requirement of contemporary thought on cultural value: that value is always value *for*.

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