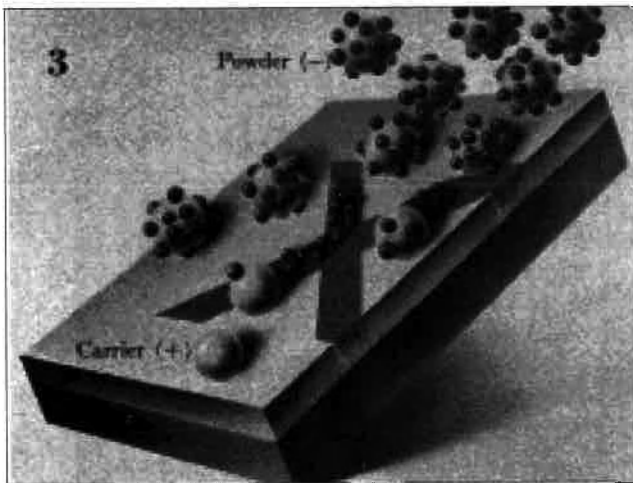


Mark Frauenfelder

CHEAP MEMES ZINES, METAZINES, AND VIRTUAL PRESS



THIS PAPER IS ABOUT THE SPECIAL TYPE of meme carriers known as zines. Before going further, three short definitions are in order. A *meme* is an information pattern capable of replicating, a *zine* is a self-published magazine, and a *metazine* is a zine about zines. I want to talk about the relationship of these things, memes and zines.

Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme*¹ in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* to describe certain types of thoughts and ideas that are analogous to genetic phenomena. A meme is an information pattern that behaves like a virus. A meme inhabits the host's nervous system and causes the host to infect other nervous systems. Slogans, use of the wheel, infectious melodies, catch phrases, religions, rules of thumb, styles, and even the theory of memes itself, are all memes. For example, when an artist thinks of a new way to express an idea, SHE² transmits the idea to other artists, so that the idea jumps from brain to brain, and the style manifests itself in the artwork of other artists.

The science of memetics is a method of studying the behavior and effects of information patterns by using techniques borrowed from epidemiology, evolutionary science and linguistics. Memetics has also been described as "Darwinism applied to ideas."

To qualify as a meme, an information pattern must possess the following attributes. It needs *bait*, something that looks tempting enough for the host to bite so it can enter the nervous system. It also needs a *hook*, something to encourage its replication. Sometimes there is also a *threat*, to discourage the host from changing or discarding the meme.

An example of a meme bearing *bait*, *hook* and *threat* is any one of many conventional religions. The bait is the promise of salvation and eternal life, the hook is the need to infect others with the religion meme, and the threat is eternal damnation and hellfire for those who reject the meme. (The preceding does not apply to your religion, of course. Your religion is not a tricky meme, but rather the one true path leading to glory.)

Memes do not have to be truthful to be robust and spreadable. Nor must they be ultimately beneficial to the host. Keith Henson points out that the Reverend Jim Jones' memes became weirder and weirder when he isolated his group in the jungle, because the well-established memes existing in society could not compete nor provide corrective feedback against his barrage of poisonous memes.³ The Jim Jones meme, the Kamikaze meme and other martyr memes are autotoxic; they kill their hosts.

Talking about memes as if they are alive is not only useful and convenient, it is also accurate. As Richard Dawkins' colleague N.K. Humphrey wrote in *The Selfish Gene*, "...memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way

that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this just isn't a way of talking—the meme for, say, 'belief in life after death' is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous system of individual men the world over."

Memes must fight one another to survive in the nervous systems of human beings, because brain resources are limited. All people filter out ideas they consider useless, and they retain ideas that they consider beneficial in some way. If they didn't, they would exceed the storage capacity of their nervous systems.

Memes also must compete for external carriers: books, magazines, billboards, and electronic media. Network television, national magazines, and book publishers in the overground media rely upon advertising sales income or public funding, and as a result must appeal to a large audience to ensure their survival. To guarantee the continuing support of a large segment of a population, these external carriers must contain memes that are consistent with the *ideosphere*,⁴ or memetic ecology, of that group. Overground media reacts allergically to mutant memes, usually by destroying the external carrier by burning it or banning it, or by inciting the meme police to incarcerate the human propagator and his dangerously contagious nervous system. Witness the sad story of Dr. Wilhelm Reich, an American psychologist who was thrown in prison for continuing his practice even after a U.S. court of law issued an order resulting in the burning of his books.

So where, then, can unpopular, hot, radical or strange memes survive and propagate? Where can the intrepid meme-explorer find a dose of exotica? She needs only to dip his brain into the zine pool, the wild ocean of self-published magazines, where fish learn to breathe and salamanders sprout feathers and try to fly. It is only here, in the primordial soup, far away from the dinosaurs of the overground media, where these new ideas have a chance to test their wings. Because zine makers, also known as *zinesters*, are unburdened by the restraints of commercialism and public opinion, their publications can carry strange memes. And because zinesters are usually more interested in propagating ideas than they are in generating a profit, zines are a plentiful source of cheap memes.

In fact, if anybody enters zine publishing simply to make money, they are doomed. Mike Gunderloy, publisher of the very successful metazine *Factsheet Five* worked an average of 90 hours per week on his zine and still struggled



to pay the bills. The copy sales and feeble advertising dollars a zinester might collect rarely cover the cost of paper, printing and postage, not to mention the time spent producing the zine. Most zines have a circulation of under 100 copies per issue, while many have as few as ten regular readers.

Zines predate the underground newspapers and magazines of the 60's, such as the *East Village Other*, *The Gothic Blimpworks*, *The Oracle*, and *The Realist*.

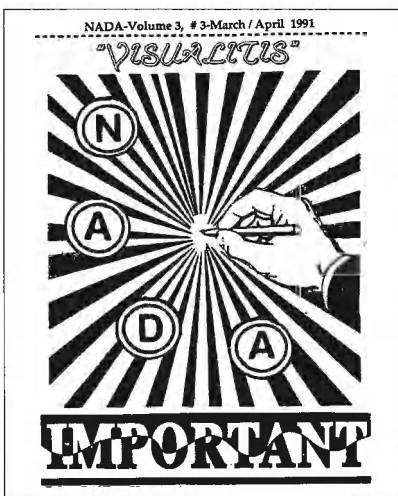
Zines have their deepest roots in science fiction fandom of the 50's and 60's. In those days, a science fiction reader who wanted to share his opinions and enthusiasm would shove a 10-sheet carbon paper sandwich into a typewriter and hack out a three- or four-page fanzine to send to other fans.

These fans would respond by mail, and the zinester would include the letters in his next zine. The letter columns of fanzines became areas for heated debate on issues both about science fiction and only peripheral to science fiction. Politics, environmentalism, religion and social engineering were all fodder for discussion. Often, the letter columns became so swollen that they filled the fanzines' pages almost entirely.

The idea of using cheaply produced zines to bring together fans who shared a common interest quickly spread to areas other than science fiction.

Zines and magazines have a superficial resemblance to one another, but differences abound. Zines are usually focused on highly specialized topics far from the mainstream. They cannot compete with *Life* or *Reader's Digest*. Fledgling memes that have little chance of surviving in well-established external carriers, such as large newspapers and television, can take root and flourish in zines. For example, the overground media rarely mentions cryonics as a method to extend the human life span, and when they do, they reject it as being obviously ridiculous without considering the issue more deeply. Many zines, on the other hand, devote entire issues to cryonics and life extension.

The other major difference between magazines and zines is their start-up and operating expenses. Leonard Mogel, founder of *National Lampoon*, estimates that it costs at least \$60,000 to start a new magazine.⁵ The budget-conscious zinester, however, can produce and mail 100 copies of a ten-page zine for under \$75. The situation is reminiscent of the punk rock movement in 1977. Frustrated musicians, bored with the insular corporate blandness of contemporary rock music, decided to short-circuit the established system by



producing, recording, distributing, promoting, and advertising their music by themselves.

The decentralized, iconoclastic quality of zines is ideal for people interested in shucking prescribed realities in favor of designing their own world-view. The Church of the SubGenius, one of the first religions to use a zine to spread its own blend of particularly virulent memes,⁶ reminds us that truth and reality are subjective yet inescapable shams, and the best course of action is to reject the reality tunnels thrust upon us by the corporate/political world and instead “pull the wool over your own eyes.” Today, anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 zine titles are in print,⁷ and every one of them offers the reality hacker a way to pull his choice of designer wool over his own eyes. Whatever an individual zine may lack in number of readers, the zine universe more than makes up for in volume and variety.

Not only is the zine menu longer than a Chinese restaurant's, it's always changing. Gunderloy estimates that the half-life of a zine is two years.⁸ In other words, only half the zines being published today will still be alive in two years. Of course, by that time, a new batch of external meme carriers will have arrived to fill any vacancies in the ideosphere. The zine world has a high birth rate to match its high death rate.

The explosive growth of zines can be attributed to two phenomena: the ubiquitous photocopier machine and the metazine called *Factsheet Five*.

Before the arrival of cheap photocopier machines, printing for zinesters was a matter of choosing two items from a menu of three: speed, economy, and quality. The traditional offset method was the fastest and prettiest way to print a zine, but it was usually far too expensive. The zinester who played the part of a Benedictine monk by hand-writing each copy, which was cheap and good but terribly slow, illustrates the opposite end of the spectrum. Other methods, such as gelatine printing, mimeograph, and carbon copies, all fell somewhere in between.

Chester Carlson patented the photocopier process in 1938, but it took several decades for the technology to trickle down to the street before zinesters finally had the speed, economy, and quality they needed for perfect printing.

As the number of zines grew in response to the inexpensive photocopier machine, it became difficult to keep track of the different titles in circulation. Mike Gunderloy of Rensselaer, New York, decided one day in 1982 to create a

list that reviewed the interesting fanzines and APAs he received in the mail. He named his list *Factsheet Five*, from a short story written by science fiction author John Brunner.⁹ The first issue of *Factsheet Five* consisted of one two-sided sheet of day-glo green paper. He sent it to 25 friends, who liked it and spread the word around that *Factsheet Five* was a lot of fun.

Other zine publishers learned about the free publicity, and *Factsheet Five's* page count climbed steadily. The first issue took 10 minutes to copy and mail. Today, *Factsheet Five* is a 140-page zine, with a print run of 8,000 copies. Each issue reviews about 1,500 zines and hundreds of audio and video cassettes, computer programs, mail art shows, t-shirts, and artifacts. Gunderloy's shelf space is being eaten up at a rate of 12 inches per week. Still, by Gunderloy's own admission, *Factsheet Five* can only skim the surface.

Categorizing zines is difficult, as most zines are either in a category by themselves, or they change themes with every issue. Some zines have no recognizable focus. The following breakdown, however, presents a rough picture of what's available, and will hopefully spark your interest to go fishing in the zine pool.

APAs

APAs are one of the oldest and most enduring type of zine.¹⁰ They are wholly reader-written zines ostensibly devoted to single topics: libertarianism, space exploration, sexuality, drugs, paganism, the occult, etc. An APA usually contains about 20 members. Each member creates a few pages of the zine at home, makes 20 copies, and sends them to a designated editor. The editor collates the contributions, and staples them together to produce 20 identical zines. These are sent back out to the members of the APA, who have contributed to a fund that covers the cost of staples, stamps and envelopes. One APA, *The Connection*,¹¹ has been around for over a decade, and features feuds, grudge matches, and intelligent discussion on categories like anarchy, libertarianism, conspiracy theory, sex, law and quantum physics. A typical issue of *The Connection* runs over 80 pages of very small print.

POLITICAL ZINES

Because the underground media usually completely ignores any type of political discussion other than the usual bland Republicrat fare, other political and anti-political groups end up hanging out in zineland. Here, among groups



more different from one another than from the democrats or republicans, you'll find anarchists, monarchists, upwingers, constitutionalists, libertarians, neo-Nazis, syndicalists, communists and conspiracy theorists. Most of the time these zines are preaching to the choir, and the rest of the time factions of similar groups are engaging in bloody duels over hypothetical scenarios.

Several political zines are made by, for or about prisoners. *Factsheet Five* has about 200 prisoner subscribers. It is interesting to speculate why so many people involved with zines are locked up. One prisoner who subscribes to *BOING-BOING* recently wrote to me saying:

I get a large amount of "subversive" and "normal" material each month. I must confess that since I've come here (to prison), my anarchist tastes have become quite strong and I like to read anything that's anti-government. Before I came here I was your basic all-American, patriotic kind of guy. But that was before I found out how vile, repulsive, crooked, lying, cheating, unlawful, disgusting and hypocritical our government was!

I can only hope that a combination of fanzines and prison can teach other wayward youth the same lesson.

RELIGIOUS ZINES

As author Peter Lamborn Wilson observes, the so-called "joke religions"—which aren't really jokes at all—such as Discordianism, The Church of the SubGenius, and the Moorish Orthodox Church, "...remove the problem of authority by laughing it out of existence."¹² The zines produced by these joke religions are some of the funniest and weirdest in the zine universe.

Other groups who use zines to spread their religious memes include psychedelic tribes, witch covens, pagans, and what I call "hate" religions—racial supremacists who believe that the path to Heaven is lined with the corpses of people having skin color other than their own. Fortunately, in my experience, for every zine that preaches hatred, there are ten that would rather throw an eternal global party.

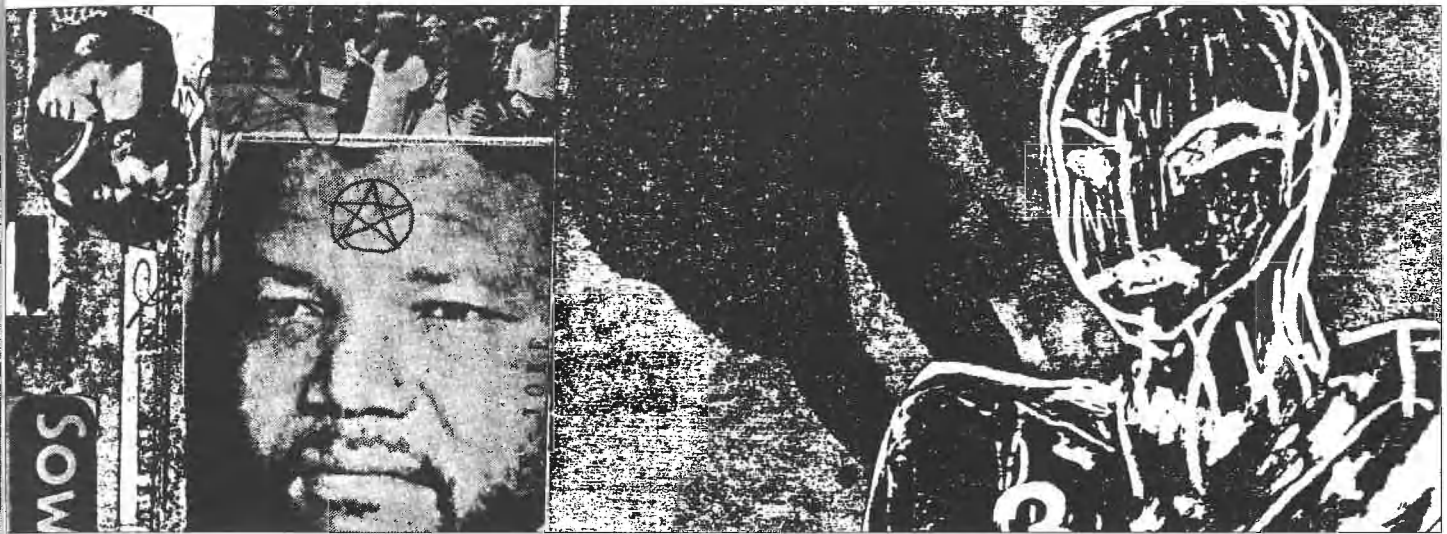
SPECIAL INTEREST ZINES

This third category includes everything else. In it you'll find things like the 170-page zine called *The Agonizer*, devoted solely to Klingon lore; *The Diseased Pariah News*, for artists and writers with AIDS; *2600*, a computer hacker's zine; and *Nomadness*, an ongoing chronicle of a man traveling around the country on a recumbent bicycle that is outfitted with two-way radio, solar power, several computers, and satellite dishes. The best way to experience the richness and variety of zines is to get a copy of *Factsheet Five* and read the reviews.

The latest and potentially most powerful evolutionary step in cheap meme propagation techniques is called the virtual zine. Virtual zines exist only in the electronic matrices of computer networks. Anyone equipped with a personal computer and a \$100 modem can tap into this network and become a member of any one of thousands of electronic communities which represent the new frontier. As information continues to overshadow gold as the hard currency of choice, these electronic communities will become more important than geographical/territorial states and nations. Individuals all over the world can instantaneously share information with one another, and by using encryption techniques, they can keep the censors and thought police at bay.

The virtual press represents the ultimate in the Fast, Cheap and Good menu. It's a method by which one may easily, cheaply and instantly make information available to tens of millions of people. This kind of power has already proven to be enough of a threat to the federal government that they have excluded electronic publications from the protection of the First Amendment.

In December of 1988, a computer hacker stole a document from the Bell South Telephone company and made it available on several electronic bulletin boards. Craig Neidorf, publisher of the virtual zine *Phrack*, found a copy of the document and placed it in his zine. About a year later, the U.S. Secret Service launched a program called Operation Sun Devil, in which they kicked down the doors of 28 homes and businesses, held guns to the heads of family



members, including a 12-year old girl's, seized 40 computers and 23,000 disks. Neidorf's computer system was confiscated and he was charged with printing the stolen Bell South Document. One man who found that the document had appeared on his network, and reported it to AT&T, had his entire system confiscated as well. The stolen document had a value of \$30, and was available to regular Bell South customers.¹³ As John Perry Barlow, Grateful Dead lyricist and co-founder of the Electronic Frontiers Foundation observed, "If the [Bell South] document had been the *Pentagon Papers* (another proprietary document) and *Phrack* the *New York Times*, a completion of the analogy would have seen the government stopping publication of *The Times* and seizing its every material possession, from notepads to presses."¹⁴ Although only four people were actually arrested in the raids, most of the people who were violated by the S.S. are still waiting for the return of their property.

The fate of electronic communication is undecided. The EFF (Electronic Frontiers Foundation) was established in June of 1991 by Barlow and Lotus Development founder Mitch Kapor to protect the virtual press from government censorship, and to see that Gestapo invasions such as Operation Sun Devil don't happen again.

All new memes deserve a chance to compete with the defending champions in the open arena of external carriers, whether these carriers are physical or electronic. Those who deny an individual the right to expose his nervous system to new information patterns are brainwashers and slave masters. What's more, these censors who fear new ideas because they threaten the established power structure, are cutting their own throats. Even if 99.9% of the memes transmitted through zines are garbage, natural selection will weed these out, just as it does to 99.9% of all mutated genes. The strong will survive. But new ideas are needed to solve old problems, and it's only in the radical meme pool that people are going to find the successors to the ideas and practices that have brought ecological destruction and genocidal politics upon our world. *

NOTES

1. Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1976) gives credit to anthropologist F.W. Cloak, geneticist L.L. Cavalli-Sforza and ethologist J.M. Cullen for introducing the idea of memes.
 2. I'm making use of a meme adopted by Dr. Timothy Leary to avoid sexist pronouns. Here's a handy list of genderless terms with which you can infect yourself: hir=her/his, SHe=she/he, WoMan=woman/man.
 3. H. Keith Henson, "Memes, Meta-Memes, & Politics." *Singularity* no. 3, Autumn 1990, pp. 15-19.
 4. Analogous to biosphere, or the genetic ecology.
 5. Leonard Mogel, *The Magazine*. Globe Pequot: Chester, Conn., 1988.
 6. Ivan Stang, *The Book of the SubGenius*. McGraw Hill: New York, 1983. *The Stark Fist of Removal* is a zine that has had a great influence on other zinesters in the development of other zines and mutant religions.
 7. Mike Gunderloy, "Zines: Where the Action is: The Very Small Press in America." *Whole Earth Review*, no. 68, Fall 1990, pp. 55-60.
 8. Gunderloy, *ibid*.
 9. John Brunner also wrote a book entitled *Shockwave Rider*, which inspired Robert Morris to write the worm computer program that accidentally brought down the Internet computer network.
 10. The acronym "APA" stands for amateur press association, and refers to an old club that used to put out their own publications to show off their printing skills.
 11. A sample copy of *The Connection* is available for \$3 from Erwin S. Strauss, P.O. Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038.
 12. Mark Frauenfelder, "Peter Lamborn Wilson Interview." *BOING-BOING* no. 5, 1991.
 13. R.U. Sirius and George Gleason, "Do G-Men Dream of Electronic Sheep?" *Mondo 2000* no. 3, Winter 1991, pp. 40-43.
 14. John Perry Barlow, "Crime and Puzzlement: In Advance of the Law on the Electronic Frontier." *Whole Earth Review* no. 68, Fall 1990, pp. 44-57. The Electronic Frontiers Foundation exists on the WELL (Whole Earth 'Electronic Link). Barlow can be reached through the WELL or any other bitnet link as barlow@well.sf.ca.us.
- Other Works Used: Glenn Grant, "A Memetic Lexicon." *BOING-BOING* no. 5, 1991. Mike Gunderloy, *How to Publish a Fanzine*. Loompanics Unlimited: Port Townsend, Wash., 1988. Douglas Hofstadter, *Metamagical Themas: Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern*. Basic Books: New York, 1985.