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<http://yalepaprika.com/this-will-kill-that-silicon-valleys-mission-of-media-transcendence/>

This Will Kill That: Silicon Valley's Mission of Media Transcendence

~R. John Williams

The archdeacon gazed at the gigantic edifice for some time in silence, then extending his right hand, with a sigh, towards the printed book which lay open on the table, and his left towards Notre-Dame, and turning a sad glance from the book to the church—"Alas," he said, "this will kill that. . . The book will kill the edifice."

~Victor Hugo, *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831)

The archdeacon's lament (the "sad glance") in this iconic scene in *Notre-Dame de Paris* signaled something more complicated—but not necessarily lamentable—for the book's author Victor Hugo. If, as Hugo explains, the world created by the printing press "killed" that of architecture and its traditional centrality as a form of human expression, that death also heralded a general expansion of media-generated possibility. "Who does not perceive," Hugo writes, "that in this form it [human thought as embodied in the printed book] is far more indelible? It was solid, it has become alive. It passes from duration in time to immortality."¹ It's no surprise Hugo felt this way, of course; he was a novelist whose success relied on the mechanical reproduction and wide circulation of his

¹ Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (New York: The Century Co., 1905), p. 200.

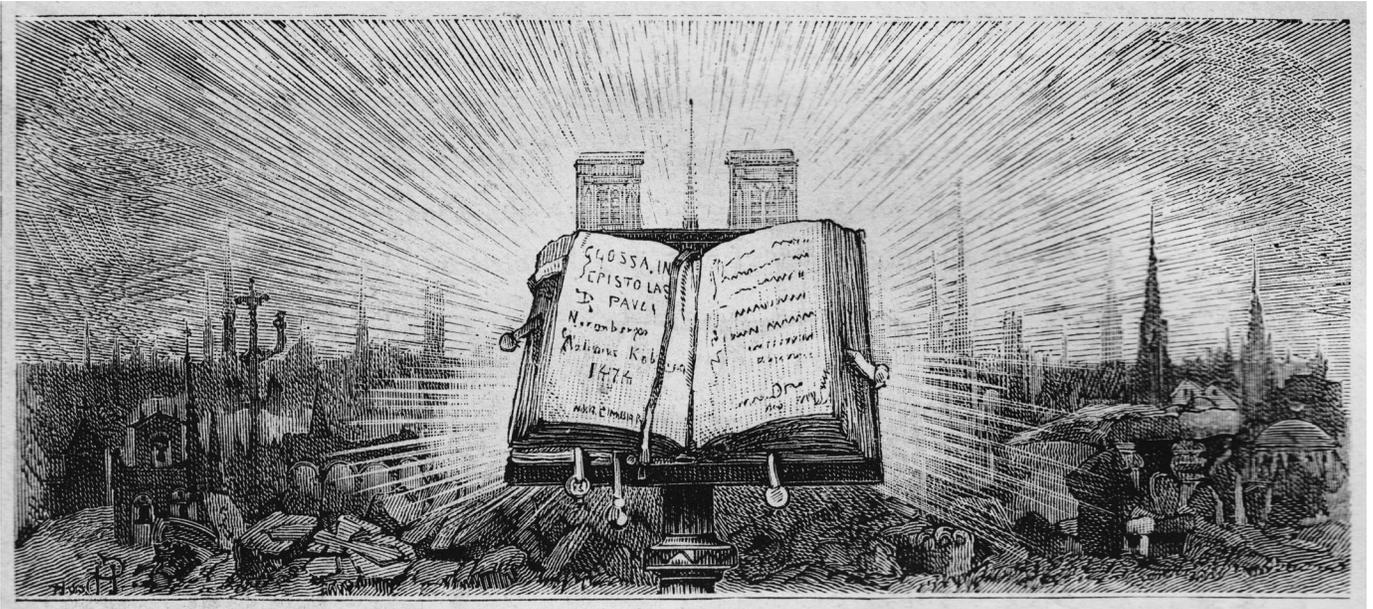


Fig. 1 "This Will Kill That." Illustration for Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Vol. I (New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1891), p. 230.



Fig. 2: "This Will Kill That." Illustration for Victor Hugo, *The Works of Victor Hugo: Notre-Dame de Paris*, Vol. I (New York: The Kelmescott Society, 1888), p. 186

work. But the scene is also symbolic, and generally positive, for Hugo in an even more obvious historical and religious sense: the “book” (as in the printed-and-therefore-more-widely-circulating *Bible*) also killed the “edifice” (as in the cloistered realm of ecclesiastical authority embodied in the *cathedral*). What the archdeacon is pointing to, in other words, signaled a transformation as religious as it was media-specific.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this scene has been illustrated widely in various translations and adaptations of Hugo’s novel (Figs. 1-2), and even presented an opportunity for a film studio to describe itself as the next media-specific iteration of the transition of human thought from “duration in time” to “immortality.” In RKO’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), the same scene shows the archdeacon looking up from his first viewing of a printed book, glancing out the window at the cathedral and offering the same lines—but with two interesting differences: first, whereas Hugo’s archdeacon expresses sadness at the passing of the media torch, RKO’s archdeacon appears wistful and full of hope. “Cathedrals are the handwriting of the past,” he explains, “the press is of *our* time.” Not only that, “the printing press is a miracle” because “small things have a way of overmastering the great.” Although it was one of the smaller Hollywood studios (described at the time as a “corporate foundling”—one that hoped very much to “overmaster” the greater studios), RKO was founded on a commitment to technological innovation in film, specifically as a means of capitalizing on new sound technology in cinema.² In a gesture that literally points to that technological commitment, the archdeacon in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* looks out the window and point *not* at the actual Notre-Dame cathedral but at a sophisticated back-projection, creating the cinematic illusion of Paris in the fifteenth century. The message for Hollywood insiders in the 1930s would have been as clear as Hugo’s was for readers of the 19th century: film is “of our time,” and RKO’s commitment to new cinematic technologies signaled the quasi-religious power of the new medium.

A more recent iteration of this media-transitional scene appeared recently in Dave Eggers’ novel *The Circle* (2013). In that, the young protagonist Mae finds herself in a new job besieged by the incessant demand to “share” everything as part of her employment at a Silicon Valley corporation known as “The Circle” (something like Facebook or Google—

² Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), p. 56-57.



Figs. 3-4: Screenshot from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (RKO Pictures, 1939). In this scene the archdeacon first looks down at a freshly printed book, commenting, "Print is a *new* form of expression of thought," and then, looking out the window at the cathedral of Notre Dame, continues, "out there is the *old* form." The added irony of this scene is that the filmmakers were using "back projection" to create the effect of being in Paris, suggesting that film itself might be an even newer form of "expression of thought."



Fig. 5 (above): Architect's rendering (2011) of Apple Inc.'s future headquarters in Cupertino, California, currently under construction.

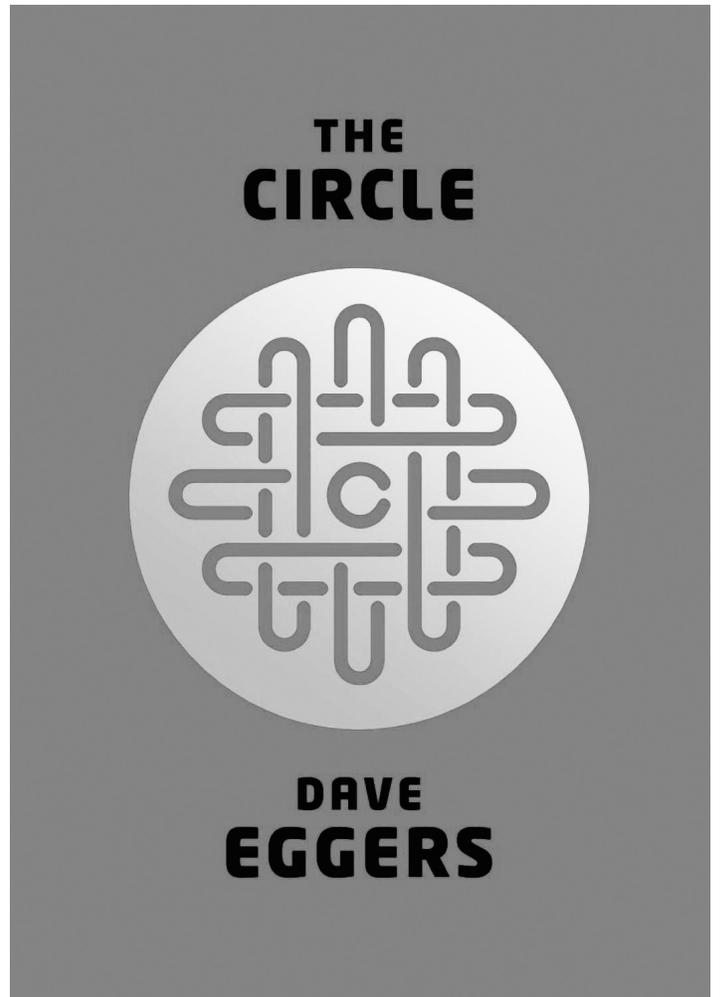


Fig. 6 (right): Cover illustration for Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (New York: Vintage, 2014).

although the novel's title is almost certainly a reference to the architectural structure of Apple's new campus [Figs. 5-6]). Mae's first reaction to this intense demand for openness is to retreat back into the privacy of her home life, with her father's illness serving as a convenient cover. Her supervisor, Josiah, promptly calls her in for a meeting, asking why she drove off in such haste: "I was just upset," she responds, "and worried, and I was driving like a maniac. I wasn't very present." Josiah replies:

"Ah, *present*. That is a wonderful word. I'm glad you used it. Do you consider yourself usually present?"

"I try to be."

Josiah smiled and tapped a flurry into his tablet.³

But this desire for privacy (and to carve out a life other than what is continually "present" online) is continually countered in the novel by the Circle's insatiable desire for a world of total transparency. Something truly sinister, we eventually discover, lies at the core of Silicon Valley's push for interconnected networks and a world where everyone "shares" everything (as the Circle's CEO teaches, "privacy is theft!"). What is characterized by the network culture of the book as a quasi-religious "world moving toward communion," readers eventually recognize as a cultish regime of totalitarian surveillance.⁴ For Eggers, the new media ethos of the Circle and its Silicon Valley cousins constitutes a violation of the intimate communion made possible in experiences like sex, family life, and—crucially—novel reading. Unlike the "always now" of the Circle's endless transparency, novels require long stretches of time and intimate headspace. One can almost hear Eggers scoffing at reviewers who complain about the novel's length (many noted, for instance, that *The Circle* is pleasant enough fiction, but that at 479 pages it can get a bit plodding at times), thinking, no doubt, "they don't get it, do they? *This* [the Circle and its Silicon Valley obsession with the instant now] *will kill that* [the extended attention, temporality, and material solidity of printed books]." Its length is part of the point, part of what is threatened by *this*.

³ Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (New York: Vintage, 2014), p. 183.

⁴ Eggers, *The Circle*, p. 468. The religious overtones conjured up by the Circle are not hard to find: the three leaders of the corporation are known as the "Three Wise Men" (pp. 19-20), and enthusiasts for the "closing of the Circle" describe it as the fulfillment of spiritual history ("All religion has been waiting for this, when every human is a direct and immediate messenger of God's will," pp. 398-399).



Fig. 7: Drawing by Theodoros Pelecanos of an *Ouroboros* (1478) in an alchemical tract attributed to Synesius.

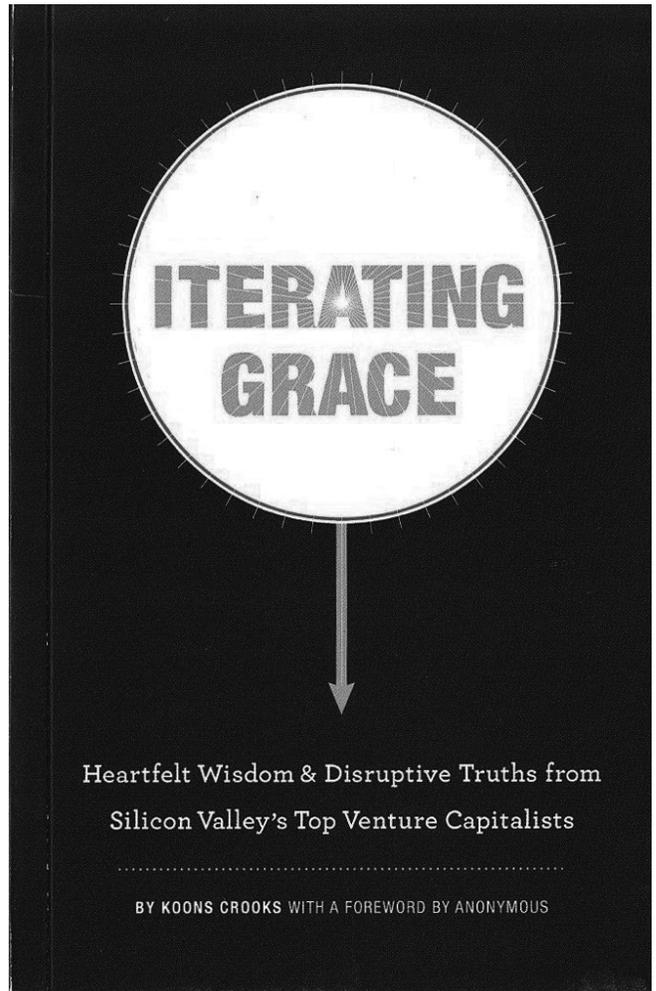


Fig. 8: Original cover for *Iterating Grace: Heartfelt Wisdom & Disruptive Truths from Silicon Valley's Top Venture Capitalists* (New York: FSG, 2015)

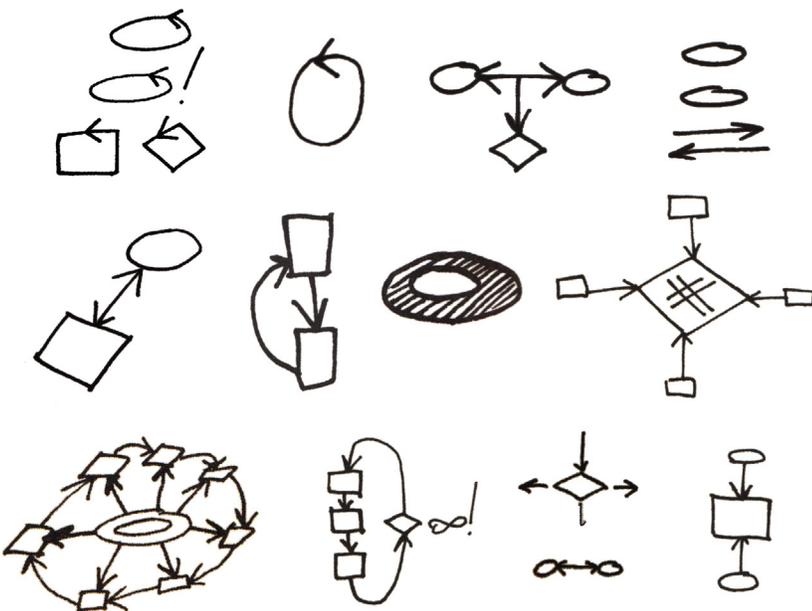


Fig. 9: Circular scribbles and diagrams printed on the inside cover and in the margins of *Iterating Grace* (2015)

But if in these iterations of religious iconography the symbol of architecture predominance was the cathedral, and the symbol of mechanical reproduction was the Gutenberg Bible, why should the symbol of Silicon Valley be a circle? It isn't just that these iconic moments of "this killing that" appear to be historically *cyclical*—although Silicon Valley corporations no doubt want very much to understand their mission as the transcendent fulfillment of all these earlier instances of human expressiveness. As so many scholars have recently demonstrated, a kind of spiritual geometry (one specifically obsessed with circles) has always lurked at the core of Silicon Valley's cultural matrix. What Marshall McLuhan called the "externalization" of our "central nervous system" generated by the Information Age's electronic wiring gave us endless loops of recursive systems—a massive, world-wide infrastructure for new modes of information *circulation* (a term whose original meaning indicated, simply, "movement in a circle").⁵ Indeed, there's a reason why the symbol of the ouroboros (the snake biting its own tail) was so important to so many of the early creators of the Internet (Fig. 7). Cybernetics itself conjured a circling loop of operator and environment.⁶

Perhaps the perfect text to point to in illustrating the circle-obsessed ethos of these network corporations is the deliciously satirical account of Silicon Valley presented in the anonymous tract *Iterating Grace: Heartfelt Wisdom and Disruptive Truths from Silicon Valley's Top Venture Capitalists*.⁷ The little volume first appeared as a kind of self-published pamphlet, delivered anonymously to a number of Silicon Valley elites. Its anonymity immediately became a topic of online blog gossip, shrouded, as it was, in an air of knowing that indicated someone on the "inside" must have written it.⁸ The text's narrator tells of one "Koons Crooks" who makes the mistake of accepting as gospel the

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *The Essential McLuhan* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 245.

⁶ The cyberneticist Stafford Beer, for instance, described his discipline as the study of "continuing operation" which he claimed was essentially "circular." "That is why cybernetics takes *ouroboros*, the snake that bites its own tail, as a suitable logo, and talks about circular causality," qtd in *International Encyclopedia of Systems and Cybernetics* (München: K.G. Saur, 2004), p. 223. For more on the centrality of the ouroboros in early cybernetic thinking see Bruce Clarke, *Neocybernetics and Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. 77-80.

⁷ *Iterating Grace: Heartfelt Wisdom and Disruptive Truths from Silicon Valley's Top Venture Capitalists* (New York: FSG, 2015).

⁸ Charley Locke, "The Strange Path of Iterating Grace, Silicon Valley's Most Vicious Satire," *Wired* (Dec. 6, 2015): <http://www.wired.com/2015/12/iterating-grace-anonymous-satire/>.

banal tweets of various Internet company big shots.⁹ In an “ecstatic realization,” after the dot-com collapse, Crooks comes to believe that “the dot-com economy had been ‘one big mandala,’ referring to the Buddhist tradition of creating art out of sand and then wiping the artwork away.”¹⁰ This realization leads him to various “spiritual exercises” that culminate in his absconding to the Bolivian highlands where he dies near a volcano, having been trampled by animals (willingly), all in an effort to “touch THE ESSENCE.”¹¹ The “Iterating” of the book’s title is ostensibly a reference to the name for platform updates offered periodically by Silicon Valley companies (iterations 2.0, 3.0, and so on), but given Crooks’ bizarre metaphysical willingness to enter the cosmic “cycle” of rebirth (and coupled with the theologically-tinged “Grace”), the title is no doubt also a satirical jab at the Valley’s obsession with the quasi-sacred geometry of the circle. In addition to the radiating circle on the cover of the volume (Fig. 8), everywhere inside *Iterating Grace*, little hand-drawn circles and other recursive loops decorate the margins. Punctuated by the occasional exclamation point, these marginal drawings look like nothing so much as diagrammatic ourobouři—or perhaps the epiphanic scribbles on a Silicon Valley whiteboard (Fig. 9).¹²

The genius of *Iterating Grace*, I would argue, is that it so effortlessly parodies the underlying, metaphysical dream of Silicon Valley elites: to get out, finally, of the “this will kill that” logic of media transition and enter a state of spiritualized media transcendence. What these corporations want to believe is that the swirling maelstrom of their networked world means not that “this” (Silicon Valley) will kill “that” (all our former media experiences), but that a kind of immortality awaits us all—*this will give Eternal Life to that*, or so goes the promise.

⁹ As far as I know no one has yet deciphered what the weird name “Koons Crooks” might mean, but it is perhaps not irrelevant, I’d suggest, that there are four circles (o’s) in it.

¹⁰ *Iterating Grace*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Iterating Grace*, p. 5.

¹² “Iterating” coupled with “grace” may also be a reference to Michael Fried’s famous 1967 essay on minimalist art, which ends with the phrase “presentness is grace” (the message being that these Internet companies think of their “iterations” as so much artistic “presentness”); see Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 168.