

HUMAN BEINGS IN A POSTHUMANIST WORLD

HUMAN BEINGS IN A POSTHUMANIST WORLD:
MENIPPEAN SATIRE AND TECHNOLOGICAL SOLIPSISM IN *INFINITE JEST*

By

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TITLE: Human Beings in a Posthumanist World: Menippean Satire and Technological Solipsism in *Infinite Jest*

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Abstract

Although written in the late twentieth century, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* takes place in the twenty-first century and is an extrapolation on social trends, namely the trend of ubiquitous technology and entertainment in American society. In this thesis, I explore, through a twenty-first century perspective, various topics in relation to the theme of technology in the novel. In order to show the all-encompassing influence of this theme, I divide my thesis into two main sections, by looking at the big picture (the structure of the novel) and the small picture (the individual characters and their relationships with one another). In the first chapter, I categorize *Infinite Jest* as a work of Menippean satire. In doing so, I suggest that the novel mimics the very culture it critiques, the fragmented culture of technology. In the second chapter, I look at the ways in which the characters communicate—or rather, don't communicate—with one another. Through a discussion on the novel's monologic quality, I then move into the third chapter, wherein I view the theme of solipsism as a product of the culture of technology. The fourth chapter is an examination of the role of the MacGuffin in the narrative. I argue that Wallace uses the MacGuffin and the novel's lack of resolution as a metaphor for the search for meaning in a posthumanist world devoid of meaning and clarity. While each chapter contains a distinct discussion, ultimately the overarching goal of this thesis is to explore the effects, as depicted in *Infinite Jest*, of the posthumanist world on humanity. According to Wallace, good fiction shows the reader what it means to be a human being, yet in a technology and entertainment-driven world, wherein the line between reality and artificiality is blurred, the issue of what it means to be a human being is problematized.

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“Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being.” – David Foster Wallace (qtd. in McCaffery 131)

“I’m not a machine.” – Hal Incandenza (*Infinite Jest* 12)

Introduction

Due to its length (nearly 1,100 pages, about a hundred of which are eye-straining endnotes), and its narrative and structural complexity, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, as far as critical appraisal goes, has garnered more of an explicative surface scratching than any kind of coherent interpretation since its publication in 1996. Similarly, the novel has received equal parts praise, such as being named by *TIME Magazine* as one of the one hundred best English-language novels since 1923, and criticism, such as when noted literary critic Harold Bloom called it "just awful," and about said about Wallace: "He can't think, he can't write. There's no discernible talent" (qtd in Koski). It should therefore be stated that it is not the aim of this thesis to explain or defend the novel, but rather to explain *aspects* of it and to contribute to the ongoing discussion by analyzing the text through a unique and modern lens. Of interest to this thesis is the culture that the author critiques, the technology-driven culture, wherein an obsession with entertainment has left people without a sense of meaning and human connection.

Superficially, *Infinite Jest* is about young members of the Enfield Tennis Academy, recovering drug addicts of Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (sic), separatist wheelchair assassins from Québec (*Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents*), and the search for the master copy (the "lethal entertainment") of the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge, but ultimately it is "about what it is to be a fucking human being" (McCaffery 131). And what it is to be a human being at the turn of the twenty-first century, according

to Wallace, is to be devoid of meaning, and it is to be confused and lonely. The cause of this confusion and loneliness is technology, which has distanced individuals from one another. Not only distanced spatially but also distanced in the sense of a lack of adequate communication as a result of an inferior language—the language of television and the Internet, which, according to Neil Postman, is inferior because it is fragmented and without a context, and because of its emphasis on entertainment.

I will begin with an examination of the overall structure of the novel, since perhaps its most discussed quality is its unique layout and size. Its structure—lengthy, fragmented, nonlinear, loosely narrated, multi-perspectival, multi-tonal, and all around difficult—is in fact so unique that some see it as being just as important as the narrative itself. Classified by some as an example of postmodern literature, in the same vein as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, by others as post-postmodernism, and yet by others as having created or been at the forefront of a new genre altogether, such as metamodernism or hysterical realism, I will instead contend that *Infinite Jest* can be best understood as an example of Menippean satire. By analyzing the novel through this particular classification I believe that Wallace's social critique will become more apparent.

In the first chapter I will define Menippean satire, as it is understood by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* and Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, and, through examples from the novel, I will explain why I believe *Infinite Jest* warrants such a classification. I will then address the implications of making such a distinction, as I will suggest that Wallace uses Menippean satire so as to mimic the experience of living in

the technology-driven world, which, similar to the structure of the novel, is fragmented, chaotic, and at times confusing. In order to make my case I will also draw upon the works of such critics as Neil Postman, whose writing deals with the effects of television on American culture. In particular, Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, which describes the decline of public discourse and American culture in general in "the Age of Show Business" (63), and which contains several sentiments that Wallace would later echo in his novel and his own essay writing, will inform a great deal of this thesis.

After discussing the overall structure of the novel, in the second chapter I will begin to analyze more specific issues, such as the characters and their relationships with one another. Again I will be discussing Postman's criticisms and how he believes that technology and entertainment have had an impact on the way in which people communicate. The first part of this chapter will outline the main theoretical framework and therefore will be more of a cultural critique than a literary one, with the goal of answering the question as to how the shift away from sharing information and knowledge via the written word to information and knowledge via technology has affected human relationships. I will then apply this theoretical framework to the novel and examine specific instances. For example, I will look at how characters, such as Hal and his brother Orin Incandenza, interact with one another. Instead of fully engaging, often when characters have conversations there is a sense of disconnection, which is similar to the phenomenon that Raymond Williams points out in "Drama in a Dramatized Society."

In this chapter I will also address Wallace's peculiar use of the term "interfacing" to refer to face-to-face conversations. Although known for his impressive lexicon, I will

argue that Wallace's use of the literal "interfacing" represents the author's recognition of the decline of human connection in the age of technology. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to analyze not only the social realm of the late-twentieth/early twenty-first century but also the social realm within *Infinite Jest*.

In contrast to the social, the third chapter deals with the individual, through the philosophical notion of solipsism, which is not only a recurring theme in *Infinite Jest* but is a recurring theme in just about all of Wallace's writing, both fiction and non-fiction. I will begin with a discussion on solipsism as a cultural issue and how people, due to the irony of globalization, wherein people are brought together and distanced from one another at the same time, faces a solipsistic crisis—that is, a sense of isolation and loneliness. By first discussing solipsism as a product of the technology-driven world, it will help give better understanding to the theme as it pertains to the novel. I will be discussing this issue in particular with Hal, as the second part of this chapter attempts to answer the question as to what happens to Hal at the end of the novel. Hal's decline is perhaps one of the most enigmatic and hotly debated aspects of the novel (for instance, there are several internet discussions, such as those found on the websites *Infinite Summer* and *The Howling Fantods*, devoted solely to answering this question). The explanation that I will explore is that Hal experiences a mental breakdown that shuts him off from everyone around him. In other words, Hal's decline is the result of solipsism, as he becomes the embodiment of Ludwig Wittgenstein's private language argument and is therefore unable to communicate with others.

The final chapter is devoted to the general theme of uncertainty or confusion that permeates the pages of the novel. Instead of attempting to answer or clarify any of the uncertainty, which would not only be hubristic on my part but downright impossible given the page-length restrictions, I will instead point towards it as being a key factor to the plot. That is, I will argue that certain questions are not supposed to be answered and that the novel is intended to be, at least to an extent, confusing and without a clear resolution, because this very lack of resolution supports the notion of the novel being reflective of American culture at the time. Wallace himself, through various interviews, seemed to allude to there both being a clear ending and not being one. At one point he said, “There is an ending as far as I’m concerned. Certain kinds of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an ‘end’ can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book’s failed you” (qtd. in *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* 321). And yet in another instance he said, “Plot wise, the book doesn’t come to a resolution. But if the readers perceive it as me giving them the finger, then I haven’t done my job. On the surface it might seem like it just stops. But it’s supposed to stop and then kind of hum and project” (qtd. in Donahue 72). Making the matter less ambiguous, literary friend and confidant Jonathan Franzen later revealed that Wallace admitted “the story can’t fully be made sense of” (qtd. in “Webs of Nerves Pulsing and Firing” 61). I will argue that this is not a fault on the author’s behalf but that the lack of resolution serves a sort of metaphorical purpose, representing the lack of clarity that the person in “the Age of Show Business” (Postman 63) encounters.

In relation to this theme of ambiguity I will examine the role of the MacGuffin. I will start off by discussing the form in which the MacGuffin takes: the *Infinite Jest* lethal entertainment, a film so entertaining it renders the viewer incapable of doing anything but watching it. This again entails the themes of technology and entertainment, as Wallace's MacGuffin echoes Postman's assertion that people are at risk of amusing themselves to death. I will then discuss the MacGuffin's use as a narrative device, which leads to the notion of what might be called postmodern absurdism—that is, the search for meaning and understanding in a posthumanist world that is increasingly artificial and vague. I will explore the idea that the subplot of the search for the *Infinite Jest* film is analogous to Albert Camus's understanding of absurdism, which says that human nature is such that man will always seek meaning and clarity from a universe that will always fail to provide such things. To conclude, I will give my unique interpretation of the (physical) ending of the novel, which is yet another ambiguous matter.

Wallace himself was a prolific essay writer and social critic—as such, I will often draw upon his non-fiction in this thesis—and he discussed the issue of television in an essay entitled “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” urging that we not take it lightly: “the most dangerous thing about television for U.S. fiction writers is that we yield to the temptation not to take television seriously as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process” (155). Not only did he comment on the effects of television on society at the time, but, through the form of speculative fiction, he also augured our current twenty-first century obsession with, and downright dependence on, technology. Like Arthur C. Clarke in the 1960s and 70s speculating on the

developments of technology in the future, Wallace seems to predict many of the commonplace features of our current screen culture, such as video on demand, videophones, and the ubiquity of the Internet. More than this, however, Wallace recognizes and predicts the cultural malaise of the twenty-first century, the sense that people were becoming, to use a technological term, *disconnected* from one another. Or, as it is described in the novel, “‘Existential individuality, frequently referred to in the West. Solipsism” (*IJ* 113).

It is therefore one of the goals of this thesis to pick up where the author left off and to examine the novel in light of cultural and technological revelations. Wallace, writing in the twentieth century, saw television as being “malignantly addictive” and a kind of ouroboros-like symbol of loneliness:

If it's true that many Americans are lonely, and if it's true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and if it's true that lonely people find in television's 2D images relief from the pain of their reluctance to be around real humans, then it's also obvious that the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent in the real human world, and the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans, solipsistic, lonely. (“E Unibus Pluram” 163)

In the twenty-first century, however, television is just one of the many examples of technology to which society is “malignantly addict[ed].” “Statisticians report that television is watched over six hours a day in the average American household,” Wallace writes in 1990 (151), but today, what with computers, smartphones, and tablets, we now shift from one screen to the next and spend more time staring at phones and tablets than we do television screens.

Such speculative works as *Infinite Jest* either fail the test of time by dating themselves and proving to be inaccurate in their predictions, or they turn out to be prophetic warnings of things to come. While Wallace himself challenged the idea that “serious fiction must be timeless” (“E Unibus Pluram” 167), his *magnum opus*, it is now safe to say, has nevertheless proven to be even more relevant today than it was nearly twenty years ago. Wallace wrote while the cultural bed was still being made, yet it is the people of the twenty-first century who find themselves lying in it and questioning its comfort. See for example Stephen Marche’s “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” in *The Atlantic* or Daniel T. Willingham’s “Smartphones Don’t Make Us Dumb” in *The New York Times*. The primary objective of this thesis, however, is not to contribute to this discussion on technology in culture. Rather, the primary objective is to analyze Wallace’s novel through such cultural criticisms, and in doing so I hope to give further understanding to such questions as: Why is the novel structured the way it is? Why do characters act and interact the way they do? And why is there no clear sense of resolution?

Chapter 1:

Defining *Infinite Jest*: Menippean Satire and the Technology-Driven World

“It’s a weird book. It doesn’t move the way normal books do.” – Wallace (qtd. in Miller 64)

“Why should things be easy to understand?” – Thomas Pynchon (qtd. in Weston 82)

Perhaps *Infinite Jest*'s most defining features are its overall size and structure. Along with other similarly lengthy novels—such as *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses*, and the aforementioned *Gravity's Rainbow*—*Infinite Jest* has garnered the reputation of being a difficult novel—if not difficult to understand then simply difficult to follow through to the end. On top of this, with its fractured structure that defies any kind of traditional, diachronic narrative linearity, and which the author once described as being like “a very pretty pane of glass that had been dropped off the twentieth story of a building” (qtd. in Caro 57), we see a novel that, in the end (if there even is an end, as the title and narrative timeline suggest a sort of *regresses ad infinitum*), leaves the reader with more questions than answers and therefore almost necessitates at least a second reading. It is for these reasons that some critics have come to question the coherency of the book, maybe most notably when *The New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani, in a somewhat mixed review, called *Infinite Jest* “a loose baggy monster.” In her review, Kakutani goes on to suggest that Wallace, perhaps in an attempt to impress, which is an accusation that has often been applied to his writing, carelessly adds excessive information into the book, as she calls it “a vast, encyclopedic compendium of whatever seems to have crossed Mr. Wallace’s

mind.” However, a more careful reading of the novel will reveal that there is indeed a purpose to the seemingly purposelessness. Wallace himself claimed as much when, in rebuttal to the “suggestion that his book is sloppy,” he said, “it may be a mess, but it’s a very careful mess. A lot of work went into making it look like that. That might sound like a pathetic lie, but it’s not” (qtd. in Donahue 70).

In this chapter I will explore the idea of *Infinite Jest* being an example of Menippean satire, and in order to do this I will first look at the many attempts that have been made to define it. In this sense, this chapter will also serve the purpose of reviewing some of the criticism surrounding Wallace’s work and tracing the author’s literary path. I will then outline the common characteristics of Menippean satire using Northrop Frye’s and Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings on the subject, and I will look at the various ways in which *Infinite Jest* shares these characteristics. Ultimately, by labeling the novel as a work of Menippean satire I hope to shed light on its complex structure and to help understand why Wallace chose to write the book in such a manner. Through the use of Menippean satire, the author is able not just to evoke a mode of writing but also a mode of thinking and feeling, a mode of thinking and feeling in a distinct contemporary world.

In contrast to Wallace’s typically maximalist style, where “sentences run as long as 800 words” and “paragraph breaks are rare” (Eggers), *Infinite Jest* opens with the simple first person narration of Hal Incandenza: “I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies” (3). This sentence, which provides the reader with only the most basic and literal information, as well as the subsequent sentence, which is in a separate paragraph that simply reads, “I am in here,” is misleading, since immediately after our

introduction to Hal the novel becomes defined by the author's exhaustive writing style and constant narrative shifts. So many shifts, in fact, that it can be difficult to keep track of all the characters. Some fans of the novel have gone so far as to create maps and diagrams of the many characters and settings, such as William Beutler's detailed Google Maps compilation of the over six-hundred locations in *Infinite Jest*, or designer Sam Potts's diagram of all the characters and their connections to one another. Focus is split between the Enfield Tennis Academy, the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, and various other subplots involving an assortment of seemingly unconnected characters—petty criminals, politicians, wheelchair assassins, Hal's football playing brother (Orin), etcetera. Aside from the disruption of linearity, the effect of these constant shifts in narration is that the novel takes on a multi-perspectival quality.

Another result of these shifts is that the novel weaves in and out of different tones. Upon its publication, many critics were quick to point out Wallace's humour and to therefore classify *Infinite Jest* as a comedy. Wallace, however, claimed that the book was intended to be more sad than funny, describing it as a distinct American sadness: "It's more like a stomach-level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself as a kind of lostness. Whether it's unique to our generation I really don't know" (qtd. in Miller 59). It is easy to understand the critics who overlooked the sadness and labeled the novel a comedy, however, as, on top of the author's generally playful writing style, there are indeed countless humorous elements, such as Johnny Gentle, "Famous Crooner" turned germaphobic U.S. president, or the fact that most of the story's action takes place during the "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment," or Hugh

Steepley, a field operative for the “United States Office of Unspecified Services (U.S.O.U.S.)” who disguises himself as a woman by the name of Helen so as to obtain information about the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge. These humorous instances are jarringly contrasted by much darker moments, such as sections dealing with the recurring themes of addiction, depression, suicide, sexual abuse, and physical deformities (i.e. “Union of Hideously and Improbably Deformed”).

Along with these shifts in tone there are also drastic shifts in narrative style, from the more traditional first and third-person narrations, to dialogue, to newspaper headings, to magazine interviews. And of course there are Wallace's famous, or perhaps infamous, endnotes (388 of them, to be exact, some of which are merely a few words long, while others are several pages and contain their own set of footnotes), which further serve to disrupt the narrative. Wallace explained the use of endnotes to his editor as such:

[they] allow...me to make the primary-text an easier read while at once 1) allowing a discursive, authorial intrusive style w/o Finneganizing the story, 2) mimic the information-flood and data-triage I expect'd be an even bigger part of US life 15 years hence. 3) have a lot more technical/medical verisimilitude 4) allow/make the reader go literally physically 'back and forth' in a way that perhaps cutely mimics some of the story's thematic concerns . . . (qtd. in “The Unfinished”)

Ultimately, the endnotes serve as a kind of second narrator, filling the reader in on important details or simply elaborating on something from the story.

The result of all of this is a fragmented, nonlinear reading experience, at times fantastical (see “herd of feral hamsters” or the King Hamlet-like ghost of James O. Incandenza) and at other times realistic, at times evidently influenced by the postmodernists (such as Thomas Pynchon and his similarly fragmented *Gravity's Rainbow*; Don DeLillo and his dialogue, as well as the game of Eschaton, which clearly

takes its inspiration from *End Zone*; and William Gaddis, also with respect to dialogue and its overall avant-garde quality), and at other times distinctly its own thing. This has presented literary critics with the difficult task of categorizing the book into a specific genre. And without a specific genre, *Infinite Jest* lacks the necessary organizing tool that would aid in any attempts at interpretation.

As an author often driven by the desire to be avant-garde—which he openly acknowledged and even questioned the value of, calling it a “vapid urge to be avant-garde and post structural and linguistically calisthenic,” and saying that he sometimes feared that it was his “root motive” (qtd. in “The Unfinished”)—it only makes sense that *Infinite Jest*, the most innovative of all his works, would elude a generally agreed upon classification. Because his first novel, *The Broom of the System*, garnered so many comparisons to Pynchon, particularly to *The Crying of Lot 49* in regards to the fact that both novels consist of female protagonists searching for something or someone, and also because both books end in the same ambiguous manner, Wallace early on was labelled a postmodernist. Michiko Kakutani, in her review of *The Broom of the System*, points out the many similarities between Wallace’s early work and Pynchon’s *Lot 49*:

From its opening pages onward through its enigmatic ending, ‘The Broom of the System’ will remind readers of ‘The Crying of Lot 49’ by Thomas Pynchon. Like ‘Lot,’ it attempts to give us a portrait, through a combination of Joycean word games, literary parody and zany picaresque adventure, of a contemporary America run amok. Like ‘Lot,’ it features comic and willfully symbolic characters with odd, cutesy names - a publisher named Rick Vigorous; a roommate named Candy Mandible, an Amherst student named Stonecipher Beadsman (also known as the Antichrist), and a talking cockateel named Vlad the Impaler. Like ‘Lot,’ it uses stories within stories to examine the relationship between real life and fiction, language and perception. And like ‘Lot,’ it focuses on a woman's quest for knowledge and identity. (“Life in Cleveland, 1990”)

Although well received, Wallace resented the fact that his novel was, as he saw it, considered a “rip-off” (Wiley). Therefore, in his next effort, *Infinite Jest*, which was published nearly nine years after *The Broom of the System*, he would attempt to transcend mere mimicry and go beyond his postmodern influences. In a 1993 interview Wallace referred to his reconsideration of postmodern literature as a kind of “patricide,” citing Barth, Coover, Burroughs, Nabokov, and Pynchon as the “patriarch[s]” for the patricide (McCaffery 146). His main critique, and the thesis of his “E Unibus Pluram” essay on television, had to do with “how poisonous postmodern irony’s become” (McCaffery 146).

For Wallace, postmodern literature had become poisonous because it held nothing sacred, it merely ridiculed social problems as opposed to diagnosing them, and it treated every subject with “sarcasm, cynicism, [and] a manic ennui” (McCaffery 147). In response to this, Wallace, with *Infinite Jest*, sought to go against the trend of postmodern irony and write with a degree of sincerity. However, along with this unique element of sincerity there remains a still evident influence from the postmodernists, and, therefore, the novel is often cited as a paradigmatic example of a new form of writing: metamodernism. Similar to, and often considered synonymous with, post-postmodernism, metamodernism is defined as a sort of hybrid genre, combining elements from both postmodernism and modernism. The meta in metamodernism, as Martin Paul Eve describes it, refers to *metaxy*, meaning “betweenness,” “a Greek term appropriated and popularized by Eric Voeglin, but originally found in the writings of Plato, especially the *Symposium*” (Eve 10). Metamodernism is a mixture of writing styles, somewhere between “postmodern irony (encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and

deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth) and modern enthusiasm (encompassing everything from utopianism to the unconditional belief in Reason)” (Vermeulean and van den Akker 4). That is, metamodernism, by combining the elements of postmodernism and modernism, goes beyond (which is the more traditional understanding of the term meta) the two styles of writing to form a new style.

While I do not contest the suggestion that *Infinite Jest* falls under the category of either, or even both, postmodernism or metamodernism, and indeed such categorizations may help to “identif[y] important shared attributes as a thematic taxonomy” (Eve 8), ultimately I believe that to label the book this way is reductive. Or if not reductive, then such labelling at least does not take all aspects of Wallace’s message into consideration, as it fails to recognize and appreciate the metaphorical nature of the book’s structure and cultural critique (Eve 8). While postmodernists, such as DeLillo with *White Noise* or Pynchon with *Bleeding Edge*, might have technology and media as recurring themes within their plots, Wallace, through his innovative style, has technology and media embedded within the very pages of his book:

Wallace's narrative structure should be seen instead as a response to an altered cultural sensibility. The book mimes, in its movements as well as in its dense loads of referential data, the distributed systems that are the new paradigm in communications. The book is not *about* electronic culture, but it has internalized some of the decentering energies that computer technologies have released into our midst. (Birkerts)

Infinite Jest's layout says as much about the culture that it critiques as the actual words in the text, and this becomes more apparent when the novel is analyzed through the analytical lens of Menippean satire, a genre that, before I apply it to the text at hand, requires some elucidation.

The first thing that should be noted about the work of Menippean satire is that it differs from more traditional definitions of the novel. Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* says that Menippean satire differs “in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent” (309). Furthermore, Menippean satire, which deals “less with people as such than with mental attitudes” (Frye) and which is often used to describe such works as Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* or Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, refers not only to the content of a work of fiction or the ways in which a work of fiction addresses issues, but also to the ways in which a work of fiction is written—that is, its structure and style. Both Frye and Mikhail Bakhtin point out that works of Menippean satire are typically fragmented or inconsistent in their narrative structures. Using the examples of Petronius, Apuleius, Rabelais, Swift, and Voltaire, Frye calls it a “loose-jointed narrative form,” with multiple perspectives and very little concern for scene changes (309). Bakhtin elaborates on this idea when he refers to the general “multi” quality of Menippean satire—that is, multiple tones, multiple genres, multiple styles, etc. (118). The work of Menippean satire, or simply *menippea*, as Bakhtin calls it in *Problems with Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, combines “the free fantastic, the symbolic, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme (from our point of view) crude *slum naturalism*” (115). Similarly, typical genre mixing includes: “novellas, letters, oratorical speeches, symposia, and so on; also characteristic is a mixing of prose and poetic speech” (*Problems with Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 118). Again, the effect of this is a “multi-styled and multi-toned nature of the *menippea*” (118).

Frye also points out the tendency of the Menippean satirist to fill his or her book with an abundance of information, leading to what he calls an “encyclopaedic farrago”: “The Menippean satirist, dealing with intellectual themes and attitudes, shows his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon” (311). The encyclopaedic characteristic of Menippean satire also adds to the multi-tonality of this genre of writing. A work of menippea might suddenly shift from a mode of writing that is descriptive and poetic to one that is pedantic and concerns itself with providing factual details to the reader. A perfect example of this is Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, which shifts from a mode of writing that is typical of Romanticism, such as those chapters that deal with the whale hunt, to a pedantic mode, such as those chapters that deal with providing the reader with facts about whales, including an entire chapter (“Cetology”) solely devoted to the classification of different whale species.

Also in contrast to the novel, which typically concerns itself with characters and plots, a work of Menippean satire predominantly concerns itself with ideas: “The short form of the Menippean satire is usually a dialogue or colloquy, in which the dramatic interest is in a conflict of ideas rather than of character” (Frye 310). As such, these books tend to take up philosophical or social issues as opposed to the “exploits of heroes” (309-10). The ultimate goal of menippea is not to tell a story, from point A to point B, but to provoke and test “a philosophical idea, a discourse, a *truth*” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 116).

It can be difficult to classify a work of fiction as being an example of Menippean satire since it tends to transgress literary traditions. While Frye, Bakhtin, and other critics are able to point out several common characteristics of this particular form of writing, individual Menippean works tend to be unique and therefore elude generic classification. As Joel Relihan points out in *Ancient Menippean Satire*: “Menippean satire is abnormal in all its aspects. It is an anti-genre; insofar as it is a satire, it is ultimately a satire on literature itself and all its pretensions to meaning” (28). In fact, perhaps the most commonly noted characteristics of a work of Menippean satire are its uncommonness, its unconventionality, its incomparability. However, as a result of several similarities between the two, Menippean satire is often compared to postmodernism, which also tends to subvert or satirize literary traditions. In addition, both postmodernism and Menippean satire are, or can be, fragmented, multi-tonal, multi-perspectival, ironic, and self-aware (i.e. meta). Both have often been noted to combine different forms of writing—different modes of writing and/or different genres. With such similarities in mind, and with postmodernism as one of the dominant forms of literary writing in the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, this “may explain why Menippean satire has received so much attention in recent decades after being all but forgotten for generations” (Branham 134). It might even be said that Menippean satire has been revived as a kind of subgenre of postmodernism. And one such example of this is *Infinite Jest*. Before I elaborate on why I feel that such a distinction is necessary and beneficial to the understanding of the text, I should point out the ways in which Wallace’s novel qualifies as an example of (postmodern) Menippean satire.

Possibly the most obvious comparison between *Infinite Jest* and the characteristics of Menippean satire is the book's "loose-jointed narrative." To go back to Wallace's description of the novel, indeed it is like a shattered "pane of glass" in that, while ultimately forming a unified picture, no two pieces seem to be connected, at least not until the reader connects the pieces him/herself. Beginning with the first-person narration of Hal Incandenza, Wallace gives the false impression of a traditional narrative, which he quickly veers from at the end of the opening section with the possibly tongue-in-cheek question: "So yo then man what's *your* story?" (*IJ* 16). From then on, *Infinite Jest* resembles less a story than a manic conglomeration of events and characters' thoughts. Not only does the novel shift from one character to the next, but it also shifts in time, beginning with the "Year of Glad," which is actually the latest timeline in the narrative, and then for the most part bouncing back and forth between days in November in the "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment." Further distorting the reader's sense of time/linearity is the novel's calendar, which presents a unique challenge to the reader. "Subsidized Time" uses brand names instead of numerical dates, which forces the reader to infer, based on the author's references to "Unsubsidized Time," as to the ordering of the events in the book. Interspersed throughout are yet even more temporal shifts, with the most drastic being the flashbacks to the early 1960s. On top of this is a constant shifting of setting, from various locations around Boston, Massachusetts, to a mountaintop rendezvous between characters (Marathe and Steeply) overlooking Tucson, Arizona.

At times Wallace is hyper-articulate, to the point of being accused of verbosity (some of his lengthier sentences can run the entire length of a page). I'll spare the reader such a sentence and instead use the following, which is still lengthy and intricate, as an example of his exhaustive, "stem-winding" ("The Unfinished") style:

--and then you're in serious trouble, very serious trouble, and you know it, finally, deadly serious trouble, because this Substance you thought was your one true friend, that you gave up all for, gladly, that for so long gave you relief from the pain of the Losses your love of that relief caused, your mother and lover and god and compadre, has finally removed its smily-face mask to reveal centerless eyes and a ravening maw, and canines down to here, it's the Face In The Floor, the grinning root-white face of your worst nightmares, and the face is your own face in the mirror, now, it's you, the Substance has devoured or replaced and become you...
(*IJ* 347)

In contrast to this polished maximalist style, Wallace's narrative will then suddenly shift to a style that is minimalist, or informal, or, in one particular section narrated by a drug addict who is recounting a drug deal gone wrong, intentionally laden with broken English and grammatical errors: "It was yrstruly and C and Poor Tony that crewed that day and everything like that" (*IJ* 128). Similarly, although predominantly narrated by an omniscient third-person narrator, wherein the author stops to comment as if personally addressing the reader through the use of endnotes and interjections that read like essayistic declaratives, at times the narration shifts to the first-person. Usually first-person narration is reserved for Hal and, in contrast to the wide scope of the third-person narrator, deals with the character's singular or, to use a Wallacean word, solipsistic thoughts, such as: "It now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of black miracle to me that people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end" (*IJ* 900).

The effect of this is a multi-perspectival narrative. There is the Enfield narrative zone (or the Hal Incandenza zone), which depicts the young members of the Enfield Tennis Academy. This zone is playful, comic, and filled with witty characters and dialogue. There is the Ennet House narrative zone (or the Don Gately zone), which deals with the minutiae of recovery from substance abuse. This zone is at times sentimental (a feature often lacking in postmodern literature) and, like the platitudes of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which plays a significant role in this subplot, riddled with clichés, a fact of which Wallace is aware and even acknowledges: “To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés. One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go. Keep coming back” (*IJ* 270). There is the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge zone, which to a large extent consists of two characters, Marathe and Steeply, engaging in a discussion on the state of American culture while looking out over Tucson from the top of a mountain, and where a typical line is: “You USA’s do not seem to believe you may each choose what to die for. Love of a woman, the sexual, it bends back in on the self, makes you narrow, maybe crazy. Choose with care. Love of your nation, your country and people... it enlarges the heart. Something bigger than the self” (*IJ* 107). And then of course there is the narrative voice of the author himself in the endnotes, which breaks all illusions and makes the reader aware of the fiction of the text (i.e. metafiction). And in keeping with Bakhtin’s description of Menippean satire as being “multi-tonal,” each narrative zone in the novel is written in a distinct tone, most evident through the juxtaposition of the Ennet

House zone with the Enfield zone. The former is typically dark and regularly consists of discussions on suicide and depression, while the latter is much lighter.

Also in keeping with Bakhtin's definition of Menippean satire is *Infinite Jest's* combination of genres. Aside from the obvious traditional first and third-person narrative fiction, Wallace uses other modes of writing, such as dialogue, newspaper headlines, interviews, and film synopses to tell the story. At one point the narrative even employs one of Hal's seventh-grade essays, written on *Hawaii Five-O* and *Hill Street Blues* for his "Introduction to Entertainment Studies" (*IJ* 142) class, presumably to make a point about heroism in the postmodern age.

With an acute attention to detail, its length, and a wide variety of topics covered, including "substantial specialized information from the sciences, the arts, and history" (Letzler 304), *Infinite Jest* also contains the common encyclopedic element of the work of Menippean satire, except with a modern twist. The novel contains so much information, and in such a scattered fashion, that some have drawn comparisons between the structure of *Infinite Jest* and the very thing that it discusses: technology, or, to be specific, television and the Internet. For example, Matt Tresco compares the novel to Wikipedia, as opposed to the traditional hardcopy encyclopedia, because both are without an "ordering or categorizing principle" (120). That is, information appears to be presented to the reader almost as if at random. David Letzler expands upon Tresco's assertion and describes the novel's onslaught of information, including information that might not be significant or further the narrative in any way, by using a computer programming term: *cruft*. According to the definition that Letzler uses from *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, *cruft* is:

“Excess; superfluous junk; used esp. of redundant or superseded code’ and ‘Poorly built, possibly over-complex’ (Raymond 135). Cruft is not ‘wrong’ per se, but it is excessive to no clear purpose, simultaneously too much and too little” (308). According to Letzler, excessive and trivial information (“cruft”) forces the reader to decipher which information is important:

Wikipedia's frequent inability to distinguish between important and trivial information either between or within subjects -- which results in proliferating and frequently unchecked cruft -- does little to help its users to keep from drowning in the tsunami of information of which Wallace writes: in fact, it becomes part of that tsunami. *Infinite Jest's* much more carefully, centrally calibrated use of cruft could not be more different in this respect. Inasmuch as there is any hope of mitigating the worst effects of the dilemma Wallace highlights, it requires us to develop our abilities to filter information to their maximum capacities, and encyclopedic novels like *Infinite Jest* are powerful tools for doing so -- not necessarily because they include information that is valuable itself, but because they force us to navigate around their junk text to the text that is more important. (Letzler 321)

Just as the person in the world of technology must wade through an abundance of trivial information in order to determine the important information in life, so too must the reader of *Infinite Jest* wade through trivial endnotes in order to attempt to determine the meaning of the novel.

As Letzler's article suggests, Wallace adheres just as much to technological traditions as he does to literary traditions when it comes to the way in which he tells his story. By drawing on the writings of such cultural critics as Neil Postman, I will show how *Infinite Jest*, as an example of Menippean satire, reflects and incorporates the very culture it critiques. That is, the novel is analogous to the experience of living in the technology-driven world, which is fragmented, chaotic, filled with information (much of which seems tangential and random), and difficult to comprehend.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argues that television, having replaced typography as the means by which people share and acquire information, exchanged a culture driven by language via the written word, where “there is no escape from meaning” (50), for a culture whose language “denied interconnectedness, proceeded without context, argued the irrelevance of history, explained nothing, and offered fascination in place of complexity and coherence” (77). One of the factors contributing to this lack of coherence is the fragmented quality of life in the world of technology and entertainment, which Postman believes to have started with the introduction of telegraphy, which he says introduced “a world of fragments and discontinuities” (70). Instead of attaining information through the written word, which is presented with a context and in a linear fashion, people began to get their information without any context, “stripped of any connection to the past, or to the future, or to other events” (Postman 110).

Not only does television scheduling, which consists of thirty-minute blocks, instill this sense of fragmentation, but so too does the very act of watching television. Channel surfing adds to the disruption of linearity and context as the viewer jumps from one place to another. And some critics are quick to point out the similarities between channel surfing and the reading experience of *Infinite Jest*. In an article in *The New York Times Book Review* on the reinvention of literature at the hands of a new wave of writers, among them David Foster Wallace, Michiko Kakutani refers to writers that “have been influenced not only by their literary precursors, but also by television, the Internet and movies” (“New Wave of Writers Reinvents Literature”). She goes on to write:

Channel surfing, Web browsing and the sort of cross-cutting pioneered by filmmakers like Robert Altman and Quentin Tarantino have given them a decidedly nonlinear outlook on the world... Time is fluid, even warped in many pale-red books; cause and effect, blurred. Instead of conventional beginnings, middles and ends, there are random convergences and eerie recapitulations. (“New Wave of Writers Reinvents Literature”)

Wallace would certainly agree with Kakutani’s assessment of the unique, non-literary influences on late twentieth-century writers, since he says in “E Unibus Pluram” that young authors, instead of looking for inspiration on what to write in the world around them, look for inspiration from the television shows they watch. This, he claims, affects the so-called realism of literature, since what writers are actually depicting is “*already* composed of fictional characters in highly ritualized narratives” (“E Unibus Pluram” 153), meaning that there is actually nothing real about it. Where once literature was like a Stendhalian mirror, reflecting to the reader the azure skies and mire of the puddles of society to the reader, Wallace believes that it has become more like a reflection of reality as it is depicted on television.

One might even go so far as to say that the endnotes are the novel’s equivalent of commercials—they interrupt the main programming, so to speak. Wallace often incorporates the subject of advertising into his works, such as the section in *Infinite Jest* that deals with Viney and Veals’s successful, yet graphic, advertisements for tongue-scrapers and Nunhagen aspirin; or “Mr. Squishy,” from the short story collection *Oblivion*, about a focus group that tests a new chocolate product called “Felonies!”; or the subsidized calendar, where years are sponsored by corporations, such as “Year of the Whopper,” “Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar,” and “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.” Thus adding another layer to the novel, Wallace integrates techniques

from the medium that he and Postman criticize, and in doing so he brings the fragmented experience of living in the world of technology and entertainment into his text. As D.T. Max puts it in the biography of Wallace, “the book consistently confounded the reader’s expectations on purpose,” because “[i]f reality is fragmented, his book should be too” (*Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* 182).

Postman also comments on the excess of information in the age of television. Similar to what David Letzler says about “cruft” in *Infinite Jest*, Postman writes that television created a distinct form of information called “*disinformation*... Disinformation does not mean false information. It means misleading information—misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information—information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing” (107). As I’ve already touched upon, *Infinite Jest* bombards the reader with information and forces him/her to decipher what is important, just as the person in the age of technology must decipher the meaningful from the meaningless excess.

Thus through Menippean satire Wallace is able to imitate the experience of living in the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, an experience that can be disorienting and confusing. And whereas other classifications, such as postmodernism, are merely forms of writing, Menippean satire, in the way that it is used by Wallace, is a form of thinking and feeling, in essence a form of anti-writing, less interested with telling a story than evoking a sense of the culture that is being satirized. But as much as *Infinite Jest* falls under the framework of Menippean satire, a framework that I believe helps elucidate the novel’s structural and experiential comparisons to technology (television and the

Internet), the text falls outside—or rather, transcends—the characteristics of Menippean satire in one significant respect. Whereas according to Northrop Frye's definition "Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes" (309), *Infinite Jest*, although it certainly deals with mental attitudes and philosophical arguments, perhaps most evidently through the conversation between Marathe and Steeply, is very much interested in people. I return to Wallace's claim that fiction is about "what it is to be a fucking human being" (McCaffery 131). As Patrick O'Donnell says about Wallace's first novel, *The Broom of the System*, which he believes also "can be considered within the framework of Menippean satire," on top of this exploration of mental attitudes Wallace is "equally invested—*contra* Frye's definition of Menippean satire—in 'persons,' and in exploring the nature (an aspect of its 'naturalism') of personhood existentially and affectively" (8). This is not to say that *Infinite Jest* does not warrant the classification of Menippean satire, but rather that Wallace takes the genre to another level, by dealing not only with the ideas of the culture it satirizes, but also with the ways in which these ideas affect the *people* within the culture. The following chapters will examine these effects.

Chapter 2:

“I cannot make myself understood”: Communication, Monologism, and the Lost Art of “Interfacing”

“When I say or write something, there are actually a whole lot of different things I am communicating. The propositional content (i.e., the verbal information I’m trying to convey) is only one part of it. Another part is stuff about me, the communicator. Everyone knows this. It’s a function of the fact that there are so many different well-formed ways to say the same basic thing, from e.g. ‘I was attacked by a bear!’ to ‘Goddamn bear tried to kill me!’ to ‘That ursine juggernaut did essay to sup upon my person!’ and so on.” – Wallace (“Authority and American Usage” 96)

“But he has to admit he’d kind of liked it. The dialogue. The give-and-take.” – (*IJ* 923)

As noted, *Infinite Jest* is made up of several distinct modes of writing, and one of the more dominant modes is dialogue. Large portions of the novel are devoted to the actual words of the characters, from conversations, to screenplay-like dialogue, to interviews, to Ennet House journal entries (i.e. “SELECTED SNIPPETS FROM THE INDIVIDUAL-RESIDENT-INFORMAL-INTERFACE MOMENTS OF D.W. GATELY” (*IJ* 563)). Along with his maximalist, sprawling, highly self-conscious, and at times conversational writing style, part of what makes David Foster Wallace one of the most “distinctive stylists” (Newton) of his generation is the way that he writes dialogue. And again it was the influence of Don DeLillo that helped shape his dialogue, as D.T. Max points out that Wallace appropriates DeLillo’s “deadpan dialogue” (“The Unfinished”) in *The Broom of the System*. More than just deadpan, however, *Infinite Jest*’s dialogue is typically funny, insightful, philosophical, and sentimental. It is also

disjointed, with characters not so much communicating with each other as speaking while in the presence of each other.

Where the previous chapter looked at *Infinite Jest* as a whole, attempting to understand the themes of the novel in relation to Wallace's unique and intricately structured narrative, this chapter will deal with the characters. More specifically it will deal with the ways in which the characters interact, the way they speak (or do not speak) with one another. And just as the form of the novel is influenced by and reflective of the culture that it critiques, in this chapter I will examine the cultural influence on the characters' interactions. How does television or technology, such as videophony, affect the community of characters in the novel? Put plainly, Wallace believes that the experience of "younger Americans" is one of disconnection and loneliness ("E Unibus Pluram" 152), where "people in the same room don't do all that much direct conversing with each other," but instead "they all sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing and then structure commercial-length conversations around the sorts of questions myopic car-crash witnesses might ask each other—"Did you just see what I just saw?" (168). This form of communicating, what Raymond Williams might call a "structure of feeling in a precise contemporary world" (12), with snippets of unengaged conversation mixed in between extended periods of entertainment, can be seen in the novel, where, instead of dialogues there are weavings of monologues, and where a character will say something only to have it followed by an unrelated comment from another character or no response at all.

Mark Greif notes that Thomas Pynchon puts “a TV set in every room of his fiction—often to drive the action” (229), and Volker Hummel similarly writes that television as a subject “proved fertile ground” for writers as early as the sixties, when “[a]uthors like John Updike (*Rabbit Run*, 1960), Norman Mailer (*Armies of the Night*, 1967) and Jerzy Kosinski (*Being There*, 1971) came to view television as some kind of cultural other, not a medium of truth and enlightenment but of manipulation and superficiality.” So while television as a subject in literature is nothing new, what is innovative about *Infinite Jest* is the way in which it incorporates the television culture, the language of television, into the book. Characters in the novel speak to each other the way characters in a TV show might speak to each other, and they don't speak to each other the way people in the age of television and entertainment don't speak to each other.

The theoretical framework of this chapter will begin with cultural criticism, as once again I will touch upon the writing of Neil Postman, whose *Amusing Ourselves to Death* describes the lack of communication between people in “the Age of Show Business” (63). By first laying this theoretical groundwork it should help to explain the nature of the interactions between the characters in the novel, who are often depicted as being lonely, isolated, and (the extreme, and which will be discussed further in the next chapter in respect to Hal's decline) solipsistic. Other theorists whose work I will explore in this chapter are Mikhail Bakhtin, with his theories on dialogism and monologism, and Raymond Williams, whose comment on structures of feeling in the dialogic qualities of such dramatists as Anton Chekhov can be used to analyze the dialogic quality of *Infinite Jest*. Williams's essay “Drama in a Dramatized Society” discusses the ways in which

television has not only affected society—“we have never as a society acted so much or watched so many others acting” (3)—but also changed the way that fiction is written, and, of specific interest to this chapter, the ways in which characters interact with each other.

Writing on the irony of globalization, Neil Postman refers to America in “the Age of Show Business” (63)—the late twentieth and eventually early twenty-first century, wherein “all subject matter is presented as entertaining. . . . No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure” (87)—as a “neighborhood of strangers and pointless quantity” (70), where people know “nothing but the most superficial facts about each other” (67). Entertainment via television, according to Postman, took the place of serious information via the written word, thereby changing the very nature of public discourse. Before television, public discourse was dominated by the printed word. And because of the “*monopoly*” of the printed word, “public discourse was insistent and powerful” (41). With the printed word as the dominant mode of communication, people had a unified language, and a language that was formal and allowed for more rational thought because it demanded consideration from both the writer and the reader. This, according to Postman, allowed for a better understanding of “truth,” with “truth” being “a kind of cultural prejudice” (22-23) or the cultural beliefs and opinions of a given time: “Each culture conceives of it as being most authentically expressed in certain symbolic forms that another culture may regard as trivial or irrelevant” (23). One of the main theses or warnings of Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is that truth, which is “intimately linked to the biases of forms of expression” (22), became diminished when “new media

displac[ed] the old” (26). That is, when public discourse via television displaced public discourse via the printed word, as he writes:

Indeed I hope to persuade you that the decline of a print-based epistemology and the accompanying rise of a television-based epistemology has had grave consequences for public life, that we are getting sillier by the minute. And that is why it is necessary for me to drive hard the point that the weight assigned to any form of truth-telling is a function of the influence of media of communication. (24)

To be clear, since such statements as “before television” often imply a qualitative opinion (i.e. that something is better or worse than it was in the past), neither Postman nor Wallace claim that television itself is the, or even *a*, problem, as Postman says that it is not categorically “impossible to use television as a carrier of coherent language or thought in process” (91), and Wallace says he doesn’t “share reactionary adults’ vision of TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores while we sit there on ever fatter bottoms with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes” (“E Unibus Pluram” 162), but rather it is the ubiquity of entertainment, entertainment as “the supra-ideology of all discourse on television” (Postman 87) and in society in general, that presents concerns.

Postman makes his point through the example of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, which took place in 1858 during what he calls “the most glorious literary outpouring” (48). He notes that not only were Lincoln’s and Douglas’s speeches eloquent and lengthy, but the audience was also more than capable of sitting through them and comprehending the arguments put forth. This, he argues, was possible because of the written word, which “*has a content*: a semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content” (49), and “there is no escape from meaning when language is the instrument guiding one’s thought” (50). On

the other hand, with television as the “language,” there is no such meaning. Instead of a language of the written word, television presents a language of images. Wallace says something similar in “E Unibus Pluram,” writing that “Americans seemed no longer united so much by common feelings as by common images: what binds us became what we stood witness to” (166). Whereas people were once united by the written word, sharing beliefs, opinions, and knowledge through it, suddenly, with television, people were united by what they watched. And really this offers no true sense of unity, since watching television, by its very nature, is a private activity, an idea that Wallace addresses in *Infinite Jest* when referring to InterLace TelEntertainment, a home entertainment system that allows the viewer to choose what he or she wants to watch. He writes about Interlace and private viewing: “But so very much private watching of customized screens behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home. A floating no-space world of personal spectation. Whole new millennial era, under Gentle and Lace-Forché. Total freedom, privacy, choice” (*IJ* 620). Wallace once said that *Infinite Jest* is “not really supposed to be a reflection of the way things are now but a kind of extrapolation on trends” (“A Lost 1996 Interview with David Foster Wallace”), and InterLace TelEntertainment is a particularly astute observation of these trends when you consider today’s viewer’s ability to “more or less 100% choose what’s on at any given time” (*IJ* 416). Like the fictional InterLace, today’s streaming services grant viewers the freedom to choose what they want to watch when they want to watch it. For example, people are now getting their entertainment from various platforms:

According to the preliminary results of the second NATPE||Content First and the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA)® joint research study on consumers’

attitudes toward television viewing, just 55 percent of millennials use TVs as their primary viewing platform, while streaming devices – laptops, tablets, and smartphones – are poised to dominate their viewing preferences. (“Streaming Devices Poised to Dominate Viewing Preferences as Seven in 10 TV Viewers Stream Programming”)

The possibility of self-controlled and infinite entertainment means that people do not leave the house and they do not interact face-to-face with other people. Instead, they stay inside and seek pleasure, which is analogous to Steeply’s anecdote about the lab rats in a Canadian biomedical experiment that become addicted to stimulating “pleasure-tissue p-terminals” (*IJ* 471) to the point of death. In keeping with the novel’s satirical form, Wallace hyperbolizes the culture’s behaviour and states that half of metro Boston works at home thanks to the Internet and 94% of all paid entertainment is watched at home (*IJ* 620). As a result of this cultural trend towards isolation, he writes that people are fascinated by live events, because of the rarity of public crowds: “Hence the new millennium’s passion for standing live witness to things. A whole sub-rosa schedule of public spectation opportunities, ‘spect-ops,’ the priceless chance to be part of a live crowd, watching” (*IJ* 620). Where once public gatherings were commonplace and essential, when the written word was the dominant form of public discourse, in the speculative realm of *Infinite Jest*, where entertainment via private television watching is the dominant form of public discourse, such gatherings are a rarity and a spectacle. And again this fascination with witnessing live events can be seen in the twenty-first century, what with reality shows and viral home videos.

Although hyperbolic at the time that *Infinite Jest* was written, to the point of being a kind of caricature of society, to today’s reader Wallace’s claims about social trends do

not seem that out of the ordinary. In fact, Wallace accurately predicted the social effects of such technologies as the Internet and streaming television (or online television) on social interaction. Since the publication of the novel in 1996, “considerable significance has been accorded to the question of whether Internet use is associated with more, or less, social interaction” (Dutton et al. 8). As Bargh and McKenna note in their study on the Internet and social life there does not appear to be a clear consensus to this question: “On no issue has research on the social effects of the Internet been more contentious than as to its effect on close relationships, such as those with family and friends” (580). While some have argued that “Internet use led to negative outcomes for the individual user, such as increases in depression and loneliness, and neglect of existing close relationships,” others have argued for the opposite, “that Internet users are no less likely than nonusers to visit or call friends on the phone, or that Internet users actually have the larger social networks” (Bargh and McKenna 580). But whether it be for better or for worse, there is no denying that technology has affected the way that people interact, as less people communicate face-to-face and instead communicate more through technology, what Bargh and McKenna refer to as “computer-mediated communication,” which “is not conducted face-to-face but in the absence of nonverbal features of communication such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and potentially influential interpersonal features such as physical attractiveness, skin color, gender, and so on” (577). Computer-mediated communication, in other words, is an impersonal form of communication, one that does not require the same connection between two people that face-to-face communication

requires. And the effects of this form of communication can be seen, as I will soon explain, in the characters and their interactions in *Infinite Jest*.

In contrast to computer-mediated communication, throughout the text Wallace repeatedly uses the term “interfacing” to refer to communication that is done face-to-face, with the first most notable instance of the word occurring in the first section during Hal’s college interview. Hal, mysteriously rendered unable to speak, attempts to convince the interviewers that he is in fact able to communicate by saying:

‘But it transcends the mechanics. I’m not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything. I believe the influence of Kierkegaard on Camus is underestimated. I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist. I believe Hobbes is just Rousseau in a dark mirror. I believe, with Hegel, that transcendence is absorption. I could interface you guys right under the table,’ I say. ‘I’m not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function.’ (IJ 12)

Hal’s claiming that he is not a machine is particularly interesting given the double meaning of the word “interfacing.” Not only does it denote a face-to-face conversation, but it can also refer to the computing term interface, which is defined as:

A boundary across which two independent systems meet and act on or communicate with each other. In computer technology, there are several types of interfaces.
 user interface – the keyboard, mouse, menus of a computer system. The user interface allows the user to communicate with the operating system. Also see GUI.
 software interface – the languages and codes that the applications use to communicate with each other and with the hardware.
 hardware interface – the wires, plugs and sockets that hardware devices use to communicate with each other. (webopedia.com)

Interfacing refers not just to the connection of two people, but the connection of a person to a machine, and a machine to a machine, and therefore, through his use of the term, Wallace emphasizes the nature of communication in the technology-obsessed world and

links human interaction with an emotionless, mechanical process, a superficial exchanging of information devoid of deeper human meaning. The opening section of the novel and the repeated use of the term interface emphasize the main struggle of the novel: the yearning to connect with another person in the age of technology and entertainment.

In addition, Wallace's use of the peculiarly literal interfacing, as opposed to merely *talking*, emphasizes the rarity, or perhaps even downright bizarreness, of face-to-face communication in society, as if such a thing required its own term. An example of the effects of technology on the ways in which people communicate in the novel is "videophony," Wallace's version of today's video messaging services, such as Skype and Facetime. So accustomed to "conventional voice-only telephony" (*IJ* 145), which "allowed you to presume that the person on the other end was paying complete attention to you while also permitting you not to have to pay anything even close to complete attention to her" (*IJ* 146), videophony, forcing the speaker to look at and be seen by the person to whom he or she is conversing, presents people with a sense of anxiety: "It turned out that there was something terribly stressful about visual telephone interfaces that hadn't been stressful at all about voice-only interfaces" (*IJ* 145). The fundamentals of face-to-face interaction—such as nonverbal communication, using physical gestures and expressions as opposed to speech to convey a message—are affected by communication that is mediated by technology.

Treating videophony as a synecdoche for all of technology, Chris Ribbat argues that the consumer's aversion to videophony, more specifically the horror of being *seen* by the other person, "addresses larger questions relevant to discussions of identities and

communicative situations online” (253). That is, technology abets the cultural desire to not be seen by others, a desire that has affected the way we converse with one another. In response to the anxiety caused by videophony, “what the telecommunications industry’s psychological consultants termed *Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria* (or *VPD*)” (*IJ* 147), high-definition masks of peoples’ faces were created to be worn while using videophones. These masks, which eventually evolved to the point of aesthetically improving upon the person’s face, are analogous to the figurative masks that people construct today through their online identities, what’s referred to as a “digital self” and defined as “a mask that we put on to engage the technological world” (Hicks). The mask of the digital self affords people the opportunity to not only hide their true selves but to construct new and better selves by presenting to others only that which they wish to be seen and excluding those things that they do not (for example, a Facebook profile is a form of a digital self, wherein the person is able to pick and choose the pictures and details about his or her life he or she wants to put on display for other people to see). While Wallace does not argue that technology created these problems in identity and communication, he does show how it helped to expose them, such as the culture’s trend towards narcissism and away from paying “complete attention to other people” (Ribbat 256).

This inability to truly connect with another person is further implied early in the novel, in what was originally intended to be the opening section (“The First Draft of *Infinite Jest*), through Hal’s interaction with the “professional conversationalist” (*IJ* 28), who is merely Hal’s father in disguise, attempting to jar his son from “the womb of solipsism” (*IJ* 839). With the conversationalist, whose job is to talk to people, it is as if

Wallace suggests that communication in the technology-driven world, where computer-mediated communication outweighs human “interfacing,” was a lost art, something that needs to be retaught. And this, we eventually learn, is indeed James Incandenza’s intention for the lethal entertainment, as Steven Moore writes that “Jim Incandenza’s failure to communicate with his son leads him to create the *Infinite Jest* cartridge” (“The First Draft of *Infinite Jest*), to get Hal to speak again by making “[s]omething the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out*—even if it was only to ask for more” (*IJ* 839).

Another contributing factor behind this inability to fully connect with others in a culture dominated by computer-mediated communication is the degree of insincerity that, as Wallace and Postman claim, inevitably accompanies interactions between people. Wallace calls television a mirror of society, referring not to “the Stendhalian mirror reflecting the blue sky and mud puddle,” but “[m]ore like the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile” (“E Unibus Pluram” 152). Television presents a version of the audience (society) that the audience wants to see, “what we as Audience want to see ourselves *as*” (“E Unibus Pluram” 152), and for this reason it is inherently false, or at least an unrealistically improved version of reality. And while television may be a reflection of society, eventually society becomes a reflection of what is portrayed on television, which is a false version of society. This then means that society, as a reflection of television, itself becomes false, with people “performing” in their daily lives so as to affect the best versions of themselves, to reflect what they believe “people want to see” (“E Unibus

Pluram” 152). This phoniness or presentation of a false self can be seen in Hal’s brother Orin, who attempts to seduce women by claiming to be fully open and honest about his intentions, saying to them, “Tell me what sort of man you prefer, and then I’ll affect the demeanor of that man” (*IJ* 1048). Orin, here, plays off the idea of a phony society, claiming to be one of the few people not pretending to be someone else. But, as Orin’s friend Marlon Bain points out, this supposed openness is actually in itself a kind of performance, which has a quality of:

Look-At-Me-Being-So-Totally-Open-And-Sincere-I-Rise-Above-The-Whole-Disingenuous-Posing-Process-Of-Attracting-Someone-, -And-I-Transcend-The-Common-Disingenuity-In-A-Bar-Herd-In-A-Particularly-Hip-And-Witty-Self-Aware-Way-, -And-If-You-Will-Let-Me-Pick-You-Up-I-Will-Not-Only-Keep-Being-This-Wittily, -Transcendently-Open-, -But-Will-Bring-You-Into-This-World-Of-Social-Falsehood-Transcendence. (*IJ* 1048)

Bain goes on to describe Orin’s pickup line, “the whole openness-demeanor thing,” as “a purposive social falsehood; it is a pose of poselessness; Orin Incandenza is the *least open man* I know” (*IJ* 1048). Another example of the theme of phoniness in Wallace’s writing is the short story “Good Old Neon,” about a man’s inability to be himself, unaffected—that is, to not be a “fraud” (141). This theme regularly appears in his work, presenting itself as a sort of unavoidable loop, wherein the person only becomes more phony the more he or she attempts to be sincere, raising the question as to whether or not it is even possible to be oneself, free of affectations, in such a highly dramatized society, where the lines of reality and unreality (fictional portrayals of reality on television) have become blurred.

The notion of people acting or performing in their daily lives is also suggested by Postman, who says that the desire to entertain does not just relate to television but to

society as a whole, as he writes that “television demands a performing art” (90), and rather than discussing important ideas and opinions people “fashion performances” (91). This presents the difficulty of truly getting to know anyone in the age of television, where people do not, to use a television metaphor, *act* like themselves but, rather, act like the best versions of themselves, versions that are not quite real. This is highlighted when Wallace brings up the metaphor of “The Show” (professional tennis). To be a professional tennis player, what most of the members of ETA dream of one day being, is to be a type of performer or entertainer, always in front of an audience. With this in mind, one of the goals of ETA is to prepare the elite players, the ones who have a chance at making “The Show,” for a life of entertaining:

‘But even you call it ‘The Show.’ They’ll be entertainers.’

‘You bet your ass they will be.’

‘So audiences will be the whole point. Why not also prepare them for the stresses of entertaining an audience, get them used to being seen?’ (*IJ* 661)

Wallace therefore gives new meaning to Shakespeare’s belief that all the world is a stage, and everyone is an actor.

We can again see this discrepancy between performing and actually communicating play out in an interaction between Mario Incandenza and LaMont Chu, when Mario, with his Bolex camera mounted to the top of his head, attempts to have a “natural” conversation with Chu. However, due to the fact that Chu is made acutely aware of the camera and Mario, instead of looking directly at Chu, is looking at him through the viewfinder, “a lens-eye view” (*IJ* 758), the conversation comes across as anything but

natural, emphasized by Mario's comments on Chu's performance: "You're acting perfectly natural' ... 'I should tell you I feel like we're getting the totally real LaMont Chu here'" (*IJ* 758). Of course, these comments are oxymoronic, since acting is inherently fake and unnatural, which Wallace addresses in "E Unibus Pluram":

And we love to laugh at how stiff and false non-professionals appear, on television. How unnatural.

But if you've ever once been the object of that terrible blank round glass stare, you know all too well how self-conscious it makes you. A harried guy with earphones and a clipboard tells you to 'act natural' as your face begins to leap around on your skull, struggling for a seemingly unwatched expression that feels impossible because 'seeming unwatched' is, like the 'act natural' which fathered it, oxymoronic. Try driving a golf ball as someone asks you whether you in- or exhale on your backswing, or getting promised lavish rewards if you can avoid thinking of a rhinoceros for ten seconds, and you'll get some idea of the truly heroic contortions of body and mind that must be required for Don Johnson to act unwatched as he's watched by a lens that's an overwhelming emblem of what Emerson, years before TV, called 'the gaze of millions.' (154)

On top of the unnatural act of trying to act natural, Mario's disconnection from the actual conversation through his camera makes him a passive viewer, not engaging in the conversation but merely watching, like an audience watching a television show. This leads Chu to comment, "Jesus, Mario, it's like trying to talk to a rock with you sometimes," to which Mario, viewing Chu as a performer for the camera and not someone with whom he is truly conversing, responds, "This is going very well!" (*IJ* 759).

Raymond Williams, discussing the changes to drama, including dramatic speech and dialogue, as a result of television, also notes this lack of interconnectedness when, in "Drama in a Dramatized Society," he writes that characters in plays no longer seemed to be speaking *to* one another but "were speaking with each other perhaps, with themselves

in the presence of others” (12). He goes on to explain this way of speaking and listening as “a structure of feeling in a precise contemporary world,” and he specifically highlights its “unfinished, transient, anxious” nature (13). There is no longer an engaged dialogue but instead a fractured “weaving of voices,” indicating a disconnection between characters (13).

Echoing Postman’s belief that as a result of television America has become a neighborhood of strangers, simultaneously drawn together and distanced from one another, Williams writes about the “group” element of the twentieth century. Thanks to television, and then the Internet, now more than ever people feel connected to one another, part of a group. Yet this group/crowd connection presents problems when it comes to the individual—that is, the problem of being heard in the crowd, of being an individual and a “human being” in the crowd. Wallace allegorizes the inability to be heard in, or to stand out from, the crowd through a conversation between the wraith (of Hal’s filmmaker father, James O. Incandenza) and Gately about dialogue in film and television. The wraith points out the falseness of dialogue in film and television, how it is only the main actors who can be heard while the extras in the background merely silently mouth words. “Aural realism” in film and television, according to the wraith of James Incandenza, would be for every person on screen to have a voice, an “egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world’s real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment” (*JJ* 835-6). In other words, the “babble of crowds,” similar to what Williams and Postman write about the group and the neighborhood of strangers, means that everyone has a

voice. Yet, instead of being inclusive, as the wraith of James O. Incandenza suggests to Gately, believing that it “honors our real-life multiplicity of voices more thoroughly than can any artistic construction that privileges certain voices at the expense of silencing others” (Holland 61), such crowd dialogue is actually *exclusive* because it stifles individual voices.

According to Mary K. Holland, many critics have misinterpreted James Incandenza's babble of crowds as being the moral of Wallace's story, believing that the novel, with its “multiplicity of voices, narrative strains, and perspectives” (61), is his attempt to produce the babble in his writing. In fact, according to Holland, the opposite of this is true, as she argues that *Infinite Jest* “reads more as a readerly intervention against babble than an indulgence in it. For it asks readers to make of the sequential multiplicity a coherent story by paying attention to *individual* voices at individual moments, to recognize unique human stories within the linguistic fray” (61). Wallace, like Postman, sees the irony in globalization and the crowd: that just because everyone has a voice does not mean that everyone can be heard. Although it appears that there are more opportunities than ever to communicate with others, through computer-mediated communication and globalization, communication on an individual, human level is silenced by the babble of crowds. As I will explore further in the following chapter with respect to Hal, to join the crowd—that is, to cease being a silent extra—and, to use one of Wallace's AA sayings, to “surrender to the Group conscience” (*IJ* 357), is a kind of “solipsistic death sentence” (Holland 61), because the person loses his or her individual identity.

Raymond Williams argues that this problem of the crowd versus the individual is reflected in the dialogue of drama, and, as I hope to show with *Infinite Jest*, in the dialogue of fiction, as he writes:

But there was a new comprehension, in which a group was speaking, yet a strange negative group; no individual ever quite finishing what he had begun to say, but intersecting, being intersected by the words of others, casual and distracted, words in their turn unfinished: a weaving of voices in which, though still negatively, the group was speaking and yet no single person was ever finally articulate. (12)

This type of dialogue, he says, can be heard not only in television shows, in the quick, disjointed interactions between characters, but also in the dramatized society itself, where the form of speaking in television has seeped over into the form of speaking in peoples' everyday lives. Television, in other words, has shaped the way people speak and interact, because, as Postman puts it, "Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself. Therefore—and this is the critical point—how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is to be properly staged" (92).

The transient and unfinished way of speaking, the weaving of voices, can be seen in the interactions between characters in *Infinite Jest*, where it is not uncommon for a character, while in the presence of someone else, to speak as if to him/herself, to speak not *to* another character but merely *with* another character. One such example of this form of disconnected communication takes place during a conversation between Hal and his brother Orin. Orin, after having been interviewed by Hugh/Helen Steepley from *Moment* magazine, attempts to have a conversation with Hal, asking him "stained-family-linen-type questions" (*IJ* 247), but his younger brother merely ignores the questions, as indicated by Wallace's repeated use of the ellipsis during the dialogue, or rambles

tangentially and instead talks about the irrelevant subject of his ability to clip his toenails into the garbage can in his dorm room:

‘Hey Hallie? I think I’m being followed.’
 ‘This is the big moment. I’ve totally exhausted the left foot finally and am switching to the right foot. This’ll be the real test of the fragility of the spell.’
 ...
 ‘The weird part is I think I’m being followed by ... by handicapped people.’
 ‘Two for three on the right foot, with one carom. Jury’s still out.’ (*IJ* 244)

Similarly, on several occasions Don Gately attempts to have a conversation with Joelle, to get her to open up about personal details about her past, such as the reason as to why she wears a veil, only to be met with resistance from her. Eventually Gately gives up and, pointing out the solipsistic or monologic nature of their conversations, says, “‘Jesus, why am I even here? Why don’t you just interface with yourself if you think you know all my issues and shames and everything I’m going to say?’” (*IJ* 537-8).

Williams’s comments on dramatic speech in “a precise contemporary world,” where characters, instead of engaging in dialogues, hold separate monologues while in the presence of others, brings to mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory on dialogism and monologism. Monologism, also referred to as “homophony,” meaning “single voice” (Robinson), “represents the shutting down of dialogue and its alteric potential” (White 1). In the monologic novel, only a single perspective, that of the author’s, is offered up to the reader. In contrast, dialogism, which is also referred to as “double-voiced” or “multi-voiced,” contains several different voices and perspectives, and as a result:

Each character has their own final word, but it relates to and interacts with those of other characters. Discourse does not logically unfold (as in analytical philosophy), but rather, interacts. This makes dialogical works a lot more ‘objective’ and ‘realistic’ than their monological counterparts, since they don’t subordinate reality to the ideology of the author. (Robinson)

In a monologic world, characters are often naturally shut off from one another due to their limited interactions, whereas the dialogic world is defined by its celebration of “inclusive unity,” where characters regularly engage in conversation, and where “truth about the world is linked with specific position, with truth for the individual personality” (Emerson 69). Unlike monologism, which subordinates the individual to a singular perspective, dialogism encourages individual personalities. This again brings to mind Mary Holland’s assertion that the true goal or moral of the novel is the recognition and appreciation of individuality in a crowd-oriented culture, and we can therefore restate this to say that *Infinite Jest* strives for dialogism, where everyone has a voice and no one voice is put above another.

Despite its multitude of distinct voices and perspectives, however, I suggest that the characters of *Infinite Jest* are trapped in a monologic realm because, more often than not, no two voices seem to overlap. That is, to repeat Williams’s comment, characters do not speak *to* each other but *with* each other, and, therefore, they do not interact as characters in a dialogic novel do, but rather they speak in a manner that might more appropriately be described as monologic. Marathe, after Steeply dominates their conversation by claiming to know what he will say next, says of this one-sided way of speaking that it is as if the person is speaking to his or herself: ““inventing sides. This itself is the habit of children: lazy, lonely, self. I am not even here, possibly, for listening to”” (*IJ* 321). Unlike the traditional monologic novel, however, where characters lack a sense of autonomy, and where “truth is impersonal...placed in a character’s mouth by the author” (Emerson 69), *Infinite Jest* is monologic by virtue of the fact that there is an

absence of dialogue, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. Like the dialogic novel, *Infinite Jest* contains the polyphonic quality, but Wallace, again with the idea of the narrative like a fractured pane of glass, presents these voices as being isolated from one another. Adam Kelly says about Wallace's paradoxical treatment of dialogue in *The Broom of the System* that he takes "an overwhelmingly monologic approach to dialogue" (271). Perhaps a helpful way to picture the novel is to imagine a complete, linear narrative (the very pretty pane of glass) as being dialogic until it is dropped off the figurative twentieth story of a building, thus fracturing it and making it monologic. Related to what James Incandenza says about the babble of crowds, each character is indeed given a distinct voice, separate from that of the author's, yet these voices ultimately combine (which is different from saying that they connect) in such a way that no one voice is distinguishable from the babble, and the result is a monologic babble of crowds.

One way in which Wallace explicitly achieves the monologic quality of his novel is through the use of ellipses, which he employs throughout much of his oeuvre, beginning with *The Broom of the System* and, perhaps most prominently, in the short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. In place of a character's dialogue, Wallace uses an ellipsis to indicate silence, giving the reader only the voice of a single character. Stephen J. Burn describes this as Wallace's attempt "to dramatize the role of the silent partner" (*David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* 31). These incomplete conversations can only be inferred by the reader based on what the characters who have been granted a voice say. In certain circumstances ellipses are not merely instances of omitted dialogue but they signify the speaker's inability to be heard, as Hal says to his

father, disguised as the professional conversationalist, ““And are you hearing me talking, Dad? It speaks. It accepts soda and defines *implore* and converses with you”” (*IJ* 31).

Hal's father's response, ignoring his son's plea to be heard, followed by ellipses in place of Hal's dialogue, implies a disconnect between the father and the son and foreshadows Hal's breakdown into a state of solipsism.

Related to the ellipsis is Wallace's use of the letter Q. in place of a speaker's question. In keeping with the monologic tone of the interactions between characters, Wallace only grants the reader access to the answers of the enigmatic questions. For example, before jumping into a lengthy endnote of Marlon Bain's responses, Wallace indicates a group of questions (and presumably sub and sub-sub-questions) from Helen Steeply by writing, “Q, Q, Q (Q, Q[Q], Q, Q, Q), Q, Q (Q), Q, Q” (*IJ* 665). Again the reader is left to infer the questions and the other half of the conversation, presenting only the perspective of one character at a given time, which simulates “the warped reality of late-20th century life in its purest sense, entirely free of context, reduced to language and vocal impersonation, like a rough cut... all sound and no picture (Passaro).”

The effect of the novel's monologic quality is that the characters rarely, if ever, evolve or find themselves coming to new conclusions, because such growth could only come as a result of the dialectical process, wherein different points of view come together to create a new, unified point of view. Jean Hyppolite describes this process through the opposing consciousnesses of master and slave:

Just as master and slave oppose each other as two figures of consciousness, so noble consciousness and base consciousness, and sinning consciousness and judging consciousness, oppose each other until finally the two essential moments of every

dialectic are simultaneously distinguished and united as universal consciousness and individual consciousness. (171)

This process does not exist in *Infinite Jest*, and therefore characters remain unchanged and trapped within their monologic barriers.

In contrast to monologism, Bakhtin views Dostoevsky's work to be the paragon of dialogic writing. In Dostoevsky, "a character exists to address an idea to someone else. This other person has a responsibility to challenge (not merely to reinforce) that idea or that concept of self" (Emerson 71). In *Infinite Jest*, perhaps with the notable exception of the hilltop conversation between Marathe and Steeply, it is unlikely for a character to find his or her sense of self directly challenged by another character. It could even be said that Marathe and Steeply do not engage in a proper dialogue, since Marathe acts as a double, or perhaps triple or quadruple agent, and therefore the sincerity of their conversation is questionable. As a result, many of the characters, like the narrative itself, find themselves at the end of the novel in a similar place that they were in at the beginning. To return to what I wrote earlier about the novel being structured in such a manner that it conveys a sense of *regresses ad infinitum*, the characters in the novel find themselves in a sort of loop, never quite getting anywhere, with Hal's story, chronologically speaking, not ending but rather returning to the beginning. Unlike Dostoevsky's dialogic novels, the characters do not reach any kind of conclusions based on their interactions with other characters, such as in *Crime and Punishment*, where the once-nihilistic Raskolnikov finds himself reformed due to the influence of Sonya. And the novel itself does not reach any kind of unified truth, because, as Bakhtin claims, change and unified truth cannot be arrived at through the single consciousness of the monologic, these things are only the

result of dialogism, through “a multiplicity of consciousnesses, one that could not in principle be fitted within the boundaries of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, social by its very nature and full of event-potential, one that is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses” (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* 78). While *Infinite Jest* does indeed contain a multiplicity of consciousnesses, it ultimately lacks a point of contact to bring them together. One can only assume, based on Wallace's comment that “[c]ertain kinds of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an ‘end’ can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame” (qtd. in *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* 321), that such a point of contact can only be arrived at by the reader outside the pages of the text, if at all.

To be clear, *Infinite Jest's* monologic quality is no fault of the author's, but rather it is a product of the culture, a culture whose mode of communication is impersonal and insists on entertainment at the expense of true human connection. Unlike, for example, the work of Leo Tolstoy, who Bakhtin views as the monologic counterpart to Dostoevsky's dialogism, Wallace does not act as the novel's single autonomous voice, and he does not claim to be the holder of any kind of unified truth, and the characters of *Infinite Jest*, therefore, do not exist solely “so that the author can address them, and ultimately the readers, with a truth that transcends them all” (Emerson 71). Instead, the novel is a fractured collection of the voices, opinions, and personal truths of several characters, each alienated from one another. In this sense, *Infinite Jest* might more accurately be compared to the Internet than to television, because the Internet is a space where people share information and opinions with others while also remaining isolated.

On the Internet, people's voices do not interact in quite the same way that they would while "interfacing." The Internet is dialogic in that it is polyphonic, yet it is monologic in that the people behind these voices do not connect. While Wallace may have denied the interpretation that the novel is intended to resemble the Internet, once claiming that he had "never been on the Internet," it inevitably imitates the experience of living in a culture that is heavily influenced by it, as he goes on to say that "[y]ou don't have to be on the Internet for life to feel this way" (Caro 57).

Ultimately Wallace employs the monologic rhetorical devices in his novel so as to create a solipsistic feeling. More than anything this applies to the solipsistic downfall of Hal, a downfall which is described by his father as being the result of depression but which is conveyed to the reader through his absence of dialogue. It's not that Hal cannot speak; it's that the others cannot hear him speak. Put otherwise it is a discrepancy of perceptions, as "it becomes clear that the novel focuses on the discrepancy between (isolated) self-perception and the perception of self by others (his father believes Hal does not speak, while from Hal's perspective this is just a 'hallucination' his father has)" (Timmer 158). Nicoline Timmer describes this discrepancy as a "*phenomenological blurring* of subjective worlds" (158), where a person's sense of the world can neither be defined fully by him/herself or by the external world. This idea is set up in the opening section of the novel, when Hal attempts to communicate and explain himself to the administrative heads during the university interview but is unable to produce a language that can be understood by others, saying of his failed attempts, "I cannot make myself understood" (IJ 10). Hal implores those around him to "[t]ry to listen" to what he has to

say, but the only response this garners is miscommunication and panic: ““What in God’s name are those...,’ one Dean cries shrilly, ‘...those *sounds?*’” (*IJ* 12).

In the following chapter I will further explore Hal’s transformation by looking at Ludwig Wittgenstein’s private language argument and the theory of solipsism, all with the aim of further explaining what happens to Hal. Where this chapter focused on the social, the following will focus more closely on the individual, in particular: ““Existential individuality, frequently referred to in the West. Solipsism”” (*IJ* 112-3).

Chapter 3:

“Inner world”: Cultural Solipsism

Related to and naturally arising from the monologic quality of the novel is the theme of solipsism. Wallace seemed to be obsessed with the idea of solipsism, “the view or theory that the self is all that can be known to exist” (OED), as it can be found in one form or another not just in *Infinite Jest* but in most of his works. Patrick Horn calls it a “struggle with solipsism,” and he says that it “haunts much of David Foster Wallace’s writings, interviews, and speeches” (245). Be it through an inability to communicate with another person, extreme solitude, alienation, narcissism, or just plain loneliness, at the root of all human dilemmas is some form of solipsism. For example, in his posthumous novel *The Pale King*, about the mundane lives of Internal Revenue Service employees, Wallace expresses his belief that solipsism—“The assumption that everyone else is like you. That you are the world”—is a product of “consumer capitalism” (516). In “Certainly the End of Something or Other, One Would Sort of Have to Think,” he similarly writes about solipsism as a product of a specific kind of culture, “a peculiarly American loneliness” arising from the “individualism and self-expression and sexual freedom” of the 1990s, which he says eventually devolved into the “joyless and anomic self-indulgence of the Me Generation” (54). Wallace’s particular choice of the word “anomic”—derived from anomie, meaning: “Lack of the social or ethical standards in an individual or group” (OED)—is telling of his understanding of the concept of solipsism, suggesting a breakdown in the link between the individual and the community, a

breakdown that he refers to, first in his 1993 essay on television and fiction and then through the character of Ingersoll in *Infinite Jest*, as “E Unibus Pluram,” roughly meaning “from one, many,” which is a solipsistic reversal on “the American motto *E Pluribus Unum*,” meaning one out of many (Jacobs 214). In *Infinite Jest* solipsism manifests itself in the loneliness of the characters, who, despite their common connections (i.e. the communities of Ennet House and Enfield Tennis Academy) find themselves feeling deeply alone, a paradox often described by Wallace as a shared aloneness.

More than his unique style of writing, his wild imagination, and his inimitable intelligence, it is perhaps due to his treatment of solipsism and his understanding of what it means “to be really human” (*IJ* 695) in a posthumanist world where the definition of community has changed so much that his writing has appealed to so many. As Steven Moore describes it, Wallace’s appeal has to do with the fact that he “has a heart as well as a brain” (142), unlike many of his postmodern predecessors, who often sacrificed content or emotion for irony or avant-garde desires. It is also fair to assume that solipsism was something with which the author struggled in his own life, suffering bouts of depression before his eventual suicide in 2008. Or perhaps Wallace found himself drawn to solipsism because of his depression, using it as a means to dramatize or convey a sense of mental solitude.

He once stated that one of the reasons he believed Ludwig Wittgenstein to be a “real artist... is that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism” (McCaffery 143), which is similar to what James Incandenza says to Gately about Hal’s decline into solipsism through a private language: “Any conversation or interchange is

better than none at all, to trust him on this, that the worst kind of gut-wrenching intergenerational interface is better than withdrawal or hiddenness of either side” (*IJ* 839). In order to combat this horrible conclusion, Wallace turned to his writing, as the goal of *Infinite Jest*, both the film cartridge and the novel, is to take the person out of solipsism, which can only be achieved through human connection. As Marshall Boswell understands it, not only is it the goal of the characters in *Infinite Jest* to overcome solipsism, through James Incandenza’s attempt to bring Hal “out of himself” (*IJ* 839) through the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge, but it is also the goal of the novel itself to overcome the “the solipsistic narcissism of contemporary American culture” (Holland 64), by bringing the readers “out of themselves” (Boswell 170) and into the lives of the myriad characters in the narrative. While Incandenza’s attempt proves to be a failure, only contributing to the “alienation, anhedonia, and solipsism that it seeks to overcome” (Boswell 169-70), Wallace claimed on several occasions that literature does indeed have the ability to make people feel less lonely, by introducing readers to people and worlds that they would otherwise not have encountered: “a big part of serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves” (McCaffery 127). Literature, to Wallace, was “a solution, the *best* solution, to the problem of existential solitude” (“Farther Away”), as he saw the empathetic nature of reading and writing as the antidote to a culture that was destroying such empathy.

For most of the characters in *Infinite Jest*, however, no such antidote seems to present itself, as in the end they are left marooned, with the most notable examples being

Hal, trapped inside his head, and Gately, laid up in the hospital unable to speak and forced to recount painful memories from his past. It is therefore the objective of this chapter to explain what it is that Wallace sees as the primary culprit contributing towards the cultural solipsism affecting the characters of *Infinite Jest* and, in so doing, to come to a better understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Hal's transformation. Where Hal's uncle (Enfield Tennis Academy Headmaster Charles Tavis) explains Hal's decline simply in terms of a failure to communicate—"He has some trouble communicating, he's communicatively challenged, no one's denying that" (*IJ* 14)—I will instead explain his decline in terms of solipsism. I will begin by examining the works of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, whose theories on language and solipsism, such as his theory on the relationship between language and reality and his private language argument, several critics have noted to inform Wallace's unique treatment of the subjects. Wallace himself claimed as much when he said that *The Broom of the System* can be considered "a dramatization of the ideas of Wittgenstein" ("The Unfinished"), a dramatization that he expanded upon with *Infinite Jest*. After defining solipsism in general philosophical terms, I will take a closer look at what it means to Wallace in particular.

As Wallace sees it, Wittgenstein's relationship with solipsism, from a proposal of it to an eventual challenge to it, can be traced in his writing, from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which consists of seven propositions, to *Philosophical Investigations*, which was published posthumously and contains several rebuttals to the claims that he

had made in the *Tractatus*. He first explicitly addresses the subject in propositions 5.61 and 5.62 of the *Tractatus*:

What we cannot think, that we cannot think: we cannot therefore *say* what we cannot think.

This remark provides a key to the question, to what extent solipsism is a truth.

In fact what solipsism *means*, is quite correct, only it cannot be *said*, but it shows itself.

That the world is *my* world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (*the* language which I understand) mean the limits of *my* world.

Due to the philosopher's understated style of writing, and perhaps also to the fact that coherency may have been compromised as a result of translation, these propositions are somewhat vague and unclear, and Jaakko Hintikka notes that "the main difficulties people have had in trying to understand Wittgenstein's pronouncements on solipsism in the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*" are directly related to proposition 5.62 (88), as he believes that it raises more questions than it answers, such as what is meant by "the limits of language are the limits of my world" and "[w]hat, in particular, is meant by the limits or boundaries (*Grenzen*) of the world?" (88-9). Hintikka proposes that the answer to these questions is Wittgenstein's belief that it is impossible to both say what is and what is not. That is, we cannot say what exists in the world and what does not, for to do this "we should be able to tell *a priori* once and for all what the forms of all elementary propositions are. And this is taken by him to be impossible" (89). With respect to solipsism, what is and what is not are bound to "the limits of language" (Hintikka 90), which leads to Wittgenstein's famous conclusion: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* proposition 7).

According to Wallace, either you accept Wittgenstein's theory that there is no existence exterior to language—that the world is defined by the word—or you succumb to solipsism. On this issue, Lee Konstantinou quotes the author as having said:

This was Wittgenstein's double bind: you can either treat language as an infinitely small dense dot, or you let it become the world—the exterior and everything in it. The former banishes you from the Garden. The latter seems more promising. If the world is itself a linguistic construct, there's nothing 'outside' language for language to have to picture or refer to. This lets you avoid solipsism, but it leads right to the postmodern, post-structural dilemma of having to deny yourself an existence independent of language. (McCaffery 144)

As I will soon explore in relation to Hal, this anxiety over the possibility that “reality may be fundamentally linguistic in character” (Konstantinou 107) is evident in *Infinite Jest*. And it is also evident in the author himself, as Lee Konstantinou argues that Wallace, not content with Wittgenstein's double bind, “regards the world as linguistic but nonetheless wants to use language as a way of reconstructing an extralinguistic reality, specifically the reality of other people” (Konstantinou 107), and the way he accomplishes this is through his writing, by creating a vast world of characters. While dramatizing the theme of solipsism, he is also attempting to combat it.

Wittgenstein, too, was discontent with his conclusions regarding solipsism, “And so he trashed everything he'd been lauded for in the 'Tractatus' and wrote the 'Investigations,' which is the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made” (McCaffery 143). Rather than the “horrible conclusion,” he asserts in *Philosophical Investigations* that a so-called “private language”—“The words of this language are to refer to what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language” (§ 243)—is

impossible, because, as Wallace goes on to explain it, “for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons” (McCaffery 143). The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says of the relationship between language and meaning:

for an utterance to be meaningful it must be possible in principle to subject it to public standards and criteria of correctness. For this reason, a private-language, in which ‘words ... are to refer to what only the speaker can know—to his immediate private sensations ...’ (*PI* 243), is not a genuine, meaningful, rule-governed language. The signs in language can only function when there is a possibility of judging the correctness of their use, ‘so the use of [a] word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands.’ (*PI* 261)

Language, according to Wittgenstein’s challenge of his earlier theories, is a product of community, as opposed to the solipsistic alternative that “I am my world.”

Like Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, who provided the introduction to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, also argues against solipsism through the example of language, saying that the fact that we can speak and understand one another is proof that other people must exist, because “[w]hen human beings speak -- that is, when we hear certain noises which we associate with ideas, and simultaneously see certain motions of lips and expressions of face -- it is very difficult to suppose that what we hear is not the expression of thought, as we know it would be if we emitted the same sounds” (19). In the case of Hal, the fact that others cannot understand him is proof of his lapse into solipsism.

Wittgenstein’s theories, and the manner in which he presents them, are often so opaque that they are to this day left open to interpretation. D.F. Pears writes about the difficulty of the discussion on solipsism, in particular propositions 5.6-5.641, in the

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus that “[i]t would be difficult to feel confident in the completeness of an interpretation” (57). Although dealing with complex metaphysical matters, he wrote in such a manner, with statements that are intended to be facts instead of explained arguments, that there is a sort of poetic or literary quality to his writing, which Wallace once alluded to by saying that the opening line of the *Tractatus*—“The world is all that is the case” (proposition 1)—is “the most beautiful opening line in western lit” (*Fate, Time, and Language* 24). And Wallace’s specific interpretation, what you might call his romanticizing and dramatizing of solipsism, seems to be unique to him, molded so as to fit his own worldview, a worldview that is evident in *Infinite Jest*.

Just as Wittgenstein’s changing relationship with solipsism can be traced through his writing, so too can Wallace’s. While at first, with *The Broom of the System*, Wallace treats solipsism merely as a philosophical theory, what he referred to as his “coldly cerebral take on fiction” (“The Unfinished”), with *Infinite Jest* he treats solipsism as a human matter, something that he attempts to transcend through his writing. Where he once called David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* an experiment in what it would be like to live in a Tractatusized world (Ryerson), with *Infinite Jest* it might be said that he does something similar, giving us an experiment in what it would be like to live in a world where solipsism and Wittgenstein’s private language argument are a reality.

Before moving on to specific instances of solipsism in the novel, further clarification as to Wallace’s unique understanding of the concept might be necessary, and perhaps the best summary of his understanding of solipsism is the oft-cited passage from the novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” published in his first short

story collection *Girl With the Curious Hair* and referred to by Marshall Boswell as a “precursor to *Infinite Jest*”:

We all have our little solipsistic delusions, ghastly intuitions of utter singularity: that we are the only one in the house who ever fills the ice-cube tray, who unloads the clean dishwasher, who occasionally pees in the shower, whose eyelid twitches on first dates; that only we take casualness terribly seriously; that only we fashion supplication into courtesy; that only we hear the whiny pathos in a dog's yawn, the timeless sigh in the opening of the hermetically-sealed jar, the splattered laugh in the frying egg, the minor-D lament in the vacuum's scream; that only we feel the panic at sunset the rookie kindergartner feels at his mother's retreat. That only we love the only-we. That only we need the only-we. Solipsism binds us together, J.D. knows. That we feel lonely in a crowd; stop not to dwell on what's brought the crowd into being. That we are, always, faces in a crowd. (308-9)

This passage, defined by the poignancy that would later separate his writing from his postmodern influences and catapult him to literary stardom, gives us a clue as to his understanding of solipsism. He sees it as a sense of loneliness while with others, viewing oneself as the center of the universe (or the protagonist in life's story) and unable to appreciate the fact that others feel the exact same things. In other words, solipsism is an extreme lack of empathy.

This specific kind of solipsism can be found throughout *Infinite Jest*. Although the characters come from different backgrounds and find themselves addicted to different things, they all share in common this sense of aloneness. For example, the first character to whom we are introduced after Hal's breakdown at the interview is Ken Erdedy, locked away in his house while waiting for a delivery of marijuana, trapped in a state of extreme self-consciousness, worrying about whether or not the marijuana will ever show up and promising himself it will be his last binge. Similar to the idea of Hal becoming more and more withdrawn, Erdedy prepares to “disappear into a hole in a girder inside him” (*IJ* 20).

Another example is Kate Gompert's solipsism as a result of her depression. Her inability to put into terms her mental illness so that others can fully understand it, evoking from her doctor only "the expression of someone who was compassionate but was not, of course, feeling what she was feeling" (*IJ* 74), eventually causes her to call out, "*get me out of this*" (*IJ* 78), which is similar to Hal's earlier plea of "I am in here" (*IJ* 3) and James Incandenza's father's desire to be noticed by his father, saying, "I was *in there*" (*IJ* 168). This idea of characters being trapped inside their own bodies and minds is again brought up in relation to Gately at the end of the novel. Having been physically incapacitated as a result of his fight with the angry Canadians and unable to communicate with others because of the tube in his mouth, Gately is described as being "trapped inside his huge chattering head" (*IJ* 922), forced to consider the excruciating pain of his injury and to look back on moments from his past. One of the forms of solipsism for Wallace, therefore, is a kind of mental and physical imprisonment, what might be referred to as a state of solipsistic immurement.

Even the communities in the novel, the two main settings of Ennet House and Enfield Tennis Academy, are affected by this sense of individualism. As athletes in an individual sport, where they compete against one another and where emphasis is put on individual ranking to the point that "[they] know where [they] stand in relation to each other" (*IJ* 112) at all times, the Enfield tennis players are all inherently alienated from each other even while members of the same team/community. As it is explained to a group of junior members by one of the senior members during a Big Buddy meeting: "We're all on each other's food chain. All of us. It's an individual sport. Welcome to the

meaning of *individual*. We're each deeply alone here. It's what we all have in common, this aloneness" (*IJ* 112). In this sense the tennis academy can be seen as a synecdoche for the United States and the American Dream, where freedom and the individual's right to "maximize pleasure, minimize displeasure" (*IJ* 423) are put in favor of the greater good of all the people. During their rendezvous in Arizona, Steeply calls the US "a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual's right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct. Defended with teeth and bared claws all through our history" (*IJ* 424). Like the ETA members seeking to become the highest ranked players or to make it to "The Show," Americans put their personal desires above those of the community, which leads Marathe to question: "the best good is each individual U.S.A. person's maximum pleasure? or it is the maximum pleasure for all the people?" (*IJ* 424). This explains Wallace's play on the American motto "E Pluribus Unum," as he views America to be a community of individuals.

A speech made by ETA athletic director and head coach Gerhardt Schtitt to the players, in response to their complaints about the cold weather, emphasizes that it is in fact the goal of the academy to promote this sense of solipsism among the individual members, calling it the "world inside" (*IJ* 459). Through solipsism, Schtitt claims, the individual can ignore external circumstances and focus on his or her own personal gain:

World built inside cold outside world of wind breaks the wind, shelters the player, you, if you stay the same, stay inside... This world inside is the same, always, if you stay there. This is what we are making, no? New type citizen. Not of cold and wind outside. Citizens of this sheltering second world we are working to show you every dawn, no? (*IJ* 459)

Here again we can see the parallels between Enfield Tennis Academy and Marathe's comments about the citizens of the United States, who choose the self over the group. While the freedom to be an individual and to pursue individual happiness is considered the defining characteristic of what it means to be an American, Wallace also shows the negative consequences of a culture of solipsism, emphasized by the fact that Schtitt's reference to the "world inside" is nearly identical to Steeply's description of Hank Hoyne, one of the victims of the *Infinite Jest* lethal entertainment film cartridge. Rendered unable to do anything but watch the film, Steeply says of Hoyne, "His world's as if it has collapsed into one small bright point. Inner world. Lost to us" (*IJ* 508).

This shift away from the community and towards the "inner world" of solipsism is not just a result of the American prioritization of the individual over the greater good; it is also a result of the culture of technology and entertainment, where people are often shut off by themselves with their technology. Northrop Frye, discussing the changes that were taking place in the late twentieth century, says:

Technological development tends to make for increasing introversion in society: the plane is more introverted than the train, the television set more introverted than the theatre. The young people one sees on the streets with headsets clamped over their ears acting out what was a science-fiction nightmare a few years ago. ("Introduction to *Art and Reality*" 170)

"The result," according to Frye, who says that each new advancement in technology is a simultaneous step towards greater introversion, "is increased alienation and a decline in the sense of festivity, the sense of pleasure in belonging to a community" ("Communications" 136). Rather than engage with other human beings, people lock themselves away in their cocoons of technology and entertainment. And we can see this

sense of technological solipsism in the novel as Erdedy, in preparation for his marijuana binge, stockpiles TP cartridges to watch while getting stoned, and Hal, in the midst of his solipsistic breakdown, retreats to one of the viewing rooms of Enfield to watch his father's films. Not only has technology led to people spending more time alone—"private watching of customized screens behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home" (*IJ* 620)—but now, what with headphones that provide the extra solipsistic function of noise-cancelling technology, what might also be referred to as other-people-cancelling technology, people can be alone while surrounded by others, like the members of Enfield. And while the American culture, what Wallace referred to as the "Me Generation" ("Certainly the End of Something or Other" 54), encourages people to seek these inner worlds, characters trapped inside them, such as Hal and Kate Gompert, are begging to be let out.

This sense of individualism or disunity that is found in the group at Enfield can also be found among the members of the community of Ennet House, where Gately comes to the solipsistic realization "[t]hat everybody is identical in their secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else" (*IJ* 205). The goal of Alcoholics Anonymous, which Wallace describes as "intensely social" and with an "emphasis on the Group" (*IJ* 362), is to lose this sense of individualism by giving oneself over to a higher power and the rules of AA. One of the ways to achieve this goal is by empathizing—the opposite of solipsism—with the other members of AA, by "identifying" with their struggles, because "[i]dentify means empathize" (*IJ* 345). As Wallace claims, this goal to give oneself over to something, in the case of AA to

“surrender to the Group conscience” (*IJ* 357), is desired by all Americans in the grips of loneliness, as Hal in the midst of a revelation says, “We are all dying to give ourselves over to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give oneself away, utterly... A flight from in the form of a plunging-into” (*IJ* 900). Addiction, in other words, in its many forms, including addiction to alcoholics anonymous, is a response to solipsism, it is an attempt to escape the immurement of the mind and become a part of something bigger than the individual.

Of course the most significant example from the novel of a character afflicted by solipsism is Hal Incandenza, mysteriously made mute and shut off from everyone else. More than just the sense of alienation and loneliness that the other characters feel, however, Hal's solipsism more closely aligns with Wittgenstein's specific definition, as he becomes the embodiment of the private language argument. Although to those around him its effects appear to come on suddenly, Hal's decline into extreme Wittgensteinian linguistic solipsism is foreshadowed throughout the novel through subtle hints from the author. Even though he is still able to communicate with others, Hal finds himself noticing discrepancies in his physical gestures, such as when he “feels at his own face to see whether he is wincing” (*IJ* 342), which indicates a growing disconnect between his mind and his physical ability to express himself. These minor instances of disconnection escalate until Hal appears to lose complete control over his expressions. For example, in the middle of a conversation, Ortho Stice asks Hal if he is crying, to which Hal responds, “a bit puzzled” (*IJ* 865), that he did not think he was crying. Shortly after this, Kenkle, one of the Enfield custodians, says to him, “Your face is a hilarity-face. It's working

hilariously. At first it merely looked *a*-mused. Now it is open-ly *cach*-inated. You are almost doubled over. You can barely get your words out. You're all but slapping your knee" (*IJ* 875). Again Hal claims not to understand, believing his face to be neutral. In a similar scene, when Hal believes he smiles at Mario, his brother responds, "You look sad" (*IJ* 941). He even attempts to "consciously" compose his "face into something deadly-somber" (*IJ* 875), but again he is unable to control his expressions.

These instances progress and eventually lead to Hal's complete withdrawal into his mind, coming to a climax during the opening interview when he is eventually taken out by ambulance to the emergency room. It is left unclear as to what exactly happens to Hal, yet there are several possible explanations, each one hinted at by the author. He could have somehow seen the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge and been rendered uncommunicative. It could be the delayed result of his having ingested a strange piece of mold during his childhood. Someone, or something (i.e. the wraith of James Incandenza), could have dosed him with DMZ, a drug that Michael Pemulis describes as having debilitating effects similar to that of the lethal entertainment. Or his symptoms could simply be the result of his withdrawal from marijuana, which causes Hal to progressively lose his edge both on and off the tennis courts. Yet while the question as to what causes Hal's transformation remains unclear, the effects of the transformation are not. Hal, who in the first-person narration of the opening section appears to the reader and to himself to be his normal, articulate self, produces gibberish whenever he attempts to speak, "subanimalistic noises and sounds" and "flailing" and "wagging" gestures (*IJ* 14). His ability to produce a language that is only understood by him brings to mind

Wittgenstein's theories regarding a private language, "a language which describes my inner experience and which only I myself can understand" (*Philosophical Investigations* §256). An important distinction of the private language argument is that a private language is not merely one that only a single person speaks; a private language is one that can only be *understood* by a single person. Language, as Wittgenstein posits, is inherently social, because words only acquire meaning after they have gone out into the world. As Wallace explains it:

In the case of Private Language, the delusion is usually based on the belief that a word such as *pain* has the meaning it does because it is somehow 'connected' to a feeling in my knee. But as Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* proved in the 1950s, words actually have the meanings they do because of certain rules and verification tests that are imposed on us from outside our own subjectivities, viz., by the community in which we have to get along and communicate with other people. Wittgenstein's argument, which is admittedly very complex and gnomic and opaque, basically centers on the fact that a word like *pain* means what it does for me because of the way the community I'm part of tacitly agreed to use *pain*. ("Authority and American Usage" 87)

The claim that language can only make sense as a social act is Wittgenstein's argument against solipsism. He intentionally raises the issue of a private language in order to prove that it cannot be true, therefore showing that complete solipsism is impossible. Despite Wittgenstein's disproof and Wallace's clear understanding of the disproof, however, the fact that Hal appears to have fallen into the realm of the private language suggests that he has lost his connection with his community and fallen into a state of solipsism.

Although in theory he knew solipsism to be impossible, Wallace nevertheless employs the theme throughout his work. As James Ryerson states it, "Whatever the explanation for his preoccupation with solipsism in Wittgenstein, Wallace never abandoned his fixation on sealed-off people." The explanation for his preoccupation is the

solipsistic American culture. Not just what he describes as the narcissistic “Me Generation,” but also rapid advancements in technology. With technology dominating more and more aspects of people’s daily lives, the issue of what it means to be a human being, Wallace’s understanding of the goal of good fiction, becomes problematized. That is, what does it mean to be human in a world that is increasingly artificial as a result of technology? What does it mean to be human in a posthumanist world? Wallace expresses this concern in the novel when Remy Marathe, who, at the time, is under disguise as a U.H.I.D. member seeking admission into Ennet House, is asked by another man seeking treatment if he is real: ““You real?... You’re real I can tell ain’t you”” (*IJ* 733). The man goes on to say that ““most of them ain’t real... There’s a micro-thin layer of skin. But underneath, it’s metal. Heads full of parts. Under a organic layer that’s micro-thin”” (*IJ* 733). The only way to tell a machine from a real person, the man explains, is to get up close to the person’s face and listen for a “whir” sound, ““Micro-faint. This whirring. It’s the processors’ gears. It’s their flaw. Machines always whir. They’re good. They can quiet down the whir”” (*IJ* 734). This scene could just be one in many of the novel’s encounters with crazy characters, yet knowing Wallace’s meticulous attention to detail it is hard not to consider the implications of the fear expressed by the addict, the fear of humanity being overrun by technology. In other words, a posthumanist fear of being the only human in a world of machines.

The effects of technology on humanity are evident in Hal, who at one point is described as being like a robot, not having had “an intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny” and treating emotions “like so many variables in rarified equations,”

able to “manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he’s in there, inside his own hull, as a human being — but in fact he’s far more robotic than John Wayne” (*IJ* 694). Hal further resembles a machine or robot through his memorization of the Oxford English Dictionary. He is able to define words with complete accuracy, therefore treating language not so much in the way that Wittgenstein explains it in *Philosophical Investigations*, as being inherently social, but more like data processed by a machine. This brings us back to Hal’s comment during the interview, when he says he is “not a machine” (*IJ* 12), as if the issue of his being a human were a question. Further highlighting Hal’s robotic quality is the opening line of the novel, when he narrates:

I am seated in an office surrounded by heads and bodies. My posture is consciously congruent to the shape of my hard chair. This is a cold room in University Administration, wood-walled, Remington-hung, double-windowed against the November heat, insulated from Administrative sounds by the reception area outside, at which Uncle Charles, Mr. deLint and I were lately received. (*IJ* 3)

Without any visible form of human emotion, Hal robotically points out facts about his surroundings. Stephen J. Burn describes the precision of Hal’s description as an indication of the “elusiveness of his identity” (39). Despite his claims to be alive and present and human, Burn says that Hal’s “marginal selfhood” forces the reader “to ask in what way can someone called Hal be said to be ‘in here’: either inside the room or inside the body that is carefully manipulated by Charles and deLint” (40). Burn refers to the famous robot from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), after whom Hal, short for Harold, may have been named by the author. The implication of this allusion, Judith Ryan argues, is that Hal’s mental breakdown at the end of the novel parallels HAL 9000’s “shutdown at the end of the film. Like Kubrick’s HAL, Wallace’s Hal suffers

from a kind of emptying-out of the brain” (195). In other words, Hal is like a machine that malfunctions.

The issue of what it means to be a human being in the increasingly inhuman world is one that Wallace continued to explore after *Infinite Jest* in *The Pale King*, which Conley Wouters calls “a kind of technological prequel to *Infinite Jest*” (449). Published posthumously in 2011, Wallace sets up a “human/machine dichotomy that recurs throughout the narrative” (Wouters 459), with “multiple examples of humans in danger of becoming machines” (Wouters 448). This eventually leads a character to question, “What am I, a machine?” (*The Pale King* 370), which “hangs unanswered at the top of a mostly blank page as well as throughout the unfinished novel” (Wouters 458). Hal, as if predicting Claude Sylvanshine’s question from *The Pale King*, answers, “I’m not a machine.” Yet his proclamation is stated in such a manner that it appears he is not only trying to convince others but to convince himself as well. Wouters describes Wallace’s last novel as a work of posthumanist fiction, where “the machine-like existence” of characters poses a challenge to their sense of humanism and agency, causing a blurring of “the distinction between humans and machines” (452). This growing sense of ambiguity surrounding the issue of what is real, or human, and what is not leads to the characters’ solipsism. And it is perhaps even more than just solipsism, since not only is the question of the existence or reality of others put into doubt, but, especially in the case of Hal, so too is the question of one’s own humanity.

Near the end of the novel, Wallace shows the extent of the culture of solipsism, and he also shows what he believes to be the solution to it. Barry Loach, the trainer at

ETA, attempts to prove to his brother, who is in the midst of a spiritual crisis as a result of his lack of faith in humanity, that there are still good people in the world. Barry's brother therefore proposes a challenge:

The spiritually despondent brother basically challenges Barry Loach to not shower or change clothes for a while and make himself look homeless and disreputable and louse-ridden and clearly in need of basic human charity, and to stand out in front of the Park Street T-station on the edge of the Boston Common, right alongside the rest of the downtown community's lumpen dregs, who all usually stood there outside the T-station stemming change, and for Barry Loach to hold out his unclean hand and instead of stemming change simply ask passersby to touch him. Just to touch him. Viz. extend some basic human warmth and contact. (*IJ* 969)

To Barry's surprise, yet not his brother's, no one is willing to touch him, even after weeks of pleading, "Touch me, please, please, someone!" (*IJ* 970). Like Hal's plea of "I am in here," Barry's plea can be seen as a posthumanist yearning for human contact in a world where much of the communication is done through non-physical (i.e. computer-mediated) means. The exception to the solipsistic rule of society is Mario Incandenza, who "had extended his clawlike hand and touched and heartily shaken Loach's own fuliginous hand" (*IJ* 971). Mario's simple gesture leads to Loach's restoration of faith by breaking through the solipsistic barrier put up by society, and it points towards Wallace's proposal to defeat solipsism: human contact.

Chapter 4:

“A flight from”: Metaphor of the MacGuffin

“Wallace has put *Infinite Jest* together so craftily that one apparently nonsensical reference in the first few pages pays off 917 pages later — and makes clear where the MacGuffin was hidden.” – David Gates (“Levity’s Rainbow”)

“It was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn’t literature. It doesn’t mean anything.” – Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49* 77)

To conclude, I would like to return to the structure of the novel and discuss the device that Wallace uses as a narrative drive: the MacGuffin. I have left this chapter for the end because I believe it to be a culmination of everything that has been discussed up until this point, including both the unique form of the novel and the humanistic—i.e. what it means to be a human being in the posthumanist world—element of the novel. And seeing as though I will be discussing the ending (or rather, lack of an ending) to the novel, it seems fitting that I discuss it at the end of this thesis. In this chapter I will look at the MacGuffin not just as a literary device but also as a metaphor. Wallace’s use of the MacGuffin, or the search-for-something narrative, speaks to the culture that he critiques, symbolizing the twentieth/twenty-first century individual’s search for meaning and understanding from a world that is increasingly artificial and ambiguous due to technological advancements and the “Age of Show Business” (Postman 63).

The use of the MacGuffin and the idea of a character’s endless search is nothing new to postmodern literature. Far from it, in fact, as Thomas Pynchon regularly uses the

device to propel his novels' plots, such as Oedipa Maas's search for understanding when it comes to the Trystero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Herbert Stencil's searches for answers as to the identity of the enigmatic "V" in *V.*, and several characters' search for the 00000 rocket and the S-Gerät in *Gravity's Rainbow*. And as some have pointed out, *Infinite Jest* is, regardless of whether or not he would have cared for such a distinction, in many ways Wallace's modern retelling of *Gravity's Rainbow*, with the *Infinite Jest* lethal entertainment in place of the rocket. For this reason I will begin this chapter by briefly exploring the work of Thomas Pynchon in relation to his use of the MacGuffin, because, like Wallace, he uses the narrative device in a symbolic manner. This will bring us back to the issue of *Infinite Jest*'s lack of resolution. While seen by some critics as a flaw on the author's behalf, the lack of resolution actually serves a metaphorical purpose. Like Pynchon's novels, the sudden ending of Wallace's novel—or rather, novels, since *The Broom of the System*, which also employs a MacGuffin, in the form of a missing grandmother, ends abruptly as well (midsentence, in fact)—suggests something about the lack of clarity and resolution of society.

More commonly used as a film term, which is fitting given that the MacGuffin in *Infinite Jest* is a film cartridge and the novel deals with the subject of entertainment, the MacGuffin is something that a character or characters search for throughout the novel: “[it] can be something that all the characters are trying to get their hands on, for example, a falcon in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) or a gem in *The Pink Panther* (1963). The MacGuffin can also be someone or something that is lost and is being sought” (Beaver 153). As such, it plays a central role in the narrative, often, as is the case with *Infinite*

Jest, serving as a link between characters. While the novel is made up of many characters' distinct stories, what draws them all together in the end is the pursuit of the MacGuffin. Made famous by Alfred Hitchcock, the MacGuffin, as it is explained in an essay on the filmmaker, "is simply the device that gets the action going, especially in a spy story or a thriller: the secret or the missing papers, whatever it is that the characters in the film are searching for" (Gottlieb 48). Hitchcock explains the origins of the term through a now-famous anecdote:

You may be wondering where the term originated. It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?'

And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin.' The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?'

'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.'

The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all. (Hitchcock qtd. in Gottlieb 48)

According to Hitchcock's understanding of the device, the MacGuffin is nothing, or, as Gottlieb goes on to write, "[t]he exact details" of it are "inconsequential" (48). What is important is the drama created by the search for the MacGuffin. A classic example of the plot device in cinema that abides by Hitchcock's definition is the enigmatic 'rosebud' in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941). Pursued throughout the film is the meaning of 'rosebud,' which is the last word that newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane whispers before dying. After a long search by several characters in the film, in the end it is revealed that 'rosebud' is simply the name of Kane's childhood sled. Despite the MacGuffin in this case only having particular value or meaning to a single person, it becomes the focal point of the entire narrative. Like Hitchcock, Welles's use of the MacGuffin proves that the

object itself is not necessarily important, but the search for it is. In the case of *Citizen Kane* (1941), on top of being a symbol for Kane's lost childhood, the MacGuffin "becomes the element of dramatic curiosity that motivates the mosaic investigation that helps explain the meaning of Kane's life" (Beaver 153). More broadly speaking, the MacGuffin symbolizes the search for meaning in an ambiguous world. However, unlike in spy thrillers (or more generally, genre fiction), in literature, and in particular in the works of David Foster Wallace, everything has meaning, including the form that the MacGuffin takes.

Little attention has been given to the role of the MacGuffin in Pynchon's writing, perhaps due to the fact that some believe it to be no more than a means to create narrative action. However, as Huei-Ju Wang argues, the MacGuffin is more than just a simple device, through it "Pynchon launches a relentless critique of the desire for presence and causality, making Pynchonesque MacGuffins the major source of *Gravity's Rainbow's* persistent refusal to settle on fixed meanings" (2). Through the characters' search for the MacGuffin, which more often than not yields little to no results, only prompting more questions and confusion, Pynchon establishes a realm wherein his characters struggle to find meaning, where causality is never fully revealed to them.

In his first novel, *V.*, for example, Herbert Stencil searches for the identity of V., which, as Alexander Nazaryan writes, "may be a person, or may be a place, though it could also be neither: Pynchon calls it, at one point, 'a remarkably scattered concept' and, at another, 'the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name.'" Nazaryan also says that *V.*, the novel, is a "classic novelistic quest-without-resolution," and that V., the object or person,

“might be fiction’s greatest example of a MacGuffin.” Similar to *V.*, in *The Crying of Lot 49* Oedipa Maas is put in charge of her ex-boyfriend’s will and stumbles “onto a chain of implication that suggests the organized existence of a counterculture called Trystero” (Dougherty 71-2). In this case, the MacGuffin is used to convey a classic Pynchonian theme: paranoia. As the existence of the Trystero is put into question, despite the “network of clues throughout the novel” suggesting that the Trystero does in fact exist, “Oedipa begins to hope that she is paranoid, that this is all a delusion” (Dougherty 72). Through the MacGuffin, whose true nature is never fully revealed to the reader or to Oedipa, Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, makes a point about the uncertainty of being a member of contemporary society (meaning 1960s United States): “This is Pynchon’s point. Neither Oedipa nor the reader can know what to make of these phenomena, and all the evidence she accumulates continues to work against certainty” (Dougherty 72).

The relentless search for MacGuffins by characters in Pynchon’s novels also symbolizes the metaphysical search for meaning from a universe that will inevitably remain silent, and the difficulty of this search is compounded by the uncertainties of society, making the likelihood of finding answers that much worse. This searching without answers brings to mind Albert Camus’s absurdism, defined in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as “the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). In the case of Pynchon, this might be deemed a unique form of absurdism, a postmodern absurdism, wherein not only is the universe a mysterious thing but so too is the individual and the culture in which he or she exists. Not only does Oedipa Maas not find answers, but she also comes to question what is real and what is false (or a conspiracy) in her immediate

surroundings. Her frustration as a result of this postmodern absurdism is perhaps best summed up near the end of the novel:

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth... Another mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (150)

Through this passage Oedipa's search for the MacGuffin is shown to be a metaphorical search for some sort of transcendent meaning, one which, as Robert Merrill sees it, is doomed to failure, since the alternatives presented by Oedipa "are not resolvable" (65), because, as absurdism would suggest, there are no answers, only questions.

One of the factors contributing to the cultural uncertainty in Pynchon's novels is the recurring theme of paranoia, which is rooted in the suspicion that everything is a conspiracy, or that the government controls everything. For example, Tyrone Slothrop from *Gravity's Rainbow*

has constant bouts of paranoia, and the reader cannot help but think there is justification for this. He is, after all, the product of a sinister program of conditioning, and his unconscious ability to anticipate where the V-2 rockets will land has made him an object of intense surveillance and scrutiny by various Allied intelligence organizations. (Lacey)

This sense of paranoia is the result of the political landscape during the mid-twentieth century in the United States. In 1964, Richard Hofstadter wrote an article on the culture of paranoia in America, calling it a "style of mind": "I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind." In order to show this type

of paranoid style of thinking in mid-twentieth century America, what he calls a cultural “phenomenon,” Hofstadter quotes a speech from Senator McCarthy in 1951 in response to the “parlous situation” of the United States:

How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men. . .

The paranoid style of mind, always questioning what is real and looking for patterns that might suggest a conspiracy, is evident throughout all of Pynchon’s writing, highlighted by the uncertain search for the MacGuffin, which, in the case of *The Crying of Lot 49*, may or may not be real—it may be a hallucination on Oedipa’s part, or it may be a conspiracy.

More to the point of this thesis, technology also plays a role in Oedipa’s uncertainty, as Steven E. Jones, viewing *Lot 49* in terms of neo-Luddism—that is, as an example of an anti-technology text—says that Pynchon foreshadows “the cyberpunk dystopias that came after it (from *Blade Runner* through *Neuromancer* to *The Matrix*), not to mention recent financial and power-system breakdowns that have revealed the extent of the embedded network of technology and our dependence on it.” (206). Jones goes on to note the theme of technology in Pynchon’s description of Oedipa’s search for the MacGuffin: “For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless” (181). Oedipa’s world, in which she is trapped and trying to find meaning, comes to resemble the confusing and oppressive technology, which Jones calls

“ubiquitous and invisible” (206), that is emerging at the time, technology that would eventually evolve and come to define the world in which Wallace wrote.

What first drew Wallace to Pynchon was the sense of confusion conveyed in the latter's writing. D.T. Max writes about Wallace's early fascination with *The Crying of Lot 49* in particular that the “[o]ne thing that caught Wallace's eye about the book was the idea that to live in America was to live in a world of confusion, where meaning was refracted and distorted, especially by the media that engulf and reconfigure every gesture” (*Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* 31). Yet if mid-twentieth century political uncertainty and advancements in technology are behind the metaphor of the MacGuffin in Pynchon's work, what, then, is behind the metaphor of the MacGuffin in Wallace's? In other words, what is the source of uncertainty and confusion, and what is behind the metaphor of the search for meaning, in *Infinite Jest* and late twentieth (into early twenty-first) century America? The answer is even more technology, and the view, held by Neil Postman and Wallace, that Americans had become obsessed with being entertained.

The MacGuffin in *Infinite Jest*, as I have already stated, is the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge, or simply “the Entertainment” (*IJ* 90), which, because it is so powerful as to be potentially weaponized, is pursued by The United States Office of Unspecified Services (U.S.O.U.S.) and Quebec Separatists, the latter for terrorist purposes. Throughout the novel the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge is paralleled with the mysteriously powerful drug DMZ, which Michael Pemulis plans for Hal, Trevor Axford, and himself to ingest at some point. Pemulis describes the effects of DMZ on a soldier in a similar manner to that of the Entertainment:

‘One article out of fucking *Moment* of all sources talks about how this one Army convict at Leavenworth got allegedly injected with some massive unspecified dose of early DMZ as part of some Army experiment in Christ only knows what and about how this convict’s family sued over how the guy reportedly lost his mind... I mean literally lost his mind, like the massive dose picked him up and carried it off somewhere and put it down someplace and forgot where.’ (*IJ* 214)

Like the debilitating yet euphoric effects of DMZ on the Army convict, the Entertainment causes a medical attaché, who is discovered by his wife in a trance-like state in front of the television, to become paralyzed with amusement:

And just before 0145h. on 2 April Y.D.A.U., his wife arrived back home and uncovered her hair and came in and saw the Near Eastern medical attaché and his face and tray and eyes and the soiled condition of his special recliner, and rushed to his side crying his name aloud, touching his head, trying to get a response, failing to get any response to her, he still staring straight ahead; and eventually and naturally she — noting that the expression on his rictus of a face nevertheless appeared very positive, ecstatic, even, you could say — she eventually and naturally turning her head and following his line of sight to the cartridge-viewer. (*IJ* 78-9)

By aligning the two, Wallace highlights the metaphor of the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge, which is itself a metaphor for entertainment in general, as being like a highly addictive drug.

Although small clues can be pieced together to form an idea, little information is provided as to the actual content of the film. For example, we know that it was the last film created by James O. Incandenza before his suicide, and Joelle, who stars in the film yet still claims not to have seen it or even to have known that it was completed, says, while being interrogated by the U.S.O.U.S., she “was in two scenes” (*IJ* 938-9). The first involves her going through a revolving door and supposedly recognizing somebody, and the second involves her leaning over a crib while repeatedly apologizing. No discernible plot, however, is known by any of the characters, since to have seen the movie is to have

essentially died, which means that the MacGuffin, as is often the case, is destined to remain somewhat mysterious to the reader. Further confusing the issue, Joelle suggests that the film might have actually been an elaborate joke (or “jest”) on the part of James Incandenza, in response to “being criticized about entertainment v. nonentertainment and stasis” (*IJ* 940). In this sense, the MacGuffin of the novel adheres to Hitchcock’s definition of the device in that its specific makeup is not its most important detail, but rather what is important is what it does to the characters and the narrative.

Also of importance is the distinctly American aspect of the film, as Marathe, in his hilltop conversation with Steeply, says:

‘This is a U.S.A. production, this Entertainment cartridge. Made by an American man in the U.S.A. The appetite for the appeal of it: this is also U.S.A. The U.S.A. drive for spectatorship, which your culture teaches... now is what has happened when a people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. that would die—and let its children die, each one—for the so-called perfect Entertainment.’ (*IJ* 318)

The search for the MacGuffin can therefore be seen as a metaphor for America’s relentless search for entertainment and pleasure, which is a distortion of the American right to pursue happiness. The true power of the MacGuffin is not that it is so entertaining as to be lethally addictive, but that America’s appetite for entertainment is killing them, as Marathe goes on to say, “‘This appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose—this *appetite* of your people unable to choose appetites, *this* is the death’” (*IJ* 318). The MacGuffin also reveals the potential dangers of freedom, which is so highly revered by Americans, as Marathe later suggests that the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge will not be forced upon Americans—“‘You know there can be no forcing to watch a thing’” (*IJ* 430)—but Americans will nonetheless be unable *not* to watch it because of their desire

for entertainment and their belief in the freedom to choose to do whatever they please. As Marathe puts it, “so many U.S.A.s cannot make the enlightened choices?” (*IJ* 430).

The search for the MacGuffin is therefore the ultimate symbol of addiction in the novel. This addiction, in its many forms, is a result of the emptiness of the American experience in the age of technology and entertainment. As Neil Postman argues, because of the desire to be entertained Americans are left without a strong sense of meaning (meaning is defined here as something in a person's life that is important or of value, something beyond mere entertainment). Like the response to solipsism, wherein the characters seek to give themselves over to a group in order to combat their sense of loneliness, many of the characters in *Infinite Jest*, in response to their meaningless existences, become addicted to something. As Wallace puts it, they give themselves over to a pursuit, like the pursuit undertaken to find the MacGuffin. Similar to Hal's realization near the end of the novel that “people are dying to give themselves over to something” (*IJ* 900), the drug use among the members of ETA (which, again, can be seen as a synecdoche for all of the United States) is rooted in the desire to give themselves over to something, anything:

But so some E.T.A.s — not just Hal Incandenza by any means — are involved with recreational substances, is the point. Like who isn't, at some life-stage, in the U.S.A. and Interdependent regions, in these troubled times, for the most part. Though a decent percentage of E.T.A. students aren't at all. I.e. involved. Some persons can give themselves away to an ambitious pursuit and have that be all the giving-themselves-away-to-something they need to do. Though sometimes this changes as the players get older and the pursuit more stress-fraught. American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels. Some just prefer to do it in secret. (*IJ* 53)

The metaphor of the MacGuffin here works on two levels. First, the relentless pursuit of the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge is like the distorted pursuit of the American Dream (i.e. individual pleasure). This pursuit, however, is not enough for some, so they take on a different form of pursuit, by giving themselves over to something else in the form of addiction. The MacGuffin can therefore be seen as not only a metaphor for the search for something, but the search itself (or giving oneself over to the search) can also be seen as a means of avoidance of something. That is, the pursuit of the MacGuffin represents the notion of Americans giving themselves over to something else in order to lend their lives meaning. This is slightly different from saying that the MacGuffin is a metaphor for the search for meaning, since, in this instance, the search *itself* is intended to provide meaning. Or at least the search is a means to distract oneself from the meaninglessness of life in the world of technology. Addiction to drugs and the pursuit of the American Dream are therefore rooted in the same thing: the desire to overcome the meaninglessness of American society. Hal realizes that this is the function of Enfield when he says, “This was why they started us here so young: to give ourselves away before the age when the questions *why* and *what* grow real beaks and claws” (*IJ* 900).

In Wallace's typical metafictional style, the MacGuffin also serves a self-reflective function, by paralleling the reader's search for meaning in the text. As I discussed earlier with Menippean satire, Wallace attempts to bring the experience of living in the technology-driven world into the experience of reading *Infinite Jest*, and one of the ways he does this is through the MacGuffin. Aside from the fact that they share the same title, the comparison between *Infinite Jest* the film/MacGuffin and *Infinite Jest* the

novel is highlighted by the fact that both lack a coherent, unified plot. Like the characters searching for answers as to the MacGuffin, the reader must search for answers as to the meaning of the text, or to simply make sense of the text. Joshua Comyn says that Pynchon does the same thing with the MacGuffin in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

One of the great achievements of *Gravity's Rainbow* however is to dramatise Slothrop's experience for the reader through the act of reading itself, since the reader's pursuit of meaning in the text makes them miss that meaning even as they are producing it—generating it metatextually. The meaning in question is thus the search for meaning itself. It is in this way that the Rocket comes to occupy the place of God (as Word, as Text) in Slothrop's and the reader's imaginative universe—a substitution that does not secularise God, but instead, deifies the Rocket, rendering it the lynchpin for an entire universe of meaning.

In *Infinite Jest*, this search for meaning is highlighted through the anecdote of Steeply's father, who in many ways resembles the reader. Steeply describes his father as having been “consumed with a sort of entertainment” (*IJ* 638-9), the television show *M*A*S*H*. He watched every episode of *M*A*S*H* and took notes, as if in an attempt to derive some sort of deeper meaning from the show, eventually developing “huge and complex theories... Like evidence of some sort of coded communication to certain viewers about an end to our familiar type of world-time and the advent of a whole different order of world-time” (*IJ* 644). It is easy to imagine oneself as being like Steeply's father, “hunched over weirdly, head out, as if pulled toward the screen” (*IJ* 640) (or, in our case, the book), trying to find meaning. The difficulty of this, however, is that the reader, like Steeply's father and like the member of society, searches for meaning in something that defies deeper meaning and only serves the purpose of entertainment (in fact, the working title of *Infinite Jest* was “A Failed Entertainment”). In other words, Steeply's father's attempt to find meaning in a sitcom, the main purpose of which is to entertain the

audience, is like the twentieth/twenty-first century individual's attempt to find meaning in society, where entertainment has seeped into every facet of life.

With Wallace, like Pynchon before him, the search for the MacGuffin does not lead to any sense of resolution for the characters: *The Crying of Lot 49* ends midsentence, with Oedipa no closer to finding the true identity of the Tristero; *V.* ends with Herbert Stencil Sr. killed by chance at sea, and Herbert Stencil Jr. no closer to finding the identity of V.; and *Gravity's Rainbow* offers few answers to the reader (not just in the end, but in general). Like *Lot 49*, *The Broom of the System* ends midsentence, and *Infinite Jest*, as I have already noted, doesn't exactly end so much as it weaves back in on itself, with the whereabouts of the MacGuffin only alluded to. In a review of Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*—which, like the author's earlier works, consists of a MacGuffin narrative, wherein the protagonist (private detective Doc Sportello) gets entangled in a possible conspiracy involving the enigmatic Golden Fang—Garth Risk Hallberg suggests that the ultimate difference between modernism and postmodernism is that the former, with such examples as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, “tend toward solutions,” while the latter, including “Pynchon's mysteries” and, I would add, Wallace's mysteries, “only ramify into further mysteries.” Dostoevsky, for example, offers closure to the reader in *Crime and Punishment* through Raskolnikov's moral redemption, and even Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick* provides a definitive ending to Ahab's search for the MacGuffin, however fatalistic it may be. Yet Wallace, in *Infinite Jest*, denies the reader any sense of closure. We don't know what happens to Hal or Gately, and we don't know what happens to the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge. What, then,

does this say about the difference between the eras of modernism and postmodernism?

Based on the themes in Wallace's and Pynchon's works, the difference between modernism and postmodernism with respect to clarity and resolution is technology and entertainment. The era of modernism occurred when the written word was the dominant language, whereas the era of postmodernism occurred, and continues to occur, in the age of technology and entertainment.

Similar to what Ludwig Wittgenstein argues in *Philosophical Investigations*, Postman says that “[l]anguage only makes sense when it is presented as a sequence of propositions” (73), and this is best achieved through the language of the written word, which provides the reader with a context and a sense of meaning. Television, on the other hand, does not have the same structuring system, or “syntax,” of the written word, and it does not require a context of before and after, because “the point of photography is to isolate images from context” (Postman 73). The result is that the language of images

deprives it of a capacity to argue with the world. As an ‘objective’ slice of space-time, the photograph testifies that someone was there or something happened. Its testimony is powerful but it offers no opinions—no ‘should-have-beens’ or ‘might-have-beens.’ Photography is preeminently a world of fact, not of dispute about facts or of conclusions to be drawn from them. (Postman 72-3)

The language of images (or the language of television and technology), in other words, does not allow a person to draw his or her own conclusions; it merely shows the person images, yet images without meaning or context. With the language of the technology-driven world there is only either/or—that is, either something is or it is not. This restricting sense of a world made up of binary oppositions can be seen in Oedipa's epiphany at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*, when Pynchon repeats “either...or”:

“Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth... Either Oedipa in the orbiting of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero” (181).

Oedipa comes to realize that, in the world of technology, something either is or it is not, yet she cannot decide which. Steven E. Jones refers to Oedipa's revelation as a “negative epiphany about ‘excluded middles’ (‘they were bad shit’) and the nature of modern technocratic society” (206). Despite the seemingly limited possibilities of her environment, like the seemingly limited possibilities of the individual in the technology-driven world, where everything is “zeroes and ones” like the language of computers, Oedipa cannot decide what is real and what is not.

This sense of uncertainty manifests itself in many ways in *Infinite Jest*, with one of the more obvious examples being the uncertainty that the characters feel in their daily lives. Hal, for example, expresses doubts as to the existence of a higher power, as he responds to Mario's weekly question of whether or not he believes in God by saying, “I'll say God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about. I'm pretty much anti-death. God looks by all accounts to be pro-death. I'm not seeing how we can get together on this issue, he and I, Boo” (*IJ* 40). Gately similarly struggles with the concept of a higher power, an important aspect of Alcoholics Anonymous, as Wallace writes about his uncertainty:

On a White Flag Group Commitment to the Tough Shit But You Still Can't Drink Group down in Braintree this past July, Don G., up at the podium, revealed publicly about how he was ashamed that he still as yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power... But Gately, at like ten months clean, at the TSBYSCD podium in Braintree, opines that at this juncture he's so totally clueless and lost he's thinking that he'd maybe rather have the White Flag Crocodiles just grab him by the lapels and just tell him what AA God to have an understanding of, and give him totally

blunt and dogmatic orders about how to turn over his Diseased will to whatever this Higher Power is. (*IJ* 442-3)

The only option offered up to ease Gately's sense of confusion comes from the crocodiles (the veterans of Alcoholics Anonymous, including Gately's sponsor Francis ('Ferocious Francis') Gehaney), who tell him, in response to his question as to how anyone can pray to a God "only morons believe in," that "it doesn't yet matter what you believe or don't believe, Just Do It" (*IJ* 350).

Because of the lack of resolution, *Infinite Jest*, like Pynchon's novels, can be classified as a work of absurdism, more specifically postmodern absurdism. That is, works of postmodern absurdism are absurd because of the culture in which they were written. Characters search for meaning in a world that defies meaning. Like the crocodiles' suggestion to Gately to stop trying to understand the world and "Just Do It," Camus says that the absurdist is one who toils through life despite not understanding. In the essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus uses the mythological figure Sisyphus, who is punished to a life of repeatedly rolling a rock up a hill, to explain the absurd condition of mankind, saying that despite the inexplicability of the universe and the repetition of daily life, which is emphasized in *Infinite Jest* through the repetitive nature of Alcoholics Anonymous (i.e. daily meetings, daily prayers, twelve-step program), "[o]ne must imagine Sisyphus happy," because "[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (111). Sisyphus is left with only the option of a meaningless existence, just as Gately is forced to go through daily rituals without a sense of meaning. Sisyphus, however, is content, while the characters of *Infinite Jest* struggle to come to terms with the futility of their lives. The persistent search for the MacGuffin is similar to what

Camus writes about Sisyphus's struggle itself towards the heights giving life purpose in that it represents the need to fill one's life with a sense of purpose so as to make up for (or distract oneself from) the futility of life in the technology-driven world. By taking up the pursuit of a MacGuffin, the characters acquire a Sisyphean task, like rolling a rock up a hill, so as to give their lives meaning.

To return to the example of *Crime and Punishment* and Garth Risk Hallberg's comment on the difference between modernism and postmodernism (that the former tends towards solutions while the latter only leads to more confusion), while Raskolnikov expresses similar doubts to that of Hal and Gately about society and the existence of a higher power, in the end he experiences a reformation. Yet no such hierophany presents itself to the characters of *Infinite Jest*; they, like the reader, are faced only with more uncertainty. The novel ends with Gately recounting the moment in which he hit rock bottom, binging on Dilaudid before being stranded on a beach by the sadistic Bobby C. Even the final line is ambiguous, with a touch of Sisyphean absurdity to it: "And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (*IJ* 981). This passage, which one can easily imagine being followed by one of Wallace's famous ellipses so as to suggest that the story continues, or a note redirecting the reader back to the front of the book, has been the source of frustration for many readers, due to the fact that it offers no sense of closure, which might seem especially frustrating given the amount of time and energy required to reach the end of the book. But there is meaning in the ending—that is, meaning through meaninglessness. Wallace, in keeping with the absurdist nature of *Infinite Jest*, suggests

that there are no answers; there is only the futility and repetition of life in the posthumanist world of technology and entertainment. This is emphasized through the repetition of “and” throughout the final line, which conveys a sense of continuity or infinity. Rather than learn of Gately’s or Hal’s fate, which is itself a sort of MacGuffin-like pursuit for the reader, the only thing left in the end is to go back to the beginning and do it all over again, like Sisyphus climbing to the top of the mountain only to have the rock fall back down.

Only adding to the reader’s sense of uncertainty is the novel’s Menippean form. Like the effort to piece together the clues regarding the *Infinite Jest* film cartridge, the reader is left to piece together the disjointed scenes in order to form a complete picture and make sense of everything, a task that proves to be nearly impossible, as, in the end, when everything is added up, the final picture of *Infinite Jest* turns out to be incomplete. In this way, the novel fulfills yet another of the characteristics of Menippean satire in that it puts ideas above plot.

Conclusion

Infinite Jest is long, arduous, and unconventional, and at times it seems to make every effort to be uninterpretable. On top of this, the amount of criticism on a given text often far outweighs, in terms of pages, the text itself. Naturally, then, *Infinite Jest*, which clocks in at over a thousand pages, requires more than just a one-hundred page thesis in order to do it full justice. I had these limitations and obstacles in mind while writing this thesis, and I therefore did not attempt, as it would have been impossible, to cover everything in the novel. Instead, I focused on the themes of technology and entertainment and looked at their effects on the structure of the novel, the social realm of the novel, and the individual characters. It was not the intention of this thesis to argue one way or the other as to the value of technology, television, the Internet, or entertainment with respect to society. Rather, my goal was merely to explore this theme in relation to the novel. As I see it, technology and entertainment are not only the focal point of *Infinite Jest*, but they are also embedded in the text itself, in the way the novel is written and structured.

When novelist Chad Harbach, in a review of Wallace's final short story collection, *Oblivion*, in literary magazine *n+1*, called *Infinite Jest* "the central American novel of the past thirty years" and the novel to which all other American novels pale in comparison, he was likely referring to the fact that not only is the book groundbreaking in its style and its wealth of knowledge, but it is also in many ways accurate in its depiction of the near future (a near future that is now our present). What is most impressive about *Infinite Jest* is the fact that not only has it stood up to the test of time, but it is even more relevant now

than it was nearly twenty years ago (keep in mind that in terms of technology, which is constantly advancing, to the point that it seems as though there is a new iPhone every month, “the test of time” refers to a much shorter length of time than traditional literary standards). For example, with InterLace TelEntertainment Wallace predicted our culture’s current obsession with binge-watching television—“watching more than three episodes of a particular TV show in one day” (Huddleston, Jr.)—as according to a recent survey roughly 90% of people binge-watch on streaming services such as Netflix. And it’s not just television shows. Nowadays just about anything we want is available to us at the click of a button, giving us the ability to “watch, listen to and read anything at anytime” (Wayne). And just as Wallace accurately predicted the technology, he also accurately predicted society’s anxiety about it. For instance, in the same survey on binge-watching, 31% of respondents also “said they have lost sleep to their binging habit while another 37% said they have spent an entire weekend binging on a show” (Huddleston, Jr.). Likewise, Teddy Wayne points out, similar to Marathe’s discussion with Steeply about America’s negative obsession with the freedom to choose, that some believe “that our surfeit of consumer choices engenders anxiety, not satisfaction, and sometimes even a kind of paralysis.” And articles such as Stephen Marche’s “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” argue that now more than ever, while we are connected to each other via technology, people are disconnected from one another (i.e. people are lonely):

What Facebook has revealed about human nature—and this is not a minor revelation—is that a connection is not the same thing as a bond, and that instant and total connection is no salvation, no ticket to a happier, better world or a more liberated version of humanity. Solitude used to be good for self-reflection and self-reinvention. But now we are left thinking about who we are all the time, without ever really thinking about who we are. Facebook denies us a pleasure whose

profundity we had underestimated: the chance to forget about ourselves for a while, the chance to disconnect.

Of course, there are counterarguments to those who believe that technology has had a negative influence, as some say that this is a misperception and that certain technological advancements, such as social media, have only benefited human relationships. Wallace, with *Infinite Jest*, may seem to throw his name decisively into the anti-technology side of this debate, but really what he does is show that technology exposes certain traits that are inherent to human beings. Technology is not the problem, but people are, and technology is merely the tool (or one of the tools) by which people destroy themselves. This becomes clear through the fact that the characters in the novel are addicted not just to entertainment but also to drugs and just about anything else. *Infinite Jest*, therefore, is ultimately not about technology, but about people.

What is inarguable is that technology, for better or for worse, has changed the way people live. Most importantly, it has changed the way that people communicate and interact. And things will inevitably continue to change as technology progresses. While Wallace's predictions of the near future have stood up to these changes so far, I'm curious to see how *Infinite Jest* will be regarded ten or twenty years from now. Will the sense of loneliness that Wallace so often wrote about be addressed through some sort of neo-luddite response to the technology-driven world? Or, similar to what James Incandenza attempts to do with the lethal entertainment, will people try to combat the sense of loneliness highlighted by the technology-driven world by creating new technologies to directly address these issues?

I am also curious to see how Wallace's writing will influence, or continue to influence, future writers. His distinctive style, wherein he brings the fragmented and confusing experience of living in the world of technology into his text, has already inspired a generation of writers to attempt (operative word being attempt, since he has proven to be inimitable [i.e. footnotes and page-long sentences do not a Wallace make]) to write in the same maximalist, self-conscious, and highly articulate fashion as him. Maud Newton argues that Wallace's influence extends far beyond literature, and that his voice—his “slangy approachability,” which is filled with “sort ofs” and “you knows,” as if he were speaking to you as a friend in an intimate conversation—can be found all over the internet in “the stylized mess that is Gen-X-and-Y Internet syntax,” which is ironic given the themes of *Infinite Jest*. What separates him from his imitators, however, is his intellect, as Newton goes on to write that “[i]n the Internet era, Wallace's moves have been adopted and further slackerized by a legion of opinion-mongers who not only lack his quick mind but seem not to have mastered the idea that to make an argument, you must, amid all the tap-dancing and hedging, actually lodge an argument.” So while he may continue to influence a future generation of writers, it is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to truly match the work that he was able to put out in such a brief period time.

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