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Watching Television

with David Foster Wallace

Exegesis

Television and Entertainment in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Novel

Slow Progress North

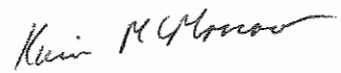
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Statement of Authorship

I am the sole author of this thesis. All sources have been properly referenced.



Kevin McMorrow

21 December 2012



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Abstract

Exegesis

The exegesis argues that David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* is largely concerned with the addictive nature of television and entertainment. The novel examines the possibility of addictive viewing by representing it metaphorically through "Infinite Jest," a film so entertaining it proves lethal; Joelle Van Dyne, a character that embodies the seductive yet crippling aspects of entertainment; and InterLace, an advanced television network/device that permits convenient access to an unprecedented amount of televised content. Current scholarship attempts seriously to qualify the role of television and entertainment in *Infinite Jest* by looking closely at these three metaphorical representations. Yet a survey of current research in media theory reveals a level of sophistication in the novel's treatment of addictive viewing that could not have been recognized in the decade following its publication. By uniting these two bodies of scholarship, this exegesis will show how David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* was able in many ways to imagine, and in some cases predict, the evolution of television and entertainment. In doing so, Wallace is also able to dramatize our culture's relationship with television and entertainment as we know them today, devoting specific attention to the corrosive and detrimental effects of addictive viewing.

Novel

My novel, *Slow Progress North*, is directly influenced by *Infinite Jest*. As such, it is devoted significantly to viewers' relationship with television and entertainment.

James North, twenty-five years old, is stricken with grief when his mother, Sarah, dies after a battle with cancer. At the reading of her will, James is shocked to see his estranged father, Richard. James and his mother moved to San Diego to escape his father's destructive alcoholism. And though James believed his parents' marriage ended at that moment, a series of letters left to him by his mother proves his parents had been in correspondence ever since. As James reads the letters, he comes to understand the nature of their marriage, and the possibility that he has misunderstood his own past.

James is forced to confront his childhood. His father, a successful advertising executive, often used James in his research. James was bullied into watching commercials so that his father could assess their effects on him. As an adult, James begins to realize that his father still exerts a powerful influence over him, which is not restricted to his relationship with television. James's job at You Co., a small self-help company, helps him in some ways to deal with his grief. But it is his girlfriend, Kristen, who helps James to reconcile his past. James, at the mercy, perhaps, of the very addiction that destroyed his family, decides finally that he must resolve years of anger and regret if he is truly to understand his inheritance. His mother, it turns out, willed him more than two stacks of tattered letters.

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Exegesis

Television and Entertainment in
David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

For my parents

Introduction:
Commercial and Scholarly Response to Television and Entertainment
in *Infinite Jest*

This exegesis is an analysis of television and entertainment in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. Reviews in 1996, and the critical research published since, engage significantly with television as it appears in the novel and the various metaphors by which *Infinite Jest* considers the possibility of addictive viewing. However, a survey of current research in media theory reveals a level of complexity and sophistication in *Infinite Jest* that could not have been recognized in the decade following its publication. Using both Wallace Studies¹ and media theory, this exegesis will look closely at specific thematic and metaphorical aspects of the novel in order to deepen readers' understanding of its treatment of television and addictive viewing.

David Foster Wallace remained relatively unknown for much of his career, name-dropped and read mainly by the literary elite and a small community of loyal fans. This helps to explain why readers unfamiliar with the late American writer might think his popularity sudden, inspired in large part by his tragic suicide in 2008. But Wallace had by then gone from cult phenomenon to one of the most important writers of his generation. His fiction and nonfiction alike are praised by contemporaries like Jonathan Franzen, one of his closest friends, and admired by

¹ David Hering, "Editor's Preface," *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering, Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010, p. 9.

N.B. Hering uses "Wallace Studies" to describe the body of scholarship devoted to Wallace and I use it throughout this thesis to do the same, for the sake of convenience.

younger writers like Dave Eggers, who penned the introduction to the tenth-anniversary edition of *Infinite Jest* (2006), the novel for which Wallace is best known.

The years have been good to it, and to its author. In 2005, *Time* included *Infinite Jest* on a list of the 100 greatest novels published since 1923,² the same year the influential magazine first hit newsstands. Michael Silverblatt, host of KCRW's Bookworm, called Wallace a genius and once confessed to feeling a bit out of his depth when he interviewed Wallace about *Infinite Jest* in 1996.³ During much of his career as a writer, Wallace was often in correspondence with American master Don DeLillo, and the elder statesman's respect for his protégé is clear: "There are sentences that shoot rays of energy in seven directions ... writer to reader, intimately, obsessively."⁴

Importantly, Wallace is prominent among the elite group of writers to whom he is most often compared, and with whom he is most often grouped: William T. Vollmann, Richard Powers, and Jonathan Franzen, all of them National Book Award-winners; Pulitzer Prize-winners Jeffrey Eugenides and Michael Chabon; and Denis Johnson, another National Book Award-winner, as well as a finalist, along with Wallace, for 2012's Pulitzer Prize (no decision/no award, however). In 1996, Vollmann called *Infinite Jest* "A brilliant depiction of the

² Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo, "All-TIME 100 Greatest Novels," *Time Entertainment* on *Time.com*, 16 October 2005, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://entertainment.time.com/2005/10/16/all-time-100-novels/#infinite-jest-1996-by-david-foster-wallace>.

³ Michael Silverblatt in an interview with Anthony Miller, *Politics of Culture*, KCRW, Santa Monica, 16 September 2008, accessed 15 August 2012, http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/pc/pc080916considering_david_fo.

N.B. Silverblatt, as always, is incredibly insightful during the interview and definitely holds his own.

⁴ Don DeLillo, "Informal remarks from the David Foster Wallace memorial service in New York on October 23, 2008," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012, p. 23.

loneliness of addiction and of modern society, written both from the mind and from the heart.”⁵ Eugenides argued, “If you want to know who’s upholding the high comic tradition—passed down from Sterne to Swift to Pynchon—it’s Wallace.”⁶ And Franzen said that it was “a spectacular achievement: addictive in its comedy and endless invention, detoxifying in its profound, clearheaded sadness.”⁷ Fourteen years later, in “Farther Away,” an essay published in *The New Yorker*,⁸ Franzen speaks of a “curious thing about David’s fiction,” which is “how recognized and comforted, how *loved*, his most devoted readers feel when reading it.” He recounts how Wallace’s “own authentic goodness is received by the reader as a gift of authentic goodness: we feel the love in the fact of his art, and we love him for it.” Indeed, in distilling the many reviews and responses to Wallace’s fiction—then and now, from fans and critics alike—one feeling seems to recur: a sense of intimacy between reader and writer. And this intimacy is quite often bent toward the purpose of alerting readers to the influence of television, the kind of entertainment most viewers choose to absorb in massive doses.

These qualities, many of them identified in early reviews, have come not just to define *Infinite Jest* but also, as Franzen points out, to define Wallace himself. His analysis of addictive entertainment, which will be discussed in detail throughout this exegesis, and the loyalty he inspired among his fans are perhaps the greatest factors in what can safely be called his canonization. Paul Giles, the Challis Professor of English at the University of Sydney and an associate member of

⁵ William T. Vollman, blurb on back cover of *Infinite Jest*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996.

⁶ Jeffrey Eugenides, *ibid.*

⁷ Jonathan Franzen, *ibid.*

⁸ Jonathan Franzen, “*Robinson Crusoe*, David Foster Wallace, and the Island of Solitude,” *The New Yorker*, 18 April 2011, accessed 15 August 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/04/18/110418fa_fact_franzen.

the Faculty of English at Oxford University, invited Wallace to Oxford to deliver the Esmond Harmsworth Lecture in American Arts and Letters in 2007, an invitation he explained by writing: "Part of my motivation ... sprang simply from my own sense that he was the most significant writer of his generation."⁹ He also asked if Wallace would prepare a series of lectures about "the aesthetics of television" because "his stylistic contortions spoke in a bizarre but entirely compelling way to the overloaded situation of the information age."¹⁰ In the "Editor's Preface" to *Consider David Foster Wallace*, David Hering writes that a conference on Wallace Studies at the University of Liverpool in 2009 "revealed ... the sheer number of scholars worldwide who had been working on Wallace before his death."¹¹ They were all of them so "eager to be amongst other Wallace scholars to share ideas and discuss his writing" that it felt like "the gathering of a force."¹² Conferences for Wallace Studies have taken place around the world,¹³ and his work is now taught in undergraduate courses.¹⁴

Scholars alone do not effect canonization. Legions of fans can be found online, mostly on the Wallace-1 listserv, The Howling Fantods! (based in Canberra), the David Foster Wallace Wiki, and the *Infinite Jest* Wiki, each of them created, run, and sustained in one way or another by devotees. Distinctively Wallace-like characters appear in Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom* (2010) and

⁹ Paul Giles, "All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012, p. 5.

¹⁰ Paul Giles, "All Swallowed Up," *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹¹ David Hering, "Editor's Preface," p. 9.

¹² David Hering, "Editor's Preface," *ibid.*

¹³ Notably in the U.S., U.K., and Australia (Sydney Writer's Festival).

¹⁴ Off the top of my head, Lucy Neave (ANU, Canberra/my supervisor), Nick Maniatis (Narrabundah College, Canberra/owner of The Howling Fantods!), and Greg Carlisle (Morehead State University, Kentucky, USA/author of *Elegant Complexity: a Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*) all teach Wallace, both in Literature and Creative Writing.

Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Marriage Plot* (2011). And Wallace was recently drawn into an episode of *The Simpsons*, its title, "A Totally Fun Thing That Bart Will Never Do Again" (2012), a deliberately unsubtle play on Wallace's essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." The irony, of course, is that Wallace himself has become a character in various entertainments, one of which is the kind he tried so carefully to diagnose and caution against in *Infinite Jest*—television.

Readers new to *Infinite Jest* will find it helpful to identify its three major plotlines, which revolve around the quest for the novel's eponymous film, students at the Enfield Tennis Academy, and the addicts at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (*sic*). Most of the action takes place in and around Enfield, Massachusetts, occasionally spiraling out to include various parts of Arizona and the northeastern United States.

"Infinite Jest,"¹⁵ a film so entertaining it's actually lethal to viewers, is the novel's most overt metaphor for addictive viewing. Its director, Dr. James O. Incandenza, is an amateur filmmaker whose final filmography is listed at seventy films, most of them unfinished and unreleased, plus eleven other projects that are listed as "conceptually unfilmable." Prolific, misunderstood, critically disdained by all but a handful of only the most *avant* of the *avant-garde*, Incandenza believed "Infinite Jest" to be his greatest work. Although it is difficult to say which "Infinite Jest," since he filmed no fewer than five versions. If someone should happen to catch a glimpse of the lethal version they're reduced to a drooling incontinent child with but one desire: to watch the film without surcease, food and toiletry needs unheeded. Neither is pain a deterrent; one viewer's fingers are cut off while he watches but he does not scream, faint, wince, or even appear to notice. If that isn't

¹⁵ Throughout this thesis I will refer to the novel in italics (*Infinite Jest*) and the film in quotes ("Infinite Jest").

threat enough, a Canadian wheelchair-bound terrorist cell plans to find the film—perhaps interred inside Incandenza’s actual deceased head—and use it to enslave Americans with their own TV sets. But what of the rumored antidote to the deadly film? Could the novel itself be a kind of extra-textual cure? “Infinite Jest” is a complicated plot device that also that functions metaphorically throughout the novel, and as such I devote significant time to it in Chapter Two.

The second plotline unfolds at the Enfield Tennis Academy. ETA, home to a number of brilliant students who are talented on court and/or in the classroom, is also home to the Incandenza family. Founded late in his life by Dr. James O. Incandenza, now deceased, only Avril and her sons Mario and Hal still reside at ETA—Mario and Hal in a shared dorm, Avril and her half-brother Charles Tavis in the Headmaster’s House. Incandenza senior died under mysterious circumstances in what appears to be an alcohol-induced suicide-by-microwave, while the widow Avril, a serial adulterer before and after her husband’s death, engages throughout the novel in a number of sexually deviant affairs, including bizarre role-play with a student and possibly even her own half-brother. Hal, young genius and tennis phenomenon, is ranked number two in the under-18s bracket, while his terribly crippled brother Mario is mostly interested in filming matches and tottering around campus with the aid of a small stilt-like pole attached to his chest. Alumnus Orin, a professional football player for the Arizona Cardinals, set out west just as soon as he was able, desperate to flee his dysfunctional family.

Of the three Incandenza sons, Hal, the youngest, serves as one of the novel’s protagonists. Despite an incredible leap in athletic performance in just one year, plus marks beyond even the highest possible GPA, Hal finds himself sinking ever more deeply into a depression characterized by a distinct inability to feel pleasure. He also develops an addiction to smoking marijuana, which he does in secret so

often he has also become addicted to secrecy itself. Hal is thus defined by an essential impenetrability—a boy hidden, locked inside himself. By novel's end Hal can no longer control his facial expressions, oscillating wildly between hilarity and sadness and fear, and what sounds to him like his normal speech patterns sound to others like an unsettling combination of grunts and stifled screams.

The third plotline involves Ennet House, just down the hill from ETA, a recovery facility for addicts of all kinds. Ennet's protagonist is big Don Gately, an ex-convict struggling with sobriety after years of abusing oral narcotics. Burglar and accidental murderer, Gately is now a live-in staffer at Ennet, in charge of monitoring the other addicts—watching closely for signs of relapse, enforcing the eleven-o'clock curfew, and organizing for residents to appear nightly at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and just about every other kind of Anonymous meeting, be it Narcotics or Sex Addicts. Gately himself attends these meetings, at which he struggles with AA-dogma, with the bland clichés that help addicts deal with recovery One Day At A Time, and, of course, with his own sobriety. Twenty-nine years old and 421 days sober, Gately spends much of the novel realizing certain things about himself and his addiction, and comes finally to understand that clichés do indeed have vital truth in them. He takes a bullet to the shoulder late in the novel while heroically intervening in a street fight—started, unbeknownst to him, when one of Ennet's residents murders the gunman's dog—and is left to wither in a hospital bed, mute, immobile. Unlike Hal Incandenza's eventual silence, Gately's seems much more like a newborn's. He is clean and innocent once more after years of abusing himself and other people and being abused by them.

These three plotlines overlap in the form of various characters throughout the novel. For instance, both Hal and Gately either dream or hallucinate, or perhaps recall, working together to unearth Incandenza senior's head while ETA's

number one under-18s singles player, Canadian John “No Relation” Wayne, looks on, masked or unmasked, depending on the version being recounted. Gately accidentally murders a man who turns out to be a peacekeeper of sorts, liaising with various Canadian terrorist groups, and upon his death the groups are unleashed upon the U.S. Hal visits Ennet one night to inquire about substance-recovery meetings, and his brother Mario has been inside Ennet twice, for no particular reason. Dr. James Incandenza more than once used the security guards from the hospital to which Ennet is attached in his films, and a few of Ennet’s residents, as part of their recovery treatment and/or court-ordered community service, work part-time at ETA as janitors. Plus many others, including ETA student Michael Pemulis, who buys the drug DMZ from the Antittoi brothers, whose store, Antittoi Entertainment, might have a copy of “Infinite Jest,” for which the brothers, themselves Canadian terrorists, are murdered by the *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents*, or wheelchair assassins; Avril Incandenza, who, along with at least one of ETA’s teachers, might have ties to certain Canadian terrorist cells; Hugh/Helen Steeply, the U.S. spy in drag who hopes to disrupt the terrorist plot to enslave Americans with the lethally addictive film; and Remy Marathe, the wheelchair-bound quadruple agent with a tender spot for his skull-less wife, who ends up undercover at Ennet House.

But the crucial link between each of the three major plotlines in the novel is Joelle van Dyne, who is a nexus for many of the novel’s tenuous, even disparate threads. Joelle is beautiful—so beautiful, in fact, she feels deformed, and wears a veil to hide her face. The veil, however, might in fact conceal an actual gruesome deformity, possibly inflicted by acid. She is the host of a late-night radio show called “Sixty Minutes More or Less with Madame Psychosis,” which has a cult following and is an especial favorite of Mario Incandenza, who finds comfort in her

voice and sits for sixty minutes more or less with his ear against the speaker whenever she is on the air. Joelle dated the profoundly damaged Orin, and became the filmic muse for James Incandenza late in his life, appearing in the final two versions of "Infinite Jest," one of them presumably lethal. A drug addict, Joelle eventually finds herself a resident at Ennet House after nearly overdosing in a friend's bathroom. She cradles a bullet-wounded Don Gately in the middle of the street, falls in love with him, and visits him in the hospital, at which point she decides she will remove the veil, just for him. On a thematic level, Joelle is draped in symbolism: she is the novel's heroine but she is also the dazzling embodiment of entertainment itself. I discuss Joelle's role in Chapter Two, since she is uniquely positioned to offer tremendous insight into many of the novel's characters. Further, as a character herself, Joelle functions metaphorically in what I will argue is the dramatization of addictive entertainment, which can be seen most clearly in both the literal and thematic interpretations of her character and her role in "Infinite Jest."

Nested in each of these narratives is InterLace TelEntertainment, which functions almost purely as a thematic device. It does so by virtue of its being a fictional technology that makes television even easier to absorb in extremely high doses. For InterLace is the literal manifestation of its name, an interlacing of available electronic mediums in a single device. It destroyed broadcast television by creating what essentially is better television, offering personalized, commercial-free TV that is both efficient and, in a sense, infinite—the debilitating combination of on-demand viewing and endless choice at any given moment. And like television it is practically inescapable, deeply embedded in American life and culture, such that its influence is almost invisible.

Although Hal is the only character to consider deeply the nature of pre- and post-InterLace television, there is more than enough InterLace-related commentary in the novel to make clear its metaphorical function, which, like “Infinite Jest” and Joelle, is to dramatize addictive viewing. It is no accident, for instance, that we gain insight into many characters’ psyches as they watch, or that most watch for hours at a time. It is also no accident that characters unfortunate enough to see “Infinite Jest” do so through InterLace’s streamlined system of rentals and downloads. After discussing “Infinite Jest” and Joelle in Chapter Two, I turn to InterLace. Scholars have touched upon it only lightly and it begs for closer reading. InterLace in *Infinite Jest* is situated somewhere between cable and the meteoric rise of the Internet, recalling the past while looking bravely toward the future. Current research in media theory suggests not only how it might function but also that something like InterLace is entirely possible. Wallace fictionalized the medium and its consequences in 1996 and in 2012 we are perhaps on the verge of InterLace as a reality.

It is a complicated novel, complicated further by the fact that it does not end with a resolution in the conventional sense. Many of the plotlines revolve in one way or another around the lethal film. Hal remains effectively mute, unable to make himself understood, his scholastic and athletic career in question thanks either to withdrawal from his marijuana addiction or the ingestion of DMZ, but it is also possible that he accidentally watched “Infinite Jest”; Gately remembers in vivid detail what might be his last drug binge before he entered Ennet House, though what happens to him after he leaves the hospital, and whether he helps to locate “Infinite Jest,” is a mystery; Joelle’s fate, after being detained and questioned about “Infinite Jest,” is left uncertain, her love for Gately not unrequited but perhaps unable to be requited, the possibility of her deformity never conclusively

decided; insurgents might be descending on the Enfield Tennis Academy, hoping finally to track the lethal film to its source. These plotlines, and many others, reach their peak after 1,079 pages, but readers are left to wonder, to piece together what clues lie scattered throughout the novel.

These loose threads, however, are deeply relevant to the novel's overall plan. And I will argue throughout this exegesis—with specific attention to “Infinite Jest,” Joelle, and InterLace—that it is designed to force readers to consider the addictive nature of entertainment, both as it relates to television and to the novel itself.

Reviewers took note of these same concerns when *Infinite Jest* was published in 1996. Whether praising or criticizing the novel, they insisted it was largely about television and entertainment. In the February issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*,¹⁶ Sven Birkerts, one of the first to review the novel, declared, “Wallace is, clearly, bent on taking the next step in fiction.” He went on to say that “The novel is confusing, yes, and maddening in myriad ways.” At 1,079 pages, 100 of them filled with 388 endnotes in tiny print—some of which have their own footnotes in even tinier print—the physical demands of the novel can be tough on readers, to say nothing of the tangled plot between its covers. Yet Birkerts also found the novel “resourceful, hilarious, intelligent, unique.” Often simultaneously, since *Infinite Jest* deals equally in humor and the deeper significance of personal struggle, using one to explicate the other. Birkerts’ review, like many that will follow shortly, also confronts the issue of *Infinite Jest*’s ending, but finds no great despair in it. Instead, he takes the opportunity to address why we as readers expect an ending at all: “the plotlines do not come to apocalyptic or even transfiguring intersection. Whatever

¹⁶ Sven Birkerts, “The Alchemist’s Retort: A Multi-layered Postmodern Saga of Damnation and Salvation,” *The Atlantic Monthly*: February 1996, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jest1a.html>.

aesthetics we espouse, we are all closet traditionalists in our expectations—and these must be shelved. Wallace rebuts the prime-time formula.” In what is to be a recurring comparison, he writes, “think Pynchon, think Gaddis. Think.” It is the review’s end that proves especially relevant, though: “the book mimes ... the new paradigm in communications,” a note struck repeatedly by the book’s critics.

Dan Cryer, in the February ’96 edition of *Newsweek*,¹⁷ also praises Wallace. “If you believe the hype,” he begins, “David Foster Wallace is about to be crowned the next heavyweight of American fiction.” Wallace’s first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), and first short-story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), had been acclaimed upon publication. With *Infinite Jest*, Cryer concludes, “the accolade is probably deserved.” Echoing Birkerts’ next-step-in-fiction, he writes, “This book teems with so much life and death, so much hilarity and pain, so much gusto in the face of despair that one cheers for the future of our literature.” Wallace emerged as an acclaimed writer during an era in which the narrative styles of Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney were much in demand, but he published large, cerebral fiction, depending not on a spare, flat narrative voice but on one rich with nuance and verbosity. “He is fighting,” Cryer says, “fiercely and usually successfully, to capture the ineffable with the only weapon at our disposal, language.” Wallace, a self-confessed S.N.O.O.T.—for “Syntax Nudniks Of Our Time,” the kind of people, for example, “who actually care about the current status of double modals and ergative verbs”¹⁸—is known for his command over vocabulary and linguistics and grammar. The language in *Infinite Jest* is precise and passionate, able, on an

¹⁷ Dan Cryer, “*Infinite Jest*,” *Newsday*: 2 February 1996, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/newsday.html>.

¹⁸ David Foster Wallace, “Authority and American Usage,” *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005, p. 69 and p. 69 fn. 5, respectively.

emotional level, to influence and move. Cryer, too, singles out the ending for specific criticism in his review, though he is uncertain about its value. Where Birkerts saw innovation in defiance of readers' expectations, which I will argue in favor of in "Infinite," the conclusion of this exegesis, Cryer saw the novel's ending as something that "sputters to a halt with a sigh of fatigue. Maybe this is by design," he wonders, "the fictional equivalent of coming down from a drug-high. Maybe it's just the writer's weakness." The end did indeed prove to be a contentious issue for many reviewers and critics, but Cryer also takes a paragraph to document Wallace's concern with our culture's addiction to "endless, mind-numbing entertainment and information," closing his review with Hal Incandenza's own take on that addiction, delivered late in the novel.

One particularly interesting review is noted critic Michiko Kakutani's, in *The New York Times*,¹⁹ also dated February 1996. It is interesting primarily because she sees true genius in Wallace's work, but does not believe that *Infinite Jest* is the novel that proves it. "The book seems to have been written and edited (or not edited)," she cheekily inserts, "on the principle that bigger is better, more means more important, and this results in a big psychedelic jumble of characters, anecdotes, jokes, soliloquies, reminiscences and footnotes, uproarious and mind-boggling, but also arbitrary and self-indulgent." Kakutani refers to Wallace's "remarkable skills as a writer" but opines that *Infinite Jest* seems more than anything like "an excuse for Wallace" to "empty the contents of his restless mind." Ultimately, she feels that "Somewhere in the mess, the reader suspects, are the outlines of a splendid novel, but as it stands the book feels like one of those unfinished Michelangelo sculptures: you can see a godly creature trying to fight its

¹⁹ Michiko Kakutani, "Infinite Jest," *New York Times*: 13 February 1996, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jest2.html>.

way out of the marble, but it's stuck there, half-excavated, unable to break completely free." Other critics also gave specific attention to the editing of the novel. Even Wallace's actual editor at Little, Brown and Company, who told Wallace that it looked "like a piece of glass that had been dropped from a great height."²⁰ Yet for every negative remark, another critic supplies a positive one. In *Time's* February '96 issue,²¹ R.Z. Sheppard writes "even the overwritten" sections of the novel, "in which the author seems to have had a fit of graphomania," are filled with "generous intelligence and authentic passion ... a virtuoso display of styles and themes reminiscent," again, of "Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis." Sheppard remarks too that Wallace often trains this intelligence on the "technology of pleasure," which has "driven people deeper into themselves." And he decides that Wallace's blend of "high and low ... should spell cult following at the nation's brainier colleges."

Even negative reviews could not help but recognize addictive entertainment to be the novel's guiding force. Jay McInerney, in the *New York Times Book Review*,²² writes scathingly enough about the novel for it to feel almost like a personal vendetta,²³ but he begins innocently enough. He notes a mixture of "admiration alloyed with impatience veering toward strained credulity" while reading Wallace's novel, but admits he'd "been a great admirer of Mr. Wallace's

²⁰ David Foster Wallace in an interview with KCRW's Michael Silverblatt, *Bookworm*, KCRW, Santa Monica, 11 April 1996, accessed 15 August 2012, http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw960411david_foster_wallace.

²¹ R.Z. Sheppard, "Mad Maximalism," *Time Magazine*, 19 February 1996 (Volume 147: No. 8), accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/time.html>.

²² Jay McInerney, "The Year of the Whopper," *New York Times Book Review*, 6 March 1996, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jest4.html>.

²³ Wallace had more than once been very harsh on the fiction of McInerney, et al., and though we should believe McInerney is purely objective it is nonetheless sort of challenging not to read personal undertones in his review.

collection of stories, *Girl With Curious Hair*, and, to a lesser extent ... his debut novel, *The Broom of the System*" (which, he admits, he didn't actually finish). But he goes on to condemn the novel for being "cartoonish in the extreme," and for its "hyper-realistic quotidian detail," which "almost crushes the narrative at times". And despite certain lofty moments, he finds it mostly to be "an interminable joke." But McNerny misunderstands and misreads certain parts of the novel, including a crucial scene in which a young James Incandenza helps his father with a bed frame. According to McNerny, Wallace "seems to want to convince us of the authenticity of his vision by sheer weight of accumulated detail ... as when, for example, we are treated to 10 dense pages about the disassembly of a bed, complete with diagrams." This particular scene, however, provides deep insight into Incandenza's psyche—his inherited addiction and his distinct lack of affect, for example, to which his own son becomes heir. Further, the diagram is not of the bed but of a doorknob that rolls around on Incandenza's bedroom floor in a very particular way, the observation of which leads to his fascination with annulation, or the proliferation of rings upon rings, circles within circles. This turns out to be a description of *Infinite Jest's* structure, which is often aligned specifically with the structure of televised entertainment. It is repeated throughout the novel and integral in understanding it. Still, McNerny is right in arguing that *Infinite Jest's* "emergent theme is that we as a nation are amusing ourselves to death," which phrase happens to be the title of a critical study of television by Neil Postman. I bolster my own arguments in Chapter One by referring to Postman's; it is clear that he would find much to fret over in "Infinite Jest" and InterLace, which make the possibility of amusing ourselves to death a frightening, literal possibility.

Jacob Levich, who reviewed the novel for—of all things—*TV Guide Entertainment Network*,²⁴ spends most of his time targeting the ending, convinced that “Wallace lost control of an overly ambitious story, blew his deadline and finally capitulated to the demands of his publisher.” The novel “isn’t a novel at all,” he says; “it’s a tantalizing literary fragment,” a “gigantic case of literary coitus interruptus,” its “last several chapters” the “last-minute manipulations of a novelist in crisis.” The review reads like one long complaint, but buried in its petulance is an insightful connection I mentioned earlier, which is also discussed in the scholarship: the possibility that Hal’s silence and psychological trauma is somehow the result of his father’s lethal film, that he is, in a sense, amused to death. Lisa Schwarzbaum refused even to read *Infinite Jest*; in March ‘96’s *Entertainment Weekly*,²⁵ she says the novel “sits there like a dare,” one she cannot accept. She remarks upon the novel’s weight, its size, the “left-hand grip strength” required to hold it. “Reviewers far more disciplined than I,” she writes, “can tell you what *Infinite Jest* is about. They’ll assure you it’s a masterpiece.” And she salutes these brave reviewers with “one crabbed hand gripping the cover like a claw and the other raised like a limp white flag.” In her capacity as a reader, one can hardly fault her for failing to read the daunting novel. As a critic, however, it is amusing that this “review” of hers was published at all.

The initial wave of reviews paint *Infinite Jest* as an impressive but flawed novel that is exhaustive in its account of a nation addicted to entertainment. It is intelligent, amusing, impressive, but long, tedious, unresolved. It is a dazzling

²⁴ Jacob Levich, “A Cruel Joke,” *TV Guide Entertainment Network*, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/levich.html>.

²⁵ Lisa Schwarzbaum, “Read it and Weep: Plowing Through *Infinite Jest*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 15 March 1996, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.smallbytes.net/~bobkat/jest5.html>.

display of linguistic brilliance marred by the weight of its own complicated structure. The negative reviews seem vicious, while the positive ones gush, or else carefully acclaim Wallace as an important new voice in American fiction. Wallace himself expressed concern over early critical response to the novel, telling Charlie Rose in 1997 that he believed critics hadn't had time to read it in its entirety before publishing their reviews.²⁶ Regardless, it was, and still is, a polarizing novel.

Much of the available research about Wallace is devoted to *Infinite Jest*. Two book-length analyses—Stephen Burn's *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (2003) and Greg Carlisle's *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (2007)—focus entirely on the novel. There is at present, however, rising critical interest in his fiction and nonfiction, a body of scholarship that examines closely the role of television in *Infinite Jest*. Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2003), for instance, was the first comprehensive critical study of Wallace's fiction, but Boswell tends to regard *Infinite Jest* as something of a fulcrum: the early fiction ascends finally to its highest point in the novel, while the fiction produced afterward is directly influenced by it. Two recent collections of essays—*Consider David Foster Wallace* (2010) and *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012)—seek also to elucidate his fiction as relevant both to his career and to American literature. Additionally, they mark the first deeply considered attempts to classify his nonfiction and journalism—his approach to literary theory in book reviews and essays, his defense of grammar and usage, the idiosyncrasies in his political pieces and travelogues. Still, these collections deal in large part with *Infinite Jest*, and for good reason. There is much

²⁶ David Foster Wallace in an interview with Charlie Rose, *The Charlie Rose Show*, 27 March 1997, accessed 15 August 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLPStHVi0SI>.

to unearth in the novel, not the least of which is that it is a profound diagnosis of our culture's addiction to television and mass entertainment.

A survey of this research is mostly to be found in Chapter One, "*Infinite Jest* Scholarship and Media Theory," in which I show how television and entertainment in the novel have been variously interpreted. In this chapter I also rely heavily on Wallace himself, since he wrote and spoke often about television in his essays and interviews. But we must also look to media theory, without which a thorough understanding of television, and thus television as it appears in *Infinite Jest*, is impossible. I give equal attention to this research in Chapter One, and use certain of the arguments therein to support my own. In Chapter Two, "Reading *Infinite Jest* Through Contemporary Scholarship and Media Theory," I turn to the novel itself. Closely examining the text reveals a specific gap in current research—a not yet thorough enough understanding of television and its fictional evolution in *Infinite Jest*—which I attempt to rectify by developing the arguments I set forth in Chapter One. In Chapter Three, "Within a Towering Shadow," I look critically at the experience of writing my own novel, striving not to imitate Wallace while at the same time working in fiction with many of the same concerns. And I conclude in "Infinite" that the idea of entertainment in *Infinite Jest*, especially television, is far more complex and captivating and influential than any critic has yet determined.

Most critics mention the lethal film as a significant plot point, but most are also savvy enough to realize that it is symbolic of a deeper addiction. No rare artifact, "Infinite Jest" is in fact a convenient way to characterize certain viewing habits. Thus do I mean to argue that David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* is largely about the addictive nature of entertainment—television in particular—and the effect of that addiction upon individuals and the culture of which they are a part. Several critics and scholars discuss Wallace's theories about entertainment,

in both his fiction and nonfiction, but their work can be enlarged by careful textual analysis and new research in both Wallace Studies and media theory. The scholarship, for instance, must account for the importance of Joelle van Dyne and InterLace TelEntertainment, which in 1996 was an imaginative theory about television that has proved to be startlingly prescient in 2012. Television's evolution is both constant and rapid, but if readers keep pace with media theory they will not overlook the far more seductive entertainment-delivery system that is InterLace in favor of the addictive film. For Wallace did not just imagine a likely evolution, but in many ways predicted it. Which leaves us with two main thematic concerns: what are readers supposed to make of the film "Infinite Jest," and, more importantly, what does InterLace, the hyper-advanced television network, suggest about us as viewers and the way we consume televised entertainment?