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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 Studies\(^1\) 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

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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


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

6 Jeffrey Eugenides, ibid.
7 Jonathan Franzen, ibid.
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.”

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.” 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.” 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.” Conferences for Wallace Studies have taken place around the world, and his work is now taught in undergraduate courses.

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

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," 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

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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 Antitoi brothers, whose store, Antitoi 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*, 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

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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,\(^\text{17}\) 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 McInerny 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"\(^\text{18}\)—is known for his command over vocabulary and linguistics and grammar. The language in Infinite Jest is precise and passionate, able, on an


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, 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

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 McInerny, 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

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23 Wallace had more than once been very harsh on the fiction of McInerny, et al., and though we should believe McInerny 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 McInerny 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 McInerny, 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, McInerny 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,*\(^\text{24}\) 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,*\(^\text{25}\) 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


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. 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

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?
Chapter One:  

*Infinite Jest* Scholarship and Media Theory

In the Introduction I sketched broadly the plot of *Infinite Jest* and advanced the argument that the novel is largely about television and mass entertainment. Specifically, that three distinct narrative threads are designed to alert readers to the possibility of addictive viewing—Incandenza’s lethal film, Joelle as both character and metaphor for the seductive appeal of television, and the role of InterLace TelEntertainment, which is sometimes overlooked, as if it is somehow less compelling or instructive. Ultimately, what emerges from the Introduction is a novel deeply concerned with the addictive nature of television and mass entertainment. Reviews of the novel from 1996 turn out to be significant since they tended most often to highlight this very same concern. Sixteen years later and it appears not to have become less but more important: scholarship focused exclusively on *Infinite Jest*, as well as recent scholarship folded into the larger body of Wallace Studies, is equally serious in its approach to television and entertainment in the novel. In order to appreciate this approach, a survey of past and current research about the novel and about television proves particularly useful.

Despite high praise from luminaries like Vollmann and Franzen, and mostly positive and enthusiastic reviews upon its publication in 1996, the analysis of *Infinite Jest* as a meditation on mass entertainment remains somewhat incomplete. With the Exception of Tom LeClair’s “The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers,
William T. Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace, "27 an essay from 1996, in which LeClair measures these three young American writers against Pynchon and the previous generation of towering postmodernists, only Wallace himself offered valuable insight into television as it appears in his fiction. Influenced by Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo, and Barth, Wallace spoke often in interviews about certain exhausted postmodern techniques and argued for genuine, honest communication with readers, unhindered by his forebears' taste for irony, parody, and metafiction. He also discussed his ideas about the general purpose of fiction as he understood it. "In dark times," he told Larry McCaffery during an interview in 1993,

the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness. Really good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it. 28

In Infinite Jest, Wallace's opinion is shorthand for our determination to live and glow in a culture saturated by electronic media. And readers perhaps cannot help but read a variation on this statement: our determination to live in the glow of electronic media. The characters in Infinite Jest spend significant time bathed in this glow, struggling to understand what they watch and why, and what discrete messages they might absorb from habitual viewing. Their lives are deeply

informed by this complicated relationship with television, and they are influenced by it to a degree that often proves disruptive. In that same interview Wallace declares:

Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being. If you operate, as most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still "are" human beings, now. Or can be.29

While his comments offer a certain amount of insight into his work, they lack specificity and do little to reveal the mechanism by which Infinite Jest turns. Only in the novel do we see what exactly makes it so tough to be a real human being, and only in the novel do we approach some sort of definition of “real human being.”

It was not until 2003, when Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn published extended critiques of Wallace’s fiction, and of Infinite Jest in particular, that the breadth and skill of the young American’s fiction began to be appreciated. Burn’s David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide is valuable for aligning the novel’s structure with its theme, instead of reading it as a haphazard collection of unstructured, unconnected narratives. Burn calculates the novel to be composed of “ninety individual sections,”30 ninety being the exact number of days it took Incandenza to film “Infinite Jest.” Thus Burn argues that, “far from being random,” the novel “seems to be subtly arranged to parallel the composition of the film that

29 Ibid.
it is about."\textsuperscript{31} Ninety might be a mistake, but I will argue for the truth of the connection between structure and theme in Chapter Two. Burn proceeds, with great insight, to spend most of his time in this slender volume discussing "one of the obsessive themes of \textit{Infinite Jest}: the search for an adequate understanding of the self."\textsuperscript{32} By inquiring into the psychology of various characters, Burn helps to document this search, which in turn brings into relief many of the novel's other concerns—like the nature of addictive entertainment, for example, or the many sections that seem almost spiritual or religious in their personal urgency. Burn also argues that "a fuller understanding of \textit{Infinite Jest} to some extent depends upon recognizing that the novel \textit{does} place demands upon the reader, and then trying to work out why."\textsuperscript{33} Which leads him to conclude: "The reasons turn out to be organically connected to what the novel is trying to say about entertainment, and are, to some extent, entangled in a series of literary, historical, and personal issues that include the novel's relation to earlier works, and Wallace's personal history as a reader."\textsuperscript{34} This is an important point, since \textit{Infinite Jest} is clearly influenced by much earlier fiction—notably \textit{The Brothers Karamazov} and \textit{Hamlet}—and in some cases updates or inverts older literary tropes like metafiction, which is present mostly in the form of endnotes. But Burn here is outdone by Boswell in \textit{Understanding David Foster Wallace}, also published 2003, and later by Greg Carlisle in \textit{Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest}, which appeared in 2007.

Boswell's \textit{Understanding David Foster Wallace} approaches Wallace's output both critically and chronologically, beginning with his first novel, \textit{The Broom of the
System, and proceeding gradually through the short-story collection Girl with Curious Hair, Infinite Jest, and Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, Wallace's second collection of short stories. He describes Infinite Jest as "a seemingly endless source of readerly pleasure," and, like Burn, argues that "it is also, paradoxically, both a diagnosis and critique of the culture's addiction to pleasure."35 Also like Burn, Boswell spends significant time examining characters and treating them like synecdoches for many of the novel's larger concerns: the crippling nature of Hal's in-bent intellectualizing, Mario's naïve innocence, Gately's turbulent, universal road to sobriety and, ultimately, redemption. Greg Carlisle documents many of the same themes in Elegant Complexity, which is a reader's guide in the truest sense. Carlisle is not concerned with criticism as much as he is with chronology, intertextual references, and the recurrence of words, phrases, and descriptions throughout the novel. His extremely close reading of Infinite Jest is invaluable because it provides evidence but leaves the interpolation of that evidence almost entirely up to the reader.

These book-length analyses inform my arguments about the addictive nature of television and entertainment in Infinite Jest. As do certain shorter analyses, since what is now called Wallace Studies, happily, has grown in recent years. There are several essays collected in Consider David Foster Wallace,36 some of them focused entirely on Infinite Jest: Gregory Phipp's "The Ideal Athlete: John Wayne in Infinite Jest"; David Hering's "Infinite Jest: Triangles, Cycles, Choices, & Chases"; Kiki Benzon's "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders: Chaos and Realism in Infinite Jest"; and Matt Tresco's "Impervious to U.S.

Parsing: Encyclopedism, Autism, and *Infinite Jest.* These essays deal with character and structure in the novel, as well as the ways in which various sections tend to bleed into one another. More recently, there is *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace,*37 a collection of tributes to and essays about Wallace and his fiction and nonfiction. Of particular interest in this collection is Samuel Cohen's "To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest's* History," which reveals some of the personal struggles Wallace experienced while writing the novel, and Kathleen Fitzpatrick's "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network," which details the way in which *Infinite Jest* has in fact helped to alleviate the many entertainment-induced symptoms it documents by bringing readers together and helping them to establish a devoted community of fans. This emerging body of research has helped to establish *Infinite Jest* as a landmark in American Fiction.

Yet most sustained examinations of *Infinite Jest* do at some point focus on what the novel has to say about television and entertainment. Even critics who do not devote themselves entirely to these overriding concerns touch briefly upon them. In order to understand Wallace's theories about television and entertainment readers must look to the scholarship, but more importantly to Wallace's own fiction and nonfiction, and especially to media theory.

Wallace states early in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" that the average American's television set is on for six hours a day, every day.38 Recent studies chart an increase in this figure, which now stands at seven hours.39

average, thirty-four hours a week are devoted to uninterrupted viewing.\textsuperscript{40} This is significant. Further statistics find that that gender, race, income, and marital status do not much affect this number, such that television now occupies nearly forty percent of our free time.\textsuperscript{41} Elsewhere, in the introduction to the twentieth-anniversary edition of Neil Postman's \textit{Amusing Ourselves to Death}—written by Postman's son, Andrew—this number is calculated at twelve uninterrupted years of watching by the age of sixty-five.\textsuperscript{42} The vast majority of us, Wallace argues, "quite literally cannot 'imagine' life without it. As it does for so much of today's developed world, it presents and so defines our common experience; but we, unlike any elders, have no memory of a world without such electronic definition. It's built in."\textsuperscript{43}

The deadly "Infinite Jest" seems less like hyperbole than a logical extension of viewers' habits; i.e., viewers everywhere appear already to be addicted to television, enslaved by their own TV-sets. The statistics do not suggest much evidence to the contrary. And since "television's one goal—never denied by anybody in or around TV since RCA first authorized field tests in 1936—is to ensure as much watching as possible,"\textsuperscript{44} those statistics are unlikely to change. But Wallace explains in "E Unibus Pluram" that he is "concerned to avoid anti-TV paranoia," and to that extent declares,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., pp. 15-16.
\item \textsuperscript{44} David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," p. 37.
\end{itemize}
Though I'm convinced that television today lies, with a potency somewhere between symptom and synecdoche, behind a genuine crisis for U.S. culture and literature, I do not agree with reactionaries who regard TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores while we all sit there on ever fatter bottoms with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes.45

"Infinite Jest," at once a metaphor for addictive viewing and a diagnosis of same, might serve to dramatize viewers' relationship with television but does not itself dramatize their responsibility as viewers. And according to Wallace, viewers are at least partly responsible for the rate at which they watch "basically because nobody is holding any weapons on us forcing us to spend amounts of time second only to sleep doing something that is, when you come right down to it, not good for us. Sorry to be a killjoy," he adds, almost sadly, "but there it is: [seven] hours a day is not good."46

Yet millions of viewers succumb daily to these seven hours, which inevitably total twelve uninterrupted years. It is perfectly reasonable to ask whether television itself might be responsible for our addiction to high-dose viewing. In a kind of verbal shrug, Wallace contends that, "On the surface of the problem, television is responsible for our rate of its consumption only in that it's become so terribly successful at its acknowledged job of ensuring prodigious amounts of watching."47 Partly it's a matter of the psychology at work on-screen, for "it is of course undeniable that television is an example of Low Art, the kind of

45 Ibid., p. 36.
46 Ibid., p. 37.
47 Ibid., p. 38.
art that has to please people in order to get their money.”48 By its very nature, it is in fact “the epitome of Low Art in its desire to appeal to and enjoy the attention of unprecedented numbers of people.”49 Television is not secretive about this; it has since its inception importuned us to watch forever and always. And it rewards our loyalty with more—more shows, more channels, more opportunities to satisfy our right to easy, uncomplicated entertainment. That the overwhelming majority of viewers often choose this kind of Low Art over what is commonly accepted as challenging, redemptive High Art—literary novels, for example—is deeply problematic for critics and intellectuals. In Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status, authors Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine note how, “In this era, an emergent set of discourses proposes that television has achieved the status of great art, or at least of respectable culture, disturbing long-standing hierarchies that placed the medium far below literature, theater, and cinema in social, cultural, and technological worth.”50 The “dominant view of television ... held by lay people and scholars alike,” however, is usually “as a waste of time at best, and possibly also a source of serious and widespread social problems.”51 Old sentiments, it seems, do not die easily, and they are quick to point out that “the very discourses that have denigrated and delegitimated the medium for many decades persist,”52 something Wallace also pointed out in his own work, expressing confusion over the split nature of critical opinion that seems either to belittle television or else treat it as irrelevant, while at the same time expressing terrible disdain for it.

48 Ibid., p. 37.
49 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p. 3.
52 Ibid., p. 2.
But it would be foolish to think that television is "Low because it is vulgar or prurient or dumb. Television is often all these things," Wallace admits, "but this is a logical function of its need to attract and please Audience." Ever concerned with anti-TV paranoia, however, he is quick to point out that television is not "vulgar and dumb because the people who compose Audience are vulgar and dumb. Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests." That much, at least, is obvious: a medium that demands little from its audience cannot hop to captivate its audience with something demanding. "It's all about syncretic diversity," Wallace concludes, "neither medium nor Audience is faultable for quality." The approach at work here is a matter providing in sufficient quantity what millions of viewers clearly demand, which television does perfectly and without fail. "Still," Wallace argues, "for the fact that individual American human beings are consuming vulgar, prurient, dumb stuff at the astounding average per-household dose of [seven] hours a day—for this both TV and we need to answer." Partly, then, it's a matter of folding into this approach a format conducive to high-dose viewing. For this we must look to the medium itself.

As early as 1985, Neil Postman formulated in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* "an argument that fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express."57 Using conversation loosely to mean the kinds of technology we use to communicate things about ourselves, to ourselves, Postman asks us to consider what the medium we rely on most to converse says about us. More importantly, he asks us to consider how it has changed what we converse about in the first place. For "what ideas are convenient to express," Postman says, "inevitably become the important content of a culture."58 And television, most convenient of all information technologies, has radically altered what we as culture consider to be important.

Postman was writing in the Eighties, and television today is an entirely different creature. I will document this evolution shortly, but it is important to recognize that many of Postman's concerns inform media theory today. According to Newman and Levine, "Television has been the chief representative of American mass culture throughout its existence. And," traditionally, at least, "mass culture has almost never been seen as a social good."59 Still, television has by now garnered significant attention, such that "television criticism is in full flower, seriously practiced by academics, professional journalists, citizen bloggers, passionate fans, and even more casual viewers."60 But Postman's insights are still valuable, twenty-five years later. It is of course undeniable, he argues, that any medium, be it artistic or technological, "makes possible a unique mode of discourse by providing a new orientation for thought, for expression, for sensibility."61 To

58 Ibid.
60 Ibid., p. 14.
that end he claims television offers us a discourse in "images, not words."\footnote{Ibid., p. 7.} Television is definitely image-based, but there is a lot going on on television at any given time, and it is today integrated with many other platforms and technologies.

It is television's combination of mediums, in fact, that makes it so profoundly alluring. Postman amends his argument to include the way television combines sight and sound and movement with a distinct sense of speed and urgency, "raising the interplay of image and instancy to an exquisite and dangerous perfection."\footnote{Ibid., p. 78.} The end toward which TV bends this exquisitely perfect interplay is even more dangerous; for everything on television must be made palatable not so much for its audience in general but for the medium itself. Everything, but everything—"politics, news, education, religion, science, sports"—is represented on television, such that "all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television."\footnote{Ibid.} Which in turn means that television, devoted entirely to entertainment, has altered the very context in which these subjects are meant to be understood by making "entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience."\footnote{Ibid., p. 87.} What's at stake here, Postman continues, "is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether."\footnote{Ibid.} This, the real crux of so many critics' theorizing, is what elevates television from mere device to medium that shapes the world as viewers understand it.

If television, as Postman has it, "is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself," then "how television stages the world becomes the model for how the

\footnote{Ibid., p. 7.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 78.} \footnote{Ibid.} \footnote{Ibid.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 87.} \footnote{Ibid.}
world is properly to be staged."\(^{67}\) David Foster Wallace, echoing Postman in a way that suggests he is familiar with Postman's work, writes in "E Unibus Pluram": "The real authority on a world we now view as constructed and not depicted becomes the medium that constructs our world-view."\(^{68}\) Television is not merely influential; television deeply informs contemporary U.S. life and art. Directs it, even. And how we choose to respond to that influence says as much about us as individuals—and the kinds of art we produce—as it does about the influence itself.

"One big claim of this essay," Wallace declares, "is going to be that the most dangerous thing about television for U.S. fiction writers is that we don't take it seriously enough as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process."\(^{69}\) That we choose most often to think television incapable of any such influence is directly related to the nature of entertainment itself, which on television presents as harmless, beneath consideration. Television seeks everywhere to remind us of this, in both content and format. That no one on television herself watches a whole lot of uninterrupted television is no coincidence. It is by design. Television must both flatter our craving for more without reminding us of that craving. "TV's whispered promises must," in other words, "somehow undercut television-watching in theory ... while reinforcing television-watching in practice."\(^{70}\) And for seven hours a day viewers internalize as imperatives that art is synonymous with entertainment, that entertainment should be easy, and above all that we Stay Tuned.

In Media Unlimited, Todd Gitlin notes the extent to which viewers who have grown up in a media-saturated environment no longer find it strange and

\(^{67}\) Ibid., p. 92.
\(^{68}\) David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," p. 62.
\(^{69}\) David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," p. 27.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., p. 39.

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overwhelming: "the media flow into the home—not to mention outside—has swelled into a torrent of immense constancy and force, an accompaniment to life that has become a central experience of life."\(^{71}\) And television—still our culture's primary source of entertainment\(^{72}\)—is not just ubiquitous but intrinsic. It defines the world as viewers know it, and so to it viewers must look for examples of that world. Hence, Wallace argues in "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young," an essay published in the fall 1988 issue of the \*Review of Contemporary Fiction*, the idea that "television, its advertising, and the popular culture they both reflect and define have fundamentally altered what intellectuals get to regard as the proper objects of their attention."\(^{73}\) Two years later, in "E Unibus Pluram," he develops the argument further by explaining how "the artistic viability of postmodernism was a direct consequence, again, not of any new facts about art, but of facts about the new importance of mass commercial culture. Americans seemed no longer united so much by common beliefs as by common images: what binds us became what we stand witness to."\(^{74}\) One need only recall the devastating attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001 to understand this claim. As Gitlin determines in \*Media Unlimited*, people across the globe looked to television "not only for facts but for rituals of shared horror, grief, sympathy, reassurance, and the many forms of solidarity."\(^{75}\) David Foster Wallace, watching coverage of the attacks on television at a neighbor's house in Illinois, helps to explain the geography of New York City to

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\(^{72}\) Ibid., p. 16.


\(^{74}\) David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," p. 42.

\(^{75}\) Todd Gitlin, \*Media Unlimited*, p. 6.
several grief-stricken elderly women by "pointing out the ocean in the foreground of the skyline they all know so well (from TV)."76

Television directs our attention and dictates how we are to speak about what we see, which extends even to our literature. As Wallace says, "What distinguishes another, later wave of postmodern literature is a further shift from television-images as valid objects of literary allusion to television and metawatching as themselves valid subjects. By this I mean certain literature beginning to locate its raison in its commentary on/response to a U.S. culture more and more of and for watching, illusion, and the video image."77 And there is more to this commentary in *Infinite Jest* than the novel's eponymous film.

Although the novel's lethal film is the most obvious—and most obviously extreme—metaphor for addictive viewing, it is actually InterLace TelEntertainment and its plethora of teleputers (TPs), cartridges, and archived content available via download, or "pulse," that looks most like the form of entertainment our culture consumes more than any other. The InterLace network functions like TiVo (or Australia's Foxtel IQ). Its pulses are like the Internet's host of file-sharing sites, which provide users with unprecedented online-access to music, movies, and television. These sites have been so much in the press recently thanks to legal mandates like SOPA and PIPA (Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect IP Act, respectively). InterLace, however, is both legal and terribly successful, offering viewers choice and content in absurd quantities, such that it has crushed traditional broadcast television and brought an end to the decades-long reign of the Big Four—ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX. Prescient in 1996, eerily precise now, one

77 David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," p. 46.
laments only Wallace's use of terms like cartridge and teleputer, which sound weirdly archaic in a novel that can be read as science fiction about the near future. Still, the fictitious decline of broadcast television in Infinite Jest looks remarkably like an extension of what we can properly refer to as television's evolution.

Here the possibility of further research often stumbles, without fault, since a fuller understanding of InterLace involves not just television before and during Infinite Jest, but after. Michael Curtin charts several points along this evolutionary arc in "Matrix Media," an essay collected in 2009's Television Studies After TV:

Beginning in the 50s and lasting roughly thirty years, the Big Three held sway until FOX emerged in the mid-80s to command a decent slice of the audience and assume its position as one of the (now) Big Four. FOX, despite pilfering a significant number of viewers, in fact reinforced broadcast television's dominance over the airwaves. The first real threat to these networks, however, was the VCR, which in the late 80s presented networks with at least two distinct problems: ratings and royalties. People often chose to record their favorite programs rather than sit still for live broadcasts; i.e., it was difficult to determine the number of viewers at home, watching, on a given night. Worse, writers began to demand royalties for video production, a scenario fraught with more red tape than traditional contracts for reruns and syndication, which were relatively simple business before VCRs. However, "executives claimed it was too early in the development of video to establish a revenue-sharing formula," which resulted in a strike in 1988. The networks finally granted writers a measly 0.3 percent, but "as video took off and became a multi-billion-dollar industry, the formula was earning


79 Ibid., p. 10.
writers only pennies,"\textsuperscript{80} and in 2007, the Screenwriter's Guild of America famously went on strike again, this time demanding royalties for content on DVDs and the Internet, "determined not to let the video rights formula established 20 years earlier"\textsuperscript{81} decide their rates. Coupled with the rise of cable networks in 90s—which further splintered audiences by catering to individual taste—television has, at least since the Eighties, been forced to combat televised content that exists outside the world of broadcast television. Television, in other words, is bigger than television.

In an outlandish parody that nonetheless parallels and in many ways predicts actual events, Hal Incandenza, a student at the Enfield Tennis Academy, helps to explain the allure and eventual dominance of InterLace "because one of the only two academic things he's ever written about anything even remotely filmic was a mammoth research paper on the tangled fates of broadcast television and the American ad industry." According to the narrator, Hal "wrote about TV-advertising's demise with a reverent tone that sounded like the events had taken place at the misty remove of glaciers" (411),\textsuperscript{82} which sounds at least partly reminiscent of the reverential tone in "E Unibus Pluram." Hal's argument is concerned with viewers' ability to choose:

Between the exponential proliferation of cable channels, the rise of the total-viewer-control hand-held remotes known historically as zappers, and VCR-recording advances that used subtle volume- and hysterical-pitch-sensors to edit

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{82} References to \textit{Infinite Jest} throughout this thesis are written in parentheses in the main text, and they correspond to David Foster Wallace, \textit{Infinite Jest}, Back Bay Books, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996. Wherever multiple references to the same page appear, page numbers are given after the last reference, so as not to clutter the main text.
most commercials cut of any program taped ... the Networks were having
problems drawing the kind of audiences they needed to justify the ad-rates their
huge overhead's slavering maw demanded. ... attacking the Four right at the
ideological root, the psychic matrix where viewers had been conditioned
(conditioned, rather deliciously, by the Big Four Networks and their advertisers
themselves, Hal notes) to associate the Freedom to Choose and the Right to Be
Entertained with all that was U.S. and true (411-12).

Partly, Hal remarks, this notion of choice was a consequence of several wholly
unpleasant commercials produced by an advertising agency called Viney and Veals,
who "like most U.S. ad agencies, greedily ... started taking advantage of the
plummeting Big Four advertising rates to launch effective Network-ad campaigns
for products and services that wouldn't previously have been able to afford
national image-proliferation" (412). Here Hal's version sounds remarkably similar
to television's actual evolution, unpleasant commercials excepted. According to
Curtin, television in the 50s began with "a centralized commercial system" in
which advertising helped networks to recoup "the enormous capital costs of
production and distribution" and "economies of scale."83 The proliferation of cable
networks in the Nineties, however, meant advertisers were free "to undermine the
network monopoly and to pursue greater efficiencies in the delivery of advertising
messages to targeted audiences."84 In Infinite Jest, the freedom to advertise led to a
series of commercials for Nunhagen aspirin, LipoVac liposuction clinics, and
NoCoat tongue-scrapers, which featured, respectively, "crippling cranio-facial
pain," "rippling cellulite," "the near-geologic layer of gray-white material coating
the tongue of an otherwise handsome pedestrian" (412-14). The ads were so

84 Ibid.
horrific they actually “compromised the ratings-figures for the ads that followed them and for the programs that enclosed the ads” and also “awakened legions of ... suddenly violently repelled and disturbed viewers to the power and agency their own thumbs actually afforded them” (412-13). The Big Four “just plain fell off the shelf, fiscally speaking,” and along with them “almost all the large slick advertising agencies with substantial Network billings ... taking with them countless production companies, graphic artists, account execs, computer-enhancement technicians, ruddy-tongued product spokespersons, horn-rimmed demographers, etc” (414-15). The demise of the Big Four, in other words, left a vacuum, a void, in the world of televised entertainment, which only InterLace could fill.

And Noreen Lace-Forché, Hal explains, “Convincing the rapacious skeletal remains of the Big Four to consolidate its combined production, distribution, and capital resources” (415), designed InterLace to be entirely about choice.

What matter whether your “choices” are 4 or 104, or 504? Because here you were ... accepting only what was pumped by distant [cable network] flat into your entertainment-ken. Here you were consoling yourself about your dependence and passivity with rapid-fire zapping and surfing ... [the] promise of “empowerment” ... still just the invitation to choose which of 504 visual spoon-feedings you’d sit there and open wide for. And so but what if, their campaign’s appeal basically ran, what if, instead of sitting still for choosing the least of 504 infantile evils, the vox- and digitus-populi could choose to make its home entertainment literally and essentially adult? I.e. what if—according to InterLace—what if a viewer could more or less 100% choose what’s on at any given time? (416)
In an essay collected in 2011’s *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, Daniel Chamberlain proceeds along much the same line by concluding that new forms of “user customization, personalization, and control are ... displacing liveness and flow as the primary ontologies and ideologies of contemporary entertainment,” and further, that viewing is “predicated less on explicit temporal sequencing and simultaneous spectatorship than on asynchronous viewer choices of what, when, and, increasingly, where to watch.”

InterLace, like TiVo and the Internet, has taken something that already has the potential to be addictive and made it easier to consume, more widely available, more pleasurable, and thus more addictive, or, at the very least, more likely to be addictive. Where once viewers had to structure their time around television’s nightly schedule, it’s now viewers who have access to content so abundant it might as well be unlimited. Thanks to recording technology and speedy Internet connections, entire episodes, seasons, series, even, can be consumed in highly concentrated doses. This, Dr. Alan Kirby argues in “The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond,” can make viewers feel “powerful ... indeed necessary,” while what’s on is “characterized both by its hyper-ephemerality and by its instability”86(86,724),(745,994) since viewers have almost total control over what they see and when they see it. The result of which, as Marshall Boswell concludes in *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, is “a population of lonely, solipsistic voyeurs, an entire nation-continent, rather—overdosing on nonstop entertainment ... within the coddled comfort of their increasingly cage-like

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http://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond
homes."^{87} Kirby would concur with this idea of entertainment-induced solipsism, since easy, unlimited entertainment makes viewers themselves "the text, there is no one else, no 'author'; there is nowhere else, no other time or place."^{88} InterLace suggests more than anything else that, while "Infinite Jest" is lethally addictive, it is involuntarily so, while the statistics about viewers' habits reveal that they have chosen their addiction voluntarily, and choose daily to indulge it.

InterLace, literally and thematically, is prescient both for what it is and for what it is a combination of. It is something Henry Jenkins, founder and director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Comparative Media Studies Program, might describe as an instance of "convergence culture, where old and new media collide ... where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways."^{89} Jenkins defines convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."^{90} In Flow TV, the editors define it in their introduction as "an umbrella term that refers to the new textual practices, branding and marketing strategies, industrial arrangements, technological synergies, and audience behaviors enabled and propelled by the emergence of digital media."^{91} In other words, they explain, "Television texts overflow onto interactive websites, television content is available

^{87} Marshall Boswell, Understanding David Foster, p. 124.
^{88} Alan Kirby, "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond," accessed 20 November 2012, http://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond
^{90} Ibid.
on myriad platforms, and television networks are part of multi-media conglomerates." Yet convergence culture, according to Jenkins, is far more than "a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices." Yet convergence culture, according to Jenkins, is far more than "a technological process bringing together multiple media functions within the same devices."92 And interLace TelEntertainment, though its content is downloadable "over PC and modem and fiber optic line" and can be watched "right there on your trusty PC's high-resolution monitor" or "a good old pre-millenial wide-screen TV with at most a coaxial or two" (416), is more than just television's easy entertainment fused to the Internet's boundless choice. InterLace delivers on the promise television is happy to make but can never quite keep, viz., "what if the viewer could become her/his own programming director; what if s/he could define the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue" (416). "Personal pleasure and gross revenue," Hal theorizes, "looked at last to lie along the same demand curve, at least as far as home entertainment went" (417). It is the exact scenario Jenkins explores in Convergence Culture: "Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles," he writes, "we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands."93 In addition, "Convergence involves both a change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media consumed."94 InterLace, downright revolutionary, of course revolutionized entertainment, rather the way television did when it was first introduced to the public at large and continues to do today.

Beginning with VCRs and videotapes, a clumsy first attempt at far more elegant systems like TiVo and DVDs, and culminating in the ease and intensely

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92 Ibid., p. 3.
93 Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture, p. 3.
94 Ibid., p. 16.
personalized structure of the Internet, television is under serious external pressure. And with the enormous popularity of video games, mobile phones, and pads—all of which try, in one way or another, through advertising or sharing content, to direct one another to one another—television has become what Curtin, expanding on Jenkins, calls a “matrix medium,” by which he means “an increasingly flexible and dynamic mode of communication.”95 Television, he argues, is “no longer a broadcast medium or a network medium, or even a multichannel medium”; instead, it is “characterized by interactive exchanges, multiple sites of productivity, and diverse modes of interpretation and use.”96 Partly this is the result of other cooperative or competitive technologies that take advantage of television’s influence or try to subvert it, but partly it is the result of television as a phenomenon that has long since left the home and rushed to fill gaps in the great big outside world. In *Legitimating Television*, Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine explain that “television’s cultural significance” used to be a matter of “its status as a commercial medium experienced collectively, mostly in domestic spaces.”97 But television is no longer familial or even communal; it is specialized, personal, portable. And InterLace is this new kind of television taken to its logical, isolating extreme. In their introduction to *Television Studies After TV*, Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay ask us to “look at what has happened to television around the world over the first decade of the twenty-first century,” which, they rightly contend, is “nothing short of dramatic”: “Globalizing media industries, deregulatory (even regulatory!) policy regimes, the multiplication and convergence of delivery

96 Ibid.
platforms, the international trade in media formats, the emergence of important production hubs in new ‘media capitals’ outside the United States/United Kingdom/Europe umbrella (particularly in East Asia), and the fragmentation of media audiences,” all of them “changing the nature of television.”98 Those changes, as we have seen, involve convergence and flow and interactivity.

And the result, as Jennifer Gillan would have it in 2011’s Television and New Media, is “must-click TV”: televised content tied to websites, video games, message boards, and forums, deliberately.99 Networks have finally realized the tremendous possibilities and profits that are waiting online and elsewhere in user-directed and user-pursued content. According to Gillan, “Savvy showrunners realize that all the divisions of the franchise need to be created simultaneously and click together in an interlocking gear model,” such that “on-air, online, and on-mobile content make the product move (as well as ‘move’ sponsor products and encourage viewers to move across the divisions of a media conglomerate).”100 Networks want “to keep the TV franchise always in circulation and the audience always interacting with the show before and after its initial and subsequent broadcasts.”101 Which is not surprising. Even in the early Seventies, British scholar Raymond Williams remarked upon the fact that “it wasn’t individual series content that viewers were encouraged to watch, but an entire evening’s flow of programming, complete with commercials and promotions between story segments.”102 And thanks to the Internet, “Today’s networks have had to adapt their models to adjust for the way

98 Ibid., p. 2.
100 Ibid., p. 4.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
some viewers switch from channel-surfing to web-surfing.”103 Now, “networks offer constant on-air reminders of the way television programming and even sponsor advertising continues online,”104 meaning that programs now do not necessarily have to end when the credits roll. But might this be an especially deft way to encourage in viewers a deeper, more problematic addiction to entertainment?

Here again we find something Neil Postman first discussed in 1984’s Amusing Ourselves to Death, which occupied him all through 1992’s Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology. Prefacing his study with a line from Paul Goodman’s New Reformation—“Whether or not it draws on new scientific research, technology is a branch of moral philosophy, not of science”105—Postman proceeds to ask how new technology might alter the way we, as human beings, interact with each other. As he did in Amusing Ourselves to Death, he first argues how “the uses made of any technology are largely determined by the structure of the technology itself—that is, that its functions follow from its form.”106 Consequently, Postman decides that “once a technology is admitted, it plays out its hand; it does what it is designed to do. Our task,” he determines, rather more forcefully than Jenkins, “is to understand what that design is—that is to say, when we admit a new technology to the culture, we must do so with our eyes wide open.”107 To open one’s eyes to the dangerous possibility of addictive entertainment, at least in Infinite Jest, is to realize that hardly a distinction exists between the novel’s eponymous film and its conception of a more perfect kind of

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
106 Ibid., p. 7.
107 Ibid. p. 7.
television. In Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself, a book-length conversation with journalist David Lipsky, Wallace says, "Because what entertainment ultimately leads to, I think, is the movie Infinite Jest. I mean, that's the star it's steering by. Entertainment's chief job is to make you so riveted by it that you can't tear your eyes away ... And the tension of the book is to try to make it at once extremely entertaining—and also sort of warped, and to sort of shake the reader awake about some of the things that are sinister in entertainment." ¹⁰⁸ And what is most sinister about this kind of entertainment "is that the pleasure that it gives you to make up for what it's missing is a kind of ... addictive, self-consuming pleasure." ¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, "there's something about the machinery of our relationship to it that makes low doses" impossible; "we don't stop at low doses." ¹¹⁰

In 1996, television in Infinite Jest seemed imaginative and amusing, a household device taken to its crippling extreme, but it was ultimately read as a parody. And like all good parodies, it helped alert readers to certain detrimental aspects of easy, isolating, unlimited entertainment. In 2012, what seemed parodic has proved to be accurate, which does indeed make Infinite Jest not less but more important, no longer just a nightmare-vision of the future but a diagnosis of the present. New research in Wallace Studies and media theory, combined with a close reading of the novel under these unprecedented circumstances, will sound new depths in Infinite Jest.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 79-80.
¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 81.
Chapter Two:

Reading *Infinite Jest* Through Contemporary Scholarship and Media Theory

Critical scholarship devoted to *Infinite Jest* is enriched by the addition of current research in media theory. This unique combination reveals previously hidden features of the novel's thematic landscape, as I demonstrated in Chapter One. Now I will turn to the text itself, wherein the metaphorical representation of mass entertainment and the evolutionary curve it imagines for television allow Wallace to make his most powerful statements about addictive viewing. I will draw them out now by focusing on "Infinite Jest," Joelle, and InterLace in the following three sections, subtitled accordingly.

"Infinite Jest"

The reality of addictive viewing is introduced early in the novel when an unnamed medical attaché falls victim to the lethal film. After treating a diplomat's raging Toblerone addiction—one of the more benign addictions in the novel—the attaché returns home for dinner and a few hours' viewing in his favorite recliner. In addition to the familiar cartridges delivered daily to his home, the attaché finds "a plain brown and irritatingly untitled cartridge-case" that has on it "a small drawn crude face, smiling, in ballpoint ink, instead of a return address or incorporated logo" (36). Inside, the cartridge itself "has only another of these vapid U.S.A.-type circular smiling heads embossed upon it where the registration- and duration-codes are supposed to be embossed" (36). It is, of course, a copy of "Infinite Jest," which the attaché sits down to watch at 7:27 p.m. (37). Five hours later he is "still
viewing the unlabelled cartridge, which he has rewound to the beginning several
times and then configured for a recursive loop” (54). The film is so engrossing that
the attaché “sits there, attached to a congealed supper, watching, at 0020h., having
now wet both his pants and the special recliner” (54). His wife returns home at
1:45 a.m. and discovers her husband sitting in a puddle of his own urine. She
speaks to him but elicits no response, remarking however “that the expression on
his rictus of a face nevertheless appeared very positive, ecstatic, even,” and turns
to look for herself at what’s got him so transfixed. By mid-afternoon the next day a
small crowd is gathered, watching the cartridge: the attaché and his wife; the
diplomat’s personal physician and the physician’s assistant, there to inquire after
the attaché, who is absent from work and is now ignoring repeated pages; two
Embassy security guards sent after them; two Seventh Day Adventists who saw
people and entered through the unlocked front door with “good spiritual
intentions”—all of them “very still and attentive, looking not one bit distressed or
in any way displeased, even though the room smelled very bad indeed” (87). Thus
“Infinite Jest,” lethally entertaining, such that viewers forgo even the most basic
human urgencies.

The circular smiling heads—smiley faces, which we associate mostly with
emoticons these days—are also the first overt, albeit as yet unclear, analogy
between televised entertainment and drug addiction. Protagonist Don Gately, a
recovering oral-narcotics addict, describes a dream in which he and “row after row
of average and totally non-unique U.S. citizens were kneeling on their knees on
polyester cushions in a crummy low-rent church basement.” Gately explains that
“it was weird because nobody seemed to have any clear idea why they were all on
their knees ... and yet there was this sense of some compelling unspoken reason
why they were all kneeling.” A woman near him stands up and is “all of a sudden
yanked backward with terrible force," at which point Gately looks up to see "a long plain hooked stick, like the crook of a giant shepherd ... moving slowly above them ... as if quietly scanning" (358). Gately recognizes the "extraordinarily snappily dressed and authoritative figure manipulating the giant shepherd's crook" and its "plain yellow smiley-face circle that accompanied invitations to have a nice day." He finds the dream "powerfully, tritely obvious," and interprets it to mean "Boston AA had the planet's most remorselessly hard-ass and efficient Sergeant at Arms," which Sergeant "stood outside the orderly meeting halls, in that much-invoked Out There where exciting clubs full of good cheer throbbed gaily below lit signs with neon bottles endlessly pouring." It is none other than "AA's disciplinarian," who "looked damned good and smelled even better and dressed to impress and his blank black-on-yellow smile never faltered as he sincerely urged you to have a nice day. Just one more last nice day. Just one" (359). In this analogy televised entertainment is not just synonymous with addiction but also with the allure and the pull of narcotizing, mood-altering substances, forever tempting, everywhere, ceaseless and without end.

Wallace makes the analogy abundantly clear in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," an essay that deeply informs Infinite Jest:

Television's greatest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving. In this respect, television resembles certain other things one might call Special Treats (e.g. candy, liquor), i.e. treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but bad for us in large amounts and really bad for us if consumed in the massive regular amounts reserved for nutritive staples. One can only guess at
what volume of gin or poundage of Toblerone [seven] hours of Special Treat a
day would convert to.\textsuperscript{111}

In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace states that as a child he split his time
between "being bookish and reading a lot" and "watching grotesque amounts of
TV.\textsuperscript{112} Special Treats in doses this high have consequences. One of which, Wallace
submits during the same interview, is that "it's impossible to spend that many
slack-jawed, spittle-chinned, formative hours in front of commercial art without
internalizing the idea that one of the main goals of art is simply to 'entertain,' to
give people sheer pleasure."\textsuperscript{113} And in \textit{Although of Course You End Up Becoming
Yourself}, he tells journalist David Lipsky that

\begin{quote}

it's gonna get easier and easier, and more and more convenient, and more and
more pleasurable, to be alone with images on a screen, given to us by people who
do not love us but want our money. Which is all right. In low doses, right? But if
that's the basic main staple of your diet, you're gonna die. In a meaningful way,
you're going to die.\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

Which is exactly the kind of nightmare-scenario we encounter in \textit{Infinite Jest} and,
more specifically, "Infinite Jest": entertainment in doses so high and pleasurable it
proves debilitating, such that viewers are entertained to the point of
unconsciousness, and even death.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[112] Larry McCaffery, "An Conversation with David Foster Wallace," accessed 15
August 2012,
\url{http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?fa=customcontent&GC0I=156471062178}
0&extrasfile=A09F8296-B0D0-B086-B6A350F4F59F01F7.html.
\item[113] Ibid.
\item[114] David Lipsky, \textit{Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself}, p. 86.
\end{footnotes}
While the film is a metaphor for the kind of entertainment viewers choose to consume in doses that might as well be lethal, the attaché’s viewing routine is equally revealing. Like most adults he often finds his work stressful, and in the evening he “needs unwinding in the very worst way,” hence his habitual viewing. And as the film’s effects are taken to their logical extreme, so too is the attaché’s routine: “He reclines before the viewer in his special electronic recliner ... adjusting the room’s lighting, fitting the complexly molded dinner tray over his head so that his shoulders support the tray and allow it to project into space just below his chin, that he may enjoy his hot dinner without having to remove his eyes from whatever entertainment is up and playing.” Reclined and comfortable, movement of any kind hardly necessary, he “sits and watches and eats and watches, unwinding by visible degrees, until the angles of his body in the chair and his head on his neck indicate that he has passed into sleep, at which point his special electronic recliner can be made automatically to recline to full horizontal, and luxuriant silk-analog bedding emerges flowingly from long slots in the appliance’s sides”. He is then “permitted to ease effortlessly from unwound spectation into a fully relaxed night’s sleep, still right there in the recumbent recliner, the TP set to run a recursive loop of low-volume surf and light rain on broad green leaves” (34). This is entertainment to the point of unconsciousness, chosen voluntarily and indulged nightly. Statistics suggest the attaché is not unique; viewers in general appear to have adopted similar high-dose habits. And it is no accident that Wallace, who mentioned specifically in “E Unibus Pluram” that watching television is second only to sleep, here combines the two activities, one sliding gradually into the other.

The attaché reclines and eats and sleeps, bathed at all times in television’s ceaseless glow. He devotes himself entirely to watching and structures his night
accordingly. When he sits down to watch "Infinite Jest," he "will pop the cartridge in and scan just enough of its contents to determine whether it is irritating or of an irrelevant nature and not entertaining or engaging in any way" (36), in which case he will watch something else. But the attaché's routine is not simply familiar; it's almost as if he has already seen "Infinite Jest." Entertainment is for him a force that dictates his evening, an activity around which all other activities must shape themselves. In other words, it's as if his nightly routine has made him especially receptive to the film's effects.

The film's plot functions as another metaphor for addictive entertainment and ceaseless viewing pleasure. Joelle Van Dyne, who appears in the film, provides the first description of what "Infinite Jest" is apparently about, although not without certain clarifications: "There was nothing coherent in the mother-death-cosmology and apologies she'd repeated over and over, inclined over that auto-wobbled lens propped up in the plaid-sided pram" (230). It is worth noting too that Joelle recounts these brief, obscure details while preparing purposely to overdose by freebasing cocaine—i.e., smoking coke until it kills her—which she refers to repeatedly as "Too Much Fun" (235-38), enough to kill her, which is hardly different than viewers' experience of watching the film. Much later, during an official government interview, she provides further information about the film: "I was in two scenes. ... In the first scene I'm going through a revolving door"; at the same time "somebody I know but apparently haven't seen for a long time" (938) revolves in the same door; but "instead of going in I keep going around in the door to follow the person out, which person is also still revolving in the door to follow me in"; this goes on for awhile, "we whirl in the door like that for several whirls" (938-39). The other person is male but "epicene," Joelle says, "Hermaphroditic. Androgynous." In the other scene, she explains to a government agent, "I wore an
incredible white floor-length gown of some sort of flowing material and leaned in over the camera in the crib and simply apologized ... As in my lines were various apologies. 'I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. I am so, so sorry. Please know how very, very, very sorry I am.' For a real long time. ... at least twenty minutes of permutations of 'I'm sorry.'” Then she reiterates, in response to a question, “The point of view was from the crib, yes,” and adds that they used a lens called an “auto-wobble” or an “ocular wobble,” which lens is designed to simulate a newborn’s perspective—“I know there’s something wobbled and weird about their vision,” Joelle says, “the newer-born they are, the more they wobble” (939). And finally she declares, “I don’t think there’s much doubt the lens was supposed to reproduce an infantile visual field” (940). Both the angle and the dialogue constitute in large part what is revealed as the film’s theoretical impulse.

Molly Notkin, a close friend of Joelle’s (the friend in whose bathroom Joelle had in fact tried to OD during a party in Notkin’s apartment), provides a few other details to that extent during another official interview, which simultaneously make clear and obscure the film’s content. She explains that Joelle is supposed to be “some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked ... explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film’s camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life’s mother.” This is the “alleged substance of the Death-cosmology” that Joelle “was supposed to deliver in a lalating monologue to the viewer, mediated by the very special lens” (788). Joelle leans over “the camera as audience-synecdoche” and explains “that this was why mothers were so obsessively, consumingly, drivenly, and yet somehow narcissistically loving of you, their kid: the mothers are trying frantically to make amends for a murder neither of you quite remember” (789). And the obscurity
here is matched by the obscure nature of the director himself, Dr. James O. Incandenza, who by various accounts found it “so bad he didn’t want it released” (253) or else considered it “a final opus so magnum he’d claimed to have had it locked away” (228). He talked about making something “too perfect” but only as a joke. Joelle claims there “wasn’t anything unendurable or enslaving” (940) in the film but admits that she has “never seen the completed assembly of what she’d appeared in” (228). She doubts the “cartridge-as-ecstatic-death rumor” (233) despite Incandenza’s claim that “the thing he’d always wanted to make had broken his heart” (228) because it had turned out to be so entertaining. There are also rumors of another film, this one a kind of antidote to “Infinite Jest, an “anti-Entertainment” (126) designed to counteract the lethal film’s effects.

Still, there are conclusions to draw. Once again, this time via Joelle, the film is overtly connected with drug use and addiction, with entertainment in the form of Too Much Fun. Introduced into the analogy, however, is the relationship between infants and mothers, which in turn is the film’s most incisive metaphor. In Elegant Complexity, Greg Carlisle notes that watching “Infinite Jest” is synonymous with taking drugs in that “both of these choices induce infantile regression”\(^{115}\)—drugs reduce users’ mental capacity to a child’s, while the film is designed to make the viewer feel like a newborn gazing up from the crib at her mother. These are forms of pleasure so pure they hearken back to infancy, when all needs are met instantly and without question, even those of which the infant is unaware.

Marshall Boswell locates in this analogy Wallace’s interpretation of Lacan’s “mirror stage,” the French psychoanalyst’s name for the moment a child no longer identifies wholly with her mother and instead recognizes herself as an

individual.\textsuperscript{116} The murder that takes place as part of the film's mother-death-cosmology, in other words, is not literal; it is the symbolic murder of the infant's identification with her mother. The infant's "next life" is thus forever marked by loneliness and alienation, for which her next-life's mother is deeply sorry. "This split subject," Boswell concludes, "then spends the rest of her life desiring a return to that early wholeness, that lost one-to-one connection".\textsuperscript{117} The film makes infants of its viewers, passive spectators who are above all vulnerable in a way most adults are not, at which point it proceeds to offer them the exact one-to-one connection they desire, in the form of Joelle, bent over the camera as if it were a crib and speaking to them in the voice mothers use to soothe their children.

In "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders': Chaos and Realism in \textit{Infinite Jest}," an essay collected in \textit{Consider David Foster Wallace}, Kiki Benzon mentions the idea of "character clusters" and how they "reflect the greater recursive cultural and philosophical systems depicted in the novel at large."\textsuperscript{118} The Incandenza boys, then, are concerned with television's effects on the psyche and culture, while addicts like Gately and Erdedy see it as a source of pure entertainment and respond to it like rapt children. There is also something primal in the way they consume their doses, which has less to do with dosage itself than it does with certain emotional and psychological triggers—i.e., things blow up and crash into each other and hypnotize with bright colors and movement. Too, staff at Ennet House must check new InterLace cartridges "for suitability [drug and/or

\textsuperscript{116} Marshall Boswell, \textit{Understanding David Foster Wallace}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p. 130.
alcohol use] and sex before they can be put out for residents" (825), which are of course examples of still other basic but powerful triggers.

Benzon borrows part of her essay’s title—“Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders”—from a series of short stories in Wallace’s collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (2000), and uses it to describe how these character clusters in certain cases melt into one another. “*Infinite Jest,*” she writes, “testifies to the permeability—the ‘porousness’—of seemingly rigid boundaries both geographical and social.”\(^{119}\) For instance, Ennet House and the Enfield Tennis Academy, which swap not only characters and storylines, but also the philosophies that inform so much of the novel’s action. And Gately is perhaps the most decisive link between the novel’s various theories about the nature of entertainment—he is the last dear friend of Dr. James Incandenza, to whom the amateur auteur reveals the true purpose of his last and best film, “*Infinite Jest.*”

Don Gately is shot in the shoulder during a brawl in front of Ennet House. In a (successful) attempt to protect Ennet’s residents, he brutally beats two men before a third shoots him. While the other residents deal just as brutally with the third, Gately lies in Joelle’s lap, looking up at both her and the stars beyond her head. Almost one hundred pages later, his fate is finally revealed: in the hospital, “a tube down his throat, torn by fever and guilt and shoulder-pain, offered Demerol by well-meaning but clueless M.D.s, in and out of delirium” (707). Another hundred pages go by before we see Gately in the hospitable at last, intubated and mute, hallucinating, tossed amidst bizarre fever dreams, or else lucid but suffering incredible amounts of sober pain, having refused repeatedly the offer of diverse painkillers. Among his visitors: the ghost of Dr. James Incandenza.

\(^{119}\) Kiki Benzon, “‘Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders’: Chaos and Realism in *Infinite Jest,*” p. 103.
Described as a wraith—a specific type of ghost most often seen immediately after the deceased’s death—Incandenza initially flits wildly around Gately’s room, making it both difficult and painful for Gately to follow his movements. After a comedic back-and-forth about whether Gately is in fact dreaming, Incandenza tells Gately that “he might as well stop trying to figure it out and just capitalize on its presence ... because Gately, if he’d bothered to notice and appreciate it, at least didn’t have to speak out loud to be able to interface with the wraith-figure” (830). The communication between the two, and what Incandenza eventually confides, is thus heightened to a level of intimacy not seen anywhere else in the book, which is significant for reasons I will discuss later, in “Infinite,” since they are relevant both to television and to certain of the novel’s other thematic concerns.

Incandeza first asks Gately to consider the notion of “figurants”—i.e., extras in movies and television. The wraith deliberately picks Cheers! as an example because Gately is familiar with the show at the level of his soul, and describes “the nameless patrons always at tables, filling out the bar’s crowd.” They are of course “concessions to realism, always relegated to back- and foreground; and always having utterly silent conversations.” The wraith describes the way “their faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound; only the name-stars at the bar itself could audibilize.” This kind of “human scenery” can “be seen (but not heard) in most pieces of filmed entertainment” (834). Gately, well aware of extras’ roles in films and television shows, waits patiently for Incandenza to get to the point. Which is that “you can’t appreciate the dramatic pathos of a figurant until you realize how completely trapped and encaged he is in mute peripheral status” (835). The terms encaged and trapped here are yet another instance of the parallels between addiction and entertainment, but the real life-and-death message of Incandenza’s point has to do with the nature of figurants themselves.
Because in Incandenza's work, "he goddamn bloody well made sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn't silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were." The essential idea being that everybody in real-life is "the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment" (835-6).


Incandenza's discussion about figurants is really just an excuse to confess to Gately that "he had seen his own personal youngest offspring, a son, the one most like him, the one most marvelous and frightening to him, becoming a figurant, toward the end." Incandenza's youngest is Hal, who by novel's end is either mute or unable to communicate in a way that sounds even vaguely human. "No horror on earth or elsewhere could equal watching your own offspring open his mouth and have nothing come out," Incandenza laments; "it mars the memory of the end of his animate life, this son's retreat to the periphery of life's frame" (837). Hal says more than once in the novel that the subject of his apparent inability to speak was nothing more than a figment of his father's imagination: "Himself"—Incandenza's nickname—"for two years before his death, had had this delusion of silence when I spoke: I believed I was speaking and he believed I was not speaking." But Hal's brother Mario "averred that Himself had never accused him of not speaking" (899).

Hal's slide, not necessarily into silence but at least into communicative difficulty, is not only self-acknowledged but also remarked upon by students and staff at the Academy (865, 875, 966) and the deans during his University interview (5, 12, 14-15). To the extent that he is empty inside and loathes his internal self (695)—mute or not, it's kind of irrelevant here—"the son had become a steadily more and more hidden boy" (838), Incandenza says. So he "spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the
muted son could simply converse” (838). And so at last we come to the film’s true purpose. In rather a moving gesture, which later turned out to have frightening and far-reaching consequences even the great director himself could not have foreseen, Incandenza makes “Infinite Jest” for his youngest and most gifted child, a last-ditch effort to communicate with his troubled son.

Incandenza’s theory is to make “Something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come out—even if it was only to ask for more” (839). And entertainment is his “last resort”:

Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. To bring him “out of himself,” as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it heard. A life-long dream. The scholars and Foundations and disseminators never saw that his most serious wish was: to entertain (839).

The language here is more than suggestive. Incandenza, though deceased, has a deeper understanding of his youngest son than any other character in the novel. Portrayed always as a distant father—absent, even—he nonetheless saw clearly Hal’s gradual retreat into a personal cage. To bring Hal “out of himself” is both to help the boy out of that cage and to prevent him from following in his father’s own tortured footsteps, to bring him “out of Himself.” For Incandenza, whose personal poison is Wild Turkey Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey, began “privately to fear that his son was experimenting with Substances” (838). Further, that the boy’s slide into silence mirrored Incandenza’s own dysfunctional relationship with his
father: "trying unsuccessfully to convince your father that you even existed," he laments to Gately, "failing ever to be really seen, gesturing wildly through the distilled haze, so that in adulthood you still carried the moist flabby weight of your failure ever to make him hear you really speak ... only to find, near the end, that your very own child had himself become blank, inbent, silent, frightening, mute" (838). Even in adulthood Incandenza was never truly heard, not even by his own family. He would "stand up and wave his arms for them all to attend to the fact that his youngest and most promising son was disappearing," but they only figured he'd "gone bats from Wild Turkey-intake and needed to try to get sober, again, one more time" (838). Hence the need not just to pull Hal from his tailspin but also actually to converse with him, since neither of them has ever truly been heard.

That Incandenza tries to do so by appealing to the infant alive in Hal, his hideous internal self, is no mere coincidence or matter of suggestion either. Hal has learned to despise and distrust his internal self, and dons the armor of irony and weary cynicism to prevent it ever from being seen. Yet that armor, like the scar on a deep wound, has grown so thick with use as to be almost impervious. Incandenza, however, understands the nature of entertainment—the way it appeals to that slavering, needy infant—and plans to dazzle the boy with it. It is the content, though, that will reach Hal while he consumes: not ironic put-downs or cynical self-awareness but genuine and utterly compelling human emotion. And if Hal fails to internalize the film's message he'll at least sit up and ask for more—because Incandenza believes that "Any conversation or interchange is better than none at all" (839).

What, then, are we to make of the fact that, by Incandenza's standards, the film is a failure? That it does not reverse thrust on viewers' fall into solipsism but, perversely, enables it? It does not permit conversation; it encourages mute, passive
reception. Viewers do indeed ask for more but not vocally, or even actively, except to press "play" again and again—the exchange remains one-sided, empty.

What are we to make of David Foster Wallace's original title for the novel, *A Failed Entertainment,* and his idea that *Infinite Jest* "is structured as an entertainment that doesn't work"?¹²⁰

The crux here is that *Infinite Jest* is meant to function like "Infinite Jest." In other words, the novel is meant to provide endless pleasure while helping readers to internalize the idea that to embrace one's hideous internal self is, as Hal says, to be truly human. It's a hellishly tall order, to both entertain and redeem. That *Infinite Jest* is purposely difficult—stylistically, structurally, syntactically—does little to encourage readers through its 1,079 pages and 388 endnotes. So how exactly can this monstrous, complex novel hope to deter readers from other, easier forms of art?

Partly it is a matter of language. Dense yet surprisingly accessible, the novel seeks through language to construct a world that feels more familiar than our own. The narrator throughout *Infinite Jest* is at once personal and expansive, intelligent and street-wise, prolix and precise. This unique mode of discourse in *Infinite Jest* is by turns droll and ebullient, heartbreakingly honest and morally compelling. Like Gately in AA, for instance:

Substances start out being so magically great, so much the interior jigsaw's missing piece, that at the start you just know, deep in your gut, that they'll never let you down; you just know it. But they do. And then this goofy slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee is so lame you just know there's no way it could ever possibly

¹²⁰ David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself,* p. 79.
work except for the utterest morons ... and then Gately seems to find out AA turns out to be the very loyal friend he thought he'd had and then lost ... (350).

Or the bizarrely vain complexities of “videophony”—i.e. phones with audio and video in/output—to which anyone familiar with Skype can probably relate:

Callers now found they had to compose the same sort of earnest, slightly overintense listener's expression they had to compose for in-person exchanges. Those callers who out of unconscious habit succumbed to fuguelike doodling or pants-crease-adjustment now came off looking rude, absentminded, or childishly self-absorbed. Callers who even more unconsciously blemish-scanned or nostril-explored looked up to find horrified expressions on the video-faces at the other end. All of which resulted in videophonic stress (146).

This kind of language is a matter of hard-wired artistic expression peculiar to Wallace but it is also intentional. "I think the language needs to find new ways to pull the reader," he says in Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself, "And my personal belief is a lot of it has to do with voice, and a feeling of intimacy between the writer and the reader."121 Partly, then, it is a matter of using language to make the reader feel as if the novel in her hands was written for her and her alone. Many of the reviews I spoke about in the Introduction made note of the distinctive, idiosyncratic language in Infinite Jest; and Jonathan Franzen, in "Farther Away," which I also spoke about in the Introduction, singles out for special recognition the intimacy readers find in Wallace's fiction. This kind of intimacy permits Wallace to converse with the reader, to bring her out of herself,

121 Ibid., p. 72.
to be heard; and the reader, in recognizing through language that "Another sensibility like [hers] exists,"\textsuperscript{122} will feel that she, too, has been heard. This is how Wallace inspires in his readers a sensitivity to the possibility that they can live and glow in a culture saturated by electronic media.

**Joelle**

Critical research about *Infinite Jest* somewhat overlooks precisely why Joelle Van Dyne—or "Madame Psychosis"—is crucial to the novel's idea of entertainment. There are three principal lines of inquiry here: a precise description of her physical appearance, her role in Incandenza's lethal film, and the way she functions as a nexus for the relationships between various characters. All of them worthy subjects, none of them yet subjected to rigorous study.

Joelle's physical appearance is decidedly linked to her being a metaphorical representation of television and addictive entertainment. Orin Incandenza, who was "by all indications in love" (296) with Joelle, called her the "P.G.O.A.T., for the Prettiest Girl Of All Time," and claimed that she was "almost grotesquely lovely" (290). So lovely and pretty, in fact, that no suitor "could summon the saliva to speak to her," not even Orin, who "couldn't get closer than four meters" (290). According to Orin, she "induced in heterosexual males" something called "the Actaeon Complex, which is a kind of deep phylogenic fear of transhuman beauty" (290). Gately more than once admires her "past-believing bod" (475), and does not argue with her when she says, "Don, I'm perfect. I'm so beautiful I drive anybody with a nervous system out of their fucking mind" (538). And Molly Notkin claims that in "Infinite Jest" she is "naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing" (788). Given

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., p. 38.
the many references to her beauty and sexual appeal, it is not unreasonable to assume that the simple fact of her physical appearance in Incandenza’s film might explain at least part of its allure.

Of these descriptions, it is the Actaeon Complex that does the most to explicate the metaphorical aspect of Joelle’s character. In Understanding David Foster Wallace, Boswell relates the mythological story of Actaeon, “a hunter who is turned into a stag after watching the chaste goddess [Artemis] bathe.”\(^{123}\) He uses this myth, along with several examples of her paralyzing beauty, to interpret Joelle as a kind of “Medusa figure, a woman so lethally beautiful that she transforms anyone in her field of vision into an inanimate object.”\(^{124}\) The analogy is hardly extreme when we consider the stricken and spitless suitors Joelle leaves in her wake, four meters back, but Boswell abruptly abandons the argument without making the significant connections that help to reveal Joelle’s integral role in the novel’s larger thematic concerns.

The analogy of the hunter-turned-stag adds both tragedy and lethality to Joelle’s character, hitherto unrecognized. A few preliminaries to begin: Artemis is most often symbolized as the goddess of the hunt, but she is also the goddess of childbirth and virginity; in “Infinite Jest” Joelle is “hugely pregnant” (788), “parturient” (789) even, and “may or may not have been holding a knife” (788). And while she is no longer a virgin, it is worth noting that before she became “sexually enmeshed” (789) with Orin, he mentions in passing that the Actaeon Complex resulted in her being “almost universally shunned” (290). These similarities are distinct clues to Joelle’s identity and pathos, while the myth itself expands upon them. When Actaeon, out hunting with his hounds, finds nude

\(^{123}\) Ibid., p. 127.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., p. 132.
Artemis bathing in the woods and is transfixed by her beauty, the goddess does indeed transform him into a stag. However, Boswell says nothing about the myth’s horrific conclusion: the stag is killed by his own hounds. To look upon such terrible beauty, in other words, is death. Nor does Boswell attend closely enough to what Joelle says about herself, and the way people react to her, during a conversation with Gately. “Once they’ve seen me,” she explains, “they can’t think of anything else and don’t want to look at anything else and stop carrying out normal responsibilities and believe that if they can only have me right there with them at all times everything will be all right” (538). It is another, subtler echo of Actaeon—he was not transformed into an inanimate object but into an animal, and animals, like Joelle’s suitors and the film’s viewer’s, seek only to satisfy their most urgent needs. Familiar territory, since these various descriptions of Joelle could be applied with equal precision to “Infinite Jest.”

What we are approaching, then, is an idea of Joelle as more than just an actress with a pretty face who also happens to be the focal point of a lethally addictive film. Boswell does not make the leap from her symbolic role in the entertainment to Joelle as a metaphor herself for entertainment as a whole. But this hypothesis requires readers to countenance the grisly side of her appearance—figuratively or quite literally grisly—since she is either so beautiful she feels deformed or else physically deformed and no longer beautiful. She is a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed, “an agnostic-style 12-step support group” for people who feel, to put it lightly, “aesthetically challenged” (187). Hence the veil, which she wears at all times, “both in light and darkness, both in solitude and before others’ gaze, and as with strangers so with

126 To clarify, perhaps she is no longer “beautiful.”
familiar friends” (534). The facts of this possible deformity are scarce and difficult to evaluate.

Molly Notkin, during the same interview in which she describes “Infinite Jest,” explains to government agents that Joelle’s mother accidentally flung acid into her daughter’s face, “resulting in [Joelle’s] traumatic deformity” (795). Accidentally, since her target was Joelle’s pedophilic father, “who’d reflexively ducked” to avoid the acid, and behind him, Orin, “a former tennis champion with superb upper-body reflexes, had instinctively ducked also,” which left Joelle “open for a direct facial hit” (795). Notkin is unreliable for a variety of reasons and her words should not always be taken as literal truth, but Joelle herself seems to confirm the incident when she calls Orin “a dodger of flung acid” (223) and casually remarks that he ended their relationship “after the acid” (225). Notkin appears to have concrete inside knowledge of this too, informing the agents that despite Orin’s “professions of self-recrimination for allowing the deformity to take place,” coupled with the “guilt and horror” that “made a committed relationship with Madame Psychosis increasingly untenable,” it nonetheless “didn’t take an expert in character-disorders and weaknesses to figure out why the fellow’d given Madame Psychosis the boot within months of the traumatic deformity” (795). All of which certainly fits with Orin’s habits as an habitual seducer and womanizer. But Joelle offers contradictory evidence: while under the influence in Notkin’s bathroom—so much influence it is likely going to kill her—she is “deveiled, too pretty for words, maybe the Prettiest Girl Of All Time” (239), which of course was Orin’s nickname for her. But the confusion persists, since Notkin claims that Joelle’s “hideously deformed face” in “Infinite Jest” is “either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer-generated squares of color or anamorphosized into unrecognizability as any kind of face” (788), a description Joelle also confirms by
saying that she was "Not exactly veiled" (939) in the film. Incandenza also cast her in Safe Boating Is No Accident, in which a woman's "face is grotesquely mangled by an outboard propeller" (992, fn. 24). As for the possibility of an actual deformity, Joelle tells Gately: "I am so beautiful I am deformed ... I am deformed with beauty" (538). Gately, for his part, does at one point glimpse what's "under the veil's billowing hem," which looks to him like "a regular female human chin and makeupless lower lip" (616). The evidence, while plentiful, is hardly conclusive.

Stephen Burn, toward the end of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide, writes that readers make a "slight error" in "doubting whether Joelle has been disfigured";127 a curious remark, given the deliberate inconsistencies scattered throughout the novel. Boswell avoids the question entirely, choosing instead to ask what her veil implies about hiddenness and self-reflexivity.128 But in the context of her metaphorical representation of additive entertainment, the question of Joelle's disfigurement turns out to be irrelevant. Because in the context of entertainment, she is both disfigured and not, a Schrödinger's Cat-type instance of the beautiful and the grotesque being at once neither true nor untrue.129 She is beautiful in the sense that admirers cannot look away, deformed because her beauty literally deforms, removing from her admirers the will to live without her constant nearby presence in exactly the same way as the film. The similarities between Joelle and "Infinite Jest" as metaphors for addictive entertainment align too precisely for this to be a coincidence. Further,

127 Stephen Burn, David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest, p. 74.
129 In the thought-experiment, a cat hidden in a box is exposed to toxic gas and is, after some time, considered to be both alive and dead since direct observation is impossible. True and untrue in this case substitute for alive and dead, direct observation being impossible since, beautiful or not, it's probably unwise to look Joelle directly in the face.
the question of her possible deformity is itself a kind of addiction, compelling readers to scour the text for any hint that might provide a conclusive answer. But Actaeon was punished for witnessing naked Artemis, for the "profanation ... of her virginity's mystery." And in a scary twist, we, who have likely inquired too much into the mystery beneath Joelle's billowing veil, are perhaps guilty of doing the same.

That Joelle happens also to be a radio personality further deepens the literal and metaphorical complexity of her character. In her guise as "the darkly revered Madame Psychosis" (182), she is the eponymous host of Sixty Minutes More Or Less With Madame Psychosis. It is an odd show; she sits behind a kind of folding screen while she speaks and "There's no telling what'll be up on a given night." The only "remotely consistent theme" is "maybe film and film-cartridges" (185), and even though she is a devout student of film—neorealist, new wave, avant- and après-garde, as well as a specific directors like Bresson and Fellini (185)—she nonetheless once told Orin that she prefers films in which "a whole bunch of shit blows up" (297). But she is "Also highly literate on U.S. sports" (185); she once asked the student engineer in charge of the broadcast to "write out the home-lab process for turning uranium oxide powder into good old fissionable U-235," which she then read "on the air between a Baraka poem and a critique of the Steeler defense's double-slot secondary" (186). She reads "circulars and catalogues and PR-type things" (187) from the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. And for awhile she "read depressing book after depressing book—Good Morning, Midnight and Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and Giovanni's Room and Under the Volcano, plus a truly ghastly Bret Ellis period" (191). Despite the subject matter,

though, Sixty Minutes More Or Less With Madame Psychosis is oddly comforting. Her "themes are at once unpredictable and somehow rhythmic" (187), her voice "low-depth familiar ... queerly powerful and compelling" (189, 191), the show itself like “an in-joke that you and she alone are in on” (191). In a sense, then, her show functions in much the same way as “Infinite Jest,” but the effect it has on her audience is radically different, which effect can be seen most clearly on Mario Incandenza.

Joelle begins each broadcast by saying, “And Lo, for the Earth was empty of form, and void. And Darkness was all over the Face of the Deep. And We said: Look at that fucker Dance” (184). It is perhaps recognizable to most readers as an altered and slightly deranged version of the Bible’s Genesis, in which God creates heaven and earth. The language here is significant, both as it relates to Joelle and to Gately’s one-sided conversation with Incandenza’s wraith, and I will examine it further in “Infinite.”

Mario Incandenza, Infinite Jest’s most honest and noble protagonist, finds Sixty Minutes More Or Less’s opening, “for all its black cynicism, terribly compelling” (184). Mario is described as “basically a born listener,” around whom “bullshit tends to drop away,” such that “the beaming and bradykinetic boy” can from an “interpersonal connection” with others that “only he can truly feel” (80). And though Mario is crippled physically he is “not, verifiably not, retarded or cognitively damaged” (314). He is Joelle’s most devoted listener because her show sounds to him like he is listening “to someone sad read out loud from yellow letters she’d taken out of a shoebox on a rainy P.M., stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, stuff that was real.” Mario believes “It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real in this way,” and he does not understand why “everyone at E.T.A. over the age of about Kent Blott finds
stuff that's really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed. It's like there's some rule that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy" (592). And so he sits very close to the radio every night to listen to Madame Psychosis, "listening the way other kids watch TP" (189), the son of a filmic genius absorbing the "really real stuff" he cannot find in his father's films. It is also Mario, importantly, who becomes "weirdly agitated about Madame Psychosis's unannounced sabbatical" from the show, sleeping next to the radio "on an air mattress ... in a sarcophagally tapered sleeping bag" (450), and especially agitated when he learns that she broadcasts from behind a screen (1032, fn. 180). That she is, like the kids at E.T.A., and even his own brother, hidden.

These nexus-aspects of Joelle were mentioned earlier, in passing, and in this chapter we've see that her character is truly integral to the novel. Plot-wise, she links Ennet House to Enfield and helps to reveal what "Infinite Jest" is about, while thematically she functions as both a metaphor for entertainment and a kind of antidote to that entertainment.

But she is also linked metaphorically to "the incredibly potent DMZ," a dangerous drug "apparently classed as a para-methoxylated amphetamine" that is "way more powerful than mescaline ... MDMA ... or psilocybin or Cylert." In other words, DMZ is likely the most powerful hallucinogenic drug on earth, whose "effects are less visual and spatially-cerebral and more like temporally-cerebral and almost ontological ... wherein the ingester perceives his relation to the ordinary flow of time as radically ... and euphorically ... altered" (170). It was perhaps used "in shady CIA-era military experiments," but its potency was judged "too incredible to proceed" (212). One description in particular "invites you to envision acid that has itself dropped acid." The only account of the drug's effects involve an Army experiment in which a soldier "literally lost his mind, like the
massive dose picked his mind up and carried it off somewhere and put it down and forgot where.” He was “found later in his Army cell, in some impossible lotus position, singing show tunes in a scary deadly-accurate Ethel-Merman-impression voice” (214). Hal and his friends plan to experiment with the drug, which, if in fact they do, might explain Hal’s delusion that he is speaking when he is not, and his inability to control his facial expressions. In other words, Joelle is not just a convenient nexus but an inescapable one—characters meet her in- and outside Ennet House, see her in “Infinite Jest,” or listen to her on Sixty Minutes More Or Less. But they might also, rather creepily, ingest her, in the form of the incredibly potent DMZ, the slang for which is, of course, Madame Psychosis.

These metaphorical representations of Joelle, along with the literal features of her physical appearance, are repeatedly identified with the addictive, possibly lethal nature of entertainment. But she is also detoxifying, an antidote to the crippling effects she induces in viewers, which I will discuss further in “infinite.” Physically, she is either ravishing or deformed, but as the embodiment of entertainment she is complexly beautiful, both ravishing and deformed—a metaphor for the kind of entertainment that is so alluring and pleasurable it proves grotesque.

**InterLace**

InterLace TelEntertainment grounds firmly in reality the metaphorical representations of additive entertainment in *Infinite Jest*. A reality, according to media theory, that is increasing likely. InterLace is thus perhaps the most urgent thematic concern in the novel.

Although the programs available to InterLace subscribers are at least as plentiful as the ones available to us via basic and extended cable, *Infinite Jest* does
not spend much time discussing any actual programs. There's *Mr. Bouncety-Bounce*, "a popular afternoon InterLace children's program" (35) whose host appears daily in an "old cloth-and-safety-pin diaper and paunch and rubber infant-head mask" (648). There's Ms. Tawni Kondo's "immensely popular exercise program ... upwards of 60 million North Americans daily kicking and genuflecting with Tawni Kondo, a mass choreography somewhat similar to those compulsory A.M. tai chi slo-mo exercise assemblies in post-Mao China" the rather pointed exception being that "the Chinese assemble publicly together" (620). There's a comparatively long section about a program entitled "Schizophrenia: Mind or Body?" to which Orin Incandenza is subjected while curled in the fetal position and unable to move. Plus references to a handful of old basic-cable titans like *Seinfeld* and *M*A*S*H* and *Cheers*.

Partly we must look to the cultural atmosphere in *Infinite Jest* and the way in which it adapts to or is directed by the kind of addictive entertainment the novel asks us to consider. In Hal Incandenza's extended discussion of InterLace TelEntertainment, he mentions how one consequence of the major networks' collapse was the simultaneous collapse of the major advertising agencies. There are "no ads of any kind in the InterLace pulses and ROM cartridges" (417), which is not just inconceivable but somehow deeply un-American. Agencies were forced to "cast wildly about" for new markets and audiences, and for a while.

Billboards sprouted with near-mycological fury alongside even rural two-laners. No bus, train, trolley, or hack went unfestooned with high-gloss ads. Commercial airliners began for a while to trail those terse translucent ad-banners usually reserved for like Piper Cubs over football games and July beaches. Magazines (already endangered by HD-video equivalents) got so full of those infuriating
little fall-out ad cards that Fourth-Class postal rates ballooned, making the e-mail of their video-equivalents that much more attractive, in another vicious spiral. Chicago's once-vaunted Sickengen, Smith, and Lundine went so far as to get Ford to start painting little domestic-product come-ons on their new lines' side-panels, an idea that fizzled as U.S. customers in Nike T-shirts and Marlboro caps perversely refused to invest in "cars that sold out" (418).

The advertising industry, in other words, sought to correct the imbalance by oversaturating other mediums. Jenkins spoke about this in terms of convergence, while Gillan noted the way television regularly reminds viewers that the entertainment need not stop because extra content is available online. In Infinite Jest, this expansion is taken to its hilarious extreme. Subsidized Time, for example, allows agencies to bid even on the rights to a given year and brand it with corporate products—Year of the Whopper, for instance, or Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland. The Statue of Liberty might have "a sun for a crown" and "what looks like a huge photo album under one iron arm" but "the other arm holds aloft a product," which "is changed each 1 Jan. by brave men with pistons and cranes" (367). The novel's most recent action takes place in the Year of Glad, but it is set mostly during the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, which means the Statue of Liberty is wrapped in an "enormous adult-design diaper" (33) for most of the novel. Thanks to advertising, the nation's identity is changed. Literally.

Though television here looks at best to have influenced indirectly a kind of mass advertising not seen anywhere since ... well, television, Hal nonetheless recalls the terrible persuasive force it had over consumers. NoCoat's tongue-scraper campaign, for example, resulted in "that horrible year Hal vaguely recalls when a nation became obsessed with the state of its tongue, when people would no
sooner leave home without a tongue-scraper and an emergency backup tongue-scraper than they’d fail to wash and brush and spray” (414). Absurd it may be, but also familiar; NoCoat is no different than the products, slogans, jingles, and slang that have entered our cultural landscape as a consequence of wildly successful commercials and television shows. Homer’s shouted Doh!, Marlboro’s lone cowboy smoking in the remote wilderness, MacDonald’s’ garish clown—all so familiar and expected that only their absence would seem odd. Too, the instance of Hal’s academic essays, both of them submitted in order to satisfy assignments in media studies at the Enfield Tennis Academy, which are designed to support Wallace’s belief that television, in both fiction and nonfiction, is a valid subject for intellectuals and critics.

InterLace and the advertising fallout it helped to perpetrate serve also to exemplify the collision of old and new media. In Convergence Culture, Henry Jenkins notes that a common misconception in this instance is to assume that one will ultimately replace the other. Indeed, television without advertising might look like InterLace, and InterLace might look like the Internet. Except Gitlin points out how the Internet has failed to divert attention from television’s flickering screen, and Jenkins argues that user-directed content is the path to which entertainment now cleaves. InterLace might have encouraged an excessive drive to advertise elsewhere, but television without advertising is unlikely to see a decrease in ratings, even without funding. Entertainment in Infinite Jest, from the addictive film to the innovative teleputer, is not only a potent metaphor for addictive viewing but also a thoroughly imagined eventuality. And Wallace, as Neil

132 Todd Gitlin, Media Unlimited, p. 16-17.
133 Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture, p. 260.
Postman hoped people would, appears to have delved into it with his eyes wide open.

Partly, then, we must look to the characters' experience of television in *Infinite Jest* and what all this viewing might be doing to them. Like the sparse, almost buried references to shows and actors and directors and films in the novel, their responses to a world presented and so defined by television are often mentioned with little in the way of actual commentary. Don Gately, for example, "can still summon great verbatim chunks" of *Seinfeld* and *M*A*S*H* and *Bewitched* and *Hazel* and *Ren & Stimpy* and *Northern Exposure* (834-5). He's also a huge fan of Mr. Bouncety-Bounce, eponymous host of "the mentally ill kiddy-show," for which he always tried "to be home and largely alert for" (922), even while heavily abusing drugs and alcohol.

Ken Erdedy provides another instance of this experience. Before entering Ennet House to receive treatment for his marijuana addiction, Erdedy tries at one point to watch something on the teleputer in his apartment but is "unable to distract himself with the TP because he [is] unable to stay with any one entertainment cartridge for more than a few seconds. The moment he recognized what exactly was on one cartridge he had a strong anxious feeling that there was something more entertaining on another cartridge and that he was potentially missing it." Erdedy is waiting for an incredibly large delivery of marijuana, all of it for his own personal use, and might seem at first merely to be impatient. Moments later, he "realized that he would have plenty of time to enjoy all the cartridges, and realized intellectually that the feeling of deprived panic over missing something made no sense" (26). In preparation for his binge with marijuana over the weekend, "He'd had to log an order to rent film cartridges from the InterLace entertainment outlet" because he will be "living in quick vectors between his
bedroom's InterLace teleputer's films and his refrigerator and his toilet" (20). It is also important to note that marijuana makes Erdedy "stare raptly like an unbright child at entertainment cartridges" but also that, while high, like Joelle, "he favored cartridges in which a lot of things blew up and crashed into each other" (22). The parallel between drugs and addictive viewing is abundantly clear in this section, as is the infantilizing nature of television. It is an echo of something from "E Unibus Pluram," too; Erdedy, as a viewer, will "assume, inside, a sort of fetal position, a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape, reassurance."134 He tries very hard actually to be an unbright child while he watches—"The cycle is self-nourishing."135

Orin Incandenza, Hal's older brother, regards broadcast television with a kind of nostalgia. When Orin is asked in an interview—by what he thinks is a fan but is in fact a wheelchair assassin—to describe what he misses most about his childhood, he cheekily states "cocoa with half-melted marshmallows" and electronic doors "that somehow knew you were there and slid open," as if by magic, in a child's eyes. Most often the cool, somewhat cocky athlete, Orin is suddenly serious—"his face changed a little" and he "no longer smiled coolly"—when he says, "I miss TV." The interviewer/Quebecois wheelchair assassin, in comically broken English, asks why, to which Orin replies, "I miss commercials that were louder than the programs. I miss the phrases 'Order before midnight tonight' and 'Save up to fifty percent and more.' I miss being told things were filmed before a live studio audience. ... I miss sneering at something I love," he says, how he used to "sneer at the commercial vapidity of broadcast stuff ... stuff so low-denominator I could watch and know in advance what people were going to say." (599-600).

135 Ibid.
When the interviewer prompts him with a question about InterLace and its extensive selection of old broadcast shows, Orin declares "But not the same. The choice, see. It ruins it somehow. With television you were subjected to repetition. The familiarity was inflicted. Different now" (600). Here again "infinite jest," which subjects viewers to ceaseless entertainment, inflicts it on them, is synonymous with television. Also that Low Art—low-denominator, according to Orin—is not Low because it is stupid but rather because TV's mass appeal seems to indicate that viewers prefer Low in large doses.

It is Hal Incandenza, however, who once more offers an incisive, considered account of televised entertainment's toll. Late in the novel, Hal succumbs to severe loneliness and something called anhedonia, a crippling form of depression "in which one loses the ability to feel pleasure or attachment to things formerly important" (692). Hal admits that he "hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny," and that "he finds terms like joie and value to be like so many variables in rarified equations"; terms—not feelings—that "he can manipulate ... well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he's in there, inside his own hull, as a human being." It is deeply tragic that "in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all," and worse, that "he knows." And in one of the novel's creepier psychological characterizations, Hal says that "His Moms [sic] Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely" (694). One year later, during the novel's most recent action, Hal internally declares "I am in here" (3), and then, to reassure the college deans who believe he's had a seizure during a college-entrance interview—even though Hal himself believes he did not have one—he again declares, vocally, "I'm in here" (13). Due both to Hal's apparent disconnect even from his own body and his clear lack of affect, it is clear there is, in
fact, nothing inside him. Or rather, that whatever is inside him does not look like the normal human being he can manipulate others into seeing in him. It is also worth noting that in this interview, which opens the novel's action, Hal claims that Dennis Gabor, inventor of holography, “may very well have been the Antichrist” (13), which is revealing since “Infinite Jest” is believed also to be “a really sophisticated piece of holography” (490).

According to Hal, his feelings of anhedonia and emptiness are at least partly the result of internalizing certain of television’s influences. “It’s of some interest,” he thinks, “that the lively arts of the millennial U.S.A. treat anhedonia and internal emptiness as hip and cool. It’s maybe the vestiges of the Romantic glorification of Weltschmerz, which means world-weariness or hip ennui” (694). That the young viewer is subjected to this kind of cool emptiness for hours at a time is not as important as the fact that the young viewer actively treats what she sees as a lesson:

Maybe it’s the fact that most of the arts here are produced by world-weary and sophisticated older people and then consumed by younger people who not only consume art but study it for clues on how to be cool, hip—keep in mind that, for kids and younger people, to be hip and cool is the same as to be admired and accepted and included and so Unalone. ... We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded encagement in the self. Once we've hit this age, we will now give or take anything, wear any mask, to fit, be part-of, not be Alone, we young. The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it’s stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us
from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté. Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent" (694).

And Hal, having grown up watching as much television as any other American child, plus with a father who late in life directed, or attempted to direct, upwards of seventy films, including the deadly "Infinite Jest", has internalized this message in high doses for most of his life. It is inescapable. "Show after show, for years now," Wallace writes in "E Unibus Pluram," "has been either a self-acknowledged blank, visual, postmodern allusion-and-attitude-fest, or, even more common, an uneven battle of wits between some ineffectual spokesman for hollow authority and his precocious children, mordant spouse, or sardonic colleagues." To be fair, Wallace said this in 1990, but it has been true for two decades since.

Viewers have weathered everything from Seinfeld's withering irony and cynicism to Married ... with Children's grotesque brand of misogynistic humor; from Saturday Night Live's extreme political parodies to The Colbert Report's feigned right-wing extremism; from Two and a Half Men's worship of all that is lewd and licentious to its star's televised drug-induced insanity, in what might as well have been a successful spin-off, ratings-wise. Reality television, once hermetic observation, is now alcohol abuse, sexual encounters, the mockery of courtship and marriage, and most of it scripted. Talent shows, where washed-up has-beens and never-weres, or else shrewd calculating businessmen, gather to heckle and deride hopeful contestants, especially in competitions' early rounds. Shows that crossed the line in the Nineties rank somewhere just below tame in 2012. Which means another of Wallace's conclusions is true: "to the extent that it can train viewers' to laugh at characters' unending put-downs of one another, to view

136 Ibid., p. 61.
ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art-form, television can reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance: the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others' ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naïveté. Treating television as a worthy object of intellectual study is not so much a matter of reaching this conclusion as it is a matter of realizing the inevitability of that conclusion.

Hal, who is frozen inside, has determined that television forecloses other modes of discourse. What we as human beings need most—to connect with other human beings such that we feel safe enough to be vulnerable—is precisely what television helps to prevent. And Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human ... is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool (694-695).

Even Hal's language here is proof of what he has so deeply internalized; he has come in some way not only to distrust or dislike this part of himself but to loathe it. He is unable to express what echoes inside his empty hull. And if there were indeed an inner-Hal, one does not, to put it mildly, get the sense that he would risk others' access to it. (It is probably worth noting that Hal finds merchandise for The

137 Ibid., p. 63.
Mr. Bouncety-Bounce Show—and the show itself, more than likely—“extraordinarily artless and young” [111]). Hidden and hated for so long, “One of the really American things about Hal” has become “the way he despises what it is he’s really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pulses and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia” (695). The cultural atmosphere, informed largely by television and the people who have chosen to imitate what they see, is bent toward the starvation of this inner-self. And Hal, like so many of the novel’s characters, can find no way to communicate that might both protect and expose this hideous internal self.

Despite what looks like awareness of these effects and a thorough reckoning of same on his own psyche, Hal nonetheless sits for hours at a time watching television. Late in the novel, “during what’s supposed to be mandatory P.M. Study Period,” Hal decides instead to sit and watch “several” of his father’s “cartridges all in a row” (686-687), each one “loaded in the cueing slots and waiting to drop, in order, and be digitally decoded” (689). He is alone in one of ETA’s communal viewing rooms when he starts watching the cartridges but notes specifically that two ETA students “come in uninvited,” and when one asks what they’re watching, Hal, clearly annoyed, “looks over at her very slowly” and points to the “cartridge’s 50-point title” onscreen, “trickling redly over the credits” (701). Hal also states clearly that he came to the viewing room to be alone (702), after which two more students enter uninvited (702), followed eventually by another three, all of them watching raptly, until “Hal’s the only person in the room who isn’t 100% absorbed” (704). That he is not completely absorbed is misleading, since he is perhaps more absorbed than anyone else in the room, though in a different way. While watching what amounts to approximately nine cartridges—the entirety of some and parts of others, recalling Chamberlain’s argument about
asynchronous viewing, made possible for the first time in the novel by InterLace—and planning to watch at least an additional two, Hal maintains a continuous internal commentary about his father's films. He speculates about the effect of so much viewing—detailed above—but he also critiques his father's artistic choices. For instance, one film's "clear internal-conflict moment, one of Himself's films' very few" (688), and "certain dark points when abstract-theory issues seemed to provide" Incandenza with "an escape from the far more wrenching creative work of making humanly true or entertaining cartridges" (703). Hal is alert almost exclusively to these sorts of humanly true moments or lack thereof only when they coincide with his crippling bouts of anhedonia, and it is significant that he does not leave the viewing room despite his mood and what appears to be a distinct lack of enthusiasm for what he is watching. Significant too is the fact that he is not alone even though he wants desperately to be alone, audibly whimpering as the other students filter slowly into the room (702), which company does nothing to deter his intention to sit for hours and watch.

Later in the novel, during another series of internal existential crises, Hal lies immobile "on the carpet of Viewing Room 5" (897) and experiences a form of panic so severe it's "endocrinal, paralyzing" (896), wondering how "people could actually care deeply about a subject or pursuit." It seems to him "a kind of black miracle" that they "could go on caring this way for years on end," which he feels is "admirable and at the same time pathetic" (900). Perhaps because he wants to escape somehow, Hal asks a friend to retrieve a specific cartridge for him; but the only scene he is interested in turns out to be one in which an academic reads a bizarre monologue about "the absence of death as teleologic end" and the idea that we are "little more than the hallucinations of God," after which the academic weeps and looks skyward "so that tears run down [his] gaunt face" (911). Shortly after,
back in his own bedroom, Hal again lies immobile on the floor. "From my horizontal position," he says, "I could use the TP's remote to do everything but actually remove and insert cartridges into the drive's dock" (947). His bedroom's TP apparently is incapable of cueing cartridges the way the viewing room's TP's do, but "With our subscription system," Hal explains, "E.T.A. got numerous large-market Spontaneous tracks," which he continues to watch while recalling horrific family incidents—his mother's numerous, sometimes incestuous affairs, for example (957), and another of Orin's deliberate attempts to hurt Mario (953). There is an odd sense that Hal is both in control of his viewing and not, rather the way he seems most vividly, if tragically, alive inside at the exact moment he begins to lose control of his face and speech. He is in control of what he watches and for how long, but he cannot control the way it affects him and he remains largely unaware of his own habits.

Ultimately, InterLace appears to inspire paralysis and a deep sense of unease. Erdedy plans to watch tremendous amounts of television while consuming tremendous amounts of marijuana, which at first glance appears (somewhat) harmless, while in reality he is in fact unable to watch without indulging his addiction. Gately seems a child in front of the set, deliberately choosing children's programs over more demanding content, and, like Erdedy, he is most often intoxicated when he does watch. Joelle's "retreat into broadcast sound" (220) and the clear metaphorical over- and undertones of her character suggest that she represents both the attractive and repulsive nature of too much television. Hal's viewing coincides with feelings of severe depression, and while his extensive viewing is intended to be a distraction, it serves only to propel him deeper into crippling psychological pain. These might be some of Infinite Jest's rather extreme examples of viewers' relationship with television but a close look at even minor
examples are fraught with many of the same issues. Characters are saturated with media, using it to relate to the world and connect with others—Gately can still summon large verbatim chunks of dialogue, and Hal seems able to discuss terrible internal conflicts only by viewing them through the lens of what he sees onscreen. That no one seems happy while they watch is perhaps the last word in *Infinite Jest*; if not, then certainly it's that people are only happy watching something entertaining enough to kill.

"*Infinite Jest,*" Joelle, and InterLace stand as distinct metaphorical representations of the addictive nature of television and entertainment. The film functions an instance of entertainment so pleasurable it proves lethal; Joelle's role in the novel helps to explain the seductive appeal of such extreme pleasure; and InterLace is the advanced technological platform that permits this pleasure by making it available in a series of endless, viewer-directed doses. Yet they are most dangerous when they become one. There is an interesting dynamic here: it is difficult to find a copy of the film even though it exists on a medium to which every character in the novel has convenient access. Thus characters that have not seen the film are still very much at the film's mercy. The very possibility of "*Infinite Jest*"—right there, at home, on their InterLace teleputers—is woven into the fabric of television and entertainment. And readers need only recall the medical attaché, who trusts so completely in the harmlessness of the unnamed cartridge delivered to his door, to realize that viewers' habits already suggest how this possibility might become a frightening reality.

But this reality is not necessarily a given. Wallace carefully planted various antidotes to the crippling effects of addictive entertainment in *Infinite Jest,* and they are complexly intertwined with the nature entertainment itself. I will
untangle them in "Infinite," where I conclude that the novel, too, is perhaps a kind of antidote.
Chapter 3: Within a Towering Shadow

I moved to Canberra from San Diego, California, shortly after graduating from the University of San Diego in 2005. I began writing my MA thesis, *Truth in jest: Irony and Emotion in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest*, at the Australian National University in 2006 and received my degree with First Class Honors in 2007. The MA comprised a mini-exegesis and the novella *An Appointment with Dr. Butchell*.

Funnily enough, I didn’t know what I was going to write my MA about until a few months before I began the program, when I happened to read *Infinite Jest*. It had been sitting on my shelf, untouched, in San Diego. I asked my parents to lug it to Australia on their next visit, which they did, and I have been grateful to them ever since. I found more in the novel than a subject for my MA.

*Infinite Jest* is to me the truest account of U.S. life and culture—the weird blend of tremendous personal freedom characterized by a kind of directionless longing for something unnamable; the pleasure and despair in certain forms of commercial art and entertainment; the aspects of adult life that can, as Wallace so beautifully put it, make it difficult “to live and glow despite the time’s darkness.” It would be unfair to say that everyone feels this way about contemporary culture, and I certainly don’t feel it to the extremes Wallace did. Nevertheless, when I return to the U.S. for a visit I sometimes can’t help but feel as though I’ve been

dropped into something overwhelming. I am daily forced to absorb "five hundred thousand discrete bits of information" from U.S. culture and entertainment, "of which," Wallace calculates, "maybe twenty-five are important."139 His fiction and nonfiction—especially \textit{Infinite Jest} and the surreal experience of a state fair and a luxury cruise ship in "Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All"140 and "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"141—help me to make sense of this information overload.

Wallace's work also resonates with me because I am interested in television and pop culture, addiction and recovery (addicts make for compelling characters, I think), the relationship between fathers and sons. He has had an exceptional impact me, and his influence is clearly visible in my life and academic pursuits.

I am not unique in the latter. People who write \textit{about} Wallace tend also to write \textit{like} Wallace. This is intentional, at least most of the time. David Hering, for example, begins his preface to \textit{Consider David Foster Wallace} with "And but so,"142 a phrase practically trademarked by Wallace, and concludes by saying he chose specifically "critical analysis that, in the spirit of Wallace's own criticism, is lucid, readable ... and avoids the 'obscurity and pretension' in certain variants of academic criticism that Wallace so disparaged".143 Further, to his "delight as an editor, the essays ... are all examples of how to construct a rigorous and well-argued academic analysis without sinking into turgidity of language or jargon."144 I submit that academic criticism sounds the way it does for a reason—certain types

\begin{itemize}
  \item [139] David Lipsky, \textit{Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself}, p.38.
  \item [140] David Foster Wallace, \textit{A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again}, pp. 83-137.
  \item [141] Ibid., pp. 256-353.
  \item [142] David Hering, "Editor's Preface," \textit{Consider David Foster Wallace}, p. 9.
  \item [143] Ibid., p. 11.
  \item [144] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
of language and jargon in fact make for convenient reading—but I also agree that it need not be dense and dull and impenetrable and boring. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, editors of *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, apparently agree. Their editors' introduction to the collection reads remarkably like Wallace's own editor's introduction to the 2007 edition of *The Best American Essays*. It is less line-to-line correspondence than general impression, this similarity to Wallace, and it permeates much of the available criticism of his fiction and nonfiction.

There is no anxiety in this influence, and I admit to a certain desire, by turns conscious and unconscious, to write like him too. I used to notice Wallacian idiosyncrasies in my work whenever I'd been reading him exclusively. But artists and critics who value what they do will not copy; they struggle instead to walk the line between *influenced by* and *imitation of*. This middle ground, if they walk it successfully, is where they locate their own unique voice. I've been writing seriously for several years now and only recently did I discover mine. The difference in prose is one of many between *Infinite Jest* and my novel, *Slow Progress North*. *Infinite Jest* is sprawling, my novel is compact; *Infinite Jest* features a cast roughly of 100 characters, mine features perhaps twelve, of which only one is a distinct protagonist; *Infinite Jest* is fractured, leaping between time and place, my novel is mostly linear, set almost entirely in San Diego.

*Slow Progress North* is about James North, twenty-five years old. When his mother, Sarah, dies after a battle with cancer, James is summoned to a law office in downtown San Diego, California, for a reading of her will. His estranged father, Richard, is also present. James is given two stacks of letters—proof his parents' relationship did not end after their divorce but continued, unbeknownst to him, for

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fifteen years. During the course of the novel James comes slowly to understand the history of his parents' marriage, and what it means to/for him. Like the Incandenza's, the members of the North family are somewhat closed, unable, quite often, to communicate effectively and express what lives inside them.

Thematically, however, my novel shares *Infinite Jest*'s concern with television and individuals' relationship with it. But there is a paradox about how best to represent television in fiction.

I agree with Wallace; television is deeply embedded in our culture and we cannot imagine life without it. So deeply embedded, in fact, we seem no longer even to notice it; let alone think deeply about it. The paradox, then, is how to speak about television without speaking about television. If I try, in fiction, to make readers pay more attention to it than they do in personal, daily life, then my novel will seem untrue. Worse, it might come off as paranoid or cynical or worst of all boring. Yet too little about television will do nothing to alert readers to the nastier aspects of viewers' relationship with it. Wallace's solution to this problem is "Infinite Jest" and InterLace. In other words, parodies that work because they are plausible (doubly plausible now because some of them are accurate), or else so far fetched readers treat them as thought experiments, purely hypothetical, from which they can nonetheless extract real truth.

I faced a sort of sub-paradox. In my novel I am less interested in addictive viewing than I am in television as a near-constant presence in viewers' homes and the public spaces they frequent. But the essential problem remains the same, a problem I too solved by creating a kind of extreme defense: James's father, Richard North, was tremendously successful in the advertising industry, and he used James as a kind of one-child focus group. He forced his son to watch commercials and asked him about what he saw. James, as an adult, is unable to watch exclusively to
be entertained, sensitive to television's influence and psychology. James and his father permit me, in other words, to discuss television in what appears to be a vacuum while at the same time alerting readers to certain of its detrimental effects. I am able also to dramatize these effects by representing them metaphorically in James's personal life—that his posture while watching television is at one point almost identical to his father's, for instance, which is revealing in terms of both viewing habits and similarities in their personalities. Viewers must watch closely and think critically about what they see in order to understand the psychology of television and its effects on their own psychology as viewers.

This psychology most often takes the form of commercials in *Slow Progress North*, which seem to me like little microcosms of television's general practice and purpose. Commercials tend to mimic the shows they interrupt, and as such they are captivating snapshots of what precisely can make television so alluring and detrimental to viewers. James, like Hal, is able to watch analytically, and while he never quite watches the way Gately and Erdedy do—childishly enthralled—he does just as often watch as if paralyzed, even when he is not particularly interested in what he is watching. He sits for hours, as the statistics suggest most of viewers do, simply to watch whatever happens to be on. And since James, like many of the characters in *Infinite Jest*, tends to regard television as a form of communication from which he might unconsciously absorb discrete lessons, its influence on him is revealed throughout the novel.

Like *Infinite Jest*, however, *Slow Progress North* is not entirely about television and entertainment. It would hardly be dramatic to write about a bunch of characters that watch television for hours on end. My novel is also a story about people—what they feel, how they communicate, the way they choose to live—who share meaningful connections with one another. James gets up, goes to work,
comes home, all the while trying somehow to deal with the personal issues that exert terrible force over his life, or else trying, like all of us, simply to live.

To that extent, the plot and theme in *Slow Progress North* are designed to depict these efforts. Alcohol looms large in James's life: like Hal, he is the son of an alcoholic; and like Incandenza's addiction, Richard North's has severely corrosive effects on both his career and his family. Substance abuse in *Slow Progress North*, however, is not identified with entertainment the way it is in *Infinite Jest*. In Wallace's novel, drugs are a synecdoche for the destructive cycle of addictive viewing. True, Richard and James consume alcohol excessively while they watch television, but Richard does so thanks mostly to his addiction, while James drinks in order to manage his grief. The death of his mother proves debilitating, and the history of his parents' relationship, revealed in their letters to each other, drives him further into confusion, despair, and anger. His job at You Co., a small self-help company, permits him in some ways to understand these feelings, but he also relies heavily on his girlfriend, Kristen, who is no stranger to a certain kind of mental and physical disorder.

My thesis as a whole is deeply informed by *Infinite Jest*. I began the exegesis with the idea that I would focus on television and entertainment in Wallace's novel. I wanted to expand on current scholarship by looking to media theory. I have concluded, thanks to my research, and also to simple, direct observation, that television is still a fundamental part of mass culture, both in the U.S. and in Australia. This belief led naturally to the artistic impulse to depict viewers' relationship them in my own novel. Wallace's influence is undoubtedly visible in my fiction, but I believe *Slow Progress North* is unique. As such, the novel should speak for itself. It must stand or fall on its own merits.
One final note: *Infinite Jest* is sometimes a very funny book, laugh-out-loud-funny, as many of the early reviews pointed out. Scholars and readers, too, speak often about the humor in it. But it would be tough to argue that it is a happy book—many of the characters are worse off by the end of the novel, and those few that aren't don't exactly have bright futures. Wallace himself “wanted it to be extraordinarily sad.”\(^{146}\) *Slow Progress North* might at times be depressing and sad, but I have tried to inject it with a certain amount of optimism and hope.

Conclusion:

Infinite

Burn wisely argues that Wallace "deliberately built a degree of ambiguity into the plot of his novel."\textsuperscript{147} Hal's devolution, for instance, is impossible to explain. One theory is he did in fact ingest the incredibly potent DMZ. Toward the end of the novel, moments before he lies paralyzed on the viewing room's floor, he says:

\begin{quote}
I was moving down the damp hall when it hit. I don't know where it came from. It was some variant of the telescopically self-conscious panic that can be so devastating during a match. I'd never felt quite this way off-court before. It wasn't wholly unpleasant ... Everything came at too many frames per second. Everything had too many aspects. But it wasn't disorienting. The intensity wasn't unmanageable. It was just intense and vivid. It wasn't like being high, but it was still very: \textit{lucid}. The world seemed suddenly almost edible, there for the ingesting (896).
\end{quote}

These feelings resemble DMZ's effect on the brain, but the references to \textit{damp} and \textit{edible} echo the novel's beginning, which is chronologically the end of the novel, and narrated by Hal. During his college interview, he claims, "I cannot make myself understood now ... Call it something I ate" (10). This statement is followed immediately by a memory from his childhood, which Orin corroborates (1042, fn. 234), when Hal ate mold from the "the damp basement" (11). The mold is "darkly

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., p. 38.
green ... with parasitic fungal points of yellow, orange, red” (10), and the DMZ is “an obscure mold that grows only on other molds” (170). However, he also tells a friend that his plan to take it is “definitely off,” thanks to a looming E.T.A.-ordered drug test (908). He must be drug-free for thirty days to pass the test, but no other plans to take the DMZ are made.

Another theory involves the possibility that Hal’s decision to stop smoking marijuana results in his psychological collapse. He tells Mario that “It’s been like forty hours without Bob Hope [marijuana] and already I’m bats inside and I can’t sleep without more of the horror-show dreams ... I feel a hole. It’s going to be a huge hole, in a month. A way more than Hal-sized hole ... And the hole’s going to get a little bigger every day until I fly apart in different directions” (785). However, as Stephen Burn points out, the first and only time Hal smokes marijuana in public is also the first time he “feels at his own face to see whether he is wincing” (342). In other words, Burn argues, it is “Hal’s loss of control over his addiction” and not his decision to quit that “is carefully timed to coincide with his loss of control over the expressions that should be most personal to him”.148 Hal’s inability to communicate—verbally or facially—“is presumably intended as a literal manifestation of the disintegration of the last of his inner core of self,”149 which further accords with his fall into anhedonia at the end of the novel, meaning psychotic depression could just as easily explain Hal’s behavior.

A final explanation involves the possibility of Hal watching “Infinite Jest.” Burn presents an especially compelling case for this argument by reminding us that the Canadian terrorists believe the master copy of the film is hidden inside Incandenza’s head. And since “the final time the reader sees Hal he is on the verge

148 Stephen Burn, *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest*, p. 50.
149 Ibid.
of being captured"¹⁵⁰ by the terrorsits, it is quite possible they force him to reveal the location of Incandenza's grave, which in turn explains why Hal himself recollects Canadian "John N.R. Wayne ... standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (17). The question, then, is whether Hal is also forced to watch the film. But the novel withholds vital information in some places and complicates it in others—Gately, in just one example, appears to dream about the incident before it happens (934), which undermines the entire theory.

This kind of ambiguity clouds many of the novel's most compelling questions. Readers cannot, for instance, decide definitively whether Joelle is disfigured. Yet what remains hidden behind her veil seems also to be more significant than simple aesthetics—Joelle is at once a visible object, an auditory object, and an obliquely edible object, given that DMZ is also called Madame Psychosis. And whether the novel's characters see, hear, or ingest her, the results are the same: paralysis combined with an uncontrollable need somehow to consume her, always. Gately's fate, intrinsically tied both to Joelle's and the Incandezas', also remains unclear. The novel ends with Gately "flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand" (981), which Boswell posits is either a recollection of the "beginning of his sobriety" or "the beginning of his recovery from his wounds."¹⁵¹ Both, however, are inconclusive. If it is a memory, what happens next? And if he has in fact been released from the hospital, how did he get there and where are the other characters? Is the novel one long dream or hallucination, or did Gately dream/hallucinate only about himself? Gately's arc "ends" Infinite Jest, but the real ending occurs at the book's beginning, with Hal at his college interview. But what happened during the intervening year?

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 37.
This is a convenient way to discuss the novel as both entertainment and anti-entertainment, exploration of addictive viewing and antidote to same. Boswell contends that commercial entertainment is "soothing," that it "concludes, solves problems, offers self-forgetting," while "nonentertainment [sic]," or complicated entertainment like *Infinite Jest*, "unsettles, remains incomplete, remains static."^{152} Wallace, he argues, wants "to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort."^{153} Is this why Incandenza considers most of his entertainments to be failures, why Wallace's working title for *Infinite Jest* was *A Failed Entertainment*? If so, the novel is both a failure and a success—it is addictively compelling despite its complexity, satisfying in that it progresses toward a resolution but frustrating in that never quite resolves itself. Like InterLace and the eponymous film, though, it lures, tantalizes, compels readers to read just one more page. Partly it's a matter of the novel's nagging questions and the pursuit for clues that might provide answers to them; partly it is the novel's structure, which requires the reader to be always alert and engaged, both physically, flipping between the endnotes and the main text, and mentally, working constantly to reveal deeply connected layers of plot and theme. Even Incandenza's filmography turns out to function not as a tedious, exhaustive account of each film's cast and crew but as a discrete, surprisingly comprehensive summary of the novel itself. We find *Insubstantial Country*, in which a filmmaker "either suffers a temporal lobe seizure and becomes mute or else is the victim of everyone else's delusion that his ... temporal lobe seizure has left him mute" (992, fn. 24); *It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him*, in which "A father ... suffering from the delusion that his

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^{152} Ibid., p. 175.

^{153} Wallace, in ibid., p. 119.
etymologically precocious son ... is pretending to be mute, poses as a 'professional conversationalist' in order to draw the boy out" (992-993, fn. 24); The Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass, in which a man "discovers that he is brittle, hollow, and transparent to others, and becomes either transcendentally enlightened or schizophrenic" (989, fn. 24). The filmography is addictive in its own right, and further impels readers to scour the novel in hopes of finding clues that might lead to further insights about the novel.

True, we see the corrosive effects of various kinds of entertainment on characters who consume tremendous, sometimes lethal amounts of it—in its guise either as InterLace or 'Infinite Jest'—but we are most often prompted to wonder about the nature of entertainment itself. Drugs are tied directly to television, either in their effects or their street-names, be it Madame Psychosis or Bob Hope; professional tennis is referred to as The Show; and psychological crises often coincide specifically with significant periods of extensive viewing or prolonged meditations on the nature of entertainment, which in turn serve to highlight and deepen these crises. Everything in the novel is viewed through this lens of addictive viewing.

But what does the novel offer as an antidote, a possible method for recovery?

When Incandenza’s wraith explains the purpose of "Infinite Jest" to Gately—to halt his youngest son’s descent into silence and substance abuse and anhedonia—we cannot help but ask why he chose to appear to Gately instead of Hal. If the purpose of the film is, in a very real sense, to save his son, why does Incandenza not converse with Hal instead? The novel withholds a resolution to this question too, but circumstantial evidence toward the end of the novel might help us to answer it. Both Hal and Gately are effectively mute by the end of the novel,
but Hal’s psychological descent does not permit escape. His inability to control his face and speech are presented as the result of something crucial collapsing inside him, something that has not been rebuilt a year later, after the events of the novel proper. Nor does he approach anything like an attempt to repair this severe psychological imbalance. He asserts during his college interview, “I am in here,” and indeed he is: the collapse is complete and he is trapped inside himself, disconnected from the world around him.

Gately, on the other hand, fights actively to escape his silence. He wrestles against intubation whenever he is conscious enough to be aware of the tube in his throat; he tries to speak to his visitors, and when he remembers that speech is impossible he hopes to communicate with eye contact and a series of grunts and a limited range of facial expressions; he tries to express his affection for Joelle and to comfort her; and he is able, somehow, to communicate mentally with Incandenza’s wraith. Most telling of all, though, he struggles mightily to tell his doctors not to give him painkillers, despite the bullet-wound in his shoulder, not to give him painkillers under any circumstance—he is a drug addict, and the tiniest drop of morphine or Demerol will likely induce a relapse. In short, he is especially receptive to communication, and Incandenza, who admits he tried for most of his life simply to be heard, chose his audience well.

Gately is also a symbol of recovery, both because he is 421 days sober and because he wants so badly to be rehabilitated in the hospital. In this he functions like Joelle, but Joelle is metaphoric of recovery from the crippling effects of addictive entertainment. She is repeatedly identified with myth and religion—veil, biblical references, paralyzing goddess- and/or Gorgon-like beauty—and if we accept that the mythical-religious symbolism in *Infinite Jest* can be representative of addictive entertainment then we must also accept that it can be representative
of an antidote to same. The Actaeon simile, for instance, serves to alert readers to the peculiar lethality of "Infinite Jest"; i.e., Joelle as both the ravishing personification of absolute beauty and proof that absolute beauty deforms, which, in the context of entertainment, is shorthand for the possibility that habitual viewing leads to addiction and "death." As Madame Psychosis, it is her biblical language at the start Sixty Minutes More Or Less that Mario, the only ETA resident who cares deeply about "really real stuff," finds so terribly compelling. When Gately, lying shoulder-shot in Joelle's lap, is about to lose consciousness, one cannot help but feel that he will be OK, that he will recover, when she leans over him and says "And Lo." And in "Infinite Jest," in which she plays a version of Death as the mother who kills you and apologizes for the murder in the your next life, it is important to recognize that she does not kill in the film. She is the viewer's next life's mother, bent over the crib, apologizing for what is about to happen, giving the viewer one last chance to escape before he become so totally addicted to her that it kills him.

This addictive, perhaps lethal, entertainment does not reach its height in "Infinite Jest," though, nor in InterLace. Rather, it is the combination of the two that proves to be especially dangerous. For viewers come to depend as thoroughly upon the device that provides entertainment as they do upon the entertainment itself. It is no coincidence that TV describes both the activity and the set. We use the term literally and figuratively, as in "I don't watch a lot of TV" or "What's on TV tonight?" The characters in Infinite Jest, and the imagined technological advances in viewing pleasure in the novel, conceptualize television and entertainment as a form of communication, albeit a dangerous and debased one. The lesson, perhaps, is that any form communication is better than none, though viewers would do well to attend closely to the kinds in which they engage. Infinite Jest might not offer a
concrete way to do this, other than to think carefully about how it might be done. But that might just be enough to wake readers up to the cycle of endless entertainment in which we seem so deeply immersed.

What we are ultimately approaching, then, is a question of personal morality. Wallace told David Lipsky in *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself* that television, "as a technology system," is "amoral." It does not in fact "have a responsibility to care about us one whit more than it does: It's got a job to do. The moral job is ours." And though he believes television is "not bad or a waste of your time," he does admit: "I'll zone out in front of the TV for five or six hours, and then I feel depressed and empty. And I wonder why." We see the novel's characters do this, and though they do not understand why, perhaps, after reading *Infinite Jest*, we do.

The film "*Infinite Jest*" really is a failed entertainment—it is so perfectly entertaining that it destroys viewers. *Infinite Jest*, on the other hand, manages to be compelling and nurturing at the same time, the kind of redemptive art that instructs without preaching, alerts without frightening, appeals to millions while seeming somehow to appeal only to the individual holding the book in her hands. "We sit around and bitch about how TV has ruined the audience for reading," Wallace said, "when really all it's done is given us the really precious gift of making our job harder." *Infinite Jest* rewards the readers who put the work into accessing its pleasures, and it changes them. It is successful not because it converts the pro-TV crowd or turns viewers into readers; it is successful because it asks us

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154 David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, p. 84.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid., p. 71.
to consider how much we watch, and why. After reading it, you do become acutely aware of your own emotional response to what you see and how long you are willing to sit for it. And even though television concludes and soothes, it does not change; the programs repeat, and new shows too will come to seem like reruns of what you have been watching for hours or days or years. You will, eventually, long for something substantial, something intimate, something complexly fascinating. At which point you will turn to the novel, and you will realize, despite many of its literal and thematic jests, it is, in truth, infinite.
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