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The Man who Put his Head in a Microwave Oven: A Look at James Incandenza from Infinite Jest

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**The Man who Put his Head in a Microwave Oven:
A look at James Incandenza from *Infinite Jest***

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

by

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May 2018

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Illustration by
David C. Jensen

Introduction

On April 1 of the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment (YDAU), a Saudi-Canadian medical attaché opens a suspiciously alluring envelope with a mordant smiley face on it. Instead of a return address there is an anachronistic “*HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!*” message: the attaché’s wedding anniversary is not April 1; a sarcastic April Fool’s joke, perhaps? The cryptic padded mailer contains a “standard black entertainment cartridge” (*Infinite Jest* 36), not unlike the VHS-format cassette tapes piled next to the TV set of the average household of the mid-1990s, the decade that saw the publication of *Infinite Jest*. The novel satirizes the addictions and infantilism of the entertainment-obsessed postindustrial generation that lived through the rise of multiple-channel cable TV, the escapism toward the shopping-mall multiplex, and the omnipresence of information technology and data. Like the film-within-the-novel that propels and interconnects the complex layers of the storyline, the new mass behaviors of millennial America were a weapon of self-destruction waiting to be deployed—death by vacuous entertainment.

Snug in his Boston home, the medical attaché starts watching the cartridge. It is 19:27h.

* * *

The fact that author David Foster Wallace failed to predict the transition from “cartridges” to digital playback is of no consequence compared to the novel’s prescience about the way in which a technology-driven society fractured the previous generations’ once-sacred interpersonal relations that provided a sense of belongingness and purpose. *Infinite Jest* is at once a self-consciously postmodern sci-fi parody that reflects on its own obsessively-crafted literary status, a dysfunctional-family drama, and a genuine coming-

of-age story about how to deal with those uncomfortable things we don't like to talk about, even if they form the basis of what it means to be human. It is this last part that perhaps most closely reflects the direction that Wallace's career-long project aimed to take—the attempt to overcome the double-entendre irony and cynicism of postmodern fiction that, despite its literary and aesthetic merits, seemed to distance the reader from whatever the author was trying to say. Even if Wallace's own writing got mired in recursive self-references, it formed a clearly-defined blueprint for what he saw as the next step in fiction: a type of storytelling that transcended the cynicism and pessimism of postmodern fiction; or perhaps a return to 19th century Realism, or to grand Victorian narratives in which human hopes and fears (sentimental and almost naïve preoccupations, yet *real*) were portrayed with earnestness.

The myriad plot turns and tonal shifts of *Infinite Jest*, revolving around its main storylines set in Boston-area Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) and Ennet House for recovering addicts, are interlinked by a comically absurd search for the eponymous film and a parallel conversation on an Arizona outcropping about the philosophical and sociopolitical implications of the weapon-like deployment of it. So entertaining that once a viewer starts watching it he simply cannot stop, 'Infinite Jest'¹—throughout the novel it is usually simply referred to as the 'Entertainment'—serves both as a device that drives the plot and as satirical symbol of Wallace's pronouncement on all he thought was wrong with modern American society, and where it was headed. The absurdity of a movie that kills its viewers, and the largely unexplained plot details of it, are conspicuously strategic.

According to Hal Incandenza (the novel's co-hero and the youngest of the Incandenzas), the academic film community had described his father James as

“technically gifted but narratively dull and plotless and static and not entertaining enough” (911). Apparently one of Wallace’s self-deprecating meta-references, this appraisal is at odds with the supposed irresistibility of the Entertainment’s fun factor. The fact that there is something hopelessly addictive about the movie works as a narrative platform from which Wallace launches on a psychological and political exploration of the “inner infant” at the core of humanity, underscored by the advent of the 21st century in all its fragmentary, divisive, and chaotic messiness.

This brings me back to Wallace’s concern with sincerity of human representation in fiction. For all its pyrotechnics and eruditeness, a signature style of Wallace’s literature (cumbersomely tagged as ‘post-postmodern’), is self-aware sincerity. Like that required of the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the novel, irony-free sincerity is the underlying motive of a big portion of *IJ*. But Wallace comes at it in an analytical and self-reflexive roundabout way: he employs irony self-consciously in order to finally subvert it. Along the way, he interweaves a type of self-analysis between ever-expanding narrative strands that spiral out and partially converge around the Entertainment—the brainchild of James Incandenza.

Part of the grandeur of the novel is its ingenious, plot-driven meta-commentary on what the novel itself is attempting to do, which is both a postmodern move and a step beyond it; it is Wallace’s self-conscious this-is-me-being-aware-of-my-own-turn-against-postmodern-irony authorial comment. An emphasis on this overarching position will be the concern of this essay.

Although Incandenza commits suicide on April 1 of the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar (2004), five years before the time when most of the present-day narrative takes

place, his presence looms intensely over the whole novel: not only does he make the movie that constitutes the central cohesive source of *IJ*, unifying what might otherwise seem disparate plotlines; he also represents both the performative process and the impetus of Wallace's post-ironic literary project that engendered the novel.

The sum of everything that establishes James Incandenza as a character and a literary driving force in *IJ* represents Wallace's own design for the novel itself. It illustrates his self-consciously analytical turn away from irony and cynicism and into a more charitable mimetic representation of authentic human emotion—people being people, slowly overcoming their own defense mechanisms that distance them from others. These include irony, intentional equivocations, and innuendos, which became fashionable tropes in post-WWII fiction and in society in general. This analysis will emphasize the relationship between specific plot elements of the novel and Wallace's motivation for writing it; that relationship constitutes the aspects of *IJ* that enact the author's ethical considerations about fiction.

The plot dramatizes Wallace's design and allows the reader temporary glimpses into its roadmap, similarly to a behind-the-scenes look at a movie director working with his actors. The approach I will use for this reading of James Incandenza consists of an analysis of two fundamental backstory scenes, set in the 1960s, with young Incandenza and his father, and a close look at Incandenza Jr.'s posthumous movie 'Infinite Jest,' the novel's strongest symbol of the infantile pursuit of pleasure in millennial America. A sample review of secondary literature will be required first to contextualize this essay and limit its scope, as well as a thorough look at Wallace's literary aesthetics and ethical

preoccupations, with the purpose of understanding the motivation and purpose behind the novel.

I will attempt to reconstruct and interpret the elusive ‘Infinite Jest’; as Incandenza’s final product whose cryptic message originates in the filmmaker’s broken upbringing and damaged relationship with his own family, the movie points beyond the novel to the world of the reader and serves as Wallace’s mirrored evaluation of the purpose and moral considerations on literary fiction, itself part of American culture. By analyzing primarily Incandenza’s relationship with his father in the two 1960s scenes, I intend to provide a missing component in previous *IJ* scholarship toward the elucidation of Incandenza as Wallace’s self-actuating literary device.

* * *

Soon after midnight, the medical attaché is still watching the Entertainment, with a grotesque hilarity impressed on his face: he has put it on a “recursive loop” and has not even touched his TV dinner. Unable to turn away from the images flashing from the TV screen, he soils his pants. It is now 00:20h. (54)

PART I — The conversation: a review of the secondary literature

While the growing body of scholarship on Wallace and *IJ* has spawned a variety of analyses and interpretations almost as obsessive as the novel itself, the discourse has tended to focus on prominent themes that include technology, addiction, communication breakdown, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, solipsism, separatist politics, New World Order paranoia, terrorism, tennis and game theory, orthopedics and body deformities, and film criticism. The initial discussion understandably gravitated toward the novel's two main characters, who don't know of each other over the course of the nonlinear plotline, and only 'meet' implicitly: 17 year-old Hal Incandenza—a dictionary-memorizing prodigy and tennis sensation at E.T.A; and Don Gately, a 28 year-old recovering Demerol addict and Ennet House live-in staff member. But there is a fascinating side to the character of Dr. James Incandenza, not ignored, but explored to a lesser degree.

Serious academic studies on the novel's implications have proliferated particularly since 2003, the year in which the first book-length studies on Wallace and his work (by Marshall Boswell and Stephen Burn, separately) were published (Max 288). In "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace," Tom LeClair writes an in-depth analysis of three novels by authors he considered products of the Age of Information, and who are indebted to the postmodern legacy of Thomas Pynchon. Published in 1996—the same year as *IJ*²—the incisive critique was the first to be published in a peer-reviewed journal (Russell 167); it engendered much of the subsequent academic discourse. LeClair considers the meta-referential relationship between James Incandenza and his creator: "Wallace enters his narrative as a tall, lexically gifted, and etymology conscious 'wraith' [who] explains his

desire to give voices to ‘figurants,’ the mute, background characters of most literary fiction” (32).

Incandenza’s wraith reveals to Gately that through a “radical realist” approach, he “bloody well made sure that either the whole entertainment [the movie] was silent or else [...] that you could bloody well hear every single performer’s voice” (*IJ* 835), which, as a symbol of the approach for *IJ* itself, accounts for the novel’s polyphony of voices and stories that come and go, seldom converging toward a unified narrative (LeClair 32). He also notes that the brief synopses in Incandenza’s filmography—relegated to an endnote but incredibly important for a deeper understanding of Wallace’s intentions—“are seeds for larger narratives in the main text” (35).

LeClair therefore considers *IJ* a “metafictional allegory” of the postmodern literary aesthetic (33), in which part of what the author does is to reject—often also react to, or even *extend*—his modernist forebears. However, though he mentions that Wallace “imagines the alcoholic James O. Incandenza’s childhood with an overbearing father from whom a dominated mother could not rescue the unhappy boy” (*Ibid.*), LeClair does not examine closely how Incandenza’s biographical background, which Wallace provides in two key scenes, turn him into the man with the means and the motivation to make ‘Infinite Jest.’

Chris Hager’s undergraduate thesis of the same year situates the novel in French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s fragmented, non-linear postmodern world to defend the structure and style of what to early readers felt like an inconsiderate lack of plot resolution. But more pertinent to this essay, Hager (like LeClair) weighs in on the understanding of Incandenza as Wallace’s fictional analog by seeing a “circular dynamic

of authorship,” whereby Incandenza influences what happens to other characters. He suggests that Incandenza could be “an unmediated self-representation of the author” in a novel that is otherwise mediated by a heterogeneity of voices, narrative perspectives, and dozens of characters.

Fast forward to 2016, the year in which *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* published two penetrating pieces on *IJ* in the same volume. Christopher Bartlett looks at Wallace’s motivation to overcome the “deleterious effects of postmodern irony” and to write a novel that would break the distancing effect between author and reader (374). Echoing LeClair, who points out that in the course of *IJ* Wallace constantly “reminds readers that they are experiencing ‘mediated consciousness’” (LeClair 35), Bartlett maintains that *IJ* results in a “conversation-like novel” that “asks the reader to actively participate in the interaction” (374). Noting the “I’m sorry” scene in the eponymous movie (explored in this essay in Part VI), Bartlett argues that *IJ* is apologetic toward its readers like ‘Infinite Jest’ is apologetic toward its viewers (375). He also suggests that Incandenza’s development of annular fusion “represents the use of meta-irony” (375).

A process whose mechanics are devised by Incandenza in the novel’s backstory, annular fusion is a systematic process in which “waste is fed to waste” (379); Bartlett asserts that annular fusion is thus “a grand metaphor for trying to curtail irony or nihilism by using irony or nihilism to point out and then replace them, ultimately leaving a void, an expanse of uninhabitable area haunted by the return of that which was supposed to be repressed” (*Ibid.*).

Bartlett then posits that while Wallace “uses sincerity to reach his readers”—in contrast to Thompson, who views Wallace as manipulative (see below)—his character James Incandenza “uses a mask, hiding his true intentions” (384). The cycle worsens the problems of irony, he maintains (384). Yet, he adds that in a way similar to AA’s effort to “destroy the veil of irony and cynicism that perpetuates the annular cycle of shame and hiding” (385), Wallace employs a conversational approach to his narrative—of which the multiple endnotes are a significant part—to do the same thing AA does. Bartlett concludes by picturing Incandenza as the conduit between the novel and Wallace; like LeClair, he suggests that Incandenza’s films are “a self-critique on Wallace’s own artistic journey” (*Ibid.*).

The second 2016 *Critique* article on *IJ* concerns literary manipulation; Lucas Thompson proposes that although for Wallace “capital-R Realism” was a manipulative and “coercive genre,” the metafictional elements of Wallace’s own work make him a prime example of literary manipulation (360-361). But Thompson also admits that “we do not yet have a way of talking about the particular ways in which contemporary literary fiction can be judged to be manipulative” (362). He ultimately warns that while Wallace dramatizes his own fear of how he might be guilty of manipulating and misleading the reader, this should not put the reader’s mind at ease, for he might actually be achieving the very thing he self-consciously fears and attempts to avert (364). Thompson maintains, thus, that Wallace is “shrewdly manipulative,” since his gambit is to make an abstract claim and to “signal that he acknowledges how naively sentimental such a claim might appear,” so as to “forestall a particular line of criticism, by showing that he has beaten the

reader to the punch” (365). His main argument is that Wallace is being manipulative by trying to anticipate interpretation and criticism in the novel itself (366).

Also from 2016, Paul M. Curtis’ article for the journal *Mosaic* concerns the novel’s recurring theme of the double bind. For Wallace, Curtis says, the double bind is “a figure upon which to construct that plot of the novel. It is not so much *about* the double bind of addiction as an *enactment* of its curious logic as Wallace the addict plays the inside out” (39, emphasis original). Particularly since Wallace’s suicide in 2008, other analyses—including Eric Thomas’ essay on depression and suicide in *IJ*—have drawn parallels between the many afflicted characters of the novel and the author himself, who suffered many breakdowns, received electroconvulsive therapy, and consumed alcohol and marijuana while in graduate school (Thomas 283). Thomas, for instance, observes that it is “tempting to argue that Kate Gompert [a clinically depressed patient on suicide watch] serves as some kind of author-surrogate character” (*Ibid.*). Curtis concludes that “Wallace’s double bind, however, does not suffer from the very limits it probes. Rather, the double bind is liberating for Wallace and admits all topics, even excess, freely” (48).

Philip Sayers also explores the double bind, not only in the novel, but (like Thomas’s biographical focus) in relation to Wallace himself: noting Wallace’s fear that *IJ* might be reduced to the low level of popular TV and entertainment that he decried in his essay “E Unibus Pluram,” Sayers suggests that he may have felt trapped in a double bind: stuck between producing a novel as commercialized entertainment, or a work of art, but one that nonetheless demanded “too much of the reader without sufficient reward” (349).

N. Katherine Hayles’ essay (1999)³ looks at *IJ* and the process of annular fusion from an angle different than Bartlett’s: she considers the ecological implications of *IJ*’s

near-future setting, in which waste is recycled to produce energy, to posit that “predatory practices and ‘enraptured’ consumers are bound together with recursive cycles to create a complex system that is spinning out of control toward a socio-ecological catastrophe” (684). She considers how the cleaning program of President Gentle (a caricature-esque former Las Vegas lounge crooner) fails, and maintains that the uncleanliness, and “the sanctified and the polluted,” return in vicious cycles (687). In this respect, her argument seems to predate Bartlett’s conclusion.

Although Hayles notes that E.T.A. Head Coach and Athletic Director Gerhardt Schtitt’s tennis philosophy—like Gately’s struggle to remain drug-free—is to “cure the dysfunctionalities of autonomous selfhood” (694), and acknowledges the heritage of alcoholism among the Incandenzas (689), she does not recognize the life philosophy that Incandenza inherits from his father and passes on to his sons Orin and Hal, and to the E.T.A. students. This philosophy plays a crucial part in shaping the tennis mindset (almost a doctrine) depicted in the novel. Preached at E.T.A., this is Incandenza Sr.’s (Hal’s grandfather) philosophy of total physicality and complete presence, which I will explore in Part IV. An understanding of its inculcation in a young James Incandenza, which defines his character for the rest of his life, will be a primary concern of this essay.

According to Catherine Nichols, *IJ* “articulates the carnivalesque qualities of postmodern culture” (3); the many masks and deceitful personas that Wallace’s characters adopt are used to inquire into their identity and relationship to culture (9). Nichols concludes by looking at the transformations of Hal and Gately together; both characters progress “through the alienation denied by their carnivalesque masks to begin expressing themselves as vocal ‘figurants’ whose incoherent voices may eventually

coalesce into an audible, collective human hum capable of restoring dialogue to a decidedly monologic culture” (15). This sentiment captures Incandenza’s intention to give a ‘voice’ to the silent supporting characters of his movies, who symbolize the loss of community and companionship—and of the *self*—in the chaotic simultaneity of information near the new millennium.

More aligned toward the direction of this essay, for Nichols, the character of James Incandenza symbolizes “the propensity for postmodern irony to entrap rather than liberate,” which Incandenza, over the course of his life, works toward overcoming. It culminates in the making of ‘Infinite Jest.’

Iannis Goerlandt looks at irony in *IJ* and notes that a common thread throughout the novel is the “problems caused by ironic detachment and the inability to empathize” (314), a topic that is dramatized in Wallace’s fiction and made explicit in his nonfiction (which I will look at closely in Part II). Goerlandt notes, for instance, that at the E.T.A. screening of Mario’s remake of his father’s parodic film about the history of the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.)⁴, the students “detach themselves from their nation without actually changing anything about the condition in which they live” (312). This dramatizes the pernicious nature of irony.

On ‘Infinite Jest,’ Goerlandt notes that when the viewing of the movie is “accidental and not consciously chosen.” When the screening of the movie “is used as a weapon, the title is especially ironic: The jest of happiness becomes a mocking jest, one that hurts” (319). Finally, in the context of the novel’s ambiguous ending, he posits—like Thompson—that the structure “becomes a loop, making it into a structurally manipulated, enslaving text,” like the television that Wallace so heavily criticized (323).

Also looking at irony, David Rando considers how Wallace supposedly fails at *overcoming* irony (577). He observes how everyone in the Incandenza family is loveless, except for Mario, who enjoys the non-ironic behavior at Ennet House's AA meetings (*Ibid.*). Rando's conclusion is that although the failure of love to emerge and separate itself from irony "constitutes the affective drama of Wallace's work" (*Ibid.*), there is, ultimately "no return to a pre-ironic state" (591).

By developing the idea that Gately's fight against his addiction entails a "kind of repetitive, performative, bodily ritual" (192), Elizabeth Freudenthal differentiates her approach from that of other critics who have analyzed Wallace's depiction of the loss of the self in a capitalistic and shallow culture. She makes the point that "the novel uses compulsiveness to depict a continuous reestablishment of selfhood contingent on external material reality" (192), indicating that compulsiveness "links together the novel's family, halfway house, and political-economic plots" (195). Freudenthal observes the danger of pathological recursivity, which traps one "within the self rather than freeing one from it" (201), and the danger of the recursivity of "compulsive cogitation that renders people functionality static" (202). Examples of the latter are the novel's famous take on "analysis paralysis" (AA's term for "addictive-type thinking" that makes it seemingly impossible to make a decision [*IJ* 203]), and Hal's marijuana-induced meta-thinking, which keeps him from intervening at the violent Eschaton debacle that results in his Little Buddies being injured (*IJ* 457).

Philip Sayers provides an insightful study of the short synopses of Incandenza's films. He starts by differentiating entertainment, which 'Infinite Jest' symbolizes, from true art, of which *IJ* might be an example. While the former "gives a passive pleasure that

Wallace associates with substances and infancy,” the latter “is active and engaging” (348). Sayers notes that ekphrasis⁵ is particularly useful for a full understanding of *IJ*, “wherein the films described by Wallace for the most part exist only as fictional, verbal entities” (352). He deduces that what is interesting about Wallace’s ekphrases in *IJ* is that they call attention to the distinctive characteristics unique to film and to literature (or prose), respectively, as two different types of media (361).

More recently, Casey Michael Henry studies the epiphany as a trope in the work of Wallace (480), observing Joycean epiphanic structures in *IJ*. Remarking on the “holes and uncertainties” in *IJ*, he notes that there is a “simultaneous articulation and erasure of epiphany” (481). Like Bartlett and Hayles, he looks at Wallace’s annular structure for the novel (whereby the end is directly connected to the beginning) and the missing portion of the narrative between the latest events depicted in the novel (Hal’s final breakdown and Gately’s epiphany), which precede the chronologically ‘most recent’ scene in the Year of Glad (2010) that opens *IJ*, to suggest (like Freudenthal) that Wallace “indicates the breaking of personal bonds, the rupture of the waste-eating-waste circuit of paralytic thought that occurs just out of frame” (483). Henry points out that Wallace ultimately plants the seeds for Hal’s and Gately’s grand epiphanies, but that they turn out to be only implicit, unavailable to the reader in a concrete and direct way (496).

* * *

As I intend to demonstrate with this sample of academic literature on *IJ*, although the metafictional aspects of James Incandenza have been considered and woven into the broader discussion of the novel as a performative narrative, there has been less emphasis on the psychological impact that Incandenza undergoes as a child, at the hands of his

belittling father, in the novel's backstory. Neither LeClair nor Bartlett (as samples of scholarship over a 10-year span that has, to various degrees, included discussion on Incandenza), analyzes the character's relationship with his father in an effort to understand *how* he became the developer of annular fusion and the maker of 'Infinite Jest,' both of which are important self-referential devices that reflect Wallace's architectural design and aesthetic. My intention, then, is to continue this conversation and narrow this gap by analyzing the two scenes in *IJ* that dramatize James Incandenza's relationship with his father. The scope of my analysis is therefore limited to the biographical background of Incandenza and to 'Infinite Jest' (to the degree that it represents the character's culminating point, before his death), among a few other titles from his long filmography.

PART II — Wallace’s ethical considerations on fiction

A singular characteristic of David Foster Wallace is his preoccupation with the burden he felt he carried as the heir of his postmodern forebears. In a way, *IJ* is the culminating point of his ‘literary project’: a simultaneous continuation of, and a turn *against*⁶ the idiosyncratic tricks and self-conscious metafiction of the postmodernists.⁷ Born in 1962, Wallace was aware of himself as belonging to a generation that grew up watching TV not only as an occasional distraction or pastime but as a way of life. His penetrating commentary on the stranglehold that TV held on his generation constitutes a large portion of the sociological and philosophical backbone of *IJ*. As far back as 1988, when his essay “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young” was published, Wallace decried TV as a “low type of narrative art [...] that strives not to change or enlighten or broaden or reorient—not necessarily even to ‘entertain’—but merely and always to *engage, to appeal to,*” with the explicit objective of “*ensur[ing] continued watching*” (“Fictional Futures” 52, *emphases original*). With *IJ*, Wallace questions and mocks the American pursuit of pleasure not as a positive factor subsidiary to a way of life that prioritizes hard work or ethical values, but as a hedonistic end in itself (Burn 5).

But the fact that TV⁸ has always sought to entertain through lowest-common-denominator mass-appeal programming was no more news in 1988 than it is now; Wallace’s insight was the realization that by the mid-1980s the mass-consumption ascendancy of TV had hijacked the distinctive avant-garde literary innovations of postmodern fiction, specifically irony, irreverence, sarcasm, satire, cynicism, self-reference, and references to real-world pop culture that jar the reader’s consciousness by asserting the text as a fictional construct. All of these were once literary approaches

through which late-20th-century writers sought to understand and expose the many cultural standards, flaws, and patterns that influenced the shaping of identity. At its best, the mock treatment of postmodern fiction sought to unmask social incongruities and to expose the unfairness of the different hierarchies of the world. The fact that TV started to imitate that agenda wasn't the problem, though; the problem was that TV's appropriation of postmodern fiction's self-conscious irony locked TV itself, as a medium, into a vicious cycle perpetuated by the self-mockery, effiteness and artificiality that were in vogue. Consequently, TV was in danger of becoming a shallow form of entertainment—about itself and for itself, insofar as TV viewers dictate what they want to watch—whose standards could take the place of “all narrative art,” such as fiction (“Fictional Futures” 53).⁹

For any in-depth analysis of *IJ*, it has become standard practice to use Wallace's landmark 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram [‘from one, many’]: Television and U.S. Fiction”¹⁰ and Larry McCaffery's *Review of Contemporary Fiction* interview with the author (also from 1993), both as a reader's companion to the novel. Much like he does in *IJ*, Wallace observes in the essay the difficult-to-accept notion that postindustrial society has had to grapple with the fact that the very things we need the most are not only the hardest to get, but the hardest to *talk* about. In this respect, TV is particularly good: it doesn't give people what they really need but an inferior substitute; it reflects “what people want to see,” (“E Unibus” 22). And by deploying the self-conscious trickery of experimental fiction, like the proverbial pair of mirrors that endlessly reflect each other, it makes the viewer aware of his own watching.

As self-conscious individuals, we seem to erect walls of sarcasm and clever evasion and equivocation as an automatic attitude for self-defense; we would much rather hide behind the safety of inaction and ambiguity than risk revealing our deepest weaknesses, hopes, and fears. Small differences notwithstanding, we all yearn for and need the same fundamental things—belongingness, meaningfulness, emotional and physical fulfillment, and acceptance. The saddest part is that although we know this, we are too afraid to openly express it. This is at the heart of the most moving parts of *IJ*; it is also a significant part of the project that Wallace set for himself and for his generation: in the essay he declaratively calls for the new “*anti-rebel*” rebels, who “treat of old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction,” risking “accusation of sentimentality [and] melodrama” (“E Unibus” 81). The hypothetical anti-rebel rebels were to revolt against a) the hip trendiness of TV shows that break the fourth wall to make fun of themselves and call attention to the viewer’s own relationship with TV, and b) against the postmodern fiction writers whose highly erudite prose, no matter how funny, clever, and entertaining, appeared to be ultimately self-congratulatory and shallowly self-contained.¹¹

As Stephen J. Burn observes, Wallace’s career-long project was to make “the ethical implications of metafiction”¹² the essence of his work (16); what this implied for Wallace’s fiction was not a complete rejection of the postmodern aesthetic that preceded it, but rather the dramatization of this self-reflexive attitude toward a more ethical, and, ideally, *symbiotic* relationship between reader and writer (31). In this respect, as Marshall Boswell suggests (16), critic A.O. Scott is not splitting hairs about Wallace’s approach when he calls him “less anti-ironic than meta-ironic. That is, his gambit is to turn irony

back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness” (“The Panic of Influence”). *IJ* is meta-ironic insofar as the author subtly reveals, in the narrative itself, the degree to which he is aware of the ethical and stylistic goals of the novel. And this is what makes it fascinating: the novel comments on its own status as a dramatization and satire of the abyss into which U.S. culture was falling, the primary culprit being the cynical, anti-narrative maneuvers of post-WW II fiction, having been co-opted and made ubiquitous by TV.

Wallace’s incisive commentary points out that the new avant-garde aesthetic of TV—regular programming and advertising alike¹³—commandeered the daring tropes of postmodern fiction (the irony, the ridicule, the self-referential parody) and projected it all across U.S. culture; this augured “a great despair and stasis” (“E Unibus” 49) that had all of the bad and none of the good of the original metafiction, which “exploded conventions and employed irony to blast the naïve hypocrisy of mass culture” (Boswell 14). Besides, it jeopardized the purpose of contemporary fiction; fiction was the original medium that applied the aesthetic and stylistic innovations that now threatened to undermine its very purpose, and it was being seized by the more powerful medium of TV. Fiction’s purpose was to point *beyond* the page, beyond the novel or short story as a self-contained technology for the dispersion of data, and toward the feelings and emotions that make humans human, via genuine mimesis and sensible dramatization.

In a novel that largely reflects on TV and film, it is not surprising to find a host of inter-textual references to real-life shows, films, and actors. Let’s see how Wallace approaches this, with a specific example: early in the novel there is a section with the heading “HAL INCANDENZA’S FIRST EXTANT WRITTEN COMMENT ON

ANYTHING EVEN REMOTELY FILMIC” (140). Hal’s seventh-grade essay is reproduced verbatim to underscore the intertextuality between the plot and the data that has been supplied, or created, by specific characters. He compares a character from the 1968 show “Hawaii Five-O”—Steve McGarrett, to one from the 1980s show “Hill Street Blues”—Frank Furillo (both are police dramas). The short essay thrusts itself into our attention in a comically artificial way for two reasons: a) though relatively short, the essay is perspicacious, cogent, and elegantly organized for a 13 year-old, which shows Hal’s precocious intellect, inherited from his father; and b) at first glance, neither show is directly related to the plot of *IJ*, except for Hal’s insight about how each character, and the development of the ‘hero’ from the older show to the hero of the newer is “useful for seeing how our North American idea of the hero changed [from the 1970s to the 1980s]” (140). Since these are real-life shows and Wallace presumably represents them faithfully via Hal’s essay, this ‘essay scene’ shows a direct link between *IJ* itself as a novel and the real world of the late 20th century that produced it and gave it context. And it also represents the postmodern aesthetic that informs the philosophy of the author: this is Wallace being cleverly self-referential, but at the same time pointing toward the stylistic development that he will continue to seek throughout the novel’s 900-odd pages that follow.

Resisting the urge to quote the essay in full, I will just highlight a few illustrative points: Nineteen-sixties’ McGarrett “is a classically modern hero of action. He acts out. It is what he does. [...] The audience knows what the [police] case is and also knows, by the end of Act One, who is guilty. Because the audience knows the truth before Steve McGarrett does, there is no mystery, there is only Steve McGarrett” (141). So the essence

of the show's narrative, as far as the reality of the world of "Hawaii Five-O" is represented, revolves expressly around McGarrett, who "single-handedly acts to refashion *a truth the audience already knows* into an object of law, justice, modern heroism" (*Ibid.*, emphasis added).

On the other hand, for Hal, what makes 1980s' Furillo a postmodern hero is his sheer complexity as he struggles to adjust to a more pronounced post-industrial era of consumerism: he is a hero "whose virtues are suite to a more complex and corporate America. I.e., a hero of *reaction*" (*Ibid.*, emphasis original). Furillo is a more realistic and more imperfect figure, a bureaucrat whose ability to solve each criminal case depends on his relationships with those with whom he works. And things are never easy; he is "beset by petty distractions on all sides from the very beginning of Act One," juggling his responsibilities with the tribulations and uncertainties of real life, which include a host of "moral dilemmas and double binds" (*Ibid.*). The key difference between the characters is that Furillo, in his more contemporary role of postmodern hero, is

a virtuoso of triage and compromise and administration. [He] retains his sanity, composure, and superior grooming in the face of a barrage of distracting, unheroic demands that would have left Chief Steve McGarrett slumped, unkempt, and chewing his knuckle in administrative confusion. [...] The jut-jawed hero of action ('Hawaii Five-O') becomes the mild-eyed hero of reaction ('Hill Street Blues,' a decade later). (141-142)

It is important to note the relationship between the fictional essay and the novel that contains it, especially as *IJ* starts to move toward a conception of what the "postmodern hero" really is. Many characters in the novel are postmodern heroes, including Hal and

Don Gately: Furillo's moral dilemmas and double binds will be experienced by several characters.

Hal concludes his essay by noting how “we, as a North American audience, have favored the more Stoic, corporate hero of reactive probity ever since, some might be led to argue ‘trapped’ in the reactive moral ambiguity of ‘post-’ and ‘post-post’-modern culture” (142).¹⁴ Wallace foregrounds the specific cultural context that propelled his novel. In reaction against the complacent postmodern TV and fiction—the kind that lives in a bubble of smug emptiness—from which he seeks to distance his writing, Wallace (via Hal) finishes the essay by declaring a new kind of future hero to succeed Frank Furillo: he predicts “the hero of *non*-action, the catatonic hero, the one beyond calm, divorced from all stimulus” (*Ibid.*, emphasis original).

Compare this to the “*anti-rebel*” literary rebels that Wallace announced in “E Unibus Pluram” (see above). Wallace is subtly commenting on his literary project for *IJ*, which the novel itself carries out in a way that reveals the author's intention.¹⁵ In a 2003 interview for the German television station *ZDF*, the topic of complacency and comfortableness in America—the insidious kind that shelters us from the harsh realities of life—was broached. Wallace commented that “in America we think of rebellion as this sexy thing that involves action and force. My guess is the forms of rebellion that will end up changing anything meaningfully will be very quiet and very individual” (“DFW Uncut Interview”). This is the kind of hero that Hal anticipates, the Nietzschean type that makes no spectacle of his quiet ‘rebellion,’ while opposing herd behavior, doctrine, the institutionalization of social programs, and standardized ways of life. The potential for long-term cultural and social change comes from within; it is motivated not by a desire to

influence others and to change their minds with the hope that they will join an agenda, crusade, or political upheaval, but by the internal conviction that what one spends his or her life doing is as close as he or she can get to a life of virtue. This is Wallace/Hal's post-postmodern hero of non-action, projected into the novel through the immobile Don Gately, the solipsistic Hal (himself a recurrence of his father), and his physically disabled brother Mario.

Perhaps Wallace's most characteristic tonal and thematic innovation came through a focus on what he repeatedly referred to as the misconception—perhaps the delusion—that cynicism and naïveté (not necessarily in its negative connotation, but rather as a genuine regard of human feelings and subtleties, no matter how unsophisticated or sentimental) were incompatible (*IJ* 694-696). What he does in the novel is to dismantle this apparent rift by employing his signature literary style while showing how the smoke and mirrors of that very style—the technical fireworks of his own prose, in which he seamlessly juxtaposes specific colloquialisms with highly erudite and technical language—eventually give way to an ulterior quest for essential human pathos. Marshall Boswell describes Wallace's approach succinctly: “[Wallace's work] treats the culture's hip fear of sentiment with the same sort of ironic self-awareness with which sophisticates in the culture portray 'goeey' sentimentality; the result is that hip *irony is itself ironized* in such a way that the opposite of hip irony—that is, goeey sentiment—can emerge as the work's indirectly intended mode” (17, emphasis added).

This is carried out through a cumulative process, so it is not easy to pinpoint brief examples of how *IJ* succeeds in 'ironizing irony'; however, the “irony-free zone” of Boston's Alcoholics Anonymous meetings is an illustrative point on how Wallace self-

referentially depicts what he is trying to accomplish in the novel. The narrator tells us that at AA meetings, when the truth comes out, it has to be “unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church” (369). Now let’s compare this to a character almost entirely separate from the AA meetings but whose very essence—the human element in his congenitally damaged body—is the embodiment of emotional sincerity: the saintly Mario, the second-born of the three Incandenza brothers. Mario enjoys listening to Madame Psychosis’ (Joelle Van Dyne’s radio persona) radio show so much, for instance, because “he felt like he was listening to someone sad read out loud from yellow letters she’s taken out of a shoebox on a rainy [afternoon], stuff about heartbreak and people you loved dying and U.S. woe, *stuff that was real*. It is increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real in this way” (592, emphasis added). The reason that the terribly deformed Mario is out of place at E.T.A. (taking after his late father, he makes films on campus) is not that he is incapacitated; it is that dewy-eyed Mario’s default mental attitude is too benign and unadulterated, too unsophisticatedly benevolent—so much so that he *would* be a misfit at E.T.A., and anywhere else, were his body not deformed.

Mario bemoans how most kids at the academy find “stuff that’s really real uncomfortable and [how] they get embarrassed” (592). He has to gradually come to terms with the fact that in the YDAU (a near-future substitute for Wallace’s own 1990s) there seems to be an unspoken rule whereby “real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn’t happy” (*Ibid.*). Note, for instance, Hal’s best friend Mike Pemulis’ “Dial-a-Prayer telephone service for atheists” joke, “in which the atheist dials the number and the line just rings and rings and no one answers” (*Ibid.*). The

joke is cleverly amusing, though we (the readers and the E.T.A. children who listen to Pemulis tell the joke at lunchtime) are not meant to laugh at it but to smirk at its wittiness in a sophisticated ‘I get it’ way. The sad part is that when Pemulis cracks the joke, Mario is the only one who can heartily laugh at it. The other boys become self-conscious and uncomfortable when they feel that Mario might think it is *him* they are laughing at—the disabled kid laughing out loud at a joke that is stifled from the beginning by its own irony and witticism.

Wallace’s distinguishing sad little ‘anecdotes’ like this, sprinkled throughout the novel, dramatize his critique of contemporary American culture. The fact that Mario is trapped in a grotesquely deformed body (he has macrocephaly, tiny claw-like arms, square feet, and bradykinesia, among other afflictions) is what allows him to be preternaturally sentimental and emotionally open; if his body were normal, this brutally unsophisticated attitude would be a social barrier resulting in his being either ostracized or taken advantage of. What Mario represents is the unabashedly cheerful self that everybody else at E.T.A. *wants to be* but is too afraid to try; he represents an innocence and vulnerability that the Ennet House AA meetings attempt to inspire in participants, so they can assume a new, honest, and emotionally open attitude. Here, as in many other self-referential signposts along the novel, Wallace makes his intentions clear. As Boswell notes, the author applies an ironic treatment to the very ironies he attempts to dispel, resulting in a newly-exposed meta-irony that attempts to dismantle itself in order to ultimately show the ugliness of irony and cynicism as a foil to the more human qualities of his characters, which are repressed and desperately eager to come out in earnest.

* * *

Before turning to the brilliantly eccentric James Incandenza as the driving force in *IJ*, let's return to Wallace's main preoccupation concerning TV and postmodern fiction, so that we can definitively place the novel in a specific sociocultural milieu and, over the rest of this essay, point out how *IJ* itself ponders on a) what Wallace perceived as the sad and dangerous collapse of the postmodern culture and generation (which is the motivation for the novel), and b) on the novel itself as an artifact of self-reflexivity to ultimately break down the dangerously seductive postmodern stratagems that characterized that milieu. Wallace saw his 1990s youth culture as quite "grim"; the predominance of TV allowed it to quickly catch up to the "postmodern aesthetic that originally sought to co-opt and redeem the pop" ("E Unibus" 64), but when TV began making the distinctive principles of postmodern literature its own, things went wrong: TV stole what once were literary innovations and started using them "to the ends of spectatorship and consumption" (*Ibid.*). And because the use of irony provides subterfuge for the medium's true motivations and intentions, not to mention the message itself, we become tyrannized by irony ("E Unibus" 67). It got to the point in which we could not ever know for sure what was meant at any given time. This is a problem that *IJ* addresses.

Finally, back to the novel, the nested storylines and their structural involution, the inter-textual references to Wallace's ethical and aesthetic concerns, and the meta-referential operating principles of *IJ*, all render the novel post-postmodern/ meta-ironic only to the degree that the reader is willing to interpret the novel in its larger sociocultural context and to measure how it diverges from or extends its postmodern heritage. *IJ* is part of the nexus between postmodern fiction as a "sensitivity, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth

century” (Nicol xvi) and the next logical step as a reaction to that. Interestingly, the stylistic conception behind *IJ* also underscores its heritage from modernism: In his essay “The Literature of Replenishment,” novelist John Barth discusses the motives and features of modernism, noting a “radical disruption of the linear flow of narrative; the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character and the cause-and-effect ‘development’ thereof; the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral and philosophical ‘meaning’ of literary action” (68, paraphrasing Gerald Graff). He might as well be describing the aesthetic and style of *IJ*.

Referring to literary theorists Robert Alter and Ihab Hassan, Barth notes that what postmodern fiction—as a continuation-of *and* a reaction-to modernism—comes down to, is the emphasis on “the ‘performing’ self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy,” which ends up looking as “a fiction that is more and more *about itself and its processes*, [and] less and less about objective reality and life in the world” (67-68, emphasis added). Compare the pejorative tone of this to Wallace’s assessment of the fundamental problem of a TV culture that has usurped the tricks of postmodern fiction and amplified its pessimism: “Television *used to point beyond itself*. Those of us born in, say, the ’60s were trained by television to look where it pointed, usually at versions of ‘real life’ made prettier, sweeter, livelier by succumbing to a product or temptation” (“E Unibus” 33, emphasis added). *IJ* is still about itself and its processes but not in a self-congratulatory way; it points at itself in an *anti*-subversive cautionary manner and finally connects with the ‘real world’ of the reader. But it also creates a hyperreal world in which the fake has taken the place of what used to

be genuine and human in a long-gone innocent era (one could say a *naïve* era) before mass communication; the novel then dramatizes the consequences of this apparently irreversible turn that humankind has taken by creating a parallel universe or a near-future setting, and, in the process, it points at how it dramatizes its cautionary program. In this way, *IJ* has a special status as a quasi-reactionary postmodern novel that attempts to transcend its postmodern heritage by dramatizing the perils of it.

Now we turn to James Incandenza, whose eponymous film symbolizes the novel's anti-ironic call to action.

* * *

When the medical attaché's wife comes home at around 01:45h. to find her husband seemingly unresponsive but with an ecstatically open-mouthed face intensely focused on the TV, her own face inevitably turns to the screen. (79)

PART III — James Incandenza: optician and filmmaker

Despite the large amount of data on Dr. James Orin Incandenza that is sprinkled throughout the novel—biographical information, physical descriptions, sordid details of his unusual suicide method—the character who makes ‘Infinite Jest’ remains peculiarly elusive and unknowable to the characters and to the readers of *IJ* alike. James Incandenza’s life traces the story of an eccentric, emotionally barren and withdrawn boy turned junior tennis player turned optics expert and dipsomaniacal amateur filmmaker who founds a tennis academy and makes an infinitely entertaining movie along the way, before putting his head in a microwave oven. A monstrously tall and gaunt man of several lives, he is an enigma that carries much of the narrative and adds a sense of continuity between the numerous fragmentary and episodic sections that make up the novel. Incandenza’s filmography, which Wallace elaborately constructs as a self-standing endnote, relates to the plot of the novel; his highly-technical movies reflect his “cold logic and surface objectivity” (Boswell 162), itself the result of his unhealthy relationship with his father.

The fact that Incandenza is already dead in the YDAU, when the present-day action of the novel takes place, compounds the mystery of his posthumous film, which has recently come to the surface in the story and drives the politically-charged search for it. Wallace sets up everything we come to know about Incandenza in an implicit, covert way, whereby the impression that we form as readers allows us to conjecture the causal connections that are implied. This impression is strong enough to suggest connections between characters who never meet during the chronology of events made explicit in the novel. For instance, because Incandenza returns in the YDAU as a “wraith” and haunts

Don Gately at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, he forms the nexus between Hal and Gately in the 'missing year'—from November of YDAU to November of Year of Glad¹⁶—in which the two characters disinter Incandenza (17). Because Hal and Gately don't meet in the novel, the reader has to assemble the pieces to conjecture that Hal is taken to St. Elizabeth's, where he meets Gately, who recognizes him based on the stories that Incandenza's wraith has told him.

Let's take a brief digression into the conversations between Marathe and Steeply in the Arizona desert, which form the philosophical backbone of *IJ* and are mostly about Incandenza's final movie: Hugh Steeply is a field operative of the U.S.O.U.S.¹⁷; Rémy Marathe, a Canadian, is a member of the A.F.R.¹⁸ Their meetings are sanctioned by both organizations, which want to acquire the master copy of 'Infinite Jest' but with different motives.¹⁹ Although the narrator tells us that it was "their sixth or seventh" meeting and, ironically, that "they accomplished little" (529), these conversations act like a Greek chorus that comments and moralizes on the main action (Dowling 48). Interspersed along the text, they work as a hinge between *IJ*'s disconnected episodes; significantly, the conversations depicted in the text turn out to have taken place at a single daylong meeting. It is as if their philosophizing is "suspended in time," occupying a static dimension that is different from the quick-paced one of the other characters (Dowling 57).

Wallace counterbalances the whirlwind of events around E.T.A. and Ennet House with the serene musings of Marathe and Steeply; both men look down at the city lights "from a height" (647), in a reflective state of equipoise and wisdom, as if detached from the chaotic reality of the other characters but commenting on more pressing matters that

will determine the course of everyone's lives. We learn that the goal of the A.F.R. is for Canada to secede from O.N.A.N. (1057); once the Canadians acquire the master copy of 'Infinite Jest,' the A.F.R. plans to disseminate it into American households via InterLace grid—a Netflix-like network of movies and TV channels that allows the viewer to choose “what's on” at any time²⁰ (presumably a big deal in the early 1990s, when the novel was written).

Perhaps the most penetrating insight that we glean from these conversations is the philosophy of freedom of choice in America. Wallace observes how the freedom of choice, as part of the 'American Dream,' can have several unwanted consequences. And yet, the dream for independent self-realization, which has also resulted in abject capitalism and the devaluation of human principles, continues to be hallowed as *the* American ideal.²¹ Marathe says that Canada will actually not force 'Infinite Jest' on the U.S.; they will only make the movie available as *an option* (318). And thus emerges, only half-sarcastically, Wallace's assessment of what the United States, as a free-enterprise society, has become: “a community of sacred individuals which reveres the sacredness of the individual choice. The individual's right to pursue his own vision of the best ratio of pleasure to pain: utterly sacrosanct. Defended with teeth and bared claws all through our history” (424).

However fascinating the details of the search for the master copy of the movie, and the philosophical implications of its deployment as a weapon of mass destruction, my aim is rather to assemble the comprehensive characteristics of Incandenza that form a mirror-image of Wallace's project for the novel, to understand how—to the degree that such characteristics actuate the novel's plotline—Incandenza and his movie work as

performative fictional devices that enact the author's intentions. Incandenza forms the link between his father's philosophy and the burden that has been passed on to his own sons Orin and Hal; he represents the underlying weaknesses of the Incandenzas and many other characters who are "powerless against [their] compulsions and resistant to change" (Carlisle 486). He also represents the conscious attempt to reverse Hal's fall into solipsism through the making of 'Infinite Jest,' which ends up producing the *opposite* effect in others (those who watch the movie), thereby threatening to bring society to a TV-fueled plunge into self-destruction. But before we get there, a brief rundown of James Orin Incandenza will help place him in context toward an understanding of the character as the impetus for Wallace's post-ironic project.

* * *

Born in Arizona in 1950, Incandenza is a bespectacled, socially-challenged geometrical-optics genius. He founds E.T.A. in 1998 (before subsidized time)²²; he was "so blankly and irretrievably hidden that [his oldest son] Orin said he'd come to see him as like autistic, almost catatonic" (737, see above: Hal's "catatonic hero" as the next postmodern hero). He is faithful to his also incredibly-tall Canadian wife Avril²³, for whom monogamy and sexual restraint are not exactly a strong suit: the adulterous Avril is involved with her half-brother Charles Tavis (whom Incandenza had appointed to co-manage E.T.A. with Avril, and who may be Mario's real father), student John Wayne, his own son Orin, and the Saudi-Canadian medical attaché who gives us the first glimpse of the lethal potency of 'Infinite Jest.' Because Avril had been involved with the medical attaché and this had deeply affected Incandenza (30), we can assume (there are subtle

hints throughout the novel) that Orin has somehow acquired copies of the movie²⁴ and sent them to his mother's lovers as an act of revenge.

The dual dynamic that Wallace carefully constructs for Incandenza is particularly revealing; it signals the novel's transition from self-serving storytelling that points only at itself, to an open-ended narrative that beckons to familiar aspects of life with which the reader can empathize. The conflicting irony that characterizes Incandenza is that of a sci-fi-esque lone genius who designs "neutron-scattering reflectors for thermo-strategic weapons systems" (63) but cannot even communicate with his own sons. The dysfunctional family motif is familiar territory, though Wallace handles it with wit and flashes of sentimentality. Because Incandenza is dead in the novel's main narrative and given no 'voice' in the third-person scenes when he returns as a wraith (he communicates with Gately nonverbally), we have to rely on the judgments of others, and on the biographical data that Wallace provides, to interpret his complexities.

When Incandenza forms a personal and professional relationship with Joelle (Orin's girlfriend at the time) in the last years of his life, he opens up to her and tells her that "he simply didn't know how to speak with either of his undamaged sons without their mother's presence and mediation. Orin could not be made to shut up, and Hal was so completely shut down in Jim's presence that the silences were excruciating" (743).²⁵ While Orin is a fast-talking pathological liar with whom neither Avril nor Incandenza can bond in a direct and purposeful way, Hal's higher sensitivity is a reflection of his own father. Of his three sons, Hal is the one with whom Incandenza can identify the most, yet there is an insurmountable rift between the two—they simply cannot communicate. This

plays a crucial impetus for the making of ‘Infinite Jest,’ which will be explored later in this essay.

The miraculously-surviving premature Mario is Wallace’s most direct symbol of the naïve human reality he envisioned as the saving grace for fiction—perhaps an antidote to the poison of cynicism that had bogged down fiction for decades—and for the culture to which it belongs. Besides being a loving character, Mario is a literary means through which Wallace makes the point that “cynicism is only another form of naiveté” (Dowling 137). Because cynicism and irony only mask real intentions, they indicate the speaker’s lack of transparency and suppression of vulnerability, which are essential for real communication about complex human dynamics. This is at the core of Wallace’s agenda for *IJ*, which he dramatizes partly through Mario’s relationship with his father (in contrast with the relationship with his two other [biological] sons), and through the relation of Incandenza’s films to the plot of the novel.

It is not surprising that Mario is the only one of the three sons with whom Incandenza can communicate somewhat successfully; when he is with Mario—with whom he had spent the longest time—he doesn’t feel Hal’s menacing silence or Orin’s corrosive glibness. Late in the novel, as Hal lies supine and his final mental deterioration begins, he wonders “what [Incandenza and Mario] spoke about together, or *how openly*” (957, emphasis added). He never pressures Mario into telling, though, especially now that their father is dead, which shows either Hal’s respect for his older brother’s much healthier relationship with their father—one he never had himself—or his fear of discovering something startling about his father and himself. Toward the end, Hal is at pains to defeat his own cynical distancing from others; he longs for this openness that he

never had with his father, or with anyone else (except for Mario, with whom he is also close).

In fact, one of the things that Hal really regrets is that the one time his father ever opened up to anyone in the family, other than Mario or Avril, he “wasted it on Orin” (956): Hal narrates that Incandenza had had a conversation about sex and pornography with a teenaged Orin in which he gently persuaded Orin not to watch with his friends a porn video allegedly floating around E.T.A.—though he admitted he couldn’t *keep him* from doing it—because it might give him “the wrong idea about having sex” (*Ibid.*). Hal laments the fact that Orin feels sorry for his father for thinking he’s still a virgin, and for thinking—it can be implied from Hal’s first-person account—that he was beyond his father’s advice. In a moving turn toward nostalgia and heartfelt openness (though he doesn’t tell anyone this, other than the reader), Hal reveals that “My most intimate memory of Himself²⁶ was the scratchiness of his jaw and the smell of his neck when I fell asleep at supper and he carried me upstairs to bed” (956). Flashes of vulnerability, emotional nakedness, and open nostalgia, like these, which Wallace carefully sprinkles throughout the novel, represent the “childish gall,” “sentimentality,” and “melodrama” of the *anti*-rebels of fiction that he proclaimed in “E Unibus Pluram” (81). Not surprisingly, they are also the novel’s most enduring and heartfelt representation of Wallace’s preoccupation with eliciting empathy from his readers.

* * *

Let’s turn now to the other side of James Incandenza: his professional life, which progressively became intertwined with his personal life until the day he killed himself (without leaving a suicide note). Incandenza’s real genius was his precocious aptitude

and later development of optics; earning a doctorate in optical physics financed by the U.S. government, Incandenza fulfills “something of a childhood dream” (63). By developing “gamma-refractive indices for lithium-anodized lenses and panels,” among other technical advancements, he provides the technology that makes possible the process of “annular fusion.”²⁷ It allows the O.N.A.N. to recycle the industrial trash and human waste that is continuously sent via enormous catapults and fans to the northeast tip of New England bordering Québec, now called the Great Concavity, or—as seen from Canada—the Great Convexity (63-64). The products of the companies that sponsor the last two years of subsidized time—diapers for incontinent adults (2009), and bags for trash and for leftover food (2010)—are comically chosen to parody the exorbitant production of waste in America. The waste sent to the giant dumpsite is used as fuel that enables a process of nuclear fission, which in turn produces the waste used to enable its own energy-making process.

Part of what the Canadian separatists demand, along with Canada’s formal separation from the O.N.A.N., is for the U.S. to reclaim the festering Concavity and acknowledge that the waste that is deposited there is “fundamentally American waste” (1017). As it stands, Québec “bears the brunt of the environmental horrors [in the Concavity]” (Carlisle 187). The implication, as Heather Houser notes, is “that the U.S. has become powerless to contain the waste that it produces” (751).

There are many references to annular fusion and to other terms and phrases derived from annulation (the formation of a ring), whose most basic function in the novel is to emphasize an aspect of Wallace’s imagined near-future society, that is, the recurrence of vicious cycles. We see this in the dramatization of the inability of an

addicted society to break free of the products and drugs that give the user a false appearance of meaningfulness. It is not only until second and subsequent readings that the reader can connect these cryptic remarks to Wallace's structural plan for the novel: as a macro-level self-referential device for the form of the novel, the "annular fusion" that Incandenza develops, or makes possible, refers to the large annulate structure of *IJ*²⁸, in which the last page circles back to the first page in a ring-like 'shape': the latest events in the chronology are narrated in the opening Year of Glad scene, and on page 17 there is a jarring shift to the introduction of a new character in the previous year (YDAU, 2009). Thus, beginning and end are fused into a ring.

In this way, if Incandenza devises the process of annulation, he can be conceived of as a fictional stand-in, or "a spokesman," for the author of *IJ* himself (Boswell 170). Wallace is the creator of *IJ* the novel while Incandenza is the creator of 'Infinite Jest' the movie; each person, in his respective ontological plane, is the mirror-image of the other insofar as he has the agency to actuate the plot elements that carry the narrative. If Incandenza creates annulation as a self-reflexive plot device *and* the film that impels much of the plot, then his meta-fictional status both drives the narrative and activates the author's impetus for the writing of the novel.

Like most characters in *IJ*, Incandenza is an obsessed person; what makes his obsessive behavior different from that of, say, the young E.T.A. tennis players who have to devote much of their early lives to routines and rituals to train their minds as much as their bodies, is that it fluctuates in patterns of different interests: Hal says his father "remained obsessed with something until he became successful at it, then transferred his obsession to something else" (949). His transition from tennis to military optics, to

private entrepreneurship (706), and finally to film as an independent auteur, is a brief outline of this pattern of shifting obsessions. Hal thinks that his father never quite succeeded as a filmmaker (949), which suggests why he might have persevered in making movies until his death.²⁹ But Incandenza was never a filmmaker in the conventional sense of narrative storytelling.

As Orin explains to Hugh Steeply—who poses as a female journalist named Helen to interview Orin for an article about Incandenza and his family, which is a guise to track down the ‘Infinite Jest’ master copy—Incandenza’s filmmaking originated in his fixation on lenses and the application of light to manipulate monochrome images in an unprecedented way that created altered perspectives. This will be significant toward our effort of understanding why Incandenza made ‘Infinite Jest.’³⁰ And that is Incandenza’s real talent: the family name is one of Wallace’s witticisms: incandescence, the emission of light, is essential for the lens to function, which focuses the light that passes through it to form images.

Among Wallace’s several meta-ironic games, through which he carries out the aesthetic he proposed in his nonfiction, is the irony of the impenetrability of Incandenza’s films, wryly referred to as “entertainments” (a facetious nod to the daunting complexity of *IJ*, which underscores the Wallace/Incandenza ontological intertwining). When film authority Molly Notkin, a Ph.D. in Film-Cartridge Theory from MIT, is interviewed by Chief of U.S.O.U.S. Rodney Tine, she clarifies that providing amusement or entertainment was “pretty low on [Incandenza’s] list of priorities” (791). The fact that Wallace includes a nearly full James Incandenza filmography in endnote 24 (including synopses, cast, and technical details) and several scenes in which characters talk about his

films, watch them or even enact them, strongly suggests a correlation between Incandenza's films and *IJ*'s narrative; Wallace's encyclopedic depiction of the minutiae of Incandenza's output creates a special level of original intertextuality between the main narrative and Incandenza's filmography.

According to Sayers, Wallace's ekphrases of Incandenza's movies (see endnote 5)—which consist of the short synopses in endnote 24 and the corresponding descriptions and enactments in the main text—draw attention to the factors that “distinguish the written word from filmed entertainment” (361, see endnote 37). The relationship between the plot and the separate filmography is analogous to that between, say, a novel and a subsequent film adaptation of it, or between a historical fiction novel and an encyclopedia or history book that details the facts that the fiction dramatizes. This is one of many examples of what Burn calls the novel's “encyclopedic urge to understand, measure, and categorize” (36), and it correspond to the intertextuality of *IJ* itself and the pop culture it acknowledges throughout: just like the Incandenza brothers and the many characters on the hunt for ‘Infinite Jest’ reflect on Incandenza's films, the reader of *IJ* reflects on its many real-life references.

Like I have claimed, Incandenza—the man and the filmmaker—can be imagined as a literary analog of Wallace's design for the novel. To expound on this point, let's dig a little deeper into the recurring motifs of Incandenza's films, which will begin to reveal—as this essay progresses toward ‘Infinite Jest’—the purpose of the novel as it actuates itself in the narrative. The preface to Incandenza's filmography tells us that it includes, among other types of films, “documentary, conceptual, advertorial, technical, parodic, nondramatic (‘anticonfluent’), and dramatic commercial work” (985 n. 24),

each of which loosely fits the general style of specific fragments or scenes from the novel. Perhaps the most revealing of these loose stylistic groups is the “anti-confluentism” of Incandenza’s middle-period, an “après-garde” style (the opposite of progressive avant-gardism), characterized by narrative stasis, in which different plot elements meander in parallel motion and fail to cohere via logical continuity, clear connections, and discernible structures.

Anti-confluentism is a kind of self-indulgent, anti-narrative and non-climactic static visual representation—more a suggestion or an impression of the subject matter than a straight depiction or dramatization of it, resulting in a ‘trapped’ or enclosed series of images that meander and seem to go nowhere, thus frustrating the viewer. In anticonfluent films, there is “a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence” (996 n. 61), which is a shallow approach that strikes Notkin as “being rather aloof [and] cerebrally technical, [with a] self-congratulatory combination of anamorphic fragmentation and anti-Picaresque narrative stasis” (791).

Incandenza’s anticonfluent style is therefore a symbol of the novel’s own fragmented structure that seems to consciously avoid concrete resolution. Hager notes, however, that Wallace places the components toward that resolution in such a way that they can be projected beyond the narrative; the resolution of *IJ* “sits chronologically and spatially *in front of* the novel proper” (Hager, emphasis added. See endnote 63 for an example of these connections outside the narrative).

As we have seen, the three main narratives hardly merge and are heavily fragmented along a nonlinear arrangement: the upper-class students at E.T.A. almost

never interact with the nearby Ennet House recovering addicts who are down the hill from the tennis academy (the geographical distinction is symbolic), and Marathe and Steeply's philosophical and political conversations about 'Infinite Jest' only momentarily converge with characters from either E.T.A. or Ennet House. Yet, the most important confluence of these semi-independent narrative strands is carefully implied but not actually narrated or dramatized; the subplots only come together into "any kind of meaningful confluence" outside of the novel, as Hager notes, especially in the missing year that loops the end of the novel back to the beginning.

As Gately lies in his hospital bed and his semi-consciousness wanders in and out of reality, his dream "goes on and on, without any kind of resolution or arrival, and he weeps and sweats as he lies there, stuck in it" (933). The reader is 'stuck' in a novel that "goes on and on" like Gately is stuck in his dream. The anticonfluent style is one of Wallace's strongest self-referential literary devices; with it, he comments on the novel through Incandenza as a metafictional character that represents and actuates the intentions of his creator.

Incandenza's anticonfluent period forms the crux of the relationship between his films and the design of *IJ*, and it augurs the making of 'Infinite Jest,' itself the revision of previous failed attempts. Wallace's omniscient narrator tells us that this period was marked by Incandenza's obsession with "the idea of audiences' relationships with various sorts of shows" (396), an idea reminiscent of Wallace's own interest in the relationship between fiction and the reader, including the author's implicit ethical obligation toward the reader. But if experimental, holographic films like "The Medusa v. the Odalisque"³¹ exaggerate the audience's temptation of the pleasure derived from the

act of watching others, thereby making the audience feel self-conscious and guilty (in the film, the Odalisque is supposed to be so beautiful that it literally petrifies the audience within the film [396]), the meta-film “The Joke”³² is an overtly cynical performance that punishes its audience: cameras mounted in a movie theater film the audience as they walk in and take their seats; eager for the movie to begin, the audience members look at the screen, onto which is projected an unmediated live feed of what the cameras are filming. The audience effectively watches itself watching itself, which is the titular “joke” (annoyed, the ticket-paying crowd exits the theater one by one; the ‘movie’ ends when the last person leaves).

With Incandenza’s cruel “The Joke,” Wallace is clearly poking fun at the metafiction of his postmodern forebears, whose turn in on itself sometimes resulted in analytical-philosophical statements—ingenious and intellectually stimulating in a Borgesian way, but sometimes at risk of sacrificing a deeper empathetic connection with the reader, which is arguably the *purpose* of fiction. The fact that Wallace lampoons gratuitous metafiction in his novel is itself curiously ironic, since he still uses self-reference in strategic places.

Note, also, that in the limited art-house-cinema run of “The Joke,” the promotional artwork for the film, displayed on marquees and posters, reads “*THE JOKE*: *You Are Strongly Advised NOT To Shell Out Money to See This Film*” (397). Wallace suggests here a ‘tragedy’ in which the hip and erudite film connoisseurs smirk at what they *think* is “a cleverly ironic anti-ad joke” (*Ibid.*). Like Pemulis’ E.T.A. classmates, they congratulate themselves for being smart enough to ‘get it’; they relish the irony of the ad because they’re in on the joke, and indeed shell out the money for a

ticket, only to walk into the theater and find out that the cautionary sub-header was in fact sincere. Finally, having become the butt of “The Joke,” they realize that all they can do is leave the theater as victims of the cynicism of the whole enterprise, which has thoroughly consumed them through its meta-ironical design.³³ This is how Wallace turns irony “on itself,” as Scott and Boswell suggest, thus creating a narrative that exposes the perils of irony and cynicism by treating irony and cynicism ironically and cynically, so as to overturn and reverse them.

Because Incandenza’s filmography parallels the development of Wallace’s impetus for the novel, I would like to briefly look at three more of his movies (before we plunge into ‘Infinite Jest’ in Part VI), to argue for Incandenza as Wallace’s analog. If “The Joke” is a brazen exposé of metafiction that only ‘works’ at the expense of the viewer, the documentary “The American Century as Seen Through a Brick” (Year of the Whopper [2002]), is Incandenza’s overt attempt to dismantle the “myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive” (694), which, as I pointed out earlier, is one of Wallace’s main preoccupations. The film follows the ‘career’ of a brick that is removed during the renovation of Boston’s Back Bay; the brick becomes a piece of subversive Duchamp-esque ‘found art’ that is then disposed of into the Great Concavity. Flickers of a human thumb come in and out the frame (989 n. 24), perhaps highlighting the hardships of humans—and their fleetingness—who live in post-industrial civilization.

The narrator tells us that the film’s main image consists of “a piano-string vibrating [...] and making a very sweet unadorned sound indeed, and then a little thumb comes into the frame [...] and as it touches the piano string the high sweet sound immediately dies. And the silence that follows is excruciating” (695). Later, the image

returns but the thumb is removed; the vibration of the piano string resumes. The symbolism of the scene is elusive, though it achieves an imagery that is sad and emotional. In passages like this, Wallace creates impressions of the emptiness and loneliness of capitalistic and individualistic American life near the turn of the millennium.

In one of the novel's most quoted passages, the third-person narrator comments—in connection to “The American Century”—that Hal thinks “that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human [note that the film's subject, a brick, is intentionally not human, yet treated as though it were], since to be really human is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic” (695). In the context of Wallace's nonfiction, this is an explicit dramatization of the author's most pressing concern: the film represents Wallace's main message (explored earlier in Part II), and Hal's third-person thoughts and indirect speech represent the author's own commentary on the subject.

One of Incandenza's few commercial successes was “Blood Sister: One Tough Nun” (Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad [2003]).³⁴ Although there is nothing compelling about the movie's generic plotline (a revenge thriller satire), what is pertinent to my reading of Incandenza is Hal's assessment of the movie: his father chooses a familiar genre to exploit and “grotesquely exaggerate the formulaic schticks of the genre” in such an excessive way “that [the film becomes an] ironic metacinematic parod[y] on the genre: [‘subversions or] inversions of the genre’” (703). With clever instances of self-reference like this, Wallace emphasizes what he is attempting to do with *IJ*. A parody usually hyperbolizes, exploits, or ridicules familiar elements of a given genre to expose some

underlying inconsistency or absurdity in real life. So, what Incandenza accomplishes with “Blood Sister” is what Wallace accomplishes with *IJ*: Incandenza overstates and magnifies the conventional narrative maneuvers of the revenge thriller genre to such a degree that his movie becomes a parody that is *aware of itself*—or that points at itself as a parody of a movie genre.

In the same way, the many narrative strands of *IJ* exaggerate and ridicule the “postmodern schticks” (a phrase Wallace often used in interviews) that I outlined in Part II in such a way that the result refers to its own treatment of these literary contrivances. But Wallace’s self-referential strategy doesn’t provide easy answers; Dowling observes how the author “alerts us to the problem and winks” (220), which jolts the reader from the passivity of reading for pleasure and makes him/her wonder why the plotline is subtly commenting on its status. And, as such, both “Blood Sister” and *IJ*—by virtue of demonstrating their own self-awareness of what each is trying to accomplish in relation to the genre or style they belong to—ultimately become subversions and/or inversions of their respective genre.

Besides focusing more on technical aspects than on traditional storytelling, Incandenza’s films self-reflectively acknowledge that they are fictional constructs and not realistic representations of life. This is a distinguishing aspect of Incandenza’s experimental films. His austere kind of filmmaking is reminiscent of the French filmmaker Robert Bresson (1901–1999); the comparison is explicitly made in the novel and is one of Wallace’s many allusions to the real world outside of *IJ* that collectively compel the reader to connect the novel to its inter-textual counterparts and references. Influenced by Bresson,³⁵ Incandenza preferred the graceless, awkward acting of

amateurs, or non-actors, “to remind the audience that they were in reality watching actors acting and not people behaving” (944). This artificial kind of acting, or a non-acting anti-performance, emphasizes the contrast with the TV and movies of Wallace’s real world, which achieve suspension of disbelief through mimesis. Incandenza is therefore concerned with creating “art that foregrounds the constructed nature of reality” (Nichols 12).

If part of the intention of the novel is to caution against the “pernicious illusion of realism” (*IJ* 944), which is directly related to the entertainment factor of mass-appeal commercial TV and film, then what Wallace demonstrates through Incandenza’s method is his conscious attempt to shake the audience free of that enchanting spell—beguiling, but very harmful in large doses. It is no wonder that his movies, though well-made, are not very fun to watch.³⁶ But there is a fascinating irony at work here: it is very ironic that it takes ungainly and painfully self-conscious *non*-actors to break the spell of “realism” (*Ibid.*). Experienced professional actors presumably relinquish their own *self* when acting, thereby momentarily becoming a fictional persona. Just like it takes Wallace an inward process of involution—he enfolds his irony within a higher-order irony that is aware of its own purpose—to dismantle irony, it would take a professional actor a type of meta-acting to assume the persona of a *non*-actor and thus reverse the illusion of realism.

So Incandenza, tellingly, hires non-actors to achieve his design, instead of hiring actors who would otherwise need to imitate non-actors to attempt to break the mimetic illusion. According to Hal, who narrates the passage, this was one of the few things about Incandenza’s films that interested academic critics (*Ibid.*), which seems like a comical side note. But it actually underscores another irony: his films tried to be so ‘real’ (as in

non-mimetic, or not representational of real human behavior, but rather unapologetically straightforward about their status as fictional fabrications) that they failed to capture the reality of human experience and largely resulted in little more than intellectual and technical experiments for critics to later hash out.³⁷

Wallace comments here on the danger of human susceptibility: we have a natural craving to be deluded by entertainment that aims, or claims, to represent slice-of-life truth, a ‘truth’ that cannot ever be faithfully reproduced through realistic, mimetic representation. When Incandenza attempts to call attention to this through his anti-narrative filmmaking with non-actors, and to teach his audience something about their mutual human wants and needs, he fails miserably.

As we approach Incandenza’s late career, we notice a turning away from his anticonfluent style; Hal conjectures that because most people don’t care about technical innovation or experimentation, his father had envisioned making a movie that was, at last, “entertaining and diverting and conducive to self-forgetting” (944).³⁸ Whether ‘Infinite Jest’ succeeded in this respect is debatable, particularly in regard to Incandenza’s intention for the movie in relation to Hal—a topic that will be discussed in Part VI. For now, to conclude this part, it is important to notice the conceptual transformation in Incandenza’s filmography and how this shifting pattern parallels the progress of Wallace’s project for the novel.

We can detect, in Incandenza’s body of work, a general flow from self-consciousness, to cynical meta-reference, to genre subversion. And finally, in movies like “Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat,”³⁹ Incandenza adopts an “unhip earnestness” (689) and “frankly sentimental narratives” (Dowling 219) that work as a self-referential

intimation of the post- or anti-ironic narrative into which Wallace slowly and analytically transforms *IJ*. Then we have the mysterious ‘Infinite Jest,’ a radical type of addictive entertainment that is nearly turned into a tactical weapon of terrorism. But before we unpack the lethal fun of Incandenza’s final act of madness, which he concocts shortly before he commits suicide at age 54 on April 1 of the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar, it is important to understand how the filmmaker became who he became, which can be traced to his childhood.

PART IV — “I felt the religion of the physical that day” (*IJ* 169): Incandenza and his father

Like his lenses that create a wobbly and blurry image, the reader’s impression of James Incandenza is unclear; the fragments of his life are intercut with no clear continuity, so it is the reader’s task to assemble the pieces to form a clearer picture of what kind of person Incandenza really is. The significance of his influence in the years after his suicide can be reconstructed through an analysis of his formative years; this is a novel concerned with recurring human dynamics and systemic social afflictions that can be traced to inherent flaws and weakness, exacerbated by self-destructive patterns that are acquired from society or inherited from family. *IJ* characters consequently have a very hard time defeating their addictions and manias.

Wallace gives us a key to understanding Incandenza through an engrossing father-and-son scene—equally absorbing and disturbing—set in 1960, long before subsidized time.⁴⁰ It heralds Incandenza’s obsession with physics, optics, film, and tennis, the latter two passed on to his sons. Essential to my reading of Incandenza as the representation of Wallace’s impetus for the writing of the novel, the scene introduces the distinctive personality traits of Incandenza’s father, which are inherited by members of the Incandenza family. As we will see in Part VI, James Incandenza attempts to rescue Hal from what he has become by making ‘Infinite Jest’; he sees in his ‘mute’ son a reincarnation of what he *himself* has become. Let’s see how.

The scene is marked by a stylistic shift, unique in the novel, which takes the form of a monologue by James O. Incandenza, Sr., himself a former junior tennis player and a failed actor, whose career fizzles out in a haze of alcoholism. Employing nonstandard

syntax, grammar, and punctuation that imitate the improvisatory flow of speech, the scene is Faulknerianly idiosyncratic. But in spite of this, what is most conspicuous is Incandenza Jr.'s apparent silence throughout: similar to his gambit of not showing the questions in the novel's interview scenes,⁴¹ Wallace chooses not to tell us what Jr.—an only child, taciturn by nature but not mentally disabled—is responding to his father (or thinking to himself) as they interact in the communal garage of their trailer-park home in Tucson. It is up to the reader to fill in those blanks, intuiting Jr.'s verbal and physical responses, based on his father's spoken reactions.

A misogynistic alcoholic, capable of loving and hurting his son in the most corrosive way, Sr. is obsessed with bodies and the physical properties of his surroundings. "Jim not that way Jim. That's no way to treat a garage door," is the opening of his monologue. He tells Jr.—though he is only 10, he is almost six feet tall—that his (Jr.'s) mother hasn't "learned that treating things in the gentlest most relaxed way is also treating them and your own *body* in the most efficient way" (157, emphasis added). Jr.'s mother, an actress, had had a small part in a Marlon Brando movie, and Sr. scapegoats the iconic rebel-type actor⁴² as the epitome of learned disrespect that is passed on to new generations: a "tough-guy rebel and slob type," responsible for the collapse of the new generations' relationship "with their own bodies and the everyday objects and bodies around them" (*Ibid.*).

Wallace plants the seeds for the intergenerational obsession with transcending the body (the cage that contains our troubled consciousness that longs for relief and distraction through entertainment, drugs, and alcohol in large doses, thus damaging the body) and 'blending' into one's surroundings, which we see especially in the elevated

status accorded to tennis in the novel. Sr. compares Brando's acting to a good game of tennis: Like the racquets that become an extension of the young E.T.A. athletes' bodies, Brando "touched whatever he touched as if it were part of him" (158). The recurring garage door, which Jr. is chastised for touching with no gentleness, is a symbol of Sr.'s tennis philosophy. Like his 1956 Mercury Montclair parked in the garage, which for him is not just a machine to be driven but a body to be felt and fused into—a body which 'feels' back and responds—tennis is a game of "total physicality" (160): it is a reciprocally proactive interaction between player and racquet, racquet and ball, player and ball. Note that there is no direct mention of the player on the other side of the court; this tennis philosophy entails a face-off with the *self*, whereby the player attempts to transcend his own bodily and physiological limitations.⁴³

Greg Carlisle recaps Sr.'s tennis/life philosophy as one that "concerns the transcendence of limits (boundaries, obstacles) and the relationship between head and body and between objects and body" (120). This is passed on to Orin and Hal, and the E.T.A. students via the rigors of Gerhardt Schtitt (*Ibid.*), a tennis trainer whose ascetic doctrine is "self-transcendence through pain" (*IJ* 660).

Sr. laments that Brando's aloof bad-boy type has been grossly misconstrued as self-centered indifference: what was really the actor's transcendence of the body, and his incorporation into the physicality that surrounded him, was mistaken for a condescending renegade attitude. For Sr., who foretells his son's aptitude for the rigors of tennis, Brando embodied the formula of the preternatural tennis player: "touch things with consideration and they will be yours; you will own them; they will move or stay still or move for you; they will lie back and part their legs and yield up their innermost seams to you" (158).

But Sr. impresses on his son the idea that head (a metonym for consciousness and self-awareness) and body must be married as a single entity and *overcome*, which is symbolized by an idealistic tennis match.

“Son, you’re a body, son. [...] you’re a machine a body an object” (159); for Sr., this ‘machine’ metaphor extends inward and outward: the vacuum inside a tennis ball represents the self devoid of character—the potential of the ball to traverse the court at speeds upward of 80 miles per hour. Like the ball’s potential energy for kinetic motion (encapsulated in a layer of rubber underneath a cover of felt fuzz), the body contains the potential for actualization (encapsulated in the constraints of the physical body) once it is freed from the pain manifested in the mind. “Imagine what it feels like to be this ball, Jim. Total physicality. No revving head, complete presence,” says Sr. (160). No head, just *presence*; but he also says that the tennis ball must be treated “with consideration,” with “a kind of love” that will endow the player with absolute control of the object: “Intensive gentleness and bodily care equals great tennis, Jim” (164).

If this sounds contradictory and simply confusing, the thing to remember is that this is not Wallace advancing a clearly-stated philosophy of life; these are only impressions of the method-behind-the-madness ideology of a has-been actor⁴⁴ and tennis player only three years prior to his death at 43. However, in this strange and circumlocutionary monologue, Sr. does capture “a seminal definition of what a *self* is” (Burn 49, emphasis added). It is the reader’s task to peel the layers and—particularly for my understanding of Jr. as a literary concept that points beyond the novel and toward Wallace’s literary concerns—to interpret the weight of the psychological torrent that has been impressed in young Jim, which reaches an apocalyptic climax in his last film.

In the novel, rituals and routines—Hal’s secret marijuana addiction, Joelle’s obsessive cleaning, Orin’s sexual sprees, Steeply’s father’s pathological obsession with the TV show *M*A*S*H*—become intertwined and sometimes indistinguishable. Later in the monologue, Sr. attempts to initiate young Jim into his daily ritual/habit of drinking whiskey out of a flask, unscrewing the cap as though the flask were a sacred chalice through which the user is channeled into an otherworldly realm, or a vessel that must be overcome and blended into the body. When he is encouraged to try the “amber liquid,” Jr.—his hands full—drops his copy of the *Columbia Guide to Refractive Indices* instead of gently placing it down with the ‘love’ for bodies that is at the core of his father’s tennis-as-life philosophy—the love of *his* body, which must selflessly merge into everything in proximity.

Jr. is reprimanded and pouts, holding back tears. Sr. will have none of it; he rebukes him for not surmounting the physicality of his body. Jr.’s face contorts and his nose runs over his upper lip, which revolts his father (161). Although Sr. seems to make an effort to teach his son the philosophy of tennis and to instill in him a determination to succeed—however questionable the method and the philosophy—he is abusive toward him. He spites and humiliates Jim, which irreversibly damages his psyche and affects his personality for the rest of his life. This is the primary function of the long scene in relation to the rest of the novel.

The scene reaches a climactic point when Sr. reveals to his son the wound, both physical and psychological, that he has carried with him for decades. He narrates how even as a boy of 13 he had already played in tennis championships for a few years; but his father, a golfer, had never shown any interest in attending his matches. He never

showed him a sign that he cared, even when the local paper in Tucson featured him as a young tennis prodigy. Sr. stresses to Jr. that, unlike his own father, “I *see* you recognize you are aware of you as a body care about what might go on behind that big flat face bent over a homemade prism [*sic*]” (163, emphasis original).⁴⁵ The only time Sr.’s father ever attended one of his games was when Sr. was playing against the son of a client of his father’s; he only attended the game “for the client, to put on some sham show of fatherly concern” (164). Body and mind as one, Jr. played as though his racquet were “a sentient expression of my arm” (165), embodying, even at 13, the philosophy he impresses on Jr. in the monologue. Decades later, Jr. instills this same philosophy on the young E.T.A. athletes through Schtitt, whom he hires.

When his father’s client casually comments that Sr. is good, Sr. overhears his father’s response—“Yes, But He’ll *Never Be Great*” (166, emphasis original)—which signals the fatal blow to his self-esteem. Immediately turned self-conscious, as he dashes forward to catch the ball from his opponent’s stroke, Sr. apparently steps on a slippery frond from a palm tree. But Wallace is strategic in how he phrases what Sr. *remembers* to have happened: it appears as though the cause of the career-ending accident was Sr.’s father’s blow to his ego (a man whom Sr. respected, even if he disliked him), not the accident itself. Enacting *IJ*’s call for a change from protective aloofness into openness and emotional vulnerability, Sr.—almost decrepit at 40—opens up his pathetic, frustrated, failed, alcoholic self to young Jim: “I’m so scared of dying without ever being really *seen*” (168). Wallace transforms Sr.’s most painful memory of falling and failing into a purely *physical* experience: not only is he forever scarred by the actual fall on that tennis court, but he remembers and feels his father’s hurtfulness as a physical shove on

that fateful day, like a “push down a stairway” (*Ibid.*) that sends him airborne and falling on his knees, which are dragged across the ground—his legs injured for life.

Whether Jim, at his tender age, can understand the full import of his father’s drunken monologue is not really the point (it is safe to assume he is just as befuddled as first-time *IJ* readers). But the origin of the transgenerational sickness that fractures Jr.’s future family can be traced almost entirely to this scene: later in his life, Jr. resurrects the worst of his father and, as a father himself, echoes Sr.’s inchoate and dysfunctional fatherly love—a love which neither men can ever fully and properly embrace.

The closing words of the monologue encapsulate Wallace’s concern for the elusiveness of spirituality—a sacred dimension that enriches and gives purpose to Sr.’s tennis philosophy that eagerly aims to transcend physicality. Wallace’s nuanced depiction of the sacred and the spiritual bemoans the doctrinal treatment of spirituality and its institutionalization. There is a spiritual aspect to AA, for instance, an institution that almost defies logic and demands a quasi-religious devotion to the doctrine that it just ‘works.’ Later in the novel we learn that although the secular Don Gately has always been deeply suspicious of the tenets of AA, with help from his sponsor he learns to *accept* it; to Gately, the fact that AA works is nothing short of miraculous.

It is no wonder that as he lies in the trauma wing of St. Elizabeth’s with a high-caliber gunshot wound, his AA indoctrination (or is it really his own will?) prevents him from accepting controlled doses of narcotics to numb the pain—perhaps the only time in his life he will ever actually need them, for non-recreational purposes. In instances like these, through depictions of damaged bodies, Wallace explores the spiritual realm of the body; the physical body is not to be resisted or abused but reconciled as the vessel of the

spirit in which resides the human potential to surmount the physicality of our earthly, bodily existence. Only by embracing the body—not by fighting it—can we overcome its physical constraints. Our consciousness can finally transition into a spiritual dimension.

And in this way, when the young tennis player James Incandenza, Sr., whose racquet is a natural extension of his arm, violently falls on his knees, landing in a painful posture of prayer, he learns what, decades later, he will try to teach his son in that garage in Tucson—“what it means to be a body.” To Sr., the fall was a “religious moment” (169). And in one fell swoop, what once promised to be a career for Sr. as a national-level junior player, is obliterated. The painful realization of the limitations of the body, which he fought so hard to transcend, comes crashing down on the 13 year-old boy, who eventually succumbs to the alcoholism that his son will inherit:

It’s pivotal, it’s a seminal religious day when you get to both hear and feel your destiny at the same moment, Jim. [...] I know you’ve seen me brought home on occasions, dragged in the door, under what’s called the Influence, son, helped in by cabbies at night, I’ve seen your long shadow grotesquely backlit at the top of the house’s stairs I helped pay for, boy: how the drunk and the maimed both are dragged forward out of the arena like a boneless Christ, one man under each arm, feet dragging, eyes on the aether. (169)

The maimed, young Incandenza Sr. becomes the drunken adult Incandenza Sr. of 1960. His broken body and spirit, and his drunkenness, are evocative of the Christ-like figures of hopeless drug addicts, like the ones who end up at Ennet House, who, with nothing to lose, have fallen so low that all they can do is place their broken selves—their ‘boneless’ bodies—in the hands of recovery programs and rehabilitation centers that fill them with

empty hope. When one has fallen as low as the Don Gatelys and the Kate Gomperts of the world, though, blind faith in some invisible higher power does work, or *seems* to work, toward restoring what remains of their dignity.

One last thought on Sr.'s monologue, concerning his assessment of how societal values have changed from one generation to the next and the impact that this has on his son, as seen in the film aesthetic he later develops: Sr. says that “you kids today somehow don’t know how to *feel*, much less love, to say nothing of respect. We’re [the parents, or the preceding generation] just bodies to you. [...] you cannot ... imagine our absence. We’re so present it’s ceased to mean. We’re environmental. *Furniture of the world*” (168, last emphasis added). When, decades later, the wraith of Incandenza, Jr. visits Gately in the hospital and infiltrates his consciousness, he tells him that for most of his life he was a piece of human “furniture at the periphery of the very eyes closest to him” (835), and that in the years before his suicide he had seen his son Hal become a “figurant” (837), like the extras that are positioned in the background of movie sets to mime conversation, their mouths moving but no sound coming out (or no sound being recorded). This is directly linked to the reason Incandenza makes ‘Infinite Jest’ (see Part VI), and other films in which either everyone speaks (no silent extras), or nobody does (835).

As we have seen, the dominant traits that Incandenza acquires and extends to his sons can be traced to this father-and-son scene. This particular part of the monologue—“We’re just bodies to you. [...] you cannot ... imagine our absence”—presents the theme of solipsism as self-fulfilling prophecy: Sr. bemoans the new generation’s rejection of fatherly figures that traditionally embody love, wisdom, and authority. When Jr. grows into adulthood, he becomes a victim of this same affliction and later attempts to save Hal

from it, who frightens his father because of how much he resembles him (837). Incandenza's wraith tells Gately that "No horror on earth or elsewhere could equal watching your own offspring open his mouth and have nothing come out" (*Ibid.*). When, removed from reality because of his daily whiskey binges, Incandenza tries to express this concern while still alive, he is dismissed (838). This becomes his deepest fear in the last years of his life: that Hal had become what he feared he himself was as a child (*Ibid.*).

* * *

Not only does Sr.'s monologue relate to the novel's overarching theme of communication breakdown; it also has an intimate connection to the father-and-son scene between Incandenza Jr. and Hal, 43 years later. As I pointed out in the previous section, in the last years of Incandenza's life, he believes—or feels—that Hal is becoming mute; while it is clear to others that Hal *does* speak, the reader is made to understand that Hal's father either is unable to comprehend his language or perceives him as mute or inaudible. The fact that we cannot 'hear' what Jr. responds to his father in the 1960 scene is intimately connected to his future inability to communicate with Hal and Orin. The first-person, present-tense narrative shows Sr.'s answers or comments to Jr.'s questions or interjections, which are implied in the text; Jr. does respond to his father either verbally or through body language.⁴⁶ But Wallace entirely leaves out Jr.'s 'voice' and turns a would-be father-and-son conversation into a self-absorbed soliloquy (which it is technically not, since many of the actions and comments—opening the garage door, telling his son to drop the book, saying how his face contorts and his nose runs when he cries—are evidence of a two-way interaction). This suggests that Sr. plainly ignores his

son or does not understand him at a psychological level. If this scene is illustrative of Sr.'s failure to communicate with his son and to express fatherly love, the detrimental relationship causes lifelong irreparable damage to Jr.

When Incandenza's wraith presents itself to Gately, the reader begins to understand the nature of the relationship between Incandenza and Hal. Some 800 pages before that (and five years earlier, in the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad), the scene⁴⁷ in which Incandenza finagles Hal into visiting a "professional conversationalist" that turns out to be himself in disguise is initially perplexing: Hal, who in this scene is 10, the same age as his father in the monologue scene, knows that his father "hallucinates" about him never speaking (29), which, as we find out later, is the reason Incandenza arranges this fake counseling session.

The conversation begins to break down as Hal starts figuring out that this 'conversationalist' is really his father, who is looking for "daily evidence that you *speak?*" and regrets the "spawned silence" that originates in his own father (31, emphasis original). As Carlisle points out, it is clear that Hal *does* speak, his father just does not listen or *cannot* listen (121). As Hal sees through his father's ruse and tells him he has a tennis match to go to, Incandenza keeps *speaking*—not communicating—with Hal. He just keeps talking, much like his own father in the 1960 scene, in which the one-way monologue shows no regard for the thoughts or feelings of what normally would be the second speaker in a conversation. The last few lines suddenly switch to the perspective of Incandenza, and Hal's voice shuts down; like one of the figurants in the background of a film set, which Incandenza so much despises, Hal simply ceases to speak, as far as his father can tell. The cryptic final lines read:

[Hal:] ‘...’

[Incandenza:] ‘Son?’

[Hal:] ‘...’

[Incandenza:] ‘*Son?*’ (31, emphasis original)

Wallace employs this interesting trick throughout the novel in which he alludes to nonverbal cues—what can be interpreted as cold stares, passive-aggressive silence, confusion, unintelligible noises, lack of empathy or understanding, or just plain silence—through the use of ellipses. In this case, Hal’s ellipses indicate either that he is saying something along the lines of what he just said before but which his father cannot ‘hear’ or perceive anymore (Maybe something like “Dad, I *just told you* I remember that argyle sweater you’re wearing, and that I gotta run to my tennis match, so I *clearly* am able to speak.”), or that he has given up and just sits there in perplexed silence, reflecting his father’s confused terror back at him. Hal’s apparent silence symbolizes the complete breakdown of communication.

What is interesting is that before Incandenza assumes his true identity and admits what he is doing—looking for evidence that his son speaks (31), there *is* a conversation of sorts going on between the two, which suggests that there is a deep level of unintentional mistrust, intimidation, or disconnect when Hal is aware of the presence of his father. Like many postmodern novelists, Wallace is concerned with the level of existence his characters think and *feel* they inhabit, particularly in relation to others and the way others perceive them. If Hal is an extension of his father, himself an extension of *his* father, the acquired traits that are perpetuated might produce an extremely awkward self-consciousness in each generation, making each Incandenza incarnation self-aware of

his status as inheritor of a recursive intergenerational curse, and rendering the Incandenzas (except for the much different Mario) fundamentally incompatible with each other. (The relationship between Hal and Orin, who has geographically and emotionally distanced himself from his family after his father's suicide, is very shallow.) This might explain the chaotic downturn of Hal's conversation with his father, much like it might account for the total lack of communication in the 1960 monologue.

As I am suggesting, all of this adds up, in an intriguing way, to Incandenza's final act of 'kindness' toward Hal, which is the driving force of the novel: the making of his final movie is a double-edged weapon with which he overdoes his final attempt to rescue Hal. But first, it is important to understand Incandenza's interest in annulation and repetitive cycles as symbols of the structure of *IJ*.

PART V — “The Awakening of My Interest in Annular Systems”: the death of Incandenza Sr. and the birth of annulation

Some 330 pages after Incandenza Sr.’s monologue, Wallace takes us to a dysfunctional-family scene in 1963 at the Incandenza home, now in California. Part of the scene serves as a continuation of Sr.’s abusive behavior from the earlier monologue. It is important to digest it in detail, for it explains, however esoterically, Incandenza Jr.’s early interest in annular fusion, the development of which, as we have seen, allows for O.N.A.N.’s recycling of waste to produce energy (which itself produces more waste that fuels more energy, *ad infinitum*). It also accounts for the recurring addictive nature of ‘Infinite Jest,’ and the ring-like structure of the novel—all cyclical or annular patterns. Because Incandenza manifests an early interest in annular fusion and later develops it as the process that actuates both the plot and the design of the novel, he stands in for Wallace’s literary plan behind *IJ*. Let’s try to understand the psychological dimension of the character.

The first thing that thrusts itself into the reader’s attention is the first-person narrative turn. The novel is otherwise mainly told by unidentified third-person narrators that provide free indirect discourse, until the switch to Hal’s first-person narrative in the novel’s final act (and in the opening Year of Glad scene; Hal’s first-person narrative thus bookends *IJ*), which is interspersed with a semi-conscious Gately’s third-person narrative. But no sooner does the 13 year-old James Incandenza’s narrative begin than Wallace mediates it with an authorial comment: what we are reading is presented as a memoir titled ‘The Awakening of My Interest in Annular Systems,’ from the book (fictional to the reader, nonfictional for the characters of *IJ*) *The Chill of Inspiration*:

Spontaneous Reminiscences by Seventeen Pioneers of DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion, released in the Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad (2003) (1034, n. 208). The organization with which the editor (Prof. Günther Sperber) is associated, the Institute for Neutron Physics and Reactor Engineering, Nuclear Research Center (translated from German, infinitejest.wallacewiki.com), is a real organization committed to “research work in the field of nuclear engineering related to the safety of thermal reactors as well as with specific problems of fusion reactor technology” (“Karlsruhe Nuclear Research Center”).

The reference to the memoir is introduced via an intrusive endnote, which is an example of the “mediated consciousness” that readers of *IJ* experience (Wallace qtd. in LeClair 35), making them aware of the presence of an extra-narrative entity: a consciousness outside the novel—the author himself. What is fascinating is how Wallace plays, through the use of this particular endnote, with the ontological status of Incandenza’s memoir: the reader knows the memoir is fictional because the character is fictional, yet, in the world of the novel it is depicted as a biographical (nonfiction) text, published by an organization in Germany whose entity exists in both ontological realms—Incandenza’s world and the reader’s. The memoir (and *The Chill of Inspiration*) thus shares the same status and literary function as the long filmography that makes up endnote 24: what they describe and represent is real for the characters of the novel but not for the reader, with the difference that the memoir is nonfictional for the characters (as are some of Incandenza’s documentaries). But because Wallace goes to great pains to depict Incandenza’s movies (including release date, production company, cast and credits, running time, film format, and synopsis) and the book *The Chill of Inspiration* as

real as any movie or book is for the reader of *IJ* in *his* world, the movies and *The Chill of Inspiration* assume a status in relation to the characters that is analogous to that of *IJ*, in relation to its readers.

Wallace therefore effectively devises and depicts an intertextual encyclopedia *in* the novel and *for* the novel itself, one that stands apart from the plot but still informs it,⁴⁸ the same way that Wallace's own postmodern heritage (novels, films, and other media, which he explicitly refers to in the novel) stands apart from *IJ* but still informs it. Because Incandenza's memoir is nonfictional in the world of the novel, its relation to the characters is analogous to the relation of a biography or an encyclopedia to the readers.

If we analyze 'The Awakening of My Interest in Annular Systems' as an autobiographical sketch of Incandenza's early life—a seemingly mundane urban scene in which a boy helps his father lift a squeaking mattress—we can see a bespectacled, bowtied pre-adult hopelessly detached from his parents; the cold and medical precision of his language indicates a pathological deviation from a normal 13 year-old's relationship with his parents. The purpose of the scene is twofold: to dramatize the sheer unpleasantness and lack of empathy among the Incandenzas, and, more importantly for understanding the person Incandenza grows up to become, to show his autistic turn into himself and his purely mathematical outlook on existence, both of which render him emotionally inaccessible. And yet, he is mentally gifted in such a way that he is able to develop annular fusion. Let's look at the major components of the scene.

Dressed in the white "Man from Glad" costume that he wears for sandwich bag TV commercials (see endnote 44), Incandenza Sr. drinks his tomato juice and demonstrates to his son a loud squeaking noise coming from his bed. Then he tells him

they have to separate the mattress from the box spring and frame to identify the source of the noise. The fixation with a noise that feels like “squeaking ravenous rapacious rats” (492) is part of the novel’s recurring theme of self-defeating obsession and compulsion not grounded in reality. Throughout the scene, Jr. quotes (directly and indirectly) the unpleasantness and sarcasm of his father, which contrasts strongly with Jr.’s otherwise neutral, matter-of-fact tone. When he repeats back to his father what he understood his part was in the plan to remove the mattress, Sr. sardonically tells him that he “was becoming almost frighteningly quick and perceptive” (495). Although the comment is made sarcastically, it is ironic that Sr. doesn’t know that his comment is in fact true, as the scene makes evident.

The mother is essentially mute throughout the scene, not because Jr. chooses to leave her voice out of his memoir, but because she really has nothing to say, or would rather not say anything to her taunting husband. Jr. tells us she is smoking, away in a corner, and submissively reacting to what Sr. tells her to do.

As Jr. and his father struggle with the oversized mattress, he perceives the hoisted mattress as “the hypotenuse of a right dihedral triangle whose legs were myself and the bed’s box spring” (495). Along with other descriptions of geometrical shapes and patterns in the scene, this is the earliest manifestation we encounter of Incandenza’s obsession with mathematics and physics; he sees mathematical patterns in almost any kind of spatial arrangement. Recall that later in life he devises a lens that warps the spatial configuration of the frame in his photography, but not before he understands the mechanics of visual perception and the effects that its distortion produces. This is how he

comes to imitate in ‘Infinite Jest’ what he perceives as the distorted perspective of newborns.

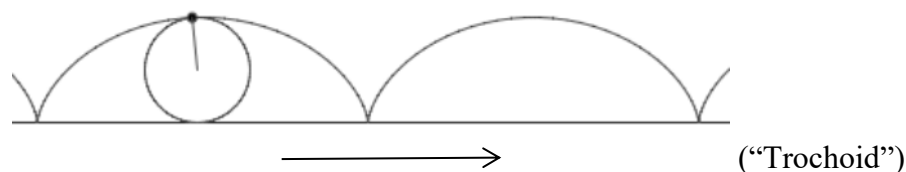
After father and son manage to position the mattress against the wall in the hallway, Sr., drenched in sweat, is disgusted by the accumulation of dust under the bed and the “sour and fungal” smell (498). He taunts and shames his wife about the lack of cleanliness—“Under what presidential administration was this room last deep-cleaned [?]” (*Ibid.*)—but she just quietly and meekly walks out of the room to fetch the vacuum cleaner. Referred to—plainly and unaffectionately—as “my mother,” Jr.’s mother is essentially one of the figurants Jr. grows up to give a voice to in his films, like Wallace gives a ‘voice’ to almost every secondary character in the novel. The fact that Jr.’s abusive father causes his mother to withdraw into silence may be what precipitates his panic, decades later, about Hal’s ‘silence,’ which in turn motivates him to make ‘Infinite Jest.’

As Sr. begins to examine the frame of the bed for any squeaking bolts, his body begins to tremble and he is overtaken by a coughing fit; Jr. describes impassively what appears to be the beginning of a stroke (technically, Sr. dies of cerebral hemorrhage [838]). As his father vomits and agonizes, Jr. determines that the “round smooth head” (500) of the bolts were unlikely to account for the squeaking noises. Sr. collapses violently on the frame, breaking it in half as he lands in an obscene posture, face-down. But Jr. doesn’t rush to aid him, or to alert his mother, or to make an emergency phone call; instead he realizes that the triangular shape his mind had previously perceived “had not in fact even been a closed figure: the box spring and the floor I had stood on did not constitute a continuous plane” (501). With a polite “excuse me,” he calmly steps down

the hallway to help his mother with the heavy vacuum cleaner. At this point, just as she is about to walk back into the bedroom, Jr.'s mother speaks her online line—a simple “thanks,” as he hands her the vacuum cleaner and lets her pass (*Ibid.*). The cold politeness between the two is disquieting, especially because the reader knows that directly down the hallway lies the body of Incandenza Sr., slumped obliquely over the frame of the bed in a pool of expelled tomato juice and gastric material.

The fact that the mother's single monosyllabic response comes immediately after the death of her unloving husband suggests a sense of relief or emancipation. But Wallace only implicitly refers to her encounter with Sr.'s body and her reaction; we remain in Jr.'s perspective, who stands silently in the hallway—“a silence so complete that I could hear the street's lawnmowers all the way out in the hall” (*Ibid.*)—long enough and close enough to be able to hear his mother's reaction. What he hears is his mother plugging in the vacuum cleaner, but makes no comment on any screams or gasps, or any sense of alarm. As Jr. hurries up the stairs, he makes the only seemingly judgmental comment on his father: “the sound of vacuuming has always frightened me in the same *irrational* way it seemed a bed's squeak frightened my father” (*Ibid.*, emphasis added).

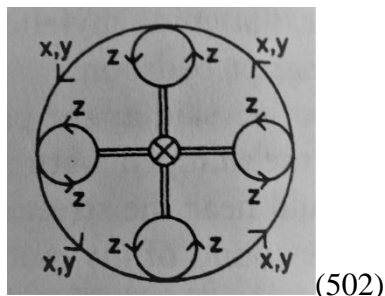
Finally, upstairs in his room, Jr. jumps onto his own bed, attempting to replicate the squeaking noise of his parents' bed. As he lands, he accidentally hits a large lamp next to the bed; it falls slowly and heavily, knocking off the round knob of the adjacent closet. Jr. observes the motion of the knob, which begins to roll down the floor; he describes it as the pattern of a “cycloid” (502), with each cycle of the knob tracing a circular pattern, like this:



The circle represents the knob as it rolls to the right, and the thick black dot any given point on its outer rim making contact with the “bare floor” (the line) of Jr.’s bedroom (*Ibid.*). As the knob rolls on the floor, it traces the semicircular patterns that we see on the straight line above.

If the last few sentences of the scene seem digressive and anticlimactic—seeing how they follow what starts out as a dysfunctional family scene that suggests the arrival of either a profound moment of shared understanding or a chaotic last-straw incident, after which a momentous decision has to be made—and its mathematical descriptions and allusions to “first order differential equations” (502) outright esoteric, the significance of the scene is that it traces the origin of Incandenza’s lifelong obsession with circular patterns.

Now, Incandenza also tells us that there was a (round) hex bolt inside the knob, which remained stationary inside the knob as the latter rolled on its circumference (*Ibid.*). This in effect describes a double circular motion of a circle within a circle: like a spinning top that turns on its own axis while tracing circular patterns, the knob traces circles as it rolls. Looking at the above diagram of the cycloid more closely, if we flip the direction of the small circle so that it is below the straight line, and we turn that line into the circumference of a larger circle, we get what Incandenza calls a “cycloid on a sphere,” which is how he describes the movement of the round hex bolt within the circular knob. It looks like the following diagram, which Wallace and Incandenza give us in the respective text of each—*IJ*, and *The Chill of Inspiration*:



The circular motions perform cycles that are circumscribed by a larger circle, which itself traces a cycle. And this accounts for the general structure that Wallace initially devised for the novel (along with the use of fractals⁴⁹), which, as we have discovered, Incandenza ideates in the novel itself in a meta-referential way. Young James Incandenza’s final ‘epiphany,’ if one can call it that, is that “the movement of the amputated knob perfectly schematized what it would look like for someone to try to turn somersaults with one hand nailed to the floor” (503)—a metaphor that helps to illustrate the technicalities of the geometrical motions Incandenza pictures: at a basic level, annular processes consist of ‘stationary’ motion: circular progress that arrives at the same place where it started, thus “perpetua[ting] stasis” in the same way that the annular fusion at the Great Concavity does (Nichols 7).

The reason this is important to my reading of Incandenza as Wallace’s literary analog is that it describes, if somewhat loosely, the structure of the novel and the different versions of cyclical patterns predominant in the novel. The fact that there is no logical continuity between Sr.’s stroke and Jr.’s initiation in “the possibilities of annulation” (*Ibid.*) intensifies the reader’s perception of the character’s pathological emotional disconnect. Wallace’s experimental shift in tone, and his portrayal of Incandenza’s morbid detachment from his parents and emotional frigidity as he witnesses his father’s rather ghastly death from up close, is disturbingly evocative of the ‘mad

genius' syndrome. Yet, Wallace doesn't overdo it; Jr.'s first-person narrative is mostly succinct and achieves with precision the dual purpose of the scene that I outlined above.

Among many other events and behaviors that constitute cyclical patterns, 41 years later Hal will stumble upon the body of his own father after he commits suicide with a microwave oven. The fact that Wallace, as Incandenza's creator, went on to commit suicide himself may be another completion of these cyclical patterns that recur at both the level of the novel's fictional world and of its real-life counterpart, but that is mere conjecture.

* * *

Speaking of suicide, this might be the right place to do justice to the gruesome details of Incandenza's suicide-by-kitchen-appliance, as a transition into Part VI. Incandenza had spent the last 90 days of his life making 'Infinite Jest' (838), agonizing from alcohol withdrawal: Joelle had made him quit as a condition for her to appear in the movie. After 13 year-old Hal finds his father's body in the kitchen of Headmaster's House at E.T.A., where his mother lives (and is soon joined by her incestuous half-brother Charles Tavis), the suicide scene is reconstructed, as Hal narrates to Orin via a long-distance phone call while he nonchalantly clips his toenails.

Incandenza had cut a hole in the door of a rotisserie microwave oven (note that the rotisserie consists of a skewer that rotates in cycles), stuck his head in, and closed the space around his neck with aluminum foil (250). According to the Boston Police Department, Hal says, "the build-up of internal pressures [was] equivalent to over two sticks of TNT" (251). Incandenza's final act of technical ingenuity was explosive, from wall to wall. But the grisly black humor-esque aspect aside, the significance of his suicide

method corresponds with Wallace's commentary on the lethality of technology: Incandenza's death-by-microwave is related to 'Infinite Jest' to the extent that both electric appliance and film are insidious technologies that can produce adverse consequences (death, in Wallace's satirical treatment) if the user loses control over them. Let's now finally turn to 'Infinite Jest' in detail to explore this further.

PART VI — The Entertainment

a) “The thinly veiled cries of a man at the very terminus of his existential tether” (*IJ* 789): the plot

On April 2 of the YDAU, the medical attaché is still repeatedly watching the entertainment cartridge of the previous day. By mid-afternoon, he and his wife have been joined by his boss and two security guards, among other unlucky passersby (87). They all seem to have regressed into a fixation on the immediate satisfaction of their bottom-rung needs. They are entertained beyond reason.

* * *

Wallace’s obsessive detailing of the technical aspects of Incandenza’s films provide the tools to assemble the fragments of ‘Infinite Jest,’ left unfinished at the time of the auteur’s death; its master copy either locked away somewhere or buried with Incandenza. Although there are several accounts of the contents of this mysterious movie, some of which are contradictory, it is part of Wallace’s strategy to leave out the connecting tissue between the disparate elements that are scattered in the novel. The depiction of the movie resembles the general plotline of *IJ*, since Wallace strategically leaves out the interstitial material that would, if we had it, coherently connect the novel’s three main plotlines. In this way, not only is *IJ* anticonfluent; the deliberate ambiguity of the contents of ‘Infinite Jest,’ and Wallace’s limited depiction of it, also make the movie anticonfluent.

The allure of a movie that is so entertaining that it kills the viewer engages the reader’s curiosity in tandem with the surfacing of the movie as the novel progresses.

‘Infinite Jest’ works as a *MacGuffin* (qtd. in Sayers 346) that calls attention to itself and

moves the plot forward. As the reader and the characters simultaneously try to discover how the movie could possibly capture the viewer's attention so strongly that he/she would rather die than turn away from it, a logical explanation becomes less important than its symbolism, which provides compelling philosophical commentary on society. 'Infinite Jest' is then a clever ploy—note that its title describes itself—to satirize millennial America's obsession with entertainment and society's inevitable plunge into addiction, both of which have had the tragic outcome of unprecedented loneliness and despair in our postindustrial era.

Toward my reading of *Incandenza* and 'Infinite Jest' as the fictional counterparts of Wallace's real-life project, of which *IJ* is an instantiation, it is important to reconstruct and interpret the fragments of the movie; most of what the reader is told about it comes from the ex-beautiful, now disfigured Joelle van Dyne,⁵⁰ the main actor in the movie, credited with her former radio show name "Madame Psychosis."⁵¹ Though she is in the movie, Joelle is none the wiser about what it means, though she knows that *Incandenza* had meant it to be particularly 'entertaining.'

As a slight digression into Wallace's technical mastery of the English prose, though one that is still pertinent to 'Infinite Jest,' I would like to look closely at one of the dozens of intricately-constructed long sentences in the novel, worth quoting here in full to retain Wallace's idiosyncratic syntax:

[a] Joelle's never seen the complete assembly of what she'd appeared in, or seen anyone who's seen it, [b] and doubts that any sum of scenes as pathologic as he'd stuck that long quartz auto-wobbling lens on the camera and filmed her for [c]

could have been as entertaining as he'd said the thing he'd always wanted to make [d] had broken his heart by ending up. (228, brackets added)

Typical of Wallace's maximalist prose style—perhaps the antithesis of Hemingway's concision—through which he bombards the reader not only with a great deal of data but also nuanced interconnections and allusions, there is a lot to savor and to untangle here: In fragments [a] and [b] the syntax is fairly standard: Joelle has neither seen the movie (presumably after however far its editing/post-production got) nor seen anyone who has. In fragment [b], the third-person narrator informs us that Incandenza had used a quartz-like wobbly lens—which, with the context of information provided elsewhere, we can conjecture resulted in a shaky and amorphous image (like the texture of the quartz mineral)—that resulted in a 'pathologic' (as in thoroughly unorthodox) sum of scenes; and that the camera filmed Joelle with that lens. Fragment [c] is the dependent clause of what the narrator says Joelle doubts, though here the sentence gets very complicated as it reaches the closing fragment [d]: Joelle doubts that any sum of scenes in which she appeared could have been as entertaining as Incandenza said they (the scenes, or—by extension—the film) actually were. And, as a parenthetical remark, the fact that the film became (according to what Incandenza told her) as entertaining as he had expected, which is what he had always wanted to accomplish, "broke his heart."

It is not clear why the 'success' of the movie broke his heart; maybe this is an intimation that Incandenza immediately grasped the lethality of the film, which might explain why he locked it away; however, as is usual with Wallace, he often subverts the norms of language and treats idioms irregularly, or for effects that deviate from the expected. Ambiguity always hangs in the air. Finally, it is oddly striking to finish a

sentence with the phrase “by ending up.” At first glance, the syntax makes it feel as though the phrase is dangling out, but a careful look at the arrangement of the words reveals an implicit logical connection to the adjectival syntax of [c]: the “ending up” syntactically circles back to “as entertaining.” So, if we simplify [c] and [d] further: Incandenza’s heart was broken by the movie having ended up as entertaining as he had meant it to be (a statement that Joelle doubts). This simplified sentence is a linear arrangement of the *cyclical* arrangement of the original [c] and [d].

By virtue of being involuted, complex, and composed of several word classes that (without clearly making it explicit) suggest syntactical and logical connections to each other, this single sentence microcosmically represents the novel itself. The “ending up” that hangs out refers back to the sentence of which it is a part, just like the inconclusive plot strands of *IJ* refer to larger plot elements that encompass them (and the protracted drug use scene with Gately and his friend Eugene Fackelmann, in the last several pages of the book, hangs out inconclusively). The fact that the ending of the novel circles back to the beginning (which chronologically depicts the latest events) suggests the micro- to macro-level parallelism encapsulated in this single sentence.

* * *

If we look again at Incandenza’s filmography, the entry for ‘Infinite Jest’ doesn’t provide anything in the way of plot, but quotes from a fictional *Cartridge Quarterly East* academic article⁵² that supposedly noted the film’s “radical experiments in viewer’s optical perspective and context” as its “distinctive feature” (993 n. 24). By piecing together several fragmentary descriptions of the movie, two seemingly unconnected scenes emerge, both featuring Joelle:

- Scene 1: According to a subject whose vital signs are being monitored by the U.S.O.U.S. as he is subjected to a test-screening of a read-only copy, ‘Infinite Jest’ opens with “a veiled woman [Joelle] going through a large building’s revolving doors and catching a glimpse of someone else in the revolving doors [which] makes her veil billow” (549). When Joelle is interviewed by Steeply, she adds that the two characters are “supposedly formerly very close,” though they have not seen each other in a long time. As the veiled woman makes eye contact with the man (an androgynous-looking character), each attempts to go all the way around the revolving door to meet the other, thereby missing one another (938).
- Scene 2: According to the not-very-reliable Molly Notkin, a Death-Mother figure (played by Joelle)—“some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure of Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant [apparently achieved through the use of Incandenza’s special lens, which strategically distorts the image of her]” (788)—looks down into a low-positioned camera and talks to the viewer (as if speaking to the film’s spectator) in a baby-like tone, saying that “Death is always female, [...] and that the woman who kills you is always your next life’s mother” (*Ibid*). Joelle tells Steeply that the camera with the wobbly lens was placed inside a type of crib, over which she leans in the scene in a soothing maternal way to apologize, obsequiously repeating “I’m so sorry. I’m so terribly sorry,” and variations thereof ad nauseam (939).

In the first scene, the complete revolution of the doors represents the cyclical addiction that the movie immediately instigates in every viewer; it also symbolizes the cyclical structure of the novel itself. And it becomes apparent that the scene symbolizes a stage of

transition beyond—or *into*—life: either the transmigration of the soul into a state of limbo where it meanders until called back into its next life in a different body (see ‘metempsychosis’ in endnote 51), or the biological process of parturition. What Scene 1 does, in effect, is to transport the viewer back to fetal existence inside the coziness of the womb, before the beginning of the ‘horror’ of life.

To understand the purpose of the androgynous character in the scene, it is particularly illuminating to draw on the post-structuralist theories of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.⁵³ According to Lacan, the human subject is defined by a sense of loss that happens in stages;⁵⁴ the first such loss begins at “the moment of sexual differentiation within the womb” and is completed right after birth (Sarup 21). The Lacanian notion of the reflection of the self in the mirror as a deeply disconcerting experience is not new; in *IJ*, the A.F.R. (see endnote 18) erects gigantic mirrors across U.S. highways as a terrorist act: unsuspecting drivers misinterpret the reflection of their own car (symbolic of the drivers’ individuality) as an oncoming car and instinctively veer off the highway to avoid a head-on collision (*IJ* 1015).⁵⁵ In Lacanian theory, the mirror stage “marks the moment when a child first acquires an individual subjectivity [...] or recognizes that [he or] she is a discreet self, separate from others” (Boswell 129). In the novel, Wallace satirizes Lacan’s mirror stage by depicting the imposed self-reflection as a weapon that comes out of nowhere and nearly kills the subject.

If we consider again the androgynous character from Scene 1, a central argument for Lacan is the “notion of an original androgynous whole” (Sarup 21), which is lost during gestation by way of sexual differentiation. This is reminiscent of Aristophanes’ tale in Plato’s *Symposium*: there was an original pre-human being with both male and

female parts, Aristophanes tells the gathering, which was cut in half by Zeus, thereby resulting in the male and female human counterparts who desire each other to be once again ‘complete’ (Sarup 22). In connection to the movie, because the ‘man’ is androgynous and used to be “very close” to the veiled woman, and both have not seen each other in a long time, there is a strong suggestion of a primordial, pre-gender stage.

The androgyne (or hermaphrodite), then, represents—in Lacan’s theory—the loss that has *not yet happened*, and the return of the subject (the veiled woman) to that pre-loss state.⁵⁶ Both characters are essentially one and the same—complements of each other. But note that they converge in time and space only in a centrifugal way that pulls them *away* from each other and never allows them to actually meet. The fact that they are not able to meet will become more clear in connection to the second scene, especially in relation to what Wallace portrays as a guilty type of motherly love in the “I’m so sorry” speech (see below).

In connection to the infantilism that the movie represents, recall that the visual style of the movie is “supposed to reproduce an infantile visual field” (*Ibid.*);⁵⁷ Sayers argues that “infancy and childhood represent narcissistic susceptibility to the fatal Entertainment, yet they also represent something of humanity” (348). Through the symbolism of ‘Infinite Jest,’ Wallace dramatizes humanity’s desire to return to a pre-linguistic state of innocence (recall that Wallace’s plan is to expose the threat of irony and cynicism as expressed, predominantly, through language). This does not entail, in practicality, a disavowal of language, but a return to authenticity in language and to non-ironic communication, which is in direct relation to the core human values and to the fulfillment of the wants and needs that make us human.

Another Lacanian aspect that is related to the cyclical quality of *IJ* and connects directly to my broader analysis of *Incandenza* and ‘Infinite Jest,’⁵⁸ is the philosopher’s idea of the “desire for desire” (Sarup 20). There is something delusional in human nature that makes us desire “an object that could be given only to *us*” (Sarup 21, emphasis original); the ‘object’ in question could be love (perhaps most clearly manifested in monogamous relationships) or a sense of belonging, in terms of the fulfillment of human needs. But when the need for love is satisfied, it is quickly supplanted by a new desire, which soon becomes frustrated: “Desire emerges when satisfaction of need is not enough, when there is a doubt or gap which cannot be closed. Desire arises out of the lack of satisfaction and it pushes you to another demand. In other words, it is the disappointment of demand that is the basis of the growth of desire” (*Ibid.*). If we look at ‘Infinite Jest,’ then, as a simulation of the fulfillment of a fundamental human desire that in reality cannot ever be completely satisfied, the recursive nature of the continuum of desire—satisfaction—desire—partial-satisfaction—more desire—frustration—and *augmented* desire emerges and helps to explain the addictiveness of the movie.

The initial satisfaction that we derive from partially fulfilled needs always creates a gap, or emptiness, which itself creates more needs that cannot ever be fulfilled. Although Lacan’s theory, as dramatized in *IJ*, helps to locate the source of unhappiness in millennial America, it is also a “trap,” which the novel parodies, according to Boswell: if an overpowering longing to return to the comfort of the mother’s womb is at the core of the adult human psyche, then this might account for the collective burden that we bear, but it only creates further problems of its own (Boswell 130). Because it pacifies and entertains its viewers, but in the long run kills them, ‘Infinite Jest’ is a satirical

exaggeration of this Lacanian principle. As we have seen, this unhealthy cycle of desire and frustration is also replicated and reiterated throughout the novel on different levels of structure and meaning (see endnote 49).

When Steeply interviews Joelle, it emerges that Incandenza, with whom Joelle was close in the last years of his life, had wanted to make a “perfect entertainment” that was “terminally compelling” (940). But according to Joelle he had meant this in an *ironic* way: she had assumed that the impenetrability of the scenes could not possibly result in anything even close to entertaining, so Joelle interpreted his theory that the movie was so “perfect” that it would entertain people to death as an ironic joke (*Ibid.*). Now, based on the multiple plotlines that Wallace gives us, we know that Incandenza was in fact not being ironic or facetious: like the proverbial man who so persistently and annoyingly jokes and pretends (recall “The Joke”) that when he *does* have something serious and important to say he gets laughed away, usually resulting in some dire consequence, Incandenza inadvertently sets himself up to be misunderstood by Joelle and by the whole world: his movie *is* in fact lethal because, in a way, it works so well. But he was not unambiguously direct about it, not with Joelle nor with anyone else: he framed the intention of ‘Infinite Jest’ in the context of his anti-narrative, anti-entertainment films, which, as we saw earlier, were *unentertaining* technical experiments usually panned by critics and hardly even known by the mainstream public, yet analyzed in academic publications.

By referring to the movie as a “perfect entertainment,” Incandenza was being meta-ironic, or ironic about a perceived state of irony, which counters—or forestalls—a previously-existing irony. The result is Incandenza’s reversal into the non-irony, or

sincerity that Wallace called for. If we substitute Wallace for Incandenza—*Infinite Jest* for ‘Infinite Jest’—we can see that Incandenza’s judgment of his movie in the context of his filmography parallels Wallace’s judgment of this novel in the context of postmodern fiction. In this way, the symbolism of ‘Infinite Jest’ reaches *beyond* the novel and serves as a cautionary wake-up call about the ‘lethality’ of the irony furnished by post-WWII fiction and—as elaborated in “E Unibus Pluram”—appropriated by TV and the postmodern culture that engendered it. *IJ* is thus Wallace’s anti-ironic project unfolding in self-referential action.

In Marathe and Steeply’s conversation, it emerges that the allure of the film can be attributed to Incandenza’s advanced use of holography. Apparently, an advanced holographic projection would create the “neural density of an actual stage play without losing the selective realism of the viewer-screen” (490-491). Although we cannot definitively know how the movie produces immediate hopeless addiction in viewers, to the point that they become catatonic and eventually die of dehydration, Wallace goes to such great pains to describe its technical composition that the plausibility of its lethality is impossible to dismiss (the obvious sci-fi element notwithstanding).

Interestingly, the film, which is described by Joelle’s third-person narrator as “scopophilic,”⁵⁹ corresponds to a hypothetical “purest, most refined pleasure imaginable [such as the] neural distillate of, say, orgasm, religious enlightenment, ecstatic drugs” (473),⁶⁰ but, as we can ascertain from the scenes described above, without being overtly sexual or pornographic. Wallace succeeds in representing ‘Infinite Jest’ both as a symbol of the moral decay in society and as a narrative device that prompts the storyline. As a “metaphor for the soullessness of a society driven by consumerism and self-gratification”

(Dowling 30), the movie exposes the infantile desire for immediate pleasure and instant gratification that is inherent in the human psyche.

The second scene is thus an instantiation of our most basic need for motherly love: to rekindle the viewer's strong desire to be unconditionally loved and cared for by an all-loving mother, the camera is positioned in a bassinet and looks up at a mother figure. The lens imitates the infant's new, imperfectly formed field of vision.⁶¹ The repetitive "I'm sorry" monologue, spoken directly to the viewer, represents humankind's fundamental need to be placated, reverting to an infantile desire for immediate mollification. For Hayles, the speech is also an apology for the movie's own recursivity, as if that were the problem "rather than the deadly illusion of autonomy" that the movie projects (692). And the infantile desire that the movie pacifies in cycles is carried into adulthood; the near impossibility to satisfy this basic yearning and to gain reprieve from discomfort are exacerbated by the myriad challenges of adult life.

* * *

In the fictionalized version of America in the 1990s—a materialistic, entertainment-fueled society—Incandenza's 'Infinite Jest' is a satirical symbol of the difficulty in fulfilling inborn human desires, which commercial TV and the advertising industry have tyrannized and industrialized. This industry pacifies our deepest wants and needs with a momentary substitute that provides no long-term solution. TV projects the illusion of belonging—of being engaged in something more significant, perhaps more *real*, than our petty human lives, while paid advertising fabricates false wants and needs and convinces consumers that those needs are real, and that the solution is the purchasing

of a product or service. As a potent symbol of the novel, it is important to understand where Wallace was coming from; in the *ZDF* interview mentioned earlier, he said:

Television and corporate entertainment—because it’s so expensive—in order to make money, it has to appeal to a very wide audience, which means it has to find things that a lot of people have in common. What most of us have in common is the most base, uninteresting, selfish, stupid interests: physical attractiveness, sex, a certain kind of easy humor, vivid spectacle. That’s stuff I will immediately look at, and so will you. It’s in our most base and childish interests that we are a mass; [whereas] the things that make us interesting and unique and human tend to be wildly different between people. (“DFW Uncut Interview”)

‘Infinite Jest,’ then, is a lowest-common-denominator free-for-all, whose only purpose is the immediate satisfaction of our most vulgar instincts. The film—particularly the repeated mother-to-child apology monologue—is a grossly and comically exaggerated satire of the demand for gratification that has been institutionalized in corporate America through our ‘customer is always right’ mentality; our 1-800 monitored customer service calls, in which we are treated with disingenuous politeness and told to ‘have a nice day’;⁶² and the quality-check phone surveys to make sure we are completely satisfied after a transaction. If we are not, repeated apologies and refunds are readily forthcoming.

In a way, the movie pokes fun at this puerile, sycophantic, and superficial way in which we treat each other, putting on a façade of friendliness and civility, when we all know, deep inside, that meaningful relationships are much more complicated than that and in fact require emotional openness and vulnerability. Genuine relationships, and *earnest* civility and concern for the wellbeing of others, requires much dedication, but it

is perhaps the only way to establish authentic human connections. And what should be common courtesy toward others has been commercialized and exploited into a self-congratulating customer service industry that pats itself on the back for doing a good job while perpetuating our inherent infantile need to be pleased, which is at odds with the indifference, hardship, and often outright hostility that we face in *real* life.

The industrialization of products and services designed to please us projects the false appearance that our individual desires objectively matter, that *we* matter, and that the fulfillment of our desires is important. This is the delusion that the consumerist mentality Wallace dreaded creates among the mass population, while ignoring small-scale attempts by isolated individuals (recall Hal's hero of non-action) whose focus on anti-consumerist self-transcendence and self-edification might result in meaningful social change, but only as a positive byproduct. However, as the mother figure in 'Infinite Jest' reminds us, we are continuously pampered and seduced by TV and advertising, which the industry dumbs down into "vulgar, prurient, dumb stuff" that is consumed "at the astounding average per-household dose of six hours a day" (a rate that Wallace attributes to 'statisticians' in 1993's "E Unibus Pluram" 22, 37).

* * *

Wallace's approach for *IJ* includes the restriction of the pleasure derived from mimesis that we usually feel in less convoluted novels; he makes the reader 'work' to understand the slowly merging plotlines that don't have a clearly-defined resolution. His plan is to replicate the indirect way in which true happiness is often found in real life: the Aristotelian kind—meaningful and long-lasting, but that nevertheless only happens as the byproduct of hard work (McCaffery 1). This is happiness as the consequence of activities

worthier than the pursuit of happiness—not an end in itself. The compensation of slogging through *IJ* is, precisely in this way, only achieved by interpreting it, for there is no easy three-part structure with a discernible conclusion, which is likely the case of the TV shows and lowbrow entertainment that the novel—and some of Incandenza’s films—parodies. Toward this end, Wallace uses the shallowness of television as a foil to call attention to the human values that really matter, or that should matter. Symbolized by ‘Infinite Jest,’ TV and film, as mass entertainment, “engages without demanding” and allows the viewer to “receive without giving” (“E Unibus” 37). In this respect, the novel calls attention to its own need to be analyzed, and to the need for the reader’s active participation in the process of interpreting it, while making social commentary on the decline of human values.

With this, let’s return to something that has been broached in this essay but not given full attention yet: exactly for what purpose James Incandenza makes ‘Infinite Jest’ (which the novel makes clear), and whether it *works* for its intended purpose (which is open to interpretation). Incandenza’s wraith tells Gately that he had spent the last three months of his life in sobriety to “to contrive a medium [the movie] via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*” (838, emphasis original).⁶³ Impersonating a therapist had not worked (see Part IV), nor had anything else; ‘Infinite Jest’ was Incandenza’s final attempt to clutch at the ‘infant’ in Hal and “reverse thrust on [his] fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life” (839). He ends up devising a way, as described above, to appeal to Hal’s most basic infantilism, “to make [the infant’s] 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 [an

apology for the self-absorbed, obsessive personality Incandenza has inherited from his father and passed on to Hal. See Scene 2, above]” (*Ibid.*).

Hager notes that by revealing to Gately his plan to save Hal, Wallace as Incandenza exposes to the reader the novel’s “explanation of its own narrative dynamics” (Hager). But in reaching for the fundamental humanness in Hal—the emotional component that is silently screaming for empathy and communion—his father overachieves what he sets out to do, which results in the lowest-human-needs mass appeal of the movie.

But did it *work*? Toward the end of *IJ*, there are signs that Hal is changing somehow, though in the direction of who he has become by the opening scene in the Year of Glad, when he is interviewed at the University of Arizona. The most obvious stylistic change in the prose is the return to the first person; it is as though Hal has finally been given a ‘voice,’ though apparently at a terrible price. Wallace is strategically ambiguous about what effected the change: the implication is that Hal has either watched ‘Infinite Jest’ or consumed the potent hallucinogen DMZ⁶⁴ that Pemulis procures, neither of which contingencies we have evidence for, although we do know that Hal is also undergoing severe marijuana withdrawals.

Now, if Hal did watch ‘Infinite Jest,’ he is more likely to have done it during the missing year, around the time when Hal and Gately exhume Incandenza (17), who had indicated that the master copy of the movie was to be buried with him (483). Whatever happens to Hal after the final act of the novel, in which he lies supine in deep first-person reflection, and before his University of Arizona interview, we can be sure that it is something quite serious. A full analysis of this change, especially as manifested and

comically exaggerated in the interview, is beyond the scope of this essay;⁶⁵ what I do want to explore is the possibility that Hal watches the movie—since I am concerned with Incandenza as its creator and how film and filmmaker are self-referential devices in *IJ*—and what this does to Hal.

For critics like Bartlett, ‘Infinite Jest’ is “indubitably a failure” (382); I would argue, though, that *if* Hal watches the movie, it does work for him, but only to the degree that it jolts him out of his stupor and anhedonia and puts him in touch with his inner feelings that make him unique (but, ironically, with the compromise of not being able to *communicate* such feelings with the world outside of his own head). Hal has achieved an early “spiritual puberty,” which makes him terribly aware of his loneliness as “excluded engagement in the self” (694). This is how he feels throughout most of the novel, until the switch to first-person narrative that starts on 20 November in the YDAU (851).

On that day, Hal begins to recognize and *accept* his emotions (“I’d felt for almost a week as if I needed to cry for some reason but the tears were somehow stopping just millimeters behind my eyes” (*Ibid.*); his deep introspection suggests that a climactic moment of self-understanding is imminent, which is interrupted by the early stages—around the time when Incandenza’s wraith begins to manifest itself at E.T.A.⁶⁶—of the extreme communication breakdown he experiences in the Year of Glad. One of Hal’s last scenes includes a strange conversation with Kenkle, a janitor at E.T.A. Kenkle comments on Hal’s “hilarity”:

[Hal:] What hilarity?

[Kenkle:] What hilarity he says. Your face is a hilarity-face. It’s working hilariously. At first it merely looked *a*-mused. Now it is open-ly

cach-inated. You are almost doubled over. You can barely get your words out [*sic*]. (875)

The references to hilarity and cachinnation are strongly reminiscent of the grotesque, helpless, and irreversible pleasure that the victims of ‘Infinite Jest’ we encounter elsewhere in the novel feel. In his final deterioration, toward the end of the novel but before the missing year, Hal’s face assumes “various expressions ranging from distended hilarity to scrunched grimace” (966), and his photographic memory begins to fade (952). This suggests that he may have watched the movie by this point.

Whatever happens to Hal in the missing year, he becomes aware of his own feelings by the Year of Glad, even if he cannot communicate at all anymore. His mask of irony, behind which he has hidden all his life in order to feel ‘safe,’ is no longer there: “I’m not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions,” he says (to himself) at the interview (12).⁶⁷ Carlisle considers the possibility that in the missing year Hal may have been abducted by the A.F.R. (in the main YDAU narrative, the A.F.R. terrorists are following Orin, so it is conceivable that they have also been following Hal) and forced to watch ‘Infinite Jest’ (480). So, if Hal watches the movie, it only ‘works’ to the extent that it puts him in touch with his own humanity, with the compromise that other people cannot perceive that. There is a gross discrepancy between what he now feels and what others register in his facial expressions, voice, and body language.

While ‘Infinite Jest’ ‘helps’ Hal to feel *something*, it kills everyone else who happens to watch the movie;⁶⁸ the question ensues: if Hal does watch the movie, why doesn’t it kill him too? While there is no definitive answer, one could conjecture—in contrast to Carlisle, who posits that the effect of the movie on Hal “presumably would be

the same as on other people” (480)—that because he is intellectually gifted, emotionally withdrawn, analytically self-aware and in a certain regard the reincarnation of his father—who by virtue of being the maker of the film is presumably immune to its lethality—Hal has a significantly higher threshold for entertainment than that of the average person and can thus resist the lure of the movie.

* * *

Although the plot details are intentionally ambiguous, Wallace’s strategy is clear: his aim is to make the reader actively hypothesize about the missing plot details, decipher the symbolism of the movie, and piece together the novel’s fractured chronology. *IJ* finally aims beyond itself: it is not a neatly packaged self-contained story, but a portal into all the references—in fiction and nonfiction—that inform it, found in the novel itself and in all its real-life influences. This is Wallace’s step toward a post-postmodern strategy, in which he reveals in the course of the novel its own design, while adding authorial comments that expose the novel’s artificiality to finally underscore its relationship with the real world beyond the page.

PART VI — The Entertainment

b) The return of the Death-Mother: Wagner, Lacan, and ‘Infinite Jest’

To close this analysis of ‘Infinite Jest,’ let’s revisit the symbolism of the Death-Mother figure, which is related to the novel’s direct reference to the *Liebestod* (“love death”) myth, itself popularized by Richard Wagner’s 19th century opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Surprisingly, there appear to be no scholarly articles yet that deal with the connections between the *Liebestod* myth, particularly as depicted in the opera, and *IJ*. I

will draw parallels between the opera and the film-within-novel via the previously-noted Lacanian undertones of ‘Infinite Jest.’

Among the many comically pseudo-intellectual comments (attributed to the unreliable Molly, and distilled by a third-person narrator who recounts them) retold in the “findings” from Molly Notkin’s interview with the U.S.O.U.S., Molly says that “the entire perfect-entertainment-as-*Liebestod* myth surrounding the purportedly lethal final cartridge was nothing more than a classic illustration of the antinomically [paradoxical] schizoid function of the post-industrial capitalist mechanism, whose logic presented commodity as the escape-from-anxieties-of-mortality-which-escape-is-itself-psychologically-fatal” (792). Whatever that means can best be interpreted by looking closely at *Tristan und Isolde*, whose libretto by the composer depicts a love that can paradoxically only be fulfilled in death.⁶⁹ In the *Liebestod* scene, with which the opera concludes, Isolde blissfully extols a mortally-wounded Tristan (as she also dies), thus consummating their transcendental love (Bergstein 749).

Moshe Bergstein also draws on Lacan to study the psychological dimensions of the characters Tristan and Isolde, and the latter’s “ensuing fantasies of love and death” (748); Bergstein observes that since Isolde’s new husband, King Mark of Cornwall, is her lover Tristan’s uncle, who had adopted Tristan as a baby (and is thus a father figure to him), there is an Oedipal dimension to the myth: Tristan attempts a kind of assisted suicide twice, once by drinking what he and Isolde thought was poison, and again when he lets Melot—King Mark’s knight—wound him. His wish to die represents a wish “to merge with the pre-Oedipal mother” (Bergstein 753). Similarly, the psychological hook

of ‘Infinite Jest’ is the semblance of a return to the viewer’s innocent relationship with his mother during infancy.

Citing Lacan, Sayers argues that in the movie, “narcissistic identification with an infant seems to provide one of the keys to the power of the Entertainment” (348). In this way, there is in ‘Infinite Jest’ a kind of transmutation of the Oedipal complex, whereby the subject returns to the love of his mother without killing his father, but the mother in turn kills her child.

In the opera, Isolde, who has become infatuated with Tristan, becomes a mother figure to him (his aunt) through her marriage to his uncle. Tristan’s infatuation with Isolde as a mother figure, and his death at the hand of Mark’s knight following Tristan’s betrayal of his uncle, who is a father figure to him, represent a “symbolic castration”—in Lacanian theory—whereby “the father castrates the child by separating it from its mother.” But the positive outcome of the ‘castration’ is the beginning of the child’s personal independence and maturation (Sarup 9).⁷⁰ Through her shared experience with Tristan of “the binding power of love and the annihilation of death” (Bergstein 748), Isolde consummates their love with a mutual love-death, and thus becomes analogous to Joelle’s Death-Mother figure in ‘Infinite Jest.’

The Lacanian ‘subject’ (each individual) spends his or her life “desiring a return to that early wholeness, that lost one-to-one connection with the (m)other” (Boswell 130), which cannot ever be achieved or fulfilled. The movie engages the viewer infinitely because it provides a continuous escape from the anxiety of mortality—an angst that is nonetheless a sign of mental maturity in adults (recall Hal’s “spiritual puberty” above). The longing for a return to “maternal plenitude” (Boswell 131), which ‘Infinite Jest’

appeals to, and Tristan and Isolde's longing for their love-death, both represent what C.E. Harrang called the "return to the primal darkness of uterine existence before the 'catastrophe' of birth and human consciousness" (qtd. in Bergstein 753).

To consider more closely these pre-Oedipal allusions, the longing for motherly love, and the concept of the mother's infanticide of her child—Isolde kills, or 'eases,' Tristan into death, and Joelle as the Death-Mother 'entertains' viewers to death—let's analyze the following passage from Gately's dream as he lies in the hospital fighting extreme pain after rejecting prescribed narcotics: in his dream, Gately is visited by his childhood neighbor, Mrs. Waite, who is condensed into Joelle. Both women represent Death, who says that

the woman who either knowingly or involuntarily kills you is always someone you love, and she's always your next life's mother. This is why Moms are so obsessively loving, why they try so hard no matter what private troubles or issues or addictions they have of their own, why they seem to value your welfare above their own, and why there's always a slight, like, twinge of selfishness about their obsessive mother-love: they're trying to make amends for a murder neither of you quite remember, except maybe in dreams. (850)⁷¹

Boswell makes a strong connection between the "woman who kills you" and the addictive substances that control the lives of the drug addicts at Ennet House: after the onset of addiction, "their preaddiction selves are murdered, [...] while the woman-murderer [the drug] becomes the mother-creator of their new addictive lives" (133). The drug figuratively kills the addict and generates a new self in him or her, one that is a slave to the "woman-murderer," or the drug. And these are horrible lives, as the novel's scenes

of drug use vividly dramatize. The Death-Mother provides a dangerous comfort or solace from the adversity of real life; and after she kills you—like potent, high-dependency drugs often kill the user—she welcomes you again into your *next* life, as your new mother, providing a more pure and innocent kind of motherly love, until the cycle starts again.

The connection of this to the movie’s “I’m sorry” speech is also strongly suggested: if the viewer is entranced by the pleasurable sensation of being pacified, the mother’s apology has a more practical purpose, especially since the birth-love-death cycle recurs indefinitely in this mythical version of life. But what both *Tristan und Isolde* and ‘Infinite Jest’ represent is the innate human tendency to prefer a post-maternal-filicide transcendental bliss⁷²—followed by a half-existence in limbo and/or rebirth through a new Death-Mother—instead of a mundane kind of love and happiness in earthly existence, one that only comes infrequently and is always compromised by the hardships of everyday life. And this, of course, is an illusion that runs against the reality of life as we know it.

* * *

When Mario walks around the E.T.A. grounds with a camera strapped to his head, shooting a documentary about the academy, he stumbles into Schtitt’s soundproofed room, from which a recording of a Wagner opera is playing loudly. When he steps in, he notices that Schtitt is sleeping to it. There is a “duet that keeps climbing in pitch and emotion: a German second tenor and a German soprano are either very happy or very unhappy or both” (756); the soprano then “leaves the baritone [the tenor?] and goes up to a high D and just hangs there, either shattered or ecstatic” (*Ibid.*). Like the hospitalized

Gately who dreams of Mrs. Waite/Joelle as the Death-Mother, Schtitt—who “sleeps only amid excruciatingly loud European opera” (756)—is also unconscious but presumably familiar with the story of *Tristan und Isolde*. He could in fact be listening to the long love duet from Act II (the Tristan and Isolde roles are performed by tenor and soprano, respectively), or to Isolde’s concluding *Liebestod* over the dying Tristan, in Act III.

The happy/unhappy and shattered/ecstatic dualities are intentional: like the conflicted ephemeral love of the fated lovers—marked simultaneously by the ecstasy of passion in the flesh and by their knowledge of their own impending doom—the grotesque rictus impressed on the face of every ‘Infinite Jest’ victim registers both the vulgar pleasure to which they have fatally succumbed *and* their internal, biological process of dying, as dehydration and starvation slowly set in. And so, death “emerges as the only resolution of this paradox” (Bergstein 757), and is manifested both in Tristan and Isolde’s fulfillment of their mutual death-wish to surmount the impossibility of their love in life, and in the death of every ‘Infinite Jest’ viewer, who unconsciously longs for endless gratification of his or her most basic and infantile needs.

“Unhip earnestness”: Conclusion

After Hal's fiasco at E.T.A., in which he almost loses in a public tennis match against the younger Ortho Stice, trainer Aubrey deLint tells him that “You just never quite occurred out there, kid,” the implication of which “chills Hal to the root” (686). The inference that Hal is disappearing, being erased, or ceasing to ‘occur,’ dramatizes Wallace's postmodern concern with the ontological status of his characters. Hal retreats to a viewing room to watch some of his late father's movies; one of them is the short film “Wave Bye-Bye to the Bureaucrat,” mentioned earlier in Part III. The film depicts an unremarkable everyman, very much like Frank Furillo from “Hill Street Blues” (recall Hal's seventh-grade essay, discussed in Part II). Despite being “efficient” and “a good worker and a fine man,” the titular bureaucrat has the habit of arriving late to work every morning (687). When his supervisor gives him a last warning, the third-person narrator interjects that “It's no accident that in a bureaucracy getting fired is called ‘termination,’ as in ontological erasure” (*Ibid.*). This realization terrifies the nameless bureaucrat, like deLint's comment terrifies Hal; both the bureaucrat and Hal are ridden with existential anxiety.

Critic Brian McHale notes that the transition from modernism to *postmodernism* can be located in the shift from the former's emphasis on epistemological questions of knowledge (“how do we know what we know?”) to the latter's emphasis on ontological preoccupations (“what constitutes identity?”) (Geyh xviii). In this respect, *IJ* dramatizes this transition, with its unreliable narrators and incomplete accounts of ‘Infinite Jest,’ and through Hal and Gately's pained quest for the core element of what makes them uniquely human. Only when separated from the body—that seemingly insurmountable obstacle

toward self-realization that is susceptible to drugs and empty entertainment—can the unique qualities in Hal and Gately—their human spirit—come out.

Incandenza, Hal, and Gately represent, and caricature, the painful struggle to locate that spirit, the essence of the self in a postindustrial culture that prioritizes data, information, and technology over the individual. In this context, as a symbol of what *IJ* plans to accomplish, “Wave Bye-Bye” measures and parodies the loss of the self and suggests that a reappraisal of our priorities in a free-market, free-choice, capitalistic society is woefully needed.

When the anonymous bureaucrat—a symbol of the myriad replaceable employees in corporate America—oversleeps again the next morning and dashes toward the last train in the station after a reckless drive, he smashes against an “earnest-faced little kid with thick glasses and a bow-tie” (688). As the bureaucrat and the boy stand in a stupor after the impact, the bureaucrat experiences an intense moment of internal conflict in which he ponders whether to save his job by quickly stepping into the train that is about to depart, or to help the boy get up. He turns toward him and asks “if he’s OK,” cleans his thick glasses, helps him pick up the packages he was carrying, which were knocked all over, straightens his bow tie, and apologizes (688-689). In the meantime, the train departs without the bureaucrat.

Note that the nerdy boy has thick glasses and a bow tie just like young James Incandenza’s in both scenes from the 1960s. To Hal, as he watches the movie, the boy is an “image of both himself and his father when they were small boys” (Dowling 107). As the bureaucrat turns around to leave, the *earnest-faced* boy asks him whether he is Jesus.

“Don’t I wish,” he replies (689). The bureaucrat walks away and the boy performs the movie’s titular call to action.

The narrator also tells us that Hal is desperately trying to remember the name of the child actor, who used to be a student at E.T.A. The erasure of his name from his memory represents the loss of Hal’s own identity: he can relate both to the boy as a character in the movie and to the ‘disappearance’ of the actor/student from his world; he can also empathize with the bureaucrat, who, now jobless, drives himself home “toward ontological erasure” (*Ibid.*). Because the boy looks like a young Incandenza, and Hal is in many respects a reincarnation of his father, the movie effectively conflates three identities in three separate ontological planes of existence: Incandenza as the creator (now dead or ‘erased’ from Hal’s world), the nameless boy as the actor (whose real-life identity is now inaccessible to Hal) who performs in Incandenza’s creation, and Hal as the viewer and interpreter of it. This hierarchy echoes the dynamic between *IJ*, the depiction of its performative devices in the novel itself, and the reader who is charged with interpreting the novel.

For Mario—the novel’s strongest symbol of the need for sincerity—the “unhip earnestness” of “Wave Bye-Bye” makes it his favorite James Incandenza film (*Ibid.*). But, the narrator tells us, Hal is incapable of admitting to Mario that he secretly likes it too; though he tells his brother that “it’s basically goo,” a clearly depressed Hal watching the movie alone and the free indirect discourse about his intimate connection to the two characters reveal what Hal *really* thinks and feels.

One thing Hal does tell Mario is that at 17, feeling much older than a teenager, “I believe the only real monsters might be the type of liar where there’s simply no way to

tell. The ones who give nothing away” (774). If Mario is a symbol of earnestness, Hal is a symbol of the conquering of the default lack of transparency that characterizes many people in a self-absorbed postindustrial society, even if through no fault of their own. Hal becomes aware of his own weakness, of the front that he has inadvertently erected in order to hide his vulnerable self; he desperately longs for meaningful human connection but his self-absorption has rendered him almost invalid—a marijuana addict who is more addicted to the secrecy of the habit than to the high. But he breaks the habit, even if for the wrong reason (a drug screening at E.T.A. is coming up), and by the Year of Glad has become aware of his identity, even if his ‘muteness’—his father’s delusion—has become factual.

Toward the end of the YDAU, Hal mourns the death of communication, empathy, and communion, brought on by the intractable duplicity of people like his own pathological-liar brother Orin. But still, the fact that Hal is aware of this tragedy signals a sense of hope for him and for the generation he represents. This is perhaps an example of what D.T. Max called the novel’s “promise of redemption” that lies at the heart of the novel (see endnote 2).

* * *

But why is an essay that is mostly about James Incandenza concluding with Hal and Mario? The Incandenza brothers’ generation represents contemporary society’s potential to embrace the novel’s anti-ironic call to action; Hal undergoes and embodies the change that Wallace intended for fiction, as a mirror of culture, and which he dramatizes in *IJ*. This change is set in motion through Incandenza, whose own filmography embodies the transition from artificial storytelling that is mostly about itself

and its technicalities to genuine representation of human values, pointing at real life *beyond* that representation and striking a chord of empathy in the viewer. And, in this way, *Incandenza* is the performative literary device that represents Wallace's structural and aesthetic design for the novel.

Hal is the transition, or the next step, toward the heartfelt sincerity that was all but lost in the millennial generation. Unlike the metafiction that Wallace initially admired but later found narcissistic and tiresome, and unlike the TV shows that pointlessly reflect their own status as TV shows, or the commercials that congratulate themselves for their wittiness, *IJ* ultimately directs the reader *away* from its pages; it calls for change not only in the purpose and style of fiction, but in people's attitude toward each other. It calls for a reassessment of the worth of earnestness regarding our most pressing human needs, to which we are all vulnerable, and for the need to talk openly about them, even if at the risk of seeming "goo-prone and generally pathetic."

Endnotes

¹ From this point forward, 'Infinite Jest' refers to the fictional movie, while *IJ* refers to the novel.

² The novel's 1996 publication was met with mixed reviews; Wallace biographer D.T. Max notes that although early critics were initially overwhelmed by *IJ*'s complexity and "calculated casualness," the consensus was that it was "significant." Though many readers were irritated by the long novel's lack of a clear resolution or catharsis, Max notes that there still was a "promise of redemption" pulling together the seemingly runaway subplots (213-216).

³ Major essays are discussed in chronological order from this point on.

⁴ The new North American configuration in the world of *IJ*, masterminded by Rodney Tine. O.N.A.N. is composed of the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

⁵ Professor Claus Clüver defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (qtd. in Sayers 352).

⁶ Speaking of predecessors like John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Vladimir Nabokov—among others—both a source of influence and the object of his symbolic "patricide," Wallace said that "even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes [and] were indispensable for their times, their aesthetic's absorption by the U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else" (McCaffery 15).

⁷ Specifically the metafiction of the 1960s, which was hailed as a "radical aesthetic, a whole new literary form, literature unshackled from the cultural cinctures of mimetic narrative and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness" ("E Unibus" 34).

⁸ Critic A.O. Scott rightly points out that a weakness in Wallace's otherwise penetrating "E Unibus Pluram" is that he refers to TV in a very generalized way. "The medium is not the message," Scott writes ("The Panic of Influence").

⁹ According to Stephen J. Burn, TV's self-referential turn was "an effort to prevent viewers from realizing the role it plays in their unhappiness (7).

¹⁰ Consider for example this short excerpt, in the context of obsessive TV-watching causing loneliness in Americans, who are disinclined to spend time around other people when watching TV is so much easier and comforting. It is essentially a description of one of the dominant themes of *IJ*: it is obvious that "the more time spent at home alone watching TV, the less time spent in the world of real human beings, and that the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel inadequate to the tasks involved in being a part of the world [...], alienated from it, solipsistic, lonely ("E Unibus" 38).

¹¹ Wallace specifically mentions Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991), and Mark Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990) as examples of 'bad' fiction of his time, their merits notwithstanding. A novel like Michael Cunningham's multigenerational family drama *Flesh and Blood* (1995), at times moving and often melodramatic but always earnest in its pursuit seems to go in the direction Wallace indicated. Marshall Boswell comments that Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001) "stands as perhaps the most prestigious confirmation of Wallace's revolution in literary sensibility (20).

¹² Burn notes that although Wallace "was fascinated by writers who dramatized the writing process, he came to believe that instead of communicating with a reader, self-referring works were narcissistic" (17).

¹³ For example, Wallace singles out a 1985 Pepsi commercial that is self-congratulatory and self-referential in the way it calls attention to the “hokey emptiness of advertising” (Boswell 14). The ad—a Pepsi van parks on a crowded beach; the driver then amplifies through loudspeakers the popping noises of a Pepsi can, which attracts the crowd toward the van—simultaneously pokes fun at itself and reminds the viewer that like other Pepsi commercials that have worked before, this one, too, is a successful commercial (“E Unibus” 60).

¹⁴ As it pertains to literature, post-postmodern fiction is what Wallace and others refer to as “image-fiction,” which is “a further involution of the relations between lit and pop that blossomed in the ‘60s’ postmodernists,” Wallace explains. Image fiction uses “popular culture as a world in which to imagine fictions about ‘real,’ albeit pop-mediated, characters” (“E Unibus” 50).

¹⁵ Hal’s essay also serves to expose “the empty promise of post-modern meta-fiction that has seeped into televised pop culture from novels,” Curtis notes (44).

¹⁶ For all the talk of anti-irony, it is indeed curiously ironic that although the novel is 1,079 pages long—including 388 endnotes—and so obsessed with providing a torrent of data and multiple perspectives, there is so much that is strategically left *out*.

¹⁷ The United States Office of Unspecified Services, a new kind of conglomerate of the N.S.A., C.I.A., and other governmental offices (1037 n.228).

¹⁸ Québec’s dreaded terrorist group *Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* (Wheelchair Assassins).

¹⁹ There is a comically convoluted ethical can of worms: Marathe appears to betray the A.F.R.; the A.F.R. knows and allows this because they think he is only *pretending* to betray his nation for the sake of his ill wife and will in fact help them acquire ‘Infinite Jest.’ However, the truth is that Marathe *is* in fact betraying the A.F.R. to help the U.S.O.U.S., who is going to help Marathe’s seriously disabled wife in exchange for helping them locate the movie first (529).

²⁰ On InterLace: “What if a viewer could more or less 100% choose *what’s on at any given time*? Choose and rent, over PC and modem and fiber-optic line, from tens of thousands of second-run films [...] what if s/he could define the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue?” (416), which essentially describes the services that Netflix and Amazon Prime, among others, provide today.

²¹ Consider, for instance: “The idea that America is one big shopping mall and that all anyone wants to do is grasp their credit card and run out to buy is stuff is a stereotype and a generalization, but as a way to summarize a certain kind of ethos in the U.S., it’s pretty accurate” (“DFW Uncut Interview”).

²² Subsidized time is introduced in 2002 by the Jonny Gentle administration, starting with the Year of the Whopper. This is a “revenue-enhancing” plan (223), in which the highest-bidding corporation has the whole year named after it. The program finances Gentle’s expensive clean-up plan via energy-producing annular fusion at the Great Concavity.

²³ Avril leads the Militant Grammarians of Massachusetts; she is the kind whose idea of fun is to spend time alphabetizing soup cans in the kitchen pantry; the kind that would ask to speak to the store manager should she spot an express check-out lane with a sign that says “Ten items or less,” instead of “fewer.” But despite her obsessive-compulsiveness and infidelity, she is the connecting tissue between the Incandenzas—“the family’s light and pulse” (737).

²⁴ Although Ennet House's Don Gately doesn't know of 'Infinite Jest,' he and his accomplice Trent Kite set loose one of the copies of the movie when they burglarize anti-O.N.A.N. organizer Guillaume DuPlessis' house, accidentally killing him, and stealing several entertainment cartridges on their way out, among which is a copy of 'Infinite Jest.'

²⁵ Orin is less sparing with his father when he tells Steeply that he was "a full-blown demented alcoholic for the last three years of his life, and he put his head in the microwave, and I think just in terms of unpleasantness you'd have to be sort of insane to kill yourself in such a painful way" (1038 n.234).

²⁶ The Incandenza brothers' nickname for their father, as in "the man Himself." N. Katherine Hayles suggests that the nickname appears to "acknowledge the man is so inward-bent that any nominative referring to him must include an intensifier of selfhood" (689).

²⁷ A "type of fusion that can produce waste that's fuel for a process whose waste is fuel for the fusion" (572) and thus perpetuates "a cyclical system of almost uncontrollable environmental devastation and creation" (Bartlett 379). See Part V.

²⁸ Hayles conjectures that for *JJ*, whose structure "creates cycles within cycles within cycles [see endnote 49]," any starting point would be "to some extent arbitrary, for no matter where one starts, everything cycles together with everything else" (684-685).

²⁹ Carlisle notes that because Incandenza was buried in a region that is part of the Concavity (the Québécois province L'Islet), "he is now buried in an annulation-zone" (452), which suggests the perpetuity of the cycle (which contains Incandenza himself and indeed brings him back, albeit as a wraith).

³⁰ There is a potent passage that serves as one of the several impressions of 'Infinite Jest.' The blurriness that the rain creates is described as similar to Incandenza's "neonatal lens," which he had crafted to blur images "in imitation of a neonatal retina, everything recognizable and yet without outline" (222).

³¹ Synopsis: "Mobile holograms of two visually lethal mythologic [*sic*] females duel with reflective surfaces onstage while a live crowd of spectators turns to stone" (988 n. 24).]

³² The meta-watching that is inflicted on the audience "supposedly comprises the film's involuted 'antinarrative' flow" (989 n. 24).

³³ Compare the "The Joke" film ad to Wallace's own assessment of the state of real-life TV advertising in "E Unibus Pluram": Wallace decried TV ads, such as the aforementioned 1985 Pepsi commercial, that pat themselves on the back for admitting that they 'know' they are only ads and for acknowledging that they have the explicit motive of urging the viewer to buy products, while making fun of the exaggerations and deceptiveness of the advertising industry itself. And, in a sad way, the audience cannot help but to 'admire' the self-mockery and indirect 'admission of fault,' and watch the ad and buy the product anyway.

³⁴ Synopsis: "a formerly delinquent nun's failure to reform a juvenile delinquent leads to a rampage of recidivist revenge" (990 n. 24).

³⁵ Bresson, Incandenza's real-life counterpart, trained what he called his "models" to "remove all traces of theatricality when acting in his movies and to speak with a fast monotonic delivery" (Pavelin).

³⁶ Joelle, who was very close to Incandenza, sums up his films very well: "the work of a brilliant optician and technician who was an amateur at any kind of real communication. Technically gorgeous, the Work, with lighting and angles planned out to the frame. But oddly hollow, empty, no sense of dramatic

towardness—no narrative movement toward a real story; no emotional movement toward an audience” (740, emphasis original).

³⁷ In a short profile of Bresson, Alan Pavelin writes “I once heard a well-known academic in the field of French cinema opine that [Bresson’s] films are ‘more interesting to read about than to see,’” which curiously adds to Wallace’s depiction of Incandenza as a fictional Bresson since the reader cannot “see” or watch any of the movies, but only read about them in the novel.

This also calls attention to the fundamental differences between watching a movie (or analyzing a piece of visual art) and *reading* about them: Sayers notes that there is a “difference in power” between ‘Infinite Jest’ and its representation (its description and/or interpretation), which strongly invites the philosophical discussion on “the common belief that films are capable of provoking far more intense reactions in their audiences than written words are in theirs” (353).

³⁸ In fact, we are told in the filmography that the first of Incandenza’s (at least) five attempts to make ‘Infinite Jest’ was his “first attempt at commercial entertainment” (986 n. 24).

³⁹ Also released on the Year of the Whopper, only two years before Incandenza’s suicide. Synopsis: “A harried commuter is mistaken for Christ by a child he knocks over” (990 n. 24).

⁴⁰ Burn notes that it is no accident that Wallace chose 1960 as the year in which the novel’s chronology begins; 1960 was “the start of the age in which [Thomas] Pynchon had diagnosed data overload [of which *J* is an example, with its massive collection of data] as the significant contemporary challenge (28).

⁴¹ For example, when Steeply interviews Orin, the scene goes something like:

‘Q.’

‘We’re not off to a good start here, ma’am, no matter how lovely you’re looking in that pantsuit.’

‘Q.’

‘Because the question doesn’t mean anything is why.’ (1038 n. 234)

⁴² Film critic Pauline Kael captures Brando’s persona, which Sr. refers to: “As a protagonist, the Brando of the early fifties had no code, only his instincts. He was a development from the gangster leader and the outlaw. He was antisocial because he knew society was crap; he was a hero to youth because he was strong enough not to take the crap.”

⁴³ Wallace makes it very obvious that the tennis philosophy portrayed in the novel is a symbol of a philosophy of *life* itself. For instance, note the announcement board that Hal remembers encountering as a young boy in Weston, which reads: “LIFE IS LIKE TENNIS / THOSE WHO SERVE / BEST USUALLY WIN” (952); or the narrator’s description of tennis as “tragic and sad and chaotic and lovely” (84).

Burn also notes that by associating the confrontation with one’s self with the ‘forgetting’ or erasure of it, Wallace “suggests the ease with which athletic transcendence can edge into the alcohol-doused oblivion of self” (71). This indicates a strong connection between the E.T.A. athletes and the Ennet House residents, who—as noted earlier—do not interact otherwise.

⁴⁴ James Incandenza Sr.’s acting career came to an end in the 1960s, appearing in sandwich-bag commercials as the Man From Glad (313; note that the last year in the chronology of the novel—the first section in the novel—is the Year of Glad).

⁴⁵ The face “bent over the prism” is a clear indication of both Jr.’s early interest in optics and of the warped lenses that he goes on to use in his movies, particularly ‘Infinite Jest.’

⁴⁶ For instance, Sr. says “Who? Who. Jim, Marlon Brando was the archetypal new-type actor who ruined it looks like two generations’ relations with their own bodies” (157), which shows Sr.’s mocking of what we can presume was his son innocently asking “Who’s that?”

⁴⁷ The scene also takes place on April 1, exactly one year before Incandenza’s suicide. The choice of April (the name of Incandenza’s wife is ‘Avril’) for landmark events in the novel is not random, Burn notes. April is T.S. Eliot’s “cruellest month” in *The Waste Land* (65), and the novel indeed features a gigantic wasteland (physical and metaphorical) in the Great Concavity, near Québec.

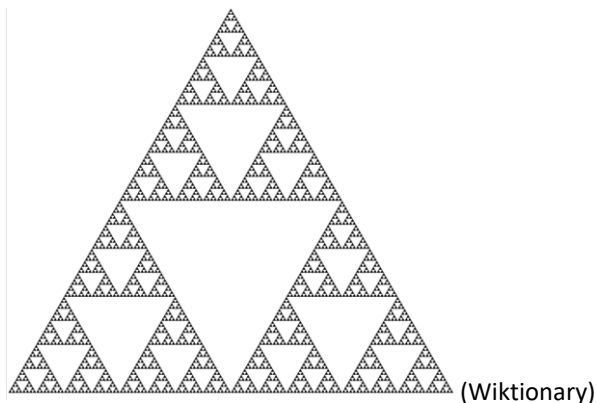
⁴⁸ Although in several instances Wallace playfully makes the relationship between Incandenza’s movies and the plot of the novel more explicit. For instance, the synopsis of “It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him” reads: “A father, suffering from the delusion that his etymologically precocious son is pretending to be mute, poses as a ‘professional conversationalist’ in order to draw the boy out” (993, n. 24).

Released the year after the scene in which Hal is tricked by his father to go see a doctor who turns out to be himself in disguise, this movie turns out to be in fact ‘autobiographical’ in the world of Incandenza and *IJ*.

⁴⁹ The fractal structure describes several sections of different scale (some longer, some shorter) that together make up the novel’s general structure. The internal structure of each section is similar among all the sections, even though they are of different scale.

In a 1996 *Bookworm* interview with the author for KCRW, host Michael Silverblatt observes: “It occurred to me that the way in which the material is presented allows for a subject to be announced in a small form, then there seems to be other subjects, and then it comes back in a second form containing the other subjects in small—and then comes back again as if what we’re being described were fractals.” To which Wallace responds: “That’s one of the things structurally going on: [*IJ* is] structured like something called a Sierpinski gasket [or triangle], which is a very primitive kind of pyramidal fractal. Although what was really structured as a Sierpinski gasket was the draft that I delivered to Michael [Pietsch, then editor at publisher Little, Brown and Company] in ‘94, and it went through some mercy cuts, so it’s probably kind of a lopsided Sierpinski gasket now, but that’s one of the structural ways it’s supposed to come together.”

A Sierpinski triangle looks like this (note the recursivity of the pattern, in which the shapes repeat in larger and smaller scales, reflecting what I have called in this essay, in relation to *IJ*’s structure, recursive, involuted, and self-referential):



⁵⁰ With “eyes [of] an extra-natural HD green” (290), Joelle hides her face behind a veil after her mother, in a fit of rage, throws a beaker of acid at her husband but accidentally hits Joelle square in the face instead.

William Dowling observes how this cartoonish episode, which Joelle's friend Molly Notkin tells her interviewer and the narrator *then* recounts to the reader, is intentionally highly suspect: not only is Notkin far from reliable in the first place, but, like many other elements of *IJ*, Joelle's veil might be a symbol of something more profound than an open disclosure that she is hiding something behind the veil, which may or may not be a physical deformation.

Dowling notes the possibility that Joelle wears the veil not because she is deformed, but because, on the contrary, "she grew tired of being so beautiful that she had become, in effect, a freak." So, she might wear the veil "because she has, in a world of male voyeurism, come to regard her own perfect beauty as a deformation" (81).

⁵¹ Which sounds like 'metempsychosis'; according to merriam-webster.com, metempsychosis is "the passing of the soul at death into another body either human or animal" (see scene 1 and 2 [Joelle as the Death-Mother] of 'Infinite Jest').

⁵² Wallace goes as far as specifying it is "vol. 4, no. 4," which suggests the intertextuality between the narrative of the novel and the fictional academic journal contained in the *world* of the novel, which anticipates and reflects the intertextuality between *IJ* and the academic monographs that it spawned in real-life journals. This is a continuation of the conversation about the ontological status of Incandenza's filmography and memoir, explored in Part V.

⁵³ I make connections between Lacan and *IJ* via Marshall Boswell (probably the first critic to interpret Lacanian concepts in the novel, in his 2003 book), and Philip Sayers, who (more recently) notes that by comparing "the movie-going experience to hypnosis, and [describing] the spectator as glued by the nose to the screen," French philosopher Roland Barthes—himself drawing on Lacan—"writes about the cinema in a manner strikingly reminiscent of 'Infinite Jest'" (346).

⁵⁴ His theory of the subject follows a trajectory of birth—the "territorialization" of the body—the mirror stage—access to language—the Oedipus complex (Sarup 21).

⁵⁵ Timothy Jacobs suggests that the 'threat' of the mirrored image of oneself on the highway "serves as a metaphor for the novel as a mirror through which readers confront their own mortality," and calls it "an aesthetic technique drawing readers out of their isolation" (173). Perhaps a bit of a stretch, although it does agree with the several meta-referential tricks and devices throughout the novel that make the reader feel self-conscious.

⁵⁶ Lacan's "second loss" is also fascinatingly connected to Hal's 'loss' of language, as his father perceives it: the loss "occurs after birth but prior to the acquisition of language" (Sarup 22), and it entails the process in which the child comes to recognize itself as separate from its mother (*Ibid.*).

Hal's complicated relationship with his mother, and his father's perception of him as 'mute,' might suggest Hal's unconscious desire to overcome this 'loss,' disavow his constitution as a subject in society (for Lacan, language is what establishes us as a subject [Sarup 6]), and return to a prior state of togetherness with his mother.

⁵⁷ Because Incandenza used a type of lens that limits the aperture of light, the image results in a "neonatal [...] milky blur," according to Joelle (939).

⁵⁸ For Boswell, the movie is Wallace's "most visible emblem of his Lacanian program, for it both embodies and parodies Lacan's ideas" (130).

⁵⁹ Scopophilia is a type of exposed, or unconcealed, voyeurism: "a desire to look at sexually stimulating scenes especially as a substitute for actual sexual participation" (merriam-webster.com).

⁶⁰ In Steeply and Marathe's long conversation (from which this quotation comes), Steeply recounts an experiment in which the pleasure neurotransmitters in lab rats are located; electrodes are then implanted in the rats to conduce extreme amounts of pleasure—"the sum of all possible pleasures refined into pure current" (473)—and the rats quickly become habituated to hit a lever for an amplified, artificial self-administration of pleasure, "ignoring food and female rats in heat" (471).

When the results are made public, people line up to be the first human subjects of the experiment, in spite of the obvious danger. Dowling sees this flashback as "the heart of *Infinite Jest's* diagnosis of American self-gratification as a spiritual disease" (55).

⁶¹ Nichols maintains that "in mimicking the undifferentiating gaze of an infant, the lens itself ensures that its viewers will remain in a perpetual state of liminality that does not require their active participation" (13).

⁶² Dowling notes the empty and pernicious pleasantness of the 'have-a-nice-day' expression, so prevalent in America, and the smiley face that goes with it (recall the smiley face on the envelope that contains the copy of 'Infinite Jest' that the medical attaché watches).

The smiley face represents "mental or spiritual death," Downing writes. It is the death of people "whose minds are slowly dying within them as they come home from work to watch *Sex and the City* or *Survivor* or *American Idol*" (228).

⁶³ Carlisle suggests that Gately might later tell Hal his father's prior revelation (to Gately) that he made 'Infinite Jest' for Hal, and that Joelle (Orin's ex-girlfriend and now a resident at Ennet House, where Gately works), "should recognize Hal" while visiting Gately at the hospital, and "inform Hal that both the U.S.O.U.S. and the A.F.R. are searching for the duplicable master copy of 'Infinite Jest,' and that she believes his father ordered the Master [copy] buried with him" (483).

⁶⁴ The "Great White Shark of organo-synthesized hallucinogens," Pemulis says (211). It is also interesting that the street name of DMZ is 'Madame Psychosis' (recall 'metempsychosis' [see endnote 51] and Scene 1 of 'Infinite Jest'), which is also Joelle's radio persona name.

⁶⁵ Basically, while Hal is perfectly conscious and coherent *inside his head*, to the outside world (the university faculty interviewing him) he grimaces and writhes in severe disconnect. What sounds in his mind (and reads on the page) like lucid English, to everyone else sounds like animalistic noises. Terrified, the interviewers call an ambulance.

⁶⁶ Wallace's obsessive cycles and recurrences continue when Incandenza's wraith commandeers E.T.A. student Ortho Stice's bed (Freudenthal suggests that Incandenza's wraith moves objects at E.T.A. "to warn its residents that ruthless Quebecois terrorists are after the master 'Infinite Jest' tape" [204]).

Mario reports that Ortho's bed was suddenly found "up near the ceiling of [the] room. The frame has some way got lifted up and bolted to the ceiling sometime during the night without [Ortho's roommate] Kyle hearing it or waking up" (*IJ* 942). The language here makes a clear allusion to the details of the bed, frame, and bolts from the 1963 scene. This suggests that in addition to the annular fusion epiphany on that same day, when Incandenza Sr. dies, the mattress incident has remained secure in Incandenza Jr.'s psyche for the rest of his life.

⁶⁷ Recall that Incandenza Sr. tells his son (Hal's father) "Son, you're a body, son. [...] you're a *machine*" (159, emphasis added). The suggestion is that there is hope lurking underneath Hal's current inability to communicate; he is overcoming the negativity he has inherited from his grandfather and father.

⁶⁸ On the relationship and difference between the (fictional) movie and the novel, Bartlett interestingly notes that while ‘Infinite Jest’ “ultimately and horrifically fails by leaving the viewer catatonic and trapped in an infinite cycle of Lacanian deferred desire, [I] fills the void left by Wallace’s literary predecessors by laying out a design for the kind of person (and reader) who can survive entertainment consumption and break the generational cycle of cynicism and solipsism” (376).

⁶⁹ A condensed synopsis: the backstory is that after killing Isolde’s betrothed, a wounded Tristan comes to Isolde because of her healing powers. She heals him but is enraged after she realizes he is the killer of her betrothed. Tristan is charged with taking Isolde, who is conflicted with love and hate for Tristan, on a ship to Cornwall to marry King Mark, who is Tristan’s uncle.

In the onstage plot, Isolde decides to end her affliction, onboard the ship, by having Tristan and herself drink poison. Her maid, though, substitutes the poison with a Shakespearean love potion. Shortly before arriving in Cornwall, Tristan and Isolde drink the potion and fall in love.

Isolde goes on to marry King Mark while having an affair with Tristan. King Mark is taken on a hunting trip by Melot, a fellow knight. When they intrude on the lovers’ escapade in the forest, Melot attacks Tristan, who—anticipating a reunion with Isolde in death—lets himself be mortally wounded. As the dying Tristan ponders on his life, Isolde returns to him. Finally, Isolde dies a mysterious death of love—the *Liebestod*—in Tristan’s arms. (Bergstein 748-749)

⁷⁰ When the child recognizes the status of its father and his relationship to its mother, “the laws of language and society come to dwell within the child,” and its infantile desire to “complete the mother” ceases (Sarup 25). This might account for why Tristan’s death in the opera (and in the myth) is a ‘happy’ or non-tragic death.

⁷¹ Compare this to Tristan’s relationship with what André Green calls the “dead mother syndrome” (qtd. in Bergstein 757): “the child develops a primary identification with the mother’s withdrawal into depression or mourning, leading eventually to guilt over the very existence of the child. Green describes the paradox of this situation in which the renewed aliveness of the mother is linked in fantasy to her renewed loss, as she is experienced as newly abandoning in order to engage in her relationships with others. The child nurtures fantasies of enlivening the mother, only to lose her again. Thus the child is trapped between two losses—presence in death or absence in life” (Bergstein 757).

⁷² In a similar vein, Bergstein comments that the “*Liebestod* fantasy of dying together expresses a wish not for a cessation of life, but for ‘intrauterine omnipotence’ (Flugel, 1953)” (757).

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